



Vrindaban Days

Memories of an Indian Holy Town
By Hayagriva Swami

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This transcendental land of Vrindaban is populated by goddesses of fortune, who manifest as milkmaids and love Krishna above everything. The trees here fulfill all desires, and the waters of immortality flow through land made of philosopher's stone. Here, all speech is song, all walking is dancing and the flute is the Lord's constant companion. Cows flood the land with abundant milk, and everything is self-luminous, like the sun. Since every moment in Vrindaban is spent in loving service to Krishna, there is no past, present, or future.

—Brahma Samhita

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CHAPTER 1. Indraprastha

October 20, 1972

As dawn brightens the horizon, the Boeing 747 circles New Delhi. The Indo-Gangetic plain spreads beneath us, and the misty earth assumes the shapes and colors of a land marked by man's toil: a vast network of roads and buildings, and, on the city's outskirts, the green and ocher patches of small farms. With seven thousand people per square mile, this is one of the world's most densely populated areas. In the capital itself are some four million people, most now joined in the bonds of sleep.

This is a fertile country, though subject to periodic droughts. It's parched by the sun in May and June and flooded by monsoons in July and August. During monsoons, great river systems carry silt from the Himalayas to fertilize the soil and feed India's millions. These are the sacred rivers: the Ganges—flowing from the lotus feet of Vishnu and down the hair of Shiva—and the Jamuna, flowing past Indraprastha, Mathura, and Vrindaban, the abode of Krishna.

Ancient texts call this land Bharatavarsa, kingdom of Emperor Bharata. Empires have flourished here from time immemorial, composed of people as varied as the Pandavas and Kauravas, Dravidians and Aryans, Mauryans and Guptas, Muslims and British. Five thousand years ago, Lord Krishna, demigods, demons, and warriors chose it as their stage for both spiritual and military exploits. At that time, Delhi was named Indraprastha and was celebrated as the capital of Yudhisthira Maharaj. Lord Krishna Himself helped Yudhisthira regain his kingdom during the Battle of Kurukshetra, fought on the plains about ninety miles north of here. Lost across centuries now are those battlecries, the rattling of chariots, galloping of horses, and blowing of conchshells. No signs of any cataclysm have ever been unearthed at Kurukshetra, although tradition says that thirty million soldiers died there in 3138 B.C.

“At that time, Krishna, smiling, in the midst of both the armies, consoled the grief-stricken Arjuna.”

I can see Palam Airport's blue lights, which disappear momentarily as our wings tilt. The plane descends onto the runway, its wheels bouncing lightly. The engines reverse and cabin lights flash on. “Please remain seated until the aircraft has come to a complete halt ...”

I gather up my handluggage—camera, film, shaving kit, notebooks, Bhagavad Gita, japa-beads—and file out onto the portable staircase leading down to the terminal buses. A hundred scents assail me, conjuring images of my first trip seven years ago: the smell of cowdung fires, of banyan, of wild date palm, mango, eucalyptus and margosa, of cardamom and turmeric; pungent smoke from fried chili and cumin sauce and bidi cigarets; car and bus fumes, and the peppermint smell of pan-betel nuts that stain the mouth red-whiffs of jasmine and henna incense, and nameless odors that evoke memories.

The bus shuttles us across the tarmac to the main terminal, where passports are stamped and visas checked by drowsy officials. Luggage from previous arrivals is thrown everywhere. Tired and irritable travelers search out their bags, shoving and shouting. The conveyor belt is stuck, and our luggage is thrown about by workers to whom nothing is fragile.

My duffel bag is tossed on one of the heaps, and I start pushing my way forward. I secure my bags, then stand helpless. It's impossible for me to carry all my luggage.

Before me appears a round, dark face with big eyes outlined with kajal mascara. A piece of burlap is wrapped around the head, coolie-style. He places one small, grimy hand on my duffel bag.

"Porter, sahib? I carry?"

He's about eighteen, short and wiry, dressed in a dhoti and wearing a T-shirt saying "I can be your super-everything." With all his strength, he heaves the duffel bag onto his shoulder and then onto the burlap head-pad. There's a sudden bond between us: out of 600 million Indians, he's the first to speak to me.

He staggers a bit, then regains his balance. The dark eyes plead: "One dollar, sahib." His forehead wrinkles under the load. His neck veins bulge.

"Oh no," I say. "No American money."

"One dollar, sahib," the boy repeats, moving as if to set the bag down. But I know he won't, after the struggle to lift it.

"Two rupees," I insist. Despite the load, he manages to waggle his head from side to side in that typical Indian gesture of assent. We push our way to the customs counter, where a uniformed official asks what's in the duffel bag.

"Personal belongings," I answer, and he motions for the coolie to pass on.

Changing dollars at the Bank of India exchange counter is a slow process, involving quadruplicate forms. I finally get a fistful of rupees, then follow my coolie out of the terminal doors. A ten-foot fence protects me from a mob of shouting cabbies. "Right here, sir. I take you to good hotel close by. Twenty rupees only. Just see. Come. My taxi just here, sahib. Pay whatever you like. Best five-star hotel, sahib, air-condition, close by ... I'm too exhausted to haggle, and they know it. For me, instead of six a.m. Thursday, Delhi time, it's six p.m. Wednesday night. It will take some days to reset my metabolism. The airport has a taxi-booking counter which is supposed to keep foreigners from being cheated and prevent taxi drivers from killing one another to get to them. However, once again I find myself confronted with quadruplicate forms.

"Where do you want to go?" a chubby woman asks.

"I don't know," I reply.

"You must have a destination," she says.

"I don't know," I repeat.

"You can't book a taxi without some destination," she insists.

"Connaught Place, then," I say, naming Delhi's commercial center.

"Best you go to Hotel Moti Mahal," she says. "That's near Connaught Circle. Twelve rupees."

I pay, then hurry across the parking lot, following my coolie. He finds my assigned taxi, number 40002. A turbaned Sikh driver collects my booking receipt and begins to argue in Hindi with the coolie. All I can catch are the words “Moti Mahal.” My duffel bag is finally dumped in the trunk, and I offer the coolie his two rupees. This he declines, holding up five fingers.

“Five rupee,” he says.

I put four rupees into his shirt pocket and get in the cab. The coolie shouts, and the Sikh shouts back, defending me now that I’m his client. We drive away, and I look back to see the coolie counting his rupees and smiling.

Apart from the taxis coming in from the airport, the city’s streets are vacant. A few homeless families sleep on sidewalks, beside fences and gates, in open parks, on grass plots, in doorways, on traffic circles before the massive Parliament Building, at the feet of Victorian monuments, and beneath the sundial and surreal pinkish obelisks of the Jantar Mantar Observatory. Now, a few people begin to stir, their woolen blankets still wrapped around them despite the pleasant October morning. The corner pan, cigaret, and chai stands, always first to open, are still closed. My driver takes advantage of the scant traffic, running red lights joyfully.

“From which country you are coming, sir?” he asks. Our eyes meet in the rearview mirror. Even for a middle-aged Sikh, he’s a fatso. The hairnet covering his beard makes him look like a turbaned panda.

“U.S.A.,” I answer.

“You Essay,” he repeats. “America. Too much rich country, no?”

“India’s also a rich country,” I say.

“Yes,” he agrees, “but too much poor people. It is very, very hard to make the rupees, sir.”

I let the subject drop, and there’s a brief silence before he takes a different approach.

“You will be staying long in Delhi, sir?”

“No.”

“There is much sightseeing here, sir. Many tourists are also coming from your country. You have brought camera?” He’s noticed my handluggage. “I can show you places for snapshots—Red Fort, Qutb Minar, Lodi Gardens. If you rent taxi all day, I give you special price. Or two, three, four hours, as you like. Pay by hour whatever you want, sir.”

“I’m not sightseeing,” I say.

“Sir—” He turns around to look at me while dangerously maintaining the same speed. “I give you very, very best price. I can pick you up at nine?”

“No,” I tell him. “I’ve already seen everything.”

He returns his attention to the road, reflects a moment, then looks at me again through the rearview mirror.

“Change dollars, sir?” he asks. “I give you eight to the dollar. Bank giving only seven.”

“No, thanks.”

“All right, then. Nine.”

“Not now.”

“Nine point two. That is very best price. Ask anyone. No one else will give you that price.”

“Later,” I say, avoiding his gaze.

“Sell anything, sir? Camera? Watch?”

“No.”

“You like to buy silk Banaras saris? Kashmiri rugs? Stones?”

“No.”

“Then what about good charas, sir?” he asks, needlessly whispering. “The very best hashish. It will send you into another world. Only twenty a tola.”

“I don’t smoke,” I say.

“Girls, then? I know very clean, regularly inspected Indian girls, sir. I will arrange everything.”

“No.”

“White Christian girl?”

“No.”

“Or two girls, sir, Kama-Sutra style?”

“I said no!” I shout, startling us both. What a welcome to the land of religion! Still, there’s no point in alienating him. “Sorry,” I say at length. “I’m very tired. Long plane ride. Just take me to the hotel to sleep.”

“Achha,” he says, giving up and minding his driving.

At Connaught Place, I spot familiar buildings: the Regal Cinema, Khadi Bhavan, American Express, Wenger’s Bakery. The colonnades of the inner circle support an arcade over numerous jewelry, sari, and curio shops, restaurants, airline offices, and banks. In a few hours, the buildings will be crowded, but now they appear desolate with their iron jalousies and gates drawn closed. Throughout the central park, the homeless now stir from beneath ragged blankets, gunnysacks, and even scraps of cardboard. Whole families, awakened by sunlight bursting suddenly over the buildings, wipe away the mucus of sleep. Later, they will petition foreigners for alms—a few paise for tea, rice, chapatis.

We turn left onto Janpath, the principal radial road leading from the Circle down past the Air India and Government Tourist offices, and stop before the Hotel Moti Mahal. One look at the doorman’s glittering panache tells me that I’ll be staying elsewhere.

“Too expensive,” I tell the cabbie.

“How much do you want to pay?” he asks.

I hesitate. This is a tricky question. If I say one hundred rupees, he’ll take me to a forty-rupee hotel, inform the manager to charge me a hundred, and then pocket thirty for himself. Srila Prabhupada is always reminding us: “This world is simply a place of cheaters and cheated.”

“As little as possible,” I tell him.

“How much? Thirty? A hundred?”

“Whatever the hippies pay,” I say. Then, fearing a dormitory ridden with thieves and fleas, add, “But it must be clean and with attached bathroom.”

“Achha! Attached bathroom. I know good place, sir.”

He swirls the taxi around and heads back to Connaught Place, then cuts down a narrow lane between the Government Tourist and Air India offices. Modest signs announce the Ajanta Guest House and Janpath Guest House, all part of a massive three-story building. We stop opposite the Ajanta Guest House. I pound on the locked front door, and a muscular little Nepali appears.

“Rooms?” I ask.

His smile says yes. He takes my duffel bag out of the trunk, and I give the cabbie a generous five-rupee tip. Still, he stares with disappointment at the money. Before he begins to complain, I turn and follow the Nepali up a dark staircase.

The hotel manager has been sleeping on a bench behind his desk. He passes me the register to fill out: name, passport and visa numbers, date and place of issue, nationality, port of embarkation, address in home country, date of arrival in India, profession, purpose of visit, next destination, etc. I begin to get the strange feeling that the Indian government is attempting to trail me as I wend my way among 600 million people. I’m appalled. If they expected something sinister, why did they ever grant me a visa?

“Thirty rupees,” the manager says, not even glancing at what I’ve written. I inspect the room before paying. It’s as tight as a Manhattan YMCA cubicle, with barely space for me to stretch out, and only one window opening onto the street. At least the sheets are clean, and the bed is firm. There’s no hot-water tap, but the cold water works. The bathroom ceiling is hardly six feet high, spacious enough for the Nepali, but forcing me to bend over to enter. The Nepali points to the toilet and proudly says, “See! Western-style!” This means that the Ajanta Guest House caters to Westerners; otherwise, there would simply be a hole in the floor, where one is supposed to squat, Indian-style.

I hand over the thirty rupees, close and latch the door, take off my shoes and socks, and fall exhausted across the bed. Only eighty-five miles down river is Vrindaban and Srila Prabhupada. Soon I’ll be there, in the abode of Krishna.

The last sound I remember is that of a flute and sitar playing morning ragas on a distant radio.

CHAPTER 2. Road to Mathura

My sleep is troubled, filled with dreams as strange as opium visions. I levitate like a demon out of the Ramayana, rising off the floor and into the air. The coolie with kajal-smearing eyes grabs my duffel bag and dashes through the airport. I lose sight of him and panic. Through the latticed window I hear the sounds of car horns, the cries of vendors, the beeping of motor-rickshas. Do I wake or sleep?

Smells of incense and steaming chapatis drift in from the street. Soon again, I dream. Somehow caught in the southwest monsoons, I struggle through flooded streets and seek refuge at the New Govardhan Hotel. The manager hands me the guest register. It's a new form required of all foreigners, and my hand soon aches from writing. There must be hundreds of pages to fill out. The questions asked by the Central Indian Government become more detailed and personal: Do you chant while bathing? What do you think of during sex? Do you ever cheat?

I awake, and the dream pops like a bubble. Groggy from jet lag and nightmares, I lie on my back, unable to move. Where am I? Not West Virginia. Hare Krishna. Somewhere on the planet. Oh, yesterday, Connaught Place. Now early morning light streams through the lattice. It's the Ajanta Guest House on Janpath Lane. I've slept nearly twenty-four hours. When we come out of sleep, we emerge from the lowest mode, the mode of ignorance. Antidote: a cold shower and the maha-mantra. All devotees are required to chant sixteen rounds of Hare Krishna every morning—about an hour and a half of chanting.

There's no chance for a warm shower at the Ajanta. I plunge into the cold drizzle. Half squatting in the tiny cubicle, I lather with neem soap. Cold water is colder when it's only a drizzle. I try sitting on my haunches, Indian-style, but lose my balance and fall over, banging into the corrugated tin walls. How do the Indians make something so difficult look so simple, and vice versa? When they sit on their haunches, their ninth gate is only a half inch from the ground, and yet they look so natural and comfortable. They squat like this to defecate, bathe, sweep, eat, smoke, chit-chat, and even, according to Kama Sutra, procreate. I fall backward every time I try it. No wonder Indians laugh whenever they see our clumsy Western bodies inconvenienced or embarrassed.

I put on a black summer suit and tie, the last remnants of my teaching days at Ohio State. I was wearing the same suit in my office at Denny Hall when my colleague, Dr. Mohan Lal Sharma, convinced me to go to India. That was in 1965. But during that 1965-66 India trip, I wore only dungarees and plaid shirts. Hippy years. Now it's back to the black suit. Prabhupada requested that I come to India wearing a suit. "I will introduce you as Professor Wheeler," he said.

In the suit, I look like a Bible preacher, especially in India, where only missionaries wear black suits. The surprise comes when I turn around and display my Hindu sikha, that little telltale tuft of long hair. Hare Krishna! Of course, I'm less sensational in the suit than in robes. Now, Prabhupada's "dancing white elephants"—the shaved-headed, saffron-clad

American and European devotees—are shocking India, just as they shocked the West. It's crossing cultures that's taboo, possibly dangerous.

By ten a.m., I catch a motor-ricksha to the Interstate Bus Terminal. A motor-ricksha is a noisy, three-wheeled contraption with a two-stroke motorcycle engine and a rear seat just big enough for two Americans. I've seen ten Indian schoolchildren squeeze into one, and the driver was still stopping for more passengers. In Delhi, motor-rickshas are usually driven by Sikhs—our bearded, turbaned friends named Singh (lion). Sikhs claim to be descendants from the old Vedic kshatriyas who fought at Kurukshetra. Indeed, I'm reminded of that battlefield as my chauffeur weaves through traffic like an ancient charioteer.

I clutch my duffel bag with one hand and the railing with the other. Affixed over the windshield, where Catholics place Saint Christopher medallions, are colored prints of Guru Nanak and Lord Shiva, who kneels and drinks with cupped hands from an ocean of poison. A Shivaite trident is attached to the front visor of the ricksha like a radio antenna. The trident, sharp and bellicose, indicates that Mr. Singh isn't to be pushed around. He sounds his high-pitched horn—Beeeeeeep-beeeeeep-beeeeeep—and zips like an angry wasp in and out of a frightening array of traffic: cars, buses, trucks, bullock carts, bicycles, rickshas, pedestrians, goats, burros, and cows. He's willing to face any danger to get me to the bus terminal. He even plays chicken with a truck barreling down on us. The truck, tottering with cargo, is decorated like a Christmas tree. Zip, zip. It roars by, just inches away.

We pass the Red Fort and Jama Masjid, India's largest mosque. At the Kashmiri Gate, we scrape the side of an ox cart, then race toward oncoming rickshas. They veer to the left and right as we pass between. Snatched from the jaws of death! My driver looks as if he'd just won a jackpot.

"Never was there a time when I did not exist, nor you, nor all these kings," Krishna tells Arjuna. "Nor in the future shall any of us cease to be."

At the Interstate Bus Terminal, an old, white-haired coolie sets my duffel bag atop his head and points to his brass armband numbered 346602 IBT. He has the intent eyes of a man frightened by a thunderbolt.

"Bus?"

"Vrindaban-Mathura."

"Vrindaban-Mathura? Achha!"

I overpay my driver, then follow #346602 into the concrete maze of the terminal. The old man sets such a lively pace that I have to jog to keep up. Dozens of buses come and go, their airhorns shrieking and engines revving. Since nothing is ever replaced until it breaks, none of these buses—with their bald tires, worn brakes, missing mufflers, rattletrap bodies resting on their axles from overweight, and God alone knows what internal defects—would ever be permitted on an American highway.

The coolie sets my bag before a counter where people shove one another to get tickets. I manage to get the ticket-walla's attention. He's in no hurry. He calmly ignores the mob's urgent shouting.

“Vrindaban!” I tell him. “One ticket.”

“Vrindaban?” He notices my kantha beads and japa-mala and gives a red, betel-stained smile. “Achha! Hare Krishna!”

I join my hands together. “Namaste.” This unexpected gesture impresses him so much that he abandons the counter and escorts me to the Mathura bus, one of the worst looking of the lot.

“Hare Krishna, Hare Rama,” he says. I give him four rupees for the ticket, and he makes sure that the coolie puts my luggage beside my seat. “Bus leaving in just twenty minutes. After three hours—Mathura. Then tonga to Vrindaban. Seva Kunj?”

“Yes,” I say. “Radha Damodar Temple.”

“Bhaktivedanta Swami,” he says, approving. “Sadhu. Guru.” He closes his eyes devoutly, letting me know that it’s a privilege to help His Divine Grace in whatever small way.

He leaves me with the warm feeling that I’m being cared for. I’m not just a tourist en route to the Taj Mahal, like most Westerners breezing by Mathura and Vrindaban on the Taj Express. So intent are they in photographing that monument to a woman that they are unaware of passing India’s spiritual center. My kantha beads and destination distinguish me as an anomaly, and people stare and wonder.

“India is a land of extremes,” I once read in a travel book. And how true! Mountain and desert, heat and cold, drought and monsoon, rich and poor, beauty and ugliness, love and hate, courtesy and rudeness, disregard and unmotivated helpfulness—all exist side by side, alternating like sun and shadow.

The bus crowds up quickly. All the seats are taken, and then the aisles are filled. The driver garlands a picture of Lord Krishna on a little dashboard altar. Incense is lit, and I can smell the fragrant jasmines from the garland. Old women in saris push their way into the aisle, shoving mysterious bundles before them. The driver revs the engine and lays on the airhorn. Vendors of fruits and peanuts fight to get off as last-minute passengers fight to get on.

The shoving becomes more hectic. Someone pounds on the back of the bus to alert the driver that the way’s clear. Airhorns blast a fanfare like doomsday trumpets. Exhaust pours through the windows, and passengers cover their faces with shawls and handkerchiefs. We bumble into the stream of southbound traffic.

We take the Mathura road south past Hamayun’s Tomb and shady mango trees. Along the roadside, turbaned Sikh schoolboys kick a soccer ball back and forth. Police in brown khaki shorts ride by on bicycles. Rickshas park along the roadside, their seats filled with old tires and sacks stuffed with cotton. From ox-drawn carts, vendors sell bananas and oranges to office workers waiting for buses.

We enter the industrial slum of Faridabad, and traffic becomes even more formidable: bullock wagons, camel carts, mule teams, elephants, and creeping dump trucks with workers standing atop tons of sand, their bandannas flapping, their dark, sinewy skin covered with dust.

I marvel at the chaos along the highway: workers clustered around brick factories and steel mills; men and boys at water pumps, dousing themselves with buckets and lathering

up. The factories spawn slums where thousands of families live elbow to elbow in huts built with burlap and cardboard. Teams of water buffalo wallow in greenish ponds beneath date palms stripped of fruit.

Faridabad is a fairly recent nightmare in Indian history, arising where no less than eight distinct cities—from Indraprastha to British New Delhi—have thrived on the fringe of the Great Indian Desert. Here, some Urdu poet even engraved on the walls of the Diwan-I-Khas: “If there is a paradise on earth, this is it, this is it, this is it.”

I remember the time five years ago, sitting on a bench on New York’s Lower East Side, Srila Prabhupada observed: “There’s a small speck covering your pure consciousness, and when it is gone, you will see this as it really is—as Vaikuntha.”

Gradually the traffic thins out. The four-lane highway becomes two-lane, and the air begins to clear. Slums and factories give way to small parcels of land where crops are cultivated by oxen with long sweeping horns. The farms are separated by low stone walls, and peasants live in mud huts shaded by banyans.

I gaze out the window, absorbing all I can of the scenes. Then I suddenly become aware that I’m being observed. I look up to see curious eyes studying me. When I return the stares, a few people look away, but others stare all the harder. Eventually, more eyes turn away, but a few diehards continue to scrutinize me. I look back out the window.

When Lord Chaitanya Mahaprabhu first journeyed to Vrindaban, He danced and chanted in ecstasy through the forests. A peacock trumpeting or a cowherd boy playing on a flute would send Him into a trance. As He walked barefoot from holy place to holy place, He would chant the Hare Krishna maha-mantra, and the deer and tigers would chant along with Him. An insignificant stream would remind Him of the holy River Jamuna. In His ecstasy He would ask even the birds and plants, “Have you seen Krishna?”

Since then, the iron age of Kali has progressed five hundred years, and I travel like an animal crammed in an iron box. The airhom shrieks to all living entities to get out of the way or perish.

My fellow passengers are not renown philosophers or intellectuals. They all fulfill some simple role in life as farmers, artisans, tailors, vendors of oranges and peanuts, menders of footwear, potters, construction workers, ox drivers, masons, and mango peelers. Yet somehow they were born Brijbasis—residents of the land of Krishna. From the cradle they were taught to consider Krishna as their special Friend. Out of respect, they have given the front seat to a couple of sadhus, who recite japa intently, their eyes half closed, their hands fingering tulasi beads.

We pass from the state of Haryana into Uttar Pradesh, and the road turns from macadam to a poorly maintained tar. The fields of Uttar Pradesh are not as well cultivated, but they are more lush and beautiful. I notice more shrubs, eucalyptus, and neem. Pampas grass, its silver plumes reaching ten feet high, grows wild along the roadside.

A few brick houses, a temple, and a watertower appear on the horizon. We turn off the main highway and enter the town of Kosi, entrance to the Mathura district. Our arrival sparks a chorus of bus station vendors offering oranges and roasted peanuts. Flies hover

around tins of jelebis—sweet, syrupy, pretzel-shaped fritters. From the windows, passengers buy fried nuts mixed with noodles and sprinkled with chili powder. A group of ragamuffin kids beneath my window demands my attention. They give me their most pathetic looks and beg for rupees. Why so miserable? Just nearby, Lord Balarama sat and waited for His brother Krishna.

Six miles after Kosi, we approach the village of Chatta, once called Chatraban because the gopis held a parasol (chatra) over Krishna's head there. During the 1857 rebellion against the British, most of the village was burned to the ground. Many stone chatras used to surmount the high-arched gateways of Chatta's caravanserai and could be seen from afar, but today only two are visible atop the remains of the red sandstone walls.

Vedic kings built chatras not only for their architectural beauty but to attract sages, who would remain under them for weeks, giving spiritual discourses for the benefit of king and kingdom. Now those days are past. On the main highway are seen only a few mud huts and chai stalls advertising Panama cigarets and Limca soda.

Twenty minutes down the road, past cornfields and sugar cane crops, a paved secondary highway branches off to the left. A small sign announces: VRINDABAN 5 KM. It's the direct route. I strain to see temple spires, but my vision is blocked by shrubbery and pampas grass. There's no public transport at this junction. It's necessary to ride on to Mathura and then backtrack.

Distant banyan and neem trees spread joyous leaves beneath a clear blue sky. Strange that there's no sign of the Jamuna here. It must lie just beyond those sugar cane fields.

Jaya Radhe, jaya Krishna, jaya Vrindavana

Sri Govinda, Gopinatha, Madana Mohana.

“All glories to Radha and Krishna and the divine forest of tulasi. All glories to Sri Govinda, Gopinatha, and Madana Mohana.”

After five more miles, we arrive at the perimeter of Mathura. From the main highway we can see the city buildings—two and three stories tall. Aurangzeb's mosque dominates the skyline. The population grows denser as small farms give way to clusters of mud huts, and side streets empty onto the main highway. Cobblestone lanes teem with children, mangy dogs, cows, goats, and pigs.

Only within the past hundred years has the population—now exceeding 130,000—destroyed Mathura's idyllic atmosphere. In the 1880s, deer were so numerous that one could hardly travel a mile without seeing a herd bound across the road. At that time, the cows of Mathura outnumbered human beings, and over half of the district engaged in agriculture. The very name “math,” meaning “to churn,” connotes a place rich in cows and butter.

Mathura's girls and Gokula's cows

Will never move while fate allows.

This, then, is Mathura!

I feel that I've arrived home. In the United States, I'm a stranger in a strange land. Now, as I look into the astonishing variety of North Indian faces, I sense having known these

people, having lived and died with them aeons before in their ancient villages. At last, I've come to rejoin my spiritual family in the land of Krishna. Vendors call out to me, holding up wooden japa beads and bright saffron gamshas imprinted with the holy Sanskrit names of God. Yes! This is today's Mathura.

CHAPTER 3. A Brief History

Mathura! Birthplace of Lord Krishna. God's hometown. "Muttra! Muttra! Muttra!" the drivers helper cries out. The bus halts at one of the station platforms. Mathura. Muttra. Matura. The British favored the "Muttra" spelling, perhaps because it best approximates the local pronunciation. But this seems as antiquated as "Hindoo." Today, the "Mathura" spelling prevails.

The Skanda Purana dates Mathura's history back to Satya Yuga, more than two million years ago, when Dhruva Maharaj performed austerities here. Srimad Bhagavatam relates that over a million years ago, during the Treta Yuga, the Mathura area was a dense forest inhabited by a giant ogre named Madhu. Being a conceited demon, Madhu named this forest after himself—Madhuban—and bequeathed it to his son, the fierce Lavana. At that time, Lord Rama was ruling the earth as King of Ayodhya. The superhuman Lavana challenged Rama to single combat, but Rama considered Lavana an unworthy opponent and sent His younger brother Satrugna to battle him. After killing Lavana, Satrugna hewed down the woods at Madhuban and founded on its site the city of Madhu Puri. More recent were Lord Krishna's times, only five thousand years ago. Then, the throne of Mathura was occupied by the family of Bhoja, descendants of the great Yadu dynasty. King Ugrasena was the last emperor in this family, and Kamsa was his only son. Although he would have been crowned in due time, Kamsa was so demonic that he imprisoned his father and usurped the throne. Kamsa was no ordinary mortal, but a reincarnation of the demon Kalanemi, who had been killed ages ago by Lord Vishnu Himself.

Kamsa learned of his previous life through the sage Narada. Narada prophesied that Lord Vishnu, as the son of Vasudeva and Kamsa's sister Devaki, would kill Kamsa again. Hoping to thwart destiny, Kamsa imprisoned Vasudeva and Devaki and killed their offspring as soon as they were born. When Devaki became pregnant for the seventh time, the Supreme Lord appeared in her womb in the form of Balarama. By the Lord's own yoga-maya potency, Balarama was transferred from Devaki's womb to that of Rohini, one of the wives of Vasudeva in Vrindaban, and everyone thought that Devaki had a miscarriage.

Devaki's eighth child, Krishna, was not begotten in the womb like an ordinary child. He manifested Himself before Vasudeva and Devaki in an effulgent form colored like a raincloud. He had four arms, and in His hands He held a conchshell, mace, disc, and lotus flower. His hair was long, as black as a raven, and His beautiful dark eyes were shaped like lotus petals. He was dressed in yellow silks, and He wore necklaces, bracelets, earrings, a crown, and other ornaments, all made with precious metals and dazzling jewels. Indeed, the very brilliance of His body lit up all directions.

Devaki feared that Krishna would meet the same fate as her other children. "I understand that this transcendental form is generally seen only by great sages," she said, "but I'm still

afraid. As soon as Kamsa realizes that You're here, he will try to kill You. For now, please, become invisible to our material vision.”

The Lord relieved Devaki's anxiety by assuming His primal two-armed form as Krishna and casting a spell over all the residents of Kamsa's palace. The dungeon guards fell into a deep sleep, and the gates of the dungeon flew open. Vasudeva then picked up Krishna, who now appeared as an infant, and carried Him from Mathura to Gokul on the other side of the River Jamuna. There, while everyone was asleep, he exchanged Krishna with a girl who had just been born to a cowherd king, Nanda Maharaj, and his wife Yasoda. Vasudeva then returned to the prison with the girl.

When Kamsa was informed of the birth, he hurried to the dungeon and seized the newborn infant to dash her upon the stone floor. Instantly, the infant rose into the air and assumed the eight-armed form of Durga, goddess of material nature. “Fool!” said Durga. “You can't kill me. And the child who will kill you is already born.”

It was then that Kamsa began his persecutions, sending forth powerful demons to hunt out and kill Krishna, but Krishna and His brother Balarama easily dispatched them all. Living in the beautiful land of Vrindaban and tending cows, Krishna manifested His transcendental pastimes with His parents and friends, the gopas (cowherd boys) and gopis (milkmaids). Through the ages, these pastimes have given joy to sages, who worship them as replicas of the Lord's eternal activities in the spiritual sky. Dancing with the gopis, herding cows and playing with the other cowherd boys, killing demons and protecting the inhabitants of Vrindaban, Lord Krishna at all times displayed His divine opulences.

When Krishna attained His sixteenth year, He left Vrindaban and went to Mathura. He promptly killed King Kamsa and restored Ugrasena to his throne.

Krishna defended Mathura seventeen times against Jarasanda, the vain king of Maghda (modern Rajgir in Bihar). Finally, Krishna chose to retreat to Dwarka on the coast of modern Gujarat. There He ruled an opulent kingdom. When Mathura fell into Jarasanda's hands, all the palaces and temples of the Yadu dynasty were destroyed and new buildings erected in honor of Jarasanda's conquest. During the Battle of Kurukshetra, Lord Krishna, Bhima, and Arjuna invaded Maghda, killed Jarasanda, and burned his capital. Reportedly, at the site of Lord Krishna's birth, a temple was built by Vajranabha, King of Mathura and son of Lord Krishna's grandson Aniruddha.

Apart from references in the Ramayana and Mahabharata—and the later Puranic accounts, which fix the advent of Kali Yuga and death of Maharaj Pariksit (Arjuna's grandson) at 3042 B.C.—there's no specific historical mention of Mathura until Alexander's crossing of the Indus in 326 B.C.

Though bhakti cults devoted to Lord Krishna are known to have existed in Mathura centuries before Christ, Mathura's Buddhist culture thrived after Emperor Ashoka espoused the faith in the third century B.C. About 175 B.C., Pushyamitra Sunga, a Hindu sun-worshiper whose origin is unknown, repelled a Greek invasion by Demetrios of Bactria and Menander. Pushyamitra occupied Mathura and inaugurated brahminical

resistance against Buddhism. At this time, Patanjali was compiling his Sanskrit grammar. The Yuga Purana of the Gargi Samhita refers to a Greek conquest in 144 B.C.

Then those hateful conquerors, the Greeks, after reducing Saketa [Ayodhya or Oudh], the country of Panchala [the area north and west of Delhi, from the Himalayas to the River Chambal], and Mathura, will take Kusuma-Dhvaja [Pataliputra, modern Patna], and every province will assuredly become disordered.

Beginning in the first or second centuries B.C., the Sakas migrated from the northern passes and established their kingdoms in the Punjab and Mathura. "Saka" was a term given loosely by the Indians to the Afghans and other tribes dwelling in the northwest frontier.

Geographically, north India is most vulnerable to attack. Century after century, soldiers would sweep through the northwest mountain passes and cross the Indus River: Persians, Greeks, and Afghans, the armies of Alexander the Great, Mahmud of Ghazni, Timur, and Babur. Nothing could discourage the hordes from Central Asia. They crossed the Indus and took the route of least resistance, avoiding the scorching desert of Rajputana and entering the fertile Ganges and Jamuna plains, rich alluvial land capable of sustaining great armies. The Ganges and Jamuna flowed through India's spiritual and artistic center, its heart's core, a valuable place for a conqueror to obtain and hold. Here indeed was the seat of empires.

The Buddhist sculptures of Sarnath and Mathura date from the reign of Kanishka in the second century A.D. They include gracious lifesize carvings of standing Buddhas and bodhisattvas whose faces and delicate flowing robes combine the best of the Greek influences with Indian art. Like Ashoka before him, Kanishka dedicated himself to the spread of Buddhism, though his ancestors were Zoroastrians. Architecture also flourished under his reign and that of his successors, and many fine buildings lined Mathura's streets. Indeed, Mathura attracted Buddhist pilgrims from as far away as China. In 400 A.D., Fa Hian journeyed to India in search of ancient Buddhist texts. He noted that most citizens of Mathura were staunch Buddhists. There were no less than twenty Buddhist monasteries, some stupas, and three thousand Buddhist monks.

Chandragupta founded the great Gupta dynasty in 320 A.D. He ruled from Pataliputra, and his son Samudra added Mathura to the Gupta empire. His grandson, Chandragupta Vikramaditya, built a great temple at Lord Krishna's birthplace, and this temple stood until the advent of the Muslims in 1018. With the Guptas dawned a Hindu renaissance, a golden age of music, sculpture, painting, and architecture. A partial breakup of the empire in 480 was precipitated by an invasion of nomadic Huns pouring in from central Asia. With the death of Harsha in 647, the empire disintegrated into small kingdoms whose histories are unknown.

In the seventh century, Hwen Thsang visited Mathura. He noted that five temples had been erected to Vedic deities and that the number of Buddhist monks had declined to two thousand. "The people [of Mathura] are soft and easy-natured," wrote Hwen Thsang, "and take delight in performing meritorious works with a view to a future life." At that time, the soil was fertile, and grain grew abundantly. Cotton of a fine texture was

cultivated, and there were great forests of mango trees. Hwen Thsang even described the two different types of mango: the large, which remains green, and the small, which turns yellow as it ripens.

By the ninth century, all the Buddhist edifices in Mathura had been destroyed. Once again Mathurans sought shelter in the authority of the Vedas, which had been rejected by Buddha. This change is generally attributed to the influence of Shankaracharya's teachings. Shankara's exact dates are unknown, but most scholars place him in the eighth or ninth century. In any case, his Vedantic doctrine succeeded in weakening Buddhism in India by the ninth century. The Muslim invasions of the twelfth century dealt the death blow to Buddhism as an organized religion in India. To escape massacre, Buddhist monks fled to Nepal and Tibet.

In 1018 A.D., Mahmud of Ghazni and his Muslim hordes attacked Mathura. Mahmud's secretary, Mir Alutbi, writes:

A Hindu king named Kulchand was overconfident of his strength, for no one had ever defeated him. He ruled vast territories, owned great wealth, and led a numerous and brave army with huge elephants. When Kulchand saw Mahmud of Ghazni advancing against him, he drew up his army and elephants in a great forest [maha-ban]. Unable to repulse the invaders, the Hindus quitted the fort and tried to cross the broad river [Jamunal. When some 50,000 men had been killed or drowned, Kulchand took a dagger, slew his wife, then killed himself. From this victory, the Sultan Mahmud gained 185 fine elephants, besides other booty. (Tarikh-i-Yamini)

The Muslims quickly proved themselves a destructive force, for their policy was one of systematic plunder and massacre. Mahmud's attack on Mathura was devastating. Vikramaditya's great temple at Krishna's birthsite was destroyed, although Mahmud himself admitted that it must have taken two hundred years to construct. "In the middle of the city there was a temple larger and finer than the rest, which can neither be described nor painted," Mahmud noted. The Deities included "five of red gold, each five yards high, with eyes formed of priceless jewels." After viewing the great temple, Mahmud ordered it and all other Hindu temples in the area "burned with naphtha and fire, and leveled to the ground." Thus he obliterated the grandest monuments of ancient India. When Mahmud died in 1030, his kingdom stretched from Mesopotamia and the Caspian to the Punjab and the northern Jamuna, almost to Delhi itself. Thus he paved the way for the Delhi Sultanate and the Mughal Empire, which would engulf most of the subcontinent.

Despite torture and oppression, most Mathurans remained Hindu, thanks to the almost exclusively brahminical population. It was the low sudra (laborer) caste, as well as the outcastes, that the Muslims managed to convert. Hindu temples were robbed, jewels torn off the Deities, altars desecrated, priests beaten. If temples were left standing, it was because it took too much effort to knock them down.

Mathura's history is almost a total blank during the five hundred years from Mahmud's first attack to the beginning of Akbar's reign (1018-1556). The Hindus tried to live inconspicuously, afraid of provoking their conquerors. They continued to worship in their

impoverished temples and were careful not to display wealth by offering large donations to temples and priests. A jealous Muslim was dangerous indeed. Muslim zealots would sometimes desecrate Hindu holy places by slaughtering cows and defecating in temples. They even made several attempts to change the name of Mathura to Islamabad (or Islampur) and the name of Vrindaban to Muminabad, but the steel will of the Hindus always won out.

In October, 1512, Lord Chaitanya Mahaprabhu arrived at Vrindaban, looking for the site of Krishna's pastimes. Vrindaban was then a thick forest. Only Krishna Himself, in the guise of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, could have discerned the exact locations of His lila. He ordered His principal disciples, the six Goswamis, to excavate the newly discovered sites and build temples there. That Lord Chaitanya did this during the height of the Muslim persecutions testifies to His fearlessness and supernatural abilities. The Goswamis also displayed great bravery by following Lord Chaitanya's orders and going to Vrindaban during the reign of a series of fanatical sultans.

Examples of Muslim cruelty at this time were recorded by Abdullah in *Tarikh-i-Daudi*: Sultan Sikandar Lodi [1488-1516] was so zealous a Muslim that he utterly destroyed many places of Hindu worship and left not a single vestige remaining. He entirely ruined the shrines of Mathura and turned their principal temples into serais and colleges. Their stone images were given to the butchers to serve them as meat-weights, and all the Hindus in Mathura were strictly prohibited from shaving their heads and beards and performing their ablutions. He thus put an end to all Hindu rites there.

In contrast was the enlightened reign of Akbar (1556–1605). Akbar tried to fuse the best of all cultures. Although he was illiterate, he would invite Hindu sages to his court to recite the slokas of Ramayana and Mahabharata. Akbar's religious tolerance permitted a flourishing of temples, particularly in Vrindaban. In 1573, Akbar even paid the Goswamis a visit, and they led him blindfolded into the sacred vrinda groves at Nidhuban, where Lord Krishna and Radha had rested after the rasa dance. There, surrounded by sacred tulasi trees, the emperor experienced a vision of such intensity that he proclaimed Vrindaban to be holy ground indeed. He therefore supported the Hindu kings, who, at the request of the Goswamis, decided to erect a series of magnificent buildings in homage to Lord Krishna.

The varied architectural styles reflecting Akbar's own eclectic views were successfully combined in the temples of Govindaji, Madana Mohana, and Gopinath. The temples of Keshava Dev at Krishna's birthsite, and Radha Ballabha and Jugal Kishore in Vrindaban, were built during the reign of Akbar's son, Jahangir (1605-1627). Jahangir more or less followed his father's policy of religious tolerance, but the next emperor, Shah Jahan (1628-1658), reverted to barbaric cruelty, trying to stamp out everything non-Muslim. His son was the cruelest tyrant of all—Aurangzeb.

Aurangzeb (1659-1707) was a compulsive destroyer of Hindu temples. He was so demoniac that Hindus still consider him a reincarnation of Kalayavana, the demon who pursued Krishna and was burned to ashes by the glance of the sage Muchukunda. Like

Kamsa, Aurangzeb was so eager to seize the throne that he imprisoned his own father. Shah Jahan died captive in the fort at Agra, within view of his beloved Taj Mahal. Whenever Aurangzeb saw a Hindu temple, he quickly thought of reasons to knock it down. He leveled the top stories of Vrindaban's Govindaji Temple because he wanted nothing higher than his own palace in Mathura. Deities were stripped of their jewels and taken to Agra, where they were buried under the steps of a mosque "so that Muslims might trample upon them forever." In 1669, using a Jat peasant rebellion as an excuse, he razed the great 250-foot high Keshava Dev Temple, which had replaced Vikramaditya's temple, destroyed by Mahmud, and also another Krishna temple built in 1150 A.D. and destroyed by Sikandar Lodi. Aurangzeb constructed his own mosque over the ruins of Keshava Dev, and there it still stands.

Rulers following Aurangzeb also dealt cruelly with the Hindus. Mathura was the scene of dreadful slaughter in 1757, when the army of the Afghan chief Ahmad Shah Durrani passed through. In 1759, the Hindus formed the Maratha Confederacy, a powerful alliance to cast off the yoke of oppression, but they were scattered two years later at the Battle of Panipat.

As the Mughal Empire finally broke into conflicting factions, the British began to consolidate the country. In 1803, Mathura became a military station on the line of the British frontier, which then extended to the Jamuna. As soon as the British took over, Mathura was rocked by the most violent earthquake in recorded history (August 31, 1803). Many buildings collapsed, and fissures opened up in fields. The Jama Masjid's gateway cracked, and one minaret fell over.

The British annexed the adjacent kingdom of Bharatpur in 1826, and in 1832 Mathura was made the capital of a new district out of the remnants of the old districts of Agra and Sa'dabad. During the 1857 rebellion, the Mathura sepoys killed a British lieutenant and seized the treasury, but after seven months the rebellion was quelled, and Pax Britannia restored.

When digging the foundation of a new courthouse in 1860, the British discovered a number of Buddhist statues, pillars, and bas reliefs, all executed in the beautiful red sandstone that is so plentiful around Mathura. They also found a pedestal, dating from the first century A.D., of a seated figure called Vasudeva, another name for Krishna.

Since Independence, Hindus have dreamed of restoring Mathura to its former Puranic glory, even planning to build a Radha-Krishna temple adjacent to Aurangzeb's mosque. This temple will replace the Keshava Dev Temple destroyed by Aurangzeb.

Hindus have suffered through nine centuries of oppression. Now they are looking forward to a reawakening of Vedic culture. By bending like the reeds of the great plains about them, they have prevailed.

CHAPTER 4. Road to Vrindaban

I step off the bus, and legions of ricksha-wallas swarm around me, ringing their bells.

“Ricksha, ricksha, sahib? Where going? Vrindaban? Come on.”

These are bicycle rickshas, pedaled by sinewy boys. There are no motor-rickshas in the district. My only option is a tonga—a small, two-wheeled horse-drawn carriage. The horses are hardly bigger than American ponies, and all the poor beasts are quite scrawny.

“Ricksha, ricksha?” the chorus continues, louder and more insistent as they see me considering the tonga. “Where going? Where going? Vrindaban? Radha Damodar? Come on, sahib. Ten rupees only.”

The tonga drivers and ricksha boys understand that most foreigners—uncommon in Mathura-Vrindaban—are now visiting a famous sadhu at the Radha Damodar Temple. Of course, ten rupees for the ten-kilometer trip is outrageous. I stall, and like cats before pouncing, the boys watch my every movement. In the bus station hangs a picture of Krishna as Govinda, the cowherd boy. He’s sitting on a rock in the Vrindaban forest, and in His hand He holds His flute. A river and waterfall flow in the background, and deer, cows, and peacocks cluster around Him.

“Krishna, Govinda,” one of the boys informs me, smiling broadly.

“Hare Krishna, Hare Rama,” another boy says. “Radha Damodar, Seva Kunj. Come on, sahib. Nine rupees only.”

The rickshas are so rickety and my luggage and I so heavy that I choose the tonga.

The driver, an old white-haired man, secures my duffel bag on the footboard. I sit on a narrow bench, and the driver, squatting on a board just below me, cracks the whip. The results are surprising. The skinny little nag snaps to life, jerking forward and breaking into a trot.

The old man starts singing. I try to get comfortable. Where to put my feet? Thanks to the low canvas top, I have to sit with my legs doubled up, my knees almost touching my chin. Gulliver in Lilliput. The horse trots briskly to the Mathura-Vrindaban road. Clip-clop clip-clop. Iron shoes ringing on cobblestones: sounds from the last century. Only yesterday, powerful jet engines were propelling me at least a hundred times faster. Yet I’m impressed with the horse’s lively trot and the driver’s dexterity, maneuvering through herds of goats and cows.

The crowded, winding lanes, the two- and three-story buildings with their grand central archways, ground-floor rooms rented out as shops, the noisy barter, the wrought-iron balconies overhanging the streets, the reticulated tracery carved in the sandstone facades—all give Mathura the atmosphere of a thriving town with some of the ambience of its Vedic days. I think of Lord Krishna’s entrance through the gold and marble city gates. When the women of Mathura heard that Krishna was coming, they dropped everything and ran to the balconies and rooftops to glimpse Him. On seeing Him and His brother Bala!ama walking slowly down the street and smiling, they took Them into their hearts

and embraced Them. The women on the balconies threw flowers so that the Lord's lotus feet would touch the soft petals instead of the hard road. The cowherd boys of Vrindaban followed Krishna and Balarama. To them, Mathura City was Big Town. In his palace, King Kamsa trembled, knowing that Krishna had arrived at last to kill him.

Soon the tonga passes out of the crowded streets and heads across flat fields toward Vrindaban. The straight, two-laned road had at one time been a cowpath. Five hundred years ago, when Rupa and Sanatan Goswamis arrived, Vrindaban was a jungle. Now the road cuts through farmland surrounded by low stone walls. The grass is chomped to the roots by cows and goats, and only the prickly ganger shrubs survive the thorough grazing. Cows seek shelter from the sun under small kadamba (stephanotis) trees.

Although located on the same latitudinal line as central Florida, Vrindaban has no mossy oaks, pecan trees, pines, or palmettos. But there are plenty of bougainvillea and creeper grass, bahera and acacia, banyan and flaming red dhak, tamarind, kadamba, mango, and the medicinal neem.

Three kilometers outside of Mathura, my driver points to a large new temple built of pink sandstone. "Gita Mandir," he says. Then: "Birla Temple," naming the wealthy industrialists who financed it. On one side of the road is a dharmasala, and on the other stands the temple itself, a plethora of spires, lotuses, chakras, and swastikas. Pilgrims check in their footwear at a shoe stall. Sadhus of the Nimbarka sect sit beneath gnarled indrajau trees. They wear red tilak in the form of a "V" on their foreheads. The scene is timeless, as if captured in a Rajput miniature of holymen listening to the glories of Lord Krishna's pastimes.

Timeless too are the big-hipped, barefoot women walking beside the road, balancing clay pots of water on their heads. They walk with a slow but steady gait. Some are young and beautiful, with golden complexions and doelike eyes; others are old, wrinkled, and brown. They all appear quite happy. Some carry wicker baskets filled with fuel for cooking: bundles of twigs and dried cowdung patties. No feminist movement has ever informed them that they're being exploited.

"Mandir," my driver says, pointing to workers carrying bricks up bamboo scaffolds. "New temple. Vishnu temple." Women work alongside the men, placing bare feet slowly and deliberately on each rung of a bamboo ladder. Tiny burros carry sacks of sand to a trough where the bricks are made. Boys put the bricks one by one into baskets on the heads of workers. Some twenty bricks—weighing at least two pounds each—are loaded in the baskets. Remarkably, this work is maintained at the same steady pace from dawn to dusk.

I've heard that when Indians perform such arduous tasks, they keep their consciousness focused about six inches above their heads, leaving the body to function by remote control. They're always carrying, pushing, or pulling loads much heavier than themselves. Perhaps such intense physical hardship helps them attain the brahma-bhuta platform of self-realization: "Aham brahmasmi. I am not this body. I am spirit."

“In India, knowledge that ‘I’m not this body’ belongs to the commonest man in the street,” Srila Prabhupada once said. “It’s no secret. You don’t have to pay some guru to tell you. Everyone knows it.”

The temples grow more numerous as we approach Vrindaban. Most of these temples are quite modest, their spires no taller than ten feet. Their courtyards are surrounded by walls covered with bougainvillea and flaming dhak. In the courtyards stand magnificent banyans, the cutting of which is a crime as serious as the killing of a cow or brahmin. If no temple stands near a banyan, there’s often a small shrine housing a Hanuman image. Hanuman, the popular monkey-devotee of Lord Rama, is the embodiment of spiritual strength. In the service of his Lord, he even carried a mountain from the Himalayas to Sri Lanka and back. Bas-relief sculptures of Hanuman are hardly recognizable, for they are covered with layers of bright orange sindhur, a powder mixed with coconut oil and rubbed on the deity by devotees eager to receive his blessings. The monkeys that scamper about these shrines are always well fed.

Our horse maintains his lively trot all the way. Herds of cows stir up the dust as boys lead them back from the pastures to the goshalas. As we enter Vrindaban township, side streets branch off the main road, leading to temples and ashrams surrounded by walls topped with broken glass to discourage thieves. Monks in bright saffron walk to and fro in the courtyards.

Many pilgrims have come to Vrindaban for the month of Kartik—October-November—some traveling great distances from Calcutta and Bombay. During this time, Lord Krishna’s rasa dance with the gopis is celebrated. Despite inconvenience and expense, the pilgrims come to circumambulate Govardhan Hill, visit Lord Krishna’s birthplace in Mathura, the temples and holy grounds, and walk the parikrama, the dirt path encircling Vrindaban.

There are many elderly purchasers of one-way tickets, widows whose pilgrimage is their final journey. Some hardly seem to have the strength left to walk. Centuries past, such widows did not wander alone through holy towns. They would throw themselves on their husband’s funeral pyre to join him in the next world—the rite of suttee. The British, shocked by this ancient ritual, outlawed suttee in 1829, claiming it barbaric. Indeed, widows were sometimes pushed into the fire by relatives for financial reasons.

In any case, many widows now crowd the streets and temples, chanting in soft monotones: Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna, Krishna Krishna, Hare Hare, and Radhe Shyam, Radhe Shyam, Hare Krishna, Hare Ram. There are also many old men who have renounced their families and other worldly ties to live out their last days with staff and begging bowl.

My driver parks at the tonga stand next to the Vrindaban bus station. Suddenly, a procession turns the corner. Teenage boys beat drums and clash cymbals. Men carry a wooden litter bearing the empty husk of a body wrapped in white linen and garlanded with marigolds. It’s an old man with a waxen death face, sunken cheeks and yellow-grey pallor. On his last journey, his face is expressionless. “There goes another one,” someone comments. The singing is joyous, and the litter bounces along as the bearers jog to the

cremation ghat. From the comers of the litter, incense billows into the air, and the boys with firewood laugh merrily and dance. It's natural, not tragic, for the shell of life to be incinerated and its ashes scattered upon the Jamuna. To die in Vrindaban is to go to Krishna. The old man has lived out his years and died successfully in the holy dham; therefore his funeral is festive.

From the tonga I transfer to a cycle-ricksha and enter the crowded streets of Loi Bazaar. Here, I get my first view of Main Street Vrindaban, a stretch of small restaurants and shops terminating at Shahji Temple. Under Shahji's gateway sit lepers with nickel-plated cups into which people throw five- and ten-paise coins. The lepers' features melt into one another, like candles that have burned too fast in a strong wind. Their limbs appear like stubs gnawed by dogs. One poor fellow's upper mouth and nose are completely rotted, and his eyes, pleading with passers-by, seem to hang over a ghastly black cavern.

The ricksha boy rings his bell, warning people to make way. Loi Bazaar, the Blanket Bazaar. At one time, blankets were manufactured and sold here. Now Loi Bazaar has become the main commercial area where an amazing variety of religious paraphernalia is sold: japa-mala beads made from vrinda, the tulasi plant that grows at the Lord's lotus feet; beadbags; tilak, small bars of hardened clay from the river banks, used for decorating the body with symbols and the Lord's names; colorful pictures of avatars and demigods and Lord Krishna in His Vrindaban pastimes; articles for Deity worship: bells, brass ghee lamps, bell-metal cymbals, incense holders, trays engraved with the Lord's lotus feet; tiny brass spoons for distributing the water that has washed the Deity's body; incense of sandalwood, jasmine, musk, henna, rose; camphor and dhoop; bell-metal Deities with elaborate jari-work crowns, necklaces, bracelets, silver ankle bells, and beautiful silk clothes; peacock fans and silver-handled chamaras used for fanning Deities; miniature silver flutes for Krishna murtis, and silver thrones and bracelets with tiny bells; gongs from Bengal; wooden tambourine clappers; fold-out bookstands carved in teakwood, and large tomes of Sanskrit literatures; woolen chadars and traditional khadi clothing made from home-spun cotton: kurtas, dhotis, bright saffron gamshas imprinted with the maha-mantra; carved conchshells; Ganges and Jamuna water in tiny 30-gram sealed brass pots; marble candleholders; boxes inlaid with mother-of-pearl designs; Shiva lingas—phallic stones—black, white, and brown, large and small; ivory carvings of Krishna holding a flute to His lips. All these wares and more are sold in little one-room shops open to the street. Clean, white sheets cover the floors. Here, the merchants sit crosslegged and barefoot, sipping tea or tending to customers.

How amazing to find a main street where the Vedas and Puranas line the magazine racks! Here, spiritual life is encouraged and cultivated. Indeed, Loi Bazaar offers all the accoutrements for the making of mahatmas. Its beadbags and tulasi beads dangling across doorways challenge us to leave mundane pursuits and follow the path of pure bhaktas like Srila Prabhupada.

The ricksha boy turns another corner, cycling out of the bazaar onto a side street. Nodding toward one temple entrance, he turns and smiles. "Shyamsundar," he says. "Radha Shyarnsundar. Seva Kunj."

This is the Seva Kunj area, the vicinity of Lord Krishna's rasa dance with the gopis. Once it was forest. Now it's crowded with temples and courtyards.

"Radha Damodar," I say.

"Achha!" says the boy, pedaling harder and ringing his bell to clear the way.

CHAPTER 5. Srila Prabhupada at Radha Damodar

“Radha Damodar Temple, sahib,” the ricksha boy announces as we stop before the modest archway of one of Vrindaban’s holiest shrines. It was here that Srila Prabhupada resided and wrote his first three volumes of Srimad Bhagavatam from 1962 until his voyage to America in 1965.

It was with full faith and surrender that seventy-year-old Prabhupada took up the challenge of his guru, Srila Bhaktisiddhanta Saraswati, to venture forth alone on a freighter to New York. Nearly thirty years after Srila Bhaktisiddhanta’s death, Prabhupada landed in the Brooklyn dockyards with only seven dollars, a pair of cymbals, and a crate of books. The following year, he started preaching Lord Krishna’s message—Bhagavad Gita—in a little storefront on Manhattan’s Lower East Side. For us, that was the apocalyptic year, 1966, the Year of the Guru, the year that changed our lives forever. Now, after six years of nonstop preaching, Prabhupada is back at Radha Damodar, where he lived and studied for so long. Now he is working on Vedic homeground, perhaps the most difficult terrain of all. “A prophet is not without honor, save in his own country,” Jesus Christ warned.

Radha Damodar is a small temple hemmed in by other buildings. Its gateway leads into a courtyard fronting a central altar. Much of the facade of the archway has crumbled, leaving the bare, original bricks exposed. In the interior courtyard are living quarters for the pujaris and also Srila Prabhupada’s quarters. The families in charge conduct daily aratiks to Jiva Goswami’s Deities.

In the back courtyard rest Lord Chaitanya’s principal disciples, interred there since the sixteenth century: the great Rupa Goswami—founder of Govindaji Temple and author of important treatises on bhakti-yoga—and his nephew Jiva Goswami, founder of Radha Damodar. Their samadhis, (tombs) give Radha Damodar its special sanctity.

As I enter, I see wizened old women chanting Hare Krishna and prostrating themselves in the dust of the checkered marble floor. Some circumambulate the temple grounds, touching the pillars and walls of the samadhis to absorb spiritual strength. The stones themselves testify to devotion, having been worn smooth by a million touches of fingers seeking salvation. A tulasi tree in the courtyard is also circumambulated, bowed to, and touched lightly and reverently. The bark is as polished as furniture. Beneath this tree’s ancestor, the great Goswamis sat discussing the pastimes of Lord Krishna.

The wrought-iron gates before the Deities are now closed, but the forms of the Deities in the shadowy alcove can be seen. I set my duffel bag aside and pay obeisances, stretching out on the ground beside the old women.

“Hayagriva!”

I look up to see Yamuna standing in the corridor outside of Srila Prabhupada's rooms. Yamuna, a devotee from Oregon, was a member of the San Francisco temple during the 1967 "good old days," when our Society was just forming. She married Gurudas and helped open the London temple. Three years ago, she sang the lyrics of Brahma Samhita—Govindam-adi-purusam-tam-aham bhajami—in a popular recording produced by George Harrison of the Beatles. Prabhupada liked the song so much that he's incorporated it into our morning ceremonies, at the greeting of the Deities.

"Haribol! Yamuna!" I say. "All glories to Srila Prabhupada!"

She sets down a broom and bucket and washes her hands, then comes over. She wears a white cotton sari and looks quite at home at the Radha Damodar.

"Prabhupada's inside," she says. "He'll be so happy. We've been expecting you."

On the ground outside of Prabhupada's door are assorted footwear: American tennis shoes, rubber flipflops, sandals. The screen door is shut, but within I hear Srila Prabhupada's voice.

"A lot of visitors?" I ask.

"Oh no," Yamuna says. "Just go on in."

I bend down to get through the door and enter a small, sparsely furnished room.

Suddenly, I'm face to face with Srila Prabhupada. He's sitting on the floor behind a low desk piled with books and papers.

"Jai!" he says. "Our Hayagriva has arrived."

I pay dandabat obeisances by prostrating myself and touching his feet with my right hand. Then I place my hand to my forehead. To remember the spiritual master's lotus feet is to remember Krishna. The effect is as cooling as sandalwood.

"Nama om vishnupadaya krishnapresthaya bhutale srimate bhaktivedanta swamin iti namine," I say, offering respects. Then I sit before him, and he smiles.

Although seventy-six, Prabhupada seems as ageless as ever. His head is freshly shaved, and the aroma of mustard-seed oil tells me that he has just received a massage. His complexion is radiant, his eyes clear, his face full and healthy. This is the face that attracted me that day when I was walking down New York's Houston Street and first met him, the face that brought so many young seekers to that little storefront temple on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday nights. For us, his face embodies all the attractive qualities of devotion, for it's a pure, truthful, and compassionate face. It is both happy and grave. It is magnanimous, gentle, and forgiving. It is also determined and self-controlled, and, above all, most learned and intelligent. It's a face not afraid to love and give all in love for Krishna.

Indeed, Prabhupada's face conjures all those virtues that lead to love of Krishna. It's not an ordinary man's face. It transports an entire spiritual fact, the Vedic culture, an atmosphere of bhakti. I first began realizing his potency just by looking at his face.

Whenever I'm Krishna conscious, it makes me joyful. Whenever I'm not, I'm afraid to look at it; it accuses me, makes me ashamed without uttering a word. What power there is in the spiritual master's face! What magnetism! What volumes of wisdom!

"So, when did you come?" he asks, still smiling.

“There were some delays,” I say. “I got into Delhi early yesterday. Thirty hours from New York. Kirtanananda Maharaj and all the devotees at New Vrindaban send their obeisances.”

“So, you’ve come as Professor Wheeler,” he laughs, referring to my black suit.

“Only because you requested it, Srila Prabhupada” I say.

“Yes. That’s very nice. You can speak at our functions and convince many gentlemen to help. They may not listen to us, but an American professor ... oh!” He smiles broadly and looks at me as if I were a Harvard Professor Emeritus instead of a lowly Ohio State instructor.

“By your mercy, even fools can be useful,” I say.

“So, how are you finding Vrindaban?”

“Uh—” I hesitate, as usual feeling very stupid before His Divine Grace. Sitting crosslegged on the floor in front of Prabhupada are my godbrothers—Shyamsundar and Gurudas—an elderly Indian gentleman, introduced as Dr. Kapoor, and two Indian boys. As always, others fall into the periphery in Srila Prabhupada’s presence. Customary greetings and chit-chat with others must wait. “Well, I saw the bazaar on the way from the tonga stand,” I say, aware that my opinion of Vrindaban is bound to be mistaken. “I’m afraid I’m going to need a guide to explain everything.”

“Your old friend Achyutananda is here,” he says. “He can show you around, and you can write up an article for Back To Godhead.”

“I never thought such a place could exist,” I say. “Just passing the bazaar was an experience in Krishna consciousness.”

“I told you,” Prabhupada says. “Remember? On 26 Second Avenue, I was telling you and Kirtanananda and others about this Vrindaban atmosphere, how I was always longing for it there in New York.”

“Even the monkeys here in Vrindaban don’t seem ordinary, Srila Prabhupada,” Shyamsundar says.

“No one born in Vrindaban is ordinary,” Prabhupada says. “It may not be very palatable to hear, but those who live in Vrindaban and commit sinful activities take birth as dogs, monkeys, and hogs here. In this way, by eating the dust of Vrindaban, they become purified, liberated.”

“Are these bodies all awarded for the same offenses,” Shyamsundar asks, “or for different mentalities?”

“Too much sex indulgence means a dog, a monkey, or a pigeon body. Or even the body of a tree. And the hog body is there for one who overeats or eats prohibited food.”

“And what about those men down by the river who smoke ganja all day?” Gurudas asks.

“Oh, they get hippy bodies,” Prabhupada laughs, “with big beards and long hair, and they have to take birth in San Francisco.”

“Well, at least we have a Radha Krishna temple there,” Gurudas says, “so they can take shelter of it.”

“Yes, that is Lord Krishna’s mercy,” Prabhupada says. “We may choose to take it or not, but it’s there. Krishna never deserts His devotees to the forces of maya. Na me bhaktah

pranasyati. ‘My devotee will never perish.’ For hundreds of years, the Muslims tried to stamp out Krishna worship in Vrindaban, Mathura, Jagannatha Puri—practically all of India—but still it’s going on, and the Muslim and British have come and gone. The potencies of the holy dham are greater than any mundane power. Of course, during Muslim times, the Deities had to be hidden, but this does not mean that They need our protection. The Muslims would break the Deities with sticks and then think, ‘Oh, we have killed the Hindu God.’ Of course, this is nonsense. Simply the marble was broken, not the Deity. Foolish men think of the Deity in a limited, mundane way. God manifests Himself in the Deity out of mercy for His devotee, but He is still present in His eternal abode, Vaikuntha, as well as in every atom of the creation. Krishna is all-powerful, His Deity form is indestructible, and His dham possesses all spiritual potencies. There might have been some damage to the temples, but generally the Muslims did not enter Vrindaban. They were afraid.”

“Even today there are very few Muslims in Vrindaban-Mathura,” Dr. Kapoor says.

“Yes,” Prabhupada agrees. “The Brijbasis prefer to die rather than give up their Krishna. Throughout India you’ll find that some of the lower castes—the sudras, or vaishyas, or harijans—will convert to Mohammedanism, but in Vrindaban even the sudra will not give up Krishna, not even for all the gold in the world.”

“Why is that, Srila Prabhupada?” Gurudas asks. “Is it from living in Vrindaban and being so close to Krishna day by day?”

“Yes, that effect cannot be overestimated,” Prabhupada says. “At every turn, you are reminded of Krishna here, and your spiritual strength increases due to that contact. For instance, from ’62 to ’65, when I lived here, I would sit in these rooms and chant Hare Krishna and see the samadhis of Jiva and Rupa Goswamis. Just by thinking of how they wrote, I got courage to write. I would type and cook a little. I lived very simply, content to be in Rupa Goswami’s presence. These samadhis are the best in Gaudiya Vaishnavism. They actually inspired me to go to the West. Now I have hundreds of temples to go to, but I still like it here best of all. What do you think, Hayagriva?”

“I’m glad you invited me here, Srila Prabhupada,” I say.

“But I think the sanitation facilities are not up to your country’s,” he laughs. Then, seriously: “Since 1965, they have not kept the streets very nicely. The sewage is spoiling it all, even the river. Now there’s no place to go bathing.”

“Most people agree that India’s main problem is overpopulation,” I say.

“Nonsense,” Prabhupada says. “Does that mean Krishna can’t supply His children with sufficient food, clothing, and shelter? No. The creation is perfect because it comes from the Supreme Perfect. Om purnam adah purnam idam. The Supreme Perfect has made perfect arrangements for all living entities. The problem is misuse of Krishna’s gifts, misappropriation. Isavasyam idam sarvam. Everything belongs to the Supreme.”

“But why is it, Srila Prabhupada, that here in Vrindaban, Krishna’s devotees also seem to suffer so?” Gurudas asks.

“Suffer? What is that suffering?” Prabhupada says.

“Many don’t have sufficient food. They sleep on the streets and—”

“Who says there’s not sufficient food? Is anyone starving? Just show me one starving man. In any temple a man can go and take prasadam. And as for sleeping, everyone is sleeping. When you sleep, do you know whether you’re on a king’s couch or a stone road? The Goswamis would sleep under a different tree every night, and then for only two or three hours. There’s no problem eating, sleeping, defending, mating. There’s no lack there, no poverty. The only poverty in India today is lack of Krishna consciousness—that’s all.”

“But most tourists are appalled when they come here and see the conditions,” Dr. Kapoor says. He is dressed in a spotless white kurta and pajama pants. “It will take more than your temple at Raman Reti to change all that.”

“Therefore I’m recommending a general program of clean-up, preservation, and restoration,” Prabhupada says. “True, the beautiful temples of the Goswamis—Madana Mohana, Govindaji, especially—are crumbling due to neglect.”

“Sometimes people even use them as stone quarries,” Dr. Kapoor laments.

“So, we must first protect them. Then restore them to first-class condition, install Deities, and conduct daily aratiks. Then many people will come and benefit.”

“Why has Krishna allowed His dham to deteriorate, Srila Prabhupada?” Gurudas asks.

“It has not deteriorated,” he replies.

“Well, you just said that the Goswami temples were neglected.”

“That’s a fact. But Vrindaban has not deteriorated.”

“Most Americans would be shocked to see what I saw this morning,” I say.

“How’s that?” Prabhupada asks.

“Well, for one, they’d consider it unhygienic.”

“Just see. For a materialist, everything is topsy-turvy because his vision is perverted. Beauty and ugliness are in the eye of the seer.”

“But what’s this veneer covering the holy dham?”

“The ugliness that you see here is yoga-maya,” Prabhupada says. “It’s Krishna’s covering. Vrindaban appears this way to drive away the atheists and impersonalists, just as New York attracts them. For a devotee, this Vrindaban is as good as Krishna’s transcendental abode in the spiritual sky-Goloka Vrindaban. But you must have the eyes to see.”

“Transcendental vision,” Dr. Kapoor says.

“Yes, Vrindaban hides herself from the materialist,” Prabhupada says.

“You speak of Vrindaban as a person,” I say.

“In spiritual consciousness, everything is personal,” Prabhupada says. “Even the city of Ravana appeared before Hanuman as a gigantic Rakshashi, and Hanuman knocked her down because she challenged him.”

“Well, I’ve certainly noticed a difference between the consciousness of Delhi and here,” I say. “I couldn’t help but feel it. Still, the poverty—”

“Krishna’s mercy keeps His devotees poor,” Prabhupada says. “Their only wealth is Krishna consciousness. Krishna doesn’t want them diverted by Maya Devi.”

“But I still don’t see how this is as good as Goloka Vrindaban,” I say.

“Then you must try to rediscover Vrindaban,” Prabhupada says. “That you must do. It is a question of consciousness. The real Vrindaban is there in your own heart, hiding herself from you.”

“So how do I go about it?” I ask.

“Just follow the examples of the elevated Brijbasis,” he says, smiling. “For instance, the gopis, the milkmaids of Vrindaban, simply tried to make Krishna happy. That is Krishna consciousness: making Krishna happy. When you love someone, you want to make him happy, right?”

“Right.

“In Vrindaban, everyone is trying to please Krishna: the birds, trees, cows, the river, and all Krishnas associates. It’s not that Vrindaban is only here. We can have Vrindaban everywhere. Krishna is not limited. We should not think that because Krishna is far away in Goloka Vrindaban, He cannot accept what we offer Him. If you offer food with love, Krishna eats. Krishna does not leave Goloka Vrindaban, but His expansion goes and accepts food. This Vrindaban that just happens to appear in India is as worshipable as Krishna. So we cannot offend His dham, His home. If we live in Vrindaban, we are living with Krishna, because Vrindaban is nondifferent from Krishna. There’s no difference between the original Vrindaban and this Vrindaban. Vrindaban is so powerful.”

Again, I feel stupid and confused. I look at Gurudas and Shyamsundar, expecting to see my confusion reflected, but they continue staring at Srila Prabhupada. According to scripture, the original Vrindaban, Goloka Vrindaban, is shaped like the whorl of a lotus and is situated in Vaikuntha, the spiritual sky. In Vaikuntha, there’s no anxiety, no birth, old age, disease or death, and everything partakes of the nature of sat-chit-ananda- eternity, knowledge, and bliss.

I wonder: Are the lepers composed of sat-chit-ananda? Are they actually four-armed demigods in disguise? Do they simply assume their ghastly appearances just to frighten the worldly?

“Srila Prabhupada,” I venture, breaking the brief, thoughtful silence.

“Yes?”

“Now I’m confused.”

“How’s that? I have not explained clearly?”

“Yes, but I don’t understand how this Vrindaban is nondifferent from Goloka Vrindaban.”

“You do not know what ‘nondifferent’ means?” he asks, looking straight at me, his head held back, his posture very erect, like a hatha-yogi’s.

“It means ‘the same as,’” I answer.

“Yes.”

“So ... I can’t quite accept that.”

“Why not?”

“Well, I’m confused because—”

“You must be confused,” he says. “You are not perfect.”

“Well—”

“Are you perfect?” His voice rises, and I sense that I’ve said something offensive.

“No,” I admit.

“Then you must be confused.”

“Well, I’m not the only one,” I say stupidly.

“If you’re not perfect, you must be confused. That’s the only answer.”

“There’s no other?”

“If you are not perfect, how can you get the right conclusion?”

“Most of what you say, I can understand, at least intellectually,” I say. “But this I don’t understand at all.”

“That means you are not completely perfect,” he says. “As far as you are perfect, you understand.”

“I’m afraid I’m far from perfect, Srila Prabhupada.”

“Because your senses are imperfect, you understand in an imperfect way. This means that you must understand from the authorities. Chaitanya Mahaprabhu says that Vrindaban is as worshipable as Krishna.”

“That I can understand,” I say. “What I don’t understand is how this Vrindaban is nondifferent from Goloka Vrindaban. When coming here in the ricksha, I saw many old people, a dead man, and many diseased people, lepers. So, old age, disease, and death exist here.”

“Of course,” Prabhupada says. “Just listen. This is not Goloka Vrindaban. This Vrindaban is a replica, and therefore nondifferent, but because it’s manifest in the material universe, the laws of material nature are working here. When we worship Deities in the temple, everyone can see that They are made of stone, metal, or wood, but still the Deities are not different from Krishna. They are Krishna. We certainly are not worshiping stone and wood, though to the naked eye it may appear so. When Chaitanya Mahaprabhu went to Puri and saw Lord Jagannatha, He immediately fell down and said, ‘Here is Krishna.’ It’s a matter of vision. Now do you understand?”

“Yes,” I say. “My eyes deceive me.”

“Not just you,” Prabhupada laughs. “Everyone in a madhouse is more or less a lunatic, and everyone in this material universe is blind to Krishna. Otherwise, no one would be here.”

“Another point I don’t understand,” I say, “is Krishna’s departure from this earth. You once said that when He leaves, He takes His paraphernalia with Him to the spiritual sky.”

“Yes. When a governor comes and goes from a circuit house, he takes his things with him but leaves the empty house behind. Similarly, when Krishna comes to this planet, He comes here. This Vrindaban is Krishna’s house. Therefore it’s as good as Goloka Vrindaban.”

“Will He come again in this age?”

“No, not in Kali Yuga. But when He comes, this is the place.”

“But it wasn’t like this when He was here, was it?”

“That may be,” Prabhupada says patiently, “but that doesn’t mean it’s less important. Rest assured that those who are responsible for the upkeep of Vrindaban will have to suffer by taking birth as dogs and hogs here. Still, they are not the losers. Vrindaban is even more

potent because the dogs and hogs here are going to be liberated. Life here is not polluted because even the most polluted are being purified.”

“I still don’t understand why Krishna has allowed His own abode to deteriorate,” I say.

“It is not deteriorating,” Prabhupada says firmly. “If even the dogs are going to be liberated, how has it deteriorated?”

“But it’s not nicely kept up.”

“Not nicely kept up in your eyes, but your vision is imperfect.”

“Not only mine,” I persist.

“No. Everyone’s. But even if everyone says that two plus two equals five, is that a fact?”

“No.”

“Therefore the majority opinion may be mistaken. You must take shelter of a perfect authority like the bona fide guru. Because he never contradicts Shastra, the guru’s opinion outweighs all others. If guru says that grass is blue and sky is green, his opinion must still be accepted. We must accept the fact that our vision is so imperfect that we are mistaken about the color.”

“People are often mistaken about Vrindaban in the beginning,” Gurudas says.

“Yes, because they are trying to find fault with Vrindaban,” Prabhupada says. “But a devotee knows that Vrindaban is Vrindaban. ‘England, with all your faults, I love you still.’ So, even if the people living in Vrindaban do not appear very pious, they are most fortunate because they live in the land of Krishna. Jaya jaya vrindavana-vasi yata jana. All glories to all the inhabitants of Vrindaban! It is not said that only the devotees here are glorified. Everyone! Even the hogs. It is more fortunate to be born in Vrindaban than in a rich or aristocratic family, because in the next life, one will go back to Godhead. Both hogs and devotees here are liberated, indiscriminately. Unless one is a devotee in a previous life, he cannot take birth here. He may take a hog’s or dog’s body for a few years, but that’s no impediment. He is simply getting rid of sinful reactions.”

“Srila Prabhupada, are people here liberated even if they don’t have a bona fide spiritual master?” Gurudas asks.

“Yes,” Prabhupada says, “because Vrindaban is directly under Krishna’s supervision. Krishna is their spiritual master.”

“I think it’s better to have you as a spiritual master,” Gurudas says, “than to be born in Vrindaban.”

“That’s a Vaishnava attitude,” Prabhupada smiles. “I remember that wherever my Guru Maharaj went, Vrindaban was there also. Since the bona fide spiritual master carries the Vrindaban atmosphere with him, then it’s better to be with him.”

“We’re in the best situation of all, Prabhupada,” Shyamsundar says. “We have both you and Vrindaban.”

“I’m simply Vrindaban’s messenger,” he says humbly, his demeanor suddenly very serious and reflective. “Vrindaban is revealed in the heart of the sincere devotee. In reality, it is not on any map, nor is it part of any country. It was in Vrindaban that I first began writing, not for name and fame, but because my Guru Maharaj told me, ‘Spread the gospel of Krishna in the English language.’ Although he gave that instruction in 1935,

I hesitated, not knowing how to go about it or how to write. Then, twenty years later, my Guru Maharaj began appearing in my dreams, telling me to give up householder life and go to Vrindaban. After several of these dreams, I knew that the time had come. My children were grown, and I could leave my wife in their care. So, I came here, and eventually, by Krishna's arrangement, stayed at this most sanctified place, Radha Damodar. It was here that I began writing. I thought, 'It may be published, or it may not be published—that does not matter. I will write for purification, that's all.'

"Actually, it was my Guru Maharaj speaking through me. But I was not very expert at writing, as he was. Oh, he was a most erudite man, most refined and expert, a gentleman, a Vaikuntha man. Because I had never written before, there were so many grammatical discrepancies, yet I had to write. The subject matter was so important, so urgent. So I wrote those first three volumes of Srimad Bhagavatam, the First Canto. All of our philosophy, everything you need to know, is in those first three volumes. By Krishna's grace, I managed to collect money to get them printed, and I took them with me on the boat to New York I didn't go to America empty-handed. I went with the complete philosophy of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, written in these rooms, inspired by the Goswamis. That's what is pushing this Krishna consciousness movement. If I have been successful, it's because I have delivered my Guru Maharaj's message intact, without change or deletion. That is parampara. The bona fide guru is like the postman delivering a message. He doesn't open the mail and write his own opinion. You may like the message or not, take it up or not—I have done my duty. I have delivered it. And it all began here. Therefore these Radha Damodar rooms are the hub of the wheel of the spiritual universe."

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Bells ringing in the courtyard signal that it's time for evening aratik, and by his expression, Prabhupada indicates that our darshan has come to an end. Someone starts beating gongs: boing-boing, boing-boing, boing-boing. A conchshell blows, and I hear a strange, high yodeling sound: oddle-odde-odde-oodle-odde. I look at Gurudas and Shyamsundar, who are laughing at my surprise.

"What's that?" I ask.

"Aratik," Prabhupada says. "You may attend."

"But that strange noise?"

"The women do it," Gurudas says. "It's supposed to be an auspicious vibration."

We pay obeisances to Srila Prabhupada and go out into the courtyard. By dim lights hanging along the wall, I can make out a group of old women dressed in faded saris. They leave their sandals under the archway of the main gate and enter barefoot, ringing a bell at the gateway. Then they prostrate themselves before the altar, sometimes rolling over on the marble floor, and then arise, disheveled and dusty. With hands joined in supplication, they stand before the Deities and chant:

kiba jaya jaya gorachander aratiko sobha
jahnavi-tata-vane jaga-mana-lobha

“All glories, all glories to the beautiful aratik ceremony of Lord Chaitanya. This Gaura aratik is taking place in a grove on the banks of the Jahnavi [Ganges] and is attracting the minds of all living entities in the universe.”

On the altar, a young pujari wearing saffron robes offers the Deities henna incense, a camphor lamp, water, and a handkerchief. The Deities shine golden in the dim light. Their eyes—black dots on white almonds—seem to leap out at us. They are dressed in pink velvet robes and almost smothered in gold and silver jari work, white and green rhinestone crowns, armbands, anklets, and necklaces. They are surrounded by bouquets of marigolds and night jasmine.

The old women watch every movement of the pujari, as if waiting for a slip-up, but he conducts the ritual flawlessly. The chanting reaches its climax. A peacock fan and chamara are waved gently before the Deities. Then the pujari blows a conchshell, reminding everyone of Lord Krishna’s chariotting Arjuna into battle and blowing His transcendental conchshell, Panchajanya, heralding the victory of the godly over the demonic.

The pujari kneels and wipes up the floor with a wet cloth. When the gates to the altar swing closed, we again offer obeisances. Then the old women resume their circumambulation, which seems designed to lead them blissfully to the threshold of death, to the moment when the machinery of the body runs completely down.

“Hayagriva!” Yamuna calls from the gateway. “Look who’s here!”

I turn to see Achyutananda Swami enter the courtyard. I last saw him in September, 1967, as he was departing for India. That was just months after Prabhupada suffered his near-fatal stroke in New York. Prabhupada returned to India to consult Ayurvedic physicians, and Kirtanananda accompanied him. Then Achyutananda joined them in Vrindaban. We were all afraid that Prabhupada had returned to India to die. Prabhupada gave Kirtanananda the renounced order of sannyas that September, and soon afterwards Achyutananda also took sannyas. They were the first sannyasis in the movement.

To everyone’s surprise, Achyutananda remained in India to preach. When I last saw him, he was a slender, curly-haired, seventeen-year-old jazz flutist. Now, his head is shaved, and he must weigh over two hundred pounds. Indians believe that they amass spiritual merit by offering mountains of food to sannyasis.

“All Krishna prasadam!” he says, slapping his stomach. “Bliss!”

“Jai! You look like Chaucer’s monk,” I say, offering obeisances.

“I can’t help it,” he says. “People keep stuffing me with gulabjamuns and rasmalai.”

One day in 1966, at my Mott Street apartment in New York, Achyutananda demonstrated a very advanced yogic exercise by expanding and contracting his stomach muscles through breath control. I was impressed to see one half of his stomach pushed out while the other half was drawn in, and then vice versa, back and forth, pectorals rippling. But Prabhupada discouraged hatha-yoga.

“You’ve seen Prabhupada?” Achyutananda asks.

“Yes. He looks wonderful. The Vrindaban climate must be very good for him.”

“Oh, Hayagriva, you’re going to love Radha Damodar,” Gurudas says, coming over. “Living here is a real Goswami experience. Nothing’s really changed in the last five hundred years.”

“So it seems.”

“Electricity first came in 1963,” he says. “Before that, there were just candles and gaslights. No radios, no fans, no Kali Yuga.”

“Now’s the best time of year,” Achyutananda says. “Pleasant days and nights, and no mosquitoes. Radha Damodar starts pulsating with kirtans at 2:30 a.m. It really comes alive. The rest of the year, no one comes.”

“Just show me where to put my luggage,” I say.

“You can stay up on the roof with Pradyumna and Sruta Kirti,” Gurudas says. “Come on, I’ll get you a bed and blanket. Charpoy’s rent for fifty paise a night, and clean blankets for a rupee.”

“Fair enough,” I say.

Gurudas slings my duffel bag over his shoulder, and I follow him and Achyutananda up a narrow brick staircase to the rooftop. Half of the rooftop is taken up by a two-room concrete structure with a stucco roof. The other half is open to the stars. A two-foot high wall keeps the unwary from falling onto the street below.

“Put your luggage in my room for now,” Gurudas says, “and I’ll see about getting you a bed set up.”

Gurudas goes back downstairs, and Achyutananda and I sit on the wall and look down at the evening street scene. Beneath a dim street lamp stands an old man chanting, his eyes closed. His voice gets sadder and sadder as he sings. I listen until Shyamsundar appears at the top of the stairs.

“Hayagriva, Prabhupada wants to see you,” he says.

“Coming,” I say, and hurry down to Prabhupada’s room. Through the screen door I can see Prabhupada on the floormat behind his desk. He’s chanting on his beads, and his face appears very grave, as if displeased. He’s sitting alone. For the first time in my life, I’m afraid to face him, but I know that now I mustn’t try to hide what he must know. Without looking up or changing his expression, he calls my name. I enter and fall before him.

“Oh, Prabhupada! Maya is so strong.”

“Yes, my dear boy,” he says gently. “I’m always praying to Krishna to protect us.”

CHAPTER 6. Darshan

Above Srila Prabhupada's head hangs a color print of Lord Krishna in a wooden frame. The frame itself is garlanded with red flowers called dhak in Sanskrit, a word meaning "on fire," and small white flowers called arni, which look and smell like honeysuckle. "I have never felt that my Guru Maharaj has been absent from me for a moment," Srila Prabhupada says. "I'm always aware that he's present in my heart."

I sit before him on the floor, ashamed—and yet not ashamed enough. I'd broken a couple of the rules and regulations; moreover, knowing my own weaknesses, I'll break them again. If I were truly ashamed or repentant, I'd be so horrified that I'd rather die first. My bad habit of sinning, repenting, then sinning again is rooted in the bad-Catholic tradition. I remember high school days when I knelt in the confessional before Father O'Farrell. "Bless me, father, for I have sinned. It has been one week since my last confession. I have yielded to impure thoughts and acts. ..."

And Father O'Farrell, leaning his big furrowed head on one hand, and fingering his rosary on the other hand, said, "My boy, the monkeys and baboons do that sort of thing, you know."

Christ said to forgive the sinner "seven times seventy" times, but Srila Prabhupada has said, "Aren't you ashamed to go back and say, 'Forgive me,' over and over? This is simply taking advantage of the Lord's mercy. It's showbottle, that's all. You sin once, I forgive. You sin twice, I forgive. You sin three times, I don't forgive. Punishment must be there for rectification, otherwise rascals will keep on sinning."

I look at the color print of Lord Krishna. I'm ashamed to look directly at Srila Prabhupada. He sits crosslegged, fingering his beads and chanting. I want him to speak, to tell me where to go from here. I look at Lord Krishna and pray for guidance. "What is man, that Thou art mindful of him?" Krishna sits on a rock, one lotus foot tucked behind the other ankle, His yellow dhoti drawn up above His knee. One arm is around a calf, one hand holds His flute. A garland hangs around His neck. He looks off into the distance, as if waiting for someone. Perhaps He's at Raman Reti, waiting for Balarama to come and play. Or maybe He's waiting for His nightly meeting with Radharani.

Srila Prabhupada is also wearing a garland. On his forehead is sandalwood paste. His golden hand suddenly turns upward in the dim light.

"Krishna and light," he says softly. Then, turning his hand downward: "Maya and shadow." I close my physical eyes and see in my mind's eye his image and his flickering golden hand, then open my eyes again. "Light or shadow," he says. "Krishna or maya. It's your choice which side is up. It all depends on your desire."

"I've come to Vrindaban because I want Krishna," I say, "but I'm torn. It's like two people sitting here: Hayagrivas and Howard, Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde."

"So, let the maya go. Howard is born with this body and dies with this body. Hayagrivas is the eternal personality of the soul, the real you."

“I think at death he turns back into Dr. Jekyll,” I say.

“That depends on your thoughts at death.”

“Then I have to learn to think of Krishna.”

“That’s this bhakti-yoga process,” says Prabhupada, “the science of the soul, the science of God. Now, in the mornings, I’m lecturing on this Nectar of Devotion. So you must come and listen and write down your realizations.”

“My problem’s that the false ego won’t stay dead,” I say, “even though I want him to. Why?”

“That’s also Arjuna’s question,” Prabhupada says. “He asks Krishna, ‘Why does a man sin, as if forced to?’ And what is Krishna’s reply?”

“Kama,” I say. “Lust.”

“The eternal enemy of the world,” Prabhupada says, “the enemy within. Conquer him, and you’re in Vaikuntha, you’re in light. Surrender to him, and you’re in hell, in darkness. That means rebirth.”

“It seems that I keep condemning myself to hell.”

“This bhakti-yoga is practical, scientific, proved,” says Prabhupada. “If it doesn’t work, then you should examine yourself to see that you’re following properly. Do you think that you can try to cheat Krishna without His knowledge?”

“No,” I say.

“What do you think omniscience means?”

Again, I look down at the floor. I remember one of my grandmother’s favorite quotes:

“There’s always an eye upon you.” It made me feel uneasy. Even as a child, I used to hate the idea.

“It means all-knowing, Srila Prabhupada,” I answer.

“Krishna knows your innermost thoughts,” Prabhupada says. “Nothing is secret to Him. Even if you think you can hide your sins from your guru, how long do you think you can go on committing them? Do you think your guru can’t tell which disciple is cheating and which isn’t?”

“No, Srila Prabhupada.”

I resist the urge to hide. I remember The Picture of Dorian Grey. All of Dorian’s sins were manifest on a canvas portrait, which he kept hidden. Although the aging Dorian’s face remained youthful and unblemished, his hidden portrait was ghastly. And it was Freud who noted that a man’s guilt oozes out from every pore of his body.

“Even an ordinary man can often tell when you’re lying,” Prabhupada continues. “What to speak of Krishna or your guru?”

“I’m sorry, Srila Prabhupada.”

“Within your heart, Krishna as Paramatma is witness. Sarvatah pani-padam tat sarvato ’ksi-siro-mukham. ‘His hands, legs, eyes, and faces are everywhere, and He is hearing everything. He is the Supersoul.’ Krishna within every atom is witness. Krishna witnesses in so many ways. How do you think you can avoid Him?”

“I don’t. But I always think that since Krishna knows everything, He understands everything.”

“Yes. He knows you better than you know yourself. Krishna not only knows everything about this life; He knows all your previous lives as well. ‘Arjuna, I can remember all the births we have passed together, but you cannot.’ That is the difference between God and the conditioned living entity—forgetfulness.”

“Sometimes I get discouraged, Srila Prabhupada,” I say. “I feel like the mouse before the moon.”

“Of course, it’s impossible by your own endeavor. If you want to see the king, there are so many impediments. But if the king wants to see you, there’s no problem. If you take one sincere step toward Krishna, He’ll take ten toward you. But to get Him completely, you have to surrender completely. As soon as you’re purified, you see nothing but Krishna. Devotional service is the purification process, but you must be patient.”

“I’m afraid I’m very impatient, Srila Prabhupada. It’s a family trait.”

“Oh?” he smiles. “You Americans are spoiled children. Krishna consciousness is not an LSD pill you can purchase for five dollars. No. Great sages undergo penances for many lifetimes to attain Krishna. But now in Kali Yuga, Lord Chaitanya Mahaprabhu has given us the easiest method: chanting. It doesn’t even matter what name of God you chant. This is not a sectarian process. The Lord has millions of names, and His transcendental potencies are in all of them.”

Drifting in from the street are the cries of the old women finishing their evening rounds:

“Radhe Shyam! Radhe Shyam!” I would have been luckier to have been born one of them. Peasants, simple folk, the earth’s meek and humble—they never seem to have difficulty being God conscious. They but see a Deity, sadhu, temple, or picture of Krishna, and their eyes brighten in ecstasy.

I look up and see that Prabhupada is laughing at me. In the picture above him, Krishna also seems amused.

“What do you think, Hayagriva? Is this not an easy process?”

Again, I’m at a loss for words. “You make it sound easy,” I say. “It’s easy when I’m with you.”

“But it’s not so easy?”

“No,” I say. “Actually, it’s very difficult.”

“If a child can do it, what’s the difficulty? Anyone can chant, dance, take prasadam.”

“It’s the rules,” I say.

“If you chant, the rules are easy. They’re only difficult because you stop chanting.

Therefore, in the beginning I suggested that you chant sixty-four rounds daily, but you complained that was too much. So, I said, ‘All right, sixteen, then.’ And now you complain that the rules are too difficult.”

“It’s the mind,” I say. “The mind keeps wallowing in stool, even while I’m chanting.”

“The mind must be controlled by the intelligence. If it is controlled, it is your friend; uncontrolled, your enemy. You control the mind by reading Bhagavad Gita and chanting.”

“The mind still wanders,” I say. “I find myself thinking of things that happened twenty years ago. Or of the future. Or something comes along to distract me.”

“Therefore you have to beat the mind every morning with your shoes,” he laughs. “Let the mind know who’s boss. Mana eva manusyanam karanam bandha-moksayoh. Mind is the cause of bondage, and mind is the cause of liberation. Bandhaya visayasango maktyai nirvisayam manah. Mind absorbed in sense objects is the cause of bondage, and mind attached to Krishna is the cause of liberation.”

“My mind’s a wild tiger,” I complain.

“That means if you don’t control him, he’ll kill you. But if you control him—ah! You have a friend. Then success is guaranteed. Maya will stand before you with folded hands.”

“Jai! When will that day come?”

“When you get serious,” he says. “It all depends on your desire. Krishna consciousness cannot be checked by any material impediment.”

“It seems hard.”

“Being in maya isn’t hard? Rebirth isn’t hard?”

“But it’s a vicious circle,” I say. “How can I get serious and surrender when the mind won’t let me surrender?”

“Well, if it’s not possible for you all at once,” he says patiently, “then just take a step at a time. In the morning, attend mangal aratik and chant sixteen rounds. Do this steadily. It may be some austerity, but you will see the tiger mind grow quieter. Just try. When Krishna sees you trying, He will say, ‘Oh, My dear boy. Now you are sincerely approaching Me. How can I help you?’

“Krishna is unconquerable. No one can defeat Him. But He becomes bound by His devotee’s love. You’re experiencing some difficulties now because of old bad habits, but sooner or later all this will be cleared because you have taken to this process. That’s the beauty of Krishna consciousness. Execute fifteen percent in this life; next life you start at sixteen percent. It’s guaranteed that some day you will become one hundred percent Krishna conscious. Just see.”

Srila Prabhupada hands me the copy of Bhagavad Gita on his desk.

“Just read,” he says. “Api cet suduracaro.”

“Api cet?” I look up the words in the index of Sanskrit verses, then read the translation:

“Even if one commits the most abominable actions, if he is engaged in devotional service, he is to be considered saintly because he is properly situated. He quickly becomes righteous and attains lasting peace. O son of Kunti, declare it boldly that My devotee never perishes.”

“You’re so merciful, Srila Prabhupada,” I say, my eyes filling with tears. “And I’m such a rascal.”

“Just don’t forget Krishna,” he says. “You have already rendered so much service, and Krishna does not forget. Just continue your writing and editing. Even if you have material desires to fulfill, go to Krishna. He’ll satisfy your material desires, and at the same time you’ll get shelter at Krishna’s lotus feet. I promise you. Don’t be disturbed.”

CHAPTER 7. On the Rooftop

One of the temple boys brings a charpoy to the rooftop and sets it down. I inspect the ropes, strung crisscross along the wooden frame, to see whether they can hold my weight. Another boy appears with a mattress, sheets, and blanket.

“So, now your bed’s all together,” Gurudas tells me. “Pick your place.”

I select a spot near the far corner of the roof, overlooking the exterior courtyard and Rupa Goswami’s samadhi. Already Pradyumna, Achyutananda, and Sruta Kirti are in their beds asleep. One of the rooms at the far end of the rooftop is locked up, and Gurudas and Yamuna occupy the other.

“We can store your valuables in here,” Gurudas informs me. “There’s nothing in this room but some of Prabhupada’s trunks.” He unlocks the door and turns on the light. “See. You can set your things over there.”

I place my duffel bag and camera case in a corner beside the trunks. “What’s in those?” I ask.

“Books. We’re going to start cleaning up this room for Prabhupada. It’s too noisy downstairs for him to write.”

Gurudas turns off the light, then secures the storeroom again with a padlock the size of a foot. “When Prabhupada found out that this door was unlocked, he was furious. He asked us, ‘What do you think locks are for? So I got the biggest padlock I could find.’”

“I never knew they came that big,” I say.

“Dacoits around here knock out whole walls,” Gurudas says. “You can’t be too careful. Well, goodnight. And pleasant Vrindaban dreams.”

“Haribol.”

Gurudas leaves, and I arrange the mattress and sheets. The charpoy is quite comfortable, the sheets and pillows are clean, and the blanket is adequate for open-air sleeping. Since the air is dry, there’s no dew to worry about. How lucky I am to be in Vrindaban at last! I should be happy on a bed of nails.

I lie down, look up at the waxing moon, and start chanting japa on my beads. How compassionate Srila Prabhupada is! How patient! Knowing that the rules and regulations are often difficult for us, he guides us like a kindly father. We only have to make a sincere effort, and he’s pleased.

It was so embarrassing to sit before him with my sins oozing out of every pore of my body. From infancy we have been conditioned to gratify our senses. Like a father seeing his child playing with a razor, Srila Prabhupada replaces the razor with something beneficial. Still, some of us are not content until we cut ourselves.

How strong is our early conditioning! Even after being fully instructed in Krishna consciousness, I’m still addicted to the world. Now I must chant more. Chanting softens the hardened heart and increases attachment for Krishna. In Krishna’s presence, undesirable things vaporize. And what better place than Vrindaban to think of Him? All

these impurities will gradually fall away, as Srila Prabhupada promised. But it will take a combination of my effort and his grace. If I keep my end of the bargain, Prabhupada will keep his. The enemy is kama, lust, but Krishna, Madana Mohana, the charmer of Cupid, can defeat that enemy within. “Just think of Krishna’s pastimes with the gopis,” Prabhupada once told me, “and Mr. Lust will be vanquished.”

In three nights, the moon will be full. Purnima, it’s called. Rasa-Lila Purnima: The full moon night of Krishna’s dance with the gopis. “Among the radiant stars, I am the moon.” Here, just a few blocks away, beside the Jamuna, Lord Krishna would join hands with the gopis and dance all night. Beneath the full moonlight, Krishna would multiply Himself 108 times so that each gopi could think that He was hers alone. What mystic nights! Krishna in the moonlight, His bluish skin radiant, His long raven-black hair hanging in tresses down His neck, His ears decorated with crocodile-shaped emerald earrings, His full lips smiling as He places His flute to them. ...

The gopis were jealous of that bamboo flute. “What pious activities and austerities did it perform?” they asked. “Whatever did it do to merit being touched by Krishna’s lips?” The lakes and ponds from which the flute grew were overjoyed to see their descendant receive from Krishna’s lips that intimate touch usually reserved for the gopis. The sound of the flute causes the four Kumaras to break their meditation. Hearing Krishna’s flute, the serpent Ananta Deva, holding all the planets on his thousand hoods, sways back and forth, and Lord Brahma, sitting on the lotus flower and creating the universe, stops his work and looks about, astonished. When Krishna’s flute echoes through the groves of Vrindaban, the peacocks go mad, and even men, cows, deer, and trees are enchanted. Radharani cries out like a kurobi bird, the bodies of the gopis tremble, calves stop drinking milk, Indra begins weeping, and the puzzled Lord Shiva drops his drum and shouts so loudly into space that he frightens the demons and inspires the devotees to jump for joy.

I wonder what would happen if Lord Krishna made an unscheduled appearance, if He just suddenly walked into Radha Damodar Temple and knocked on Srila Prabhupada’s door. How would we react? Since we’re advised to first worship the Lord’s lotus feet, it’s to His feet that we should first turn our gaze. Their very sight fills and satisfies the mind. Krishna’s lotus feet, like the rest of His body, are a dark blue, described as the color of a raincloud, and their soles and nails are pink like the palms and nails of His hands. Having been held against the breasts of the gopis, His feet are reddish with kum-kum powder. And they are sweet. “Madhava,” one of Krishna’s names, means “sweeter than honey.” The greatest yogis faint, overcome by sweetness, just to touch those feet. When Krishna walked the ground of Vrindaban, He left footprints in the dust marked with a flag, thunderbolt, fish, a rod for controlling elephants, and a lotus flower. Kamsa’s envoy Akrura fell to the ground in ecstasy upon seeing Krishna’s footprints. How wonderful to be staying on the Radha Damodar roof, looking up at the moon and hearing the myriad night sounds of Vrindaban! How pleasant to smell the night-blooming jasmine and rich scents of life scattered by the night breezes! On such a night, Krishna seems so near.

Fortunately, thanks to the mercy of Srila Prabhupada, we don't look on other ordinary beings as Krishna, like the sahajiyas. It is most offensive to think that the eternal, transcendental Lord inhabits a material body. The Vaishnava sees Krishna within all beings, and all beings as part of Krishna, but he doesn't make the mistake of thinking that an ordinary living entity can be Krishna.

Shyamsundar told me of one foreigner who went around Vrindaban inspecting cowherd boys' feet for the signs of a flag, thunderbolt, etc. His madness was inspired by reading the life of Jayadeva, who was once saved from dying of thirst by a cowherd boy, whom he considered to be Krishna. Stories abound of sahajiyas who think themselves to be Krishna and go to Vrindaban to carry on "rasa lila" with a harem of young girls. And there are also women who "worship" some obliging cowherd boy as part of their "sadhana."

"If you go to the rasa-lila grounds at night, you'll never return, because you'll see Krishna dancing there with the gopis." To this local rumor, Srila Prabhupada once replied, "Do you think that Krishna is so easily seen?"

Worship in separation: that's Lord Chaitanya's teaching. I look up at the autumnal moon now at its zenith and finger the 108 large, red japa-mala beads. "Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna, Krishna Krishna, Hare Hare, Hare Rama, Hare Rama, Rama Rama, Hare Hare." The names of God are nondifferent from God. In one sense, there is never separation. Still, Lord Chaitanya says that in relation to Krishna, separation is more ecstatic than meeting. Only in separation can one realize the bleakness of existence without Krishna and thus become aware that Krishna is all-in-all. Chaitanya Mahaprabhu prays in His Sikshastakam: "O my Lord, when will my eyes be decorated with tears of love flowing constantly when I chant Your holy name? When will my voice choke up, and when will the hairs of my body stand on end? O Govinda! Feeling Your separation, I am considering a moment to be like twelve years or more. Tears are flowing from my eyes in torrents, and I am feeling all vacant in this world."

The scrawny weasel-like dogs of Vrindaban howl and yelp, their snouts pointed up at the moon, their brains maddened by its radiance. "Uuuuuuuuuuuuuuh!" they yowl eerily, wailing through the empty streets of Seva Kunj. The white-domed samadhi of Rupa Goswami glistens in the moonlight like bleached sands. The aroma of eucalyptus fills the air. "Uuuuh uuuuh uuuuuuuuh!" The howling continues as I fall off to sleep. Why should they complain? They'll get to Vaikuntha before me.

I pass in and out of consciousness. I dream of American devotees languishing in jail for proselytizing in parking lots. In Moscow, devotees are arrested at night, then disappear into Siberian mental hospitals, never to be seen again. In Honolulu, a sankirtan party is knifed by a gang of Hawaiians. In Jagannatha Puri, devotees are tossed out of the temple of the Lord of the Universe by lathi-wielding guards shouting, "Janma! Janma! Next birth! Next birth!" "Mlecchas!" priests yell from the temple parapets.

I awake. The pariah dogs are still howling, and the moon is now twenty degrees past zenith. My watch indicates midnight. What does eternity indicate? Such vivid dreams for early night! Such awful Kali-Yuga nightmares!

In the Mahabharata, the sage Markandeya prophesies the symptoms of this dark age of Kali: devotees are persecuted; charity and sacrifices are performed just for show; brahmins work like sudras while sudras prosper; kings and presidents cannot set a good example for the people because they themselves are sinners; meat-eating becomes common; animals and even humans are raised for slaughter; people are short-lived, and their stature is diminished; the senses of taste and smell vanish; women become prostitutes; cows give no milk; violent, bestial men run rampant, and murder and robbery are commonplace; no one knows the meaning of God or truth; people become mad for intoxication and sex; flowers and fruits decrease and crows increase; people think that they become beautiful just by growing long hair; no one observes religious principles; the seasons become mixed; rainfall diminishes; trees and plants refuse to grow; young girls become pregnant, and boys turn gray-headed; old men refuse to abandon the follies of youth; large-scale famine and violent earthquakes kill millions of people.

Instead of helping mankind, science simply accelerates the death process. “The demoniac—unintelligent and lost to themselves—engage in horrible works meant to destroy the world.” Biological warfare. Genetic warfare. Poison gas, defoliants, synthetic plagues, nuclear warfare. Kalki! Doomsday, at last!

Arjuna said: “O Krishna! I see all people rushing with full speed into Your mouths as moths dash into a blazing fire.”

The Blessed Lord said: “Time I am, destroyer of worlds.”

“Krishna takes away everything,” Prabhupada warned us during a 1966 lecture. “So give everything to Him out of love and get the credit. Don’t, and you won’t. In any case, you’ll lose it.”

“Everything?”

“Everything.”

Sans teeth, sans, eyes, sans taste, sans everything.

Shantih shantih shantih.

“Do you think you’ll have peace just because there’s no war?” Prabhupada asked at one lecture. “How can you ever have peace as long as there’s birth, old age, disease, and death?”

War or no war, death moves inexorably forward as Time, the serpent. “For the born, death is certain; and for the unborn, birth is certain.” Maharaj Yudhisthira said that the greatest wonder of all is that each man thinks he’ll keep on living, although everyone else is dying.

Again I dream. This time, I’m in lower Manhattan, standing in front of Prabhupada’s little storefront temple and looking downtown toward the Brooklyn Bridge. I chant my rounds and watch the traffic hurry down Second Avenue past the Red Star Bar, Wetzner’s Funeral Home, and Cosmos Parcels Express Corporation.

The storefront door opens, and Srila Prabhupada appears. He stands under the “Matchless Gifts” sign left by the storefront’s previous owner. Prabhupada’s saffron robes shine brightly, and around him rainbows glow. “It’s time for aratik,” he says, smiling, and I awake.

CHAPTER 8. Vrindaban Morn

Boing-boing boing-boing, be-dooo, be-dooo. The gongs and conchshells reverberate, announcing mangal aratik at Radha Damodar.

The moon is still high in the sky. No hint of dawn. It's 2:30 a.m. I sit up, wide awake. The dogs have stopped howling. I can clearly see Rupa Goswami's samadhi in the courtyard below, luminous in the moonlight. Overhead rustle the dark leaves of mango trees. The ferny branches of the flaming dhak wave in the breeze like beckoning hands. I smell the heavy, feminine scent of henna incense—Radharani's favorite—rising from the altar. What an inspiration, Rupa Goswami! Absorbed in the ecstasy of Krishna consciousness, he'd sleep only two or three hours a night, and each night bed on the ground beneath a different tree.

Now I hear someone bathing at the corner pump. An old man's trembling voice chants, "Radhe Shyam, Radhe Shyam." He pours a bucket of cold water over his head. "Krishna hey! Kesava hey! Radha Ramana hey! Radha Damodar hey!" the old man cries out, then empties another bucket. I sense the chill of the night air outside my blanket. The old man has probably been enduring this ritual all his life. Whether in the staggering heat of May and June or in the coldest pre-dawn hours of winter, the devout Hindu won't neglect his bath, though he may overlook a dozen rules governing it.

Srila Prabhupada must be awake by now. Pradyumna, Achyutananda Swami, and Sruta Kirti—outside with me on the rooftop—are still hidden under their blankets. On the street below, someone else moves into the old man's place at the water pump. "Radhe Shyam, Hare Krishna, Hare Ram," he chants to a side chorus of nose-blowing, coughing, and spitting. There's no 2:30 a.m. chit-chat. I go downstairs to the bathroom and pour two buckets of water over my head. The cold shock takes my breath away. In contrast, the air suddenly feels warm. Refreshed, I dry off and return to the rooftop.

What to do? My only dhoti is locked up in the storage room, and Gurudas, who has the key, is still sleeping. I can't attend aratik without a dhoti. Fortunately, my bedsheet is clean and white. I try it on, and it serves adequately. After putting on tilak, I go downstairs.

The courtyard is crowded with old women. They look rather small and insignificant in their faded saris, but they are there nonetheless, all spirit soul, and all staring at me. I stretch face down on the ground, offering dandabats to Their Lordships Radha Damodar. Two old men stooped with age play the gongs, and one Indian brahmachari pounds a mridanga. I stand up and start clapping in rhythm to the mantras.

After aratik, I offer obeisances before the closed door of Srila Prabhupada's rooms. He's awake; there's a sliver of light under the door. He must be translating Srimad Bhagavatam. No point in disturbing him. I return to the rooftop and start chanting my sixteen rounds.

Now that aratik is over, a peaceful hush prevails. How soothing, chanting japa in the early morning beneath the near-full moon! The old women circumambulate the back courtyard, offering obeisances to the samadhis, muttering, “Radhe Shyam, Radhe Shyam.” Again, I hear buckets being filled at the corner pump, the sound of water rising to a sharp pitch as it nears the rim, the sound of grunting, then water splashing on the head. “Krishna hey! Keshava hey!”

I chant an hour and a half before Shyamsundar and Malati arrive to awaken Gurudas and Yamuna. Then Achyutananda Swami, Pradyumna, and Sruta Kirti also awake. It’s five a.m., and still no hint of dawn.

We gather in Srila Prabhupada’s room for an aratik to his Deities. Prabhupada sits behind his desk, his dictaphone before him. Open books—a Sanskrit-English dictionary and a large tome of Srimad Bhagavatam—testify to the night’s work. Now he sits erect, his eyes closed, expression meditative.

Offerings are made to the Deities, and we chant the mangal aratik mantra. Prabhupada doesn’t open his eyes until the conch signals the end of the ritual. Then he takes up his beads and begins chanting japa. “Chant your rounds,” he tells us, and we all sit on the floor and chant Hare Krishna until the dawn begins to light up the sky.

“Now let’s take our walk,” Prabhupada says. “Sruta Kirti, get my chadar.”

We follow Prabhupada out of the temple gateway and into the near-deserted streets. The smoke of cowdung fires hangs in the air. An occasional pilgrim passes by on his way to or from his eye-opening bath in the Jamuna. Aratik bells ring from the rose-tinged spires of temples. A boy cycles past, empty milkpails, jangling from his handlebars. Old women sweep the street with long straw brooms. A milk-walla stokes coals beneath an enormous wok of steaming buffalo milk.

Walking down the streets of Loi Bazaar, Srila Prabhupada fingers tulasi beads in a cloth beadbag and chants softly, “Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna, Krishna Krishna, Hare Hare, Hare Rama, Hare Rama, Rama Rama, Hare Hare.” About fourteen of us—all American and European disciples follow him, our woolen chadars draped over our heads.

We pass Shahji Temple and hear the transcendental staccato rhythms of mantras pulsate through the air, broadcast from Shahji’s loudspeakers. Such ethereal language! Its very accents and rhythms are worthy only of lofty subject matter.

“What are those mantras?” I ask Prabhupada.

“Vishnu Sahasranam,” he says. “Vishnu’s thousand names.”

Prabhupada does not stop to rest but heads straight for the river. A light haze, shrouding the chatras and ghats, slowly lifts as the sun rises above mango, neem, and banyan trees. Then the sacred cadences of the mantras fade as we walk down the parikrama toward the temples of Imlitala and Madana Mohana. Rowboats are already transporting pilgrims back and forth, although the river is now so low that most of its bed is a dry winding ribbon of gray-white sand. At some places, it’s barely twelve feet wide. Scattered hundreds of feet from the banks stand ancient ghats and chatras, left high and dry over the years by the river’s ever-changing course. The Jamuna is a mere rivulet for eight months of the year, meandering through wide stretches of sand across the North Indian

plain. In the monsoons, it swells into a mighty torrent, a mile or more broad, and the ponds and lakes of the region overflow.

The weeks immediately following monsoons are a good time for bathing. The waters are clear then. Now, looking at the brown, sluggish stream, I can make out bits of raw sewage from the open gutters of Vrindaban.

In Lord Krishna's day, before human industry could pollute the earth, Kaliya, a gigantic black serpent, emitted a vapor that poisoned the Jamuna's pure waters. Birds passing over would drop dead on the spot. Trees and grass near the Jamuna's banks wilted and died. Thanks to Kaliya, the entire river turned into a stream of venom.

Krishna decided to confront the demon. He jumped into the Jamuna, making a great splash, and began swimming about like an elephant. Kaliya then appeared and beheld Lord Krishna smiling and exhibiting great strength in the water. Krishna's body resembled a dark cloud, and His yellow garments flashed like lightning. His lithesome beauty belied His incalculable strength. Indeed, His arms and legs seemed as lustrous as lotus flowers. Kaliya grew angry watching the Lord's radiant form. He quickly grabbed Krishna with his mighty coils. When the inhabitants of Vrindaban saw this, they collapsed out of fear. The earth trembled, meteors fell, and all men shivered with anxiety. Only Krishna's elder brother Balarama was unperturbed, for he knew that Krishna was invincible.

For two hours, Krishna remained in Kaliya's grip like an ordinary child. Then He saw His father, mother, gopis, cowherd boys and cows nearly dead from fright. For their sake, He began to expand Himself, forcing Kaliya to slacken his coils and free Him.

Infuriated, Kaliya expanded his hundred hoods, exhaled deadly fumes and flames, and flicked his tongues, but Krishna pounced on his hoods and began to dance. Leaping from hood to hood, the Lord danced vigorously, the rays from Kaliya's jewels tinging His feet red. Krishna then pounded His feet and kicked, and Kaliya vomited refuse and fire in a desperate struggle for life. His hoods crushed, Kaliya spewed blood. Understanding Krishna to be master of everything, Kaliya surrendered unto Him, falling unconscious. Demigods in the sky showered Krishna with flowers, sang hymns of praise, and beat kettledrums.

The Nagapatnis, wives of Kaliya, prayed to Krishna: "O dear Lord, how is it that Kaliya is so fortunate? He has received the dust from Your lotus feet. Even the goddess of fortune underwent severe austerities to get that dust. Your dancing on Kaliya's hoods has released him from all sins."

Krishna listened to the prayers offered by the Nagapatnis. He then restored Kaliya to life and mitigated his punishment by banishing him to the ocean. Thus the Jamuna was freed from poison.

Until recently. Looking down at the flotsam and jetsam, I resist the urge to criticize. Srila Prabhupada has made himself divinely clear: the holy dham does not deteriorate. The pollution must be a by-product of my polluted consciousness, of repentant rascals like me washing away their sins in the holy river. A devotee should never consider the Jamuna, which is identical with Sri Krishna, as anything but crystal pure.

Now, Prabhupada has decided that it's time to return to Radha Damodar. The red sandstone towers of Madana Mohana loom above us in the haze. Of all landmarks in Vrindaban, Madana Mohana is the most prominent. It stands on the highest hill around. Achyutananda Swami agrees to take me there after breakfast prasadam.

On the way back, Prabhupada sets an even more lively pace, not stopping to talk. Already people are waiting at Radha Damodar for his 7:30 lecture. They sit in the back courtyard beneath a spreading mango, next to the samadhis of Rupa and Jiva Goswamis.

Prabhupada enters the courtyard, followed by Shyamsundar with a tape recorder and Sruta Kirti with a rug and cushion. Pilgrims stop their circumambulations to watch him receive obeisances from his foreign disciples. He then sits on the cushion, picks up a pair of cymbals, and leads the chanting of a song by Bhaktivinode Thakur. This song gives a complete picture of Vrindaban. "Everything's there," Prabhupada once said. "Krishna, Radharani, Vrindaban, Govardhan, the Jamuna, and the gopis."

Now he sings in a voice trembling with devotion. His eyes are closed, and in his hands the cymbals flash in the morning light. His singing is so intense that each word seems like a condensed Veda, replete with transcendental significance.

Jaya Radha-Madhava Kunja-Bihari

Gopijana-vallabha Giri-vara-dhari

Yasoda-nandana, braja-jana-ranjana

Jamuna-tira-vana-cari.

"Krishna, the lover of Radha, displays many amorous pastimes in the groves of Vrindaban. He is the lover of the milkmaids of Braja. He lifted Govardhan Hill to protect His devotees. He is the beloved son of mother Yasoda. Delighting all those who live in Braj, He wanders in the forest along the banks of the River Jamuna."

After chanting this verse, Srila Prabhupada begins his series of lectures on his recently published Nectar of Devotion: The Complete Science of Bhakti Yoga, a summary study of Rupa Goswami's Bhakti Rasamrita Sindhu.

"Everyone has a unique relationship with Krishna," Prabhupada says. "That will be revealed gradually as you advance in devotional service by following Shastra and the spiritual master. We must associate with devotees to understand the writings of Rupa Goswami. We should not try to understand the Radha-Krishna loving affairs immediately. First we must learn to become pure devotees by rendering service to the Goswamis. As we advance, our relationship with Krishna is revealed or manifest. For instance, the sex urge is automatically manifest in a young boy when he reaches a certain age. It doesn't have to be taught or learned. It appears, like the sun rising. You cannot force the sun to rise in the dead of night. Just wait. When the time is right, it will rise.

"Devotional service must be executed with patience and enthusiasm. Enthusiasm is the first qualification. Dullness will not help you. You must become enthusiastic. My Guru Maharaj used to say, 'A person can become a preacher if he has life. A dead man cannot.' So we should be enthusiastic to preach the Lord's glories to our best capacity. We don't have to be a very learned scholar. 'My Lord is so great, so kind, so beautiful, so wonderful—I must speak something about my Lord.' This is the qualification of

enthusiasm. You may not know Krishna very perfectly. He is unlimited. It's not possible to know Him cent per cent. But we can understand as far as Krishna reveals. If we are sincere and serve faithfully, then Krishna reveals. Not that immediately you will become fully Krishna conscious and perfect. No. We are in an imperfect atmosphere. Still, if we execute our duty, success is guaranteed.

“We have to chant sixteen rounds minimum. Sixteen rounds is nothing. Here in Vrindaban there are many devotees who chant a hundred and twenty rounds. In Western countries it's difficult to finish sixty-four rounds; therefore the minimum is sixteen rounds. That must be finished. That is a regulative principle.

“If you engage in Krishna consciousness, you'll get at least a human body next birth. Say that you do not mature, that for some reason you fall down. There's nothing inauspicious because whatever you have done sincerely is recorded in Krishna's book. Krishna is an accountant.” Prabhupada suddenly laughs. “Yes, He keeps nice accounts of the activities of His devotees. That's a fact. The activities of nondevotees are kept by Yamaraj, god of death, for punishment. Similarly, devotees' accounts are kept by Krishna personally.

“Our real business is to surrender to Krishna. If we surrender cent per cent, we get cent per cent results. Sarva-dharman parityajya mam ekam saranam vraja. If Krishna relieves me from the result of all sinful activity, then where is my misery? Because a devotee does everything for Krishna, a devotee neither enjoys nor suffers. For his personal self, there's no question of karma. If you act for Krishna, you're free; but if you act otherwise, that is karma-bhanda. Activities of karmis, jnanis, and yogis are all karma-bhanda, bound up. Jnanis and yogis merge into the Brahman existence without distinction, but this is not a devotee's liberation. For a devotee, liberation means going to Vaikuntha, Goloka Vrindaban, and serving Krishna eternally.”

“To better serve Krishna, the great Goswamis abandoned their administrative posts and became mendicants. They became poor voluntarily. If one changes his dress artificially by imitating, he will eventually fall down by taking some intoxication or sex. But the Goswamis did not fall down because they were merged in the feelings of the gopis with Krishna.

“There's a flow of waves in the ocean of loving affairs between Krishna and the gopis. Because the Goswamis were merged in it, material enjoyment did not attract them. If you take shelter at Krishna's lotus feet, you will never lack pleasure. That is a fact. And if you want to stay attached to His lotus feet, you must keep yourself busy in His transcendental loving service. Thank you very much.”

Srila Prabhupada waits for questions. Now the people's eyes are riveted on him. Pilgrims interrupt their parikrama and cluster around the edges of the audience, straining for a better view. Monkeys swing on the mango branches and chatter, as if trying to ask Prabhupada for solutions to their problems, too. Sruta Kirti hands Prabhupada a newspaper clipping, and he reads it over.

“So, we have just received one news article from Durban, South Africa,” he says, holding up the clipping between his thumb and index finger. “Two of our young Goswamis—Rishi Kumar and Giriraj Brahmachari—their age is only twenty years, yet they have gone

to spread Krishna's message in South Africa. This is very encouraging. By the grace of Lord Chaitanya, the message of His Lordship is going all over the world nicely. You are also members of the Society. Just try to preach this message: Chant Hare Krishna. The more you preach, the more strength you get. Srila Rupa Goswami says, 'Somehow or other, induce people to become Krishna conscious.' just like our little girl, Saraswati." Prabhupada gestures to Saraswati, the five-year-old daughter of Shyamsundar and Malati. Saraswati offers namaste.

"Saraswati's also preaching. She goes to some friend and says, 'Do you know what is Krishna?' And her friend says, 'No.' Then she says, 'The Supreme Personality of Godhead.'" Again, Prabhupada laughs. "That is preaching. It's not difficult. Just like this child, you go everywhere and inform everyone, 'Krishna is the Supreme Personality of Godhead.' Anyone can do it. Just believe it, be convinced of the statement: Isvara parama krishna. Everyone has a controller over him except Krishna.

"People generally think that liberation is the ultimate goal, but it is very insignificant in the presence of devotional service. Dharma, artha, kama, moksha. Usually, people labor hard for artha, money, thinking that the highest goal is to get money somehow to satisfy the senses—kama, sex life. But sex life is so strong that you can never be satisfied, not as long as you remain in material existence. Your sex life is satisfied only when you come to Krishna consciousness. Krishna is Madana Mohana, the charmer of Kamadev, or Kandarpa, the god of sex. In the West, Kamadev is known as Cupid. If we're attached to the beauty of Krishna, we'll never be enamored by the arrows of Cupid. And if we're not attracted to Krishna's beauty, we'll surely be attracted to the beauty of this material world. That beauty is but a perverted reflection of Krishna's infinite beauty. So, are there any questions?"

"Yes," a middle-aged Indian gentleman says. "I have."

"Just ask."

"You said that Krishna is Cupid?"

"Yes," Prabhupada says. "Prajanas casmi kandarpah. 'I am Kandarpa,' Krishna says in Bhagavad Gita. Krishna is everything, but this does not mean that we worship everything as Krishna. Distinctions are there. So, Sanatan Goswami constructed this Madana Mohana Temple here. Mohana is also another name for Cupid, and Madana. Mohana means one who has conquered Cupid. Another name for Krishna is Madana Mohana because His beauty defeats the beauty of thousands of Cupids. And Radharani is called Madana-Mohana-Mohini, which means one who attracts the attractor of Cupid. No one is more attractive than Krishna, but Radharani attracts Krishna. So, we cannot imagine Her potencies. She is the expansion of Krishna's very own pleasure potency. Is that clear?"

"Yes, thank you," the man says.

"Any other questions?" Prabhupada looks around, then indicates that Shyamsundar is to turn off the tape recorder. "So, let us have kirtan."

* * *

After kirtan, Srila Prabhupada returns to his room to take a light breakfast and then rest. I go upstairs to the roof and ask Gurudas to open the storage room so I can get my luggage.

“Hayagriva Prabhu!” Yamuna calls, then starts laughing. “Oh, Gurudas, just look! I was searching all over for that sheet.”

I was locked out this morning,” I explain.

“Really, Prabhu,” Gurudas laughs. “Dhotis are only ten rupees in the bazaar. Yamuna got those sheets for the beds.”

I open my luggage and get out my own dhoti.

“Achyutananda promised to take me around to the temples,” I say. “Where is he?”

“He’s coming up,” Gurudas says. “Are you going out to Raman Reti?”

“Later,” I say. “Right now I want to see Madana. Mohana.”

Pradyumna sits reading on the edge of the roof. He beckons me over.

“The Maharaj awaits,” he says and points to the street below. Achyutananda Swami is waiting in a cycle-ricksha.

“Come on, Haya,” Achyutananda shouts. “The meter’s running.”

“Be right down,” I shout back.

I load my Pentax with film and change from the bedsheet into a dhoti. Then we set out on pilgrimage to the temple of Madana Mohana, the Enchanter of Cupid.

CHAPTER 9. Madana Mohana and Govindaji

“The two of us will never fit,” I say. It’s obvious to me.

“Come on, Haya. You can squeeze in,” Achyutananda insists, but his girth speaks louder than words. Only four inches are left on the ricksha seat. Even the ricksha boy looks skeptical.

“Let’s get another,” I suggest, and summon another boy. “My treat.”

Thus in the bright October morning, we take two rickshas down to the holy river. The ricksha boys, joking and giggling, race through the narrow, cobblestone streets. We bumble past the house of Mirabai and down past Shahji Temple to Kesi Ghat. I pay the boys, and we start out on foot along the parikrama.

There’s considerable activity on the river banks. Pilgrims walk swiftly down the old cowherd path, trying to circumambulate the town before noon. All along the banks, people wash clothes, pounding them on rocks. A colorful array of saris is spread out on the sands to dry. Down where the river is shallow, cowherd boys lead hundreds of white high-humped cows across to the northern shore. Near-naked babajis, their bodies smeared with ashes, squat under the chatras at the top of the ghat steps. Shivaites smoke ganja in clay chillums and swallow bhang patties, washing them down with holy Jamuna water. Rowboats take passengers from Kesi Ghat to the opposite bank, where there’s more room for spreading out laundry. And, of course, men, women, and children bathe leisurely, reveling in that most thorough of ablutions—the Hindu bath. Huge snapping turtles swim back and forth alarmingly close to the bathers, but no one pays them any mind.

“Their teeth are like razors,” Achyutananda tells me, “but they never attack a living body.”

“So, what do they eat?”

“Children,” he says.

“What?!”

“Kids under ten don’t rate a cremation. They’re just thrown in the river. The turtles strip them clean within minutes.”

“Jai!”

Suddenly we encounter Malati leading Saraswati by the hand. They’re both coming from Chir Ghat, and are brimming with wide-eyed bliss.

“We just saw Krishna,” little Saraswati says. “He was stealing the clothes from the gopis.”

“Did you really?” I ask, patting her head.

“Yes, really,” Malati says seriously. “Just around that corner, Krishna’s stealing clothes. You can’t miss Him.”

“Yeah, come on, Haya,” Achyutananda says, and we leave Malati and Saraswati still talking about Krishna swiping clothes.

We turn the corner and enter the shade of an immense banyan. There, sitting in the tree, is Lord Krishna. He holds the milkmaids' saris in His hands. His eyes are big and dark, and His expression is one of lively amusement.

"This is Chir Ghat," Achyutananda says. "Women come here to hang their saris on the branches of this tree and pray for a good husband."

"Who tends the Deity?"

"The Deity's put outside in the morning and taken in before sunset," he says. "He's kept in the temple over there. According to Jiva Goswami, this pastime took place ten kilometers upriver. Anyway, this is a popular place."

"He's beautiful," I say. "Look at those eyes."

I leave a two-rupee donation in the hundi at the base of the banyan, pay obeisances, and take photos.

It was in October that the gopis worshiped goddess Katyayani (Durga) to acquire Krishna as their husband. The gopis used to come here in the early mornings to bathe. As was customary, they left their clothes on the banks and bathed naked in the river. Krishna knew of their desire to have Him as their husband. He suddenly appeared one morning, collected all their clothes lying on the banks, and climbed up into an ancestor of this banyan tree.

"Come for your clothes one at a time," He called down to the gopis. "You all have slender waists, and I want to see them."

The gopis were overjoyed, but they pretended to be annoyed. Although they loved Krishna more than life itself, they were too shy to come out of the water naked. After a while, they began to shiver with cold.

"Dear Krishna," they said, "we're all Your eternal servants, but if You don't give us back our clothes, we're going to tell Your father, Nanda Maharaj. And if he doesn't do anything, we'll go to King Kamsa."

"Go tell My father, if you want," Krishna said. "He's too old to do anything. But if you're My servants, then come here one by one for your garments."

The gopis complied, seeing that Krishna was determined. As they came out of the water, they held their hands over their pubic area. In Vedic culture, a woman cannot go naked before any man except her husband. The gopis wanted Krishna as their husband, and to fulfill their desire, Krishna said, "You've offended the river deity, Varuna, by going naked in the water. You'd better offer him namaste to be excused."

The simple girls immediately offered namaste by joining their hands together over their heads. Thus they stood naked before Krishna, and their dreams of becoming His wives were realized.

Five thousand years later, beautiful dark girls with doe-like eyes come to Chir Ghat, tie a sari to the banyan, bow to the ground, and pray, "Dear Krishna, please give me a young, handsome, strong, rich husband."

Achyutananda and I follow the parikrama upstream. The path winds in and out of temple courtyards, passes by ghats and chatras left high and dry by the everchanging Jamuna, and then merges with a dirt road lined by retaining walls made of mud. The road is even

ditched for drainage. On the left side stand the crumbling facades of houses and old palaces; on the river side are fields divided into small farmlands.

“That’s Imlitala there,” Achyutananda says, pointing to a small temple beneath a spreading tamarind tree. “We’ll stop by later for prasadam.”

Soon, the towers of Madana Mohana loom above us. Stone steps lead up the side of a hill to the temple. Though less than a hundred feet high, it’s the highest hill around.

“This is Dwadashadipya Hill,” Achyutananda tells me, “the hill of twelve suns. This whole area’s known as Kaliya Ghat because here Krishna defeated Kaliya. After dancing on Kaliya’s hoods, Krishna felt a little chilly and came here. When Radharani prayed for Him to get warm, twelve suns arose at once in the sky to warm Him.”

We walk over mud puddles to the base of the hill. A stone staircase leads up to the temple. At the top of the steps we get a good view of both sides of the jamuna. Fields extend some two hundred yards from the hill to the river, and farmers have planted them with vegetables and built small huts of mud and straw. The fields flood during monsoon, but now they’re very dusty. Across the river stands Nandagram forest.

“Madana Mohana was the first temple constructed in Vrindaban,” Achyutananda says. “It was completed in the 1580s. Let’s walk around.”

The red sandstone complex consists of a gateway, a nave, and two cylindrical towers—four distinct edifices in all. The towers are no higher than fifty feet, but they dominate the Vrindaban skyline from Dwadashadipya Hill.

What makes Madana Mohana so successful? The glory is not in height, nor ornamentation. The smaller tower has no carvings at all, and only two basic patterns—a lotus and a diamond—adorn the other. The taller tower is divided into four sections, each higher section smaller than the one below. The lotus carving on the top is a masterful crown, even though five of the eight horse gargoyles surrounding it are missing.

“There used to be a golden spire on top,” Achyutananda tells me, “but the Muslims stole it.”

Standing beside the towers is a square gateway with a pyramidal top and a nave nearly sixty feet long. The vaulted roof of this nave has entirely disappeared, and the upper part of a choir loft within has also been destroyed. The exterior surface is covered with sculptured panels, and over the eastern door a Sanskrit inscription proclaims the temple dedicated to Nandakishore, Krishna. Within the past hundred and fifty years, someone tried to restore the nave with brick instead of red sandstone. Fortunately, this attempt was abandoned. The square gateway, executed in the same warm red sandstone as the towers, now serves as home for countless bats. They flap their wings as we enter the portico. Lotus and diamond patterns are abundant, and two carved elephants fight above the exterior archway.

In the small alcove of the main tower, Radha Krishna and Gour Nitai Deities are worshiped, as well as Deities of Gopal Krishna, the butter thief, and Govardhan sila, stones from Govardhan Hill.

After walking around the temple, we sit down and rest beside the samadhi of Sanatan Goswami. An old sadhu draws water from a well and hands it to us in clay cups. The water is pure, cool, and sweet.

“Drink deep,” Achyutananda says. “Krishna also drank from this well.”

While we sit and drink, Achyutananda relates the temple’s history.

When the Goswamis arrived here in the sixteenth century, Vrindaban was a jungle, a forest of tulasi and neem. Still, the Goswamis were instructed by Chaitanya Mahaprabhu. to establish temples.

Of all the Goswamis, Sanatan underwent the most severe austerities. Once, a very naughty boy named Madana Mohan was entrusted to him for rectification. It was hoped that the great sage’s influence would be beneficial. Sanatan used to get the boy to fetch water from this very well, but one day the boy disappeared, and in his place appeared the Deity of Madana Mohana. Of course, there was no temple here then. Sanatan kept the Deity in a tree, wrapped in a cloth.

Sanatan made offerings to the Deity every day. He would take some flour, mix it with Jamuna water, roll it into a ball, and throw it onto a cowdung fire. Then, after the ball baked very hard, he would offer it to Madana Mohana. This somewhat unpalatable food was offered day after day. Finally, the Deity spoke: “You are offering Me only these bread lumps? Not even a little salt?”

“Today You want some salt,” Sanatan replied, transcendently angry, “and tomorrow You’ll want some sugar. Then some ghee. So, You’re supplying the universe with everything. I can offer only what You give me.

At that moment, a rich merchant named Ramdas was passing down the Jamuna in his boat loaded with salt. Suddenly, he ran aground just opposite Dwadashadipya Hill. The boat couldn’t be budged. Some local boys suggested that the merchant consult Sanatan Goswami for help. Out of frustration, Ramdas went to Sanatan, who said, “I can’t do anything, but you can pray to Madana Mohana, who’s in that tree over there.”

As soon as Ramdas began to pray, the boat slid off the sand. “How can I repay you?” he asked.

“I don’t want anything,” Sanatan said, “but you may build a temple for my Madana Mohana.”

Thus, the Madana Mohana Temple was built from the profits of that cargo of salt.

During the Muslim persecution of 1780, the Maharaj of Jaipur ordered all the valuable Deities of Vrindaban moved to Jaipur for safety, but a princess of Karauli, Rajasthan, prayed for Madana Mohana to come to her. Madana Mohana did so, and to this day, the original Deity is worshiped very opulently in Karauli.

We pay obeisances before the samadhi of Sanatan Goswami. In front of the samadhi, a Sanskrit verse is inscribed on a marble plaque: Param vijayate sri-krishna-sankirtanam. Words from Lord Chaitanya’s Sikshastakam: “All glories to Sri Krishna sankirtan. Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna, Krishna Krishna, Hare Hare, Hare Rama, Hare Rama, Rama Rama, Hare Hare.” Then the last phrase of the first verse of Srimad Bhagavatam: Satyam param dhimahi. “I meditate on the Absolute Truth.”

After taking photos, we descend the staircase and return to the parikrama.

“On festival days, so many sadhus go up and down here,” Achyutananda says, “that it looks like one of those Byzantine stairways to heaven.”

We retrace our steps down the parikrama and arrive at Imlitala Temple in time for the noon aratik. The knarled, ancient imli (tamarind) in the courtyard has reportedly survived five thousand years. Krishna waited beneath this tree for Radha after disappearing from the rasa dance. And when Krishna returned to Vrindaban as Lord Chaitanya Mahaprabhu on October 25, 1512, He sat here again and became absorbed in Radha’s ecstasy of separation.

“Lord Krishna’s blackish body would turn golden from thinking of Radharani,” Achyutananda tells me. “And Chaitanya Mahaprabhu’s golden body would turn blackish from thinking of Krishna.”

The pujari blows a conch, announcing aratik, and the doors of the Deity room swing open. The altar has three alcoves: in the center are Deities of Radha and Krishna. Krishna is carved in black marble, and Radha in white marble. In the alcove to the right are Deities of Gour Nitai—Lord Chaitanya Mahaprabhu and Nityananda—and in the alcove to the left is a murti of Srila Bhaktisiddhanta Saraswati sitting very straight and wearing glasses. Imlitala is run by his Society, the Gaudiya Math.

At the arati’s conclusion, the pujaris close the doors. Prasadam is then distributed in the courtyard on banana leaves: rice, dahl, chapatis, sabji, and clay cups filled with cold watermelon juice. Achyutananda takes second and third helpings. The brahmacharis are delighted to see him eat and hear him speak in Hindi and Bengali. Many of the monks come from Bengal.

Afterward, I’m introduced to the ashram leader, Nityananda Swami, a peaceful, intellectual man with short-cropped white hair and beard. He looks about sixty. He knows little English, but Achyutananda talks to him for some time in Hindi. Like most of the Gaudiya Math leaders, Nityananda is Srila Prabhupada’s godbrother.

“He’s quite sympathetic to Srila Prabhupada,” Achyutananda tells me, “unlike most of Prabhupada’s godbrothers, who criticize him for preaching in the West. Some are so envious that they claim that Prabhupada lost his brahminical status simply by crossing ‘the black waters.’”

After Imlitala, we return to the streets of Vrindaban and take rickshas to Rupa Goswami’s Govindaji Temple. Govindaji has been praised as “the most impressive religious edifice that Hindu art has ever produced, at least in Upper India.”*

My first reaction is: “It’s too squat.” But then I remember that only the first three stories are here; Aurangzeb knocked down the top four. So I’m looking at less than one half of the original.

The red sandstone was reportedly donated by Akbar the Great, and the construction financed by Raja Man Singh, a disciple of Raghunatha Bhatta Goswami. The magnificent seven-story temple was built in the 37th year of Akbar’s reign (1590) under the direction of Rupa and Sanatan Goswamis. The story goes that Rupa Goswami was led here by a

beautiful cowherd boy and advised to dig nearby. He thus unearthed the self-manifesting Deity of Govinda Dev: Krishna the cowherd boy.

Accounts of the Deity's appearance differ. Most Brijbasis believe that Rupa Goswami dug up the Deity here, but some claim that the Deity appeared to Rupa and Sanatan Goswamis in a cowshed at Nandagram, a few miles away. Another has it that the Deity came from a pond near Govardhan. In any case, the Deity was taken to Jaipur for safety during the reign of Aurangzeb.

Aurangzeb was infuriated when he looked out of his palace window and saw an enormous ghee lamp burning at the top of Govindaji Temple. He promptly announced that no light could be higher than that of his own palace and ordered the top four stories removed, block by block. Originally, Govindaji was pyramidal and crowned by five towers.

"It's magnificent," I tell Achyutananda. "Let's take a closer look."

We walk up the incline of the exterior courtyard, paved with flat, square stones a shade darker than the temple. Seven steps lead up to the main entrance, now doorless. The ten-foot-thick walls give the structure solidity. Its warmth—like that of Madana Mohana's—comes from the natural glow of the red sandstone, suggestive of dark redwood. Yes, Govindaji has the warmth of wood, yet the carvings have the precision and solidity of stone. A rich panoply of sculpture—horizontal layer upon layer—gives the whole building a generously stratified effect. Everywhere are carvings of octagons, leaves, diamonds, spades, fleurs-de-lis, hearts, bells, lotuses, concentric circles. At the epicenter, one's vision is drawn to the vaulted ceiling and its magnificent carving of a lotus. Originally, the dome had been studded with jewels; now we see only the vicious lacerations left by the Muslims when they hacked them out.

The overall design of the building is that of a Greek cross, in which both the nave and its intersect extend a hundred feet in length. The unique combination of dome and spire reminds me of Western cathedrals. The altar is flanked on both sides by lateral chapels, each with separate entrances. Even within the cross shape, one gets the feeling of space. Light enters abundantly from three directions. No less than a hundred small, arched windows create a honeycomb effect.

Govindaji's original central altar was razed to the ground, but in 1854 it was roughly rebuilt in brick, and new Deities were installed. From Aurangzeb's day to the present, nothing has been done to preserve Govindaji from decay. Indeed, a hundred years ago, Brijbasis looked on it as a convenient quarry for house-building materials. Most tourists pass it by because of its stunted appearance, resulting from the demolition of the top stories and lofty arcaded parapet.

"There's a subterranean vault under one of the chapels," Achyutananda informs me. "It's rumored to be the shrine of vrinda, the tulasi plant worshiped by the Goswamis when they first arrived."

"It makes me sad to look at all this," I say. "It's the devas and asuras all over again, the creators and destroyers."

I look down the hill at the popular Rangaji Temple, a tasteless imitation of the famous Srirangam Temple of South India. In contrast, the magnificent ruins of Govindaji speak eloquently of a great saint's work of love. "My kingdom's not of this world," the stones of Govindaji announce. Rupa Goswami must have known that some day a Mogul heir would rule who would not be as magnanimous and sympathetic as Akbar. Yet Rupa worked as the great always work, for the sake of devotion only, leaving the results to God.

We hail two rickshas from the street below, and as we coast down the hill toward Rangaji, I curse Aurangzeb again and again.

From Rangaji's loudspeakers come the shrill, ethereal sounds of shenai horns, arabesque melodies evoking images of swaying cobras and harem dancers. Through the opening in the outer wall, I can see pilgrims taking off their shoes to enter. Foreigners are not allowed. Rangaji was completed in 1851 at the cost of six years' work and four and a half million rupees. There are no less than eight South Indian gopurams overpopulated with avatars and demigods. These are carved no better than most lawn sculpture. The largest gopuram is almost 150 feet tall. In front stands a 93-foot-high brown sandstone gateway pavilion executed with tasteful tracery in the Mathuran style. Architecturally, this gateway has no connection whatsoever with the gopurams behind it. I can't help but think that all that money and energy could have been better spent on reconstructing Govindaji's missing stories.

But preservation is a Western tradition. The Indian tries to improve upon the work of his predecessors by building something bigger. Consequently, there are very few structures of any great antiquity remaining.

Achyutananda and I take the rickshas to Loi Bazaar. We buy clay cups of delicious rubbri, a kind of sweet condensed milk skimmed from a bubbling wok. Then we start walking back to Radha Damodar.

When we turn the corner, we encounter street children playing. As soon as they see us, they shout, "Hare Krishna, Hare Rama," and jump up and down from the excitement of speaking to foreigners.

"Hare Krishna," I call back, and pass on. The children continue to frolic.

"Hare Krishna, Hare Rama," they yell. "Dum-marodum."

"Oh ho!" Achyutananda says.

We stop and turn back to look. The children keep their distance.

"Did you hear that?" Achyutananda asks me.

"Yeah," I say, turning back. "Dum-marodum."

"Do you know what it means?"

"Yeah, I've heard. 'Smoke pot.'"

Suddenly I hear a splat and look down to see a big blotch of mud on my dhoti. One of the kids threw it. I shake my fist at them, and they scatter. "Rakshashas!" I shout. "Take birth as lizards!"

"Patience," Achyutananda says. "Remember, we should not insult the Brijbasis."

"To Patalaloka with 'em," I curse. My dhoti is ruined for the day.

“It’s all the fault of that stupid ‘Hare Krishna, Hare Ram’ movie,” Achyutananda says. “Hare Krishna, Hare Ram” is a poorly made, low-budget movie that opens with a film clip of one of our public kirtans. There’s also footage of the San Francisco Jagannatha festival, 1969 or 1970. The story that follows shows how Mohini, daughter of a respectable Delhi businessman, is lured away to Nepal by drug-crazed American hippies. Mohini joins in hippy orgies and sings the song destined to become a national hit:

“DumMaro-Dum.”

Dum-maro-dum

Niti-jai-dam Bolo

suba shyam

Hare Krishna, Hare Ram.

Smoke dum (marijuana),

Forget your troubles,

And chant morning and evening,

Hare Krishna, Hare Ram.

Mohini succumbs to a drug overdose, and her body is returned to her grief-stricken family. The movie closes with footage of more Hare Krishna chanting in Golden Gate Park.

The moral is clear: C.I.A. agents, disguised as hippies and Hare Krishna monks, are out to destroy Indian youth with drugs and sex.

“But there’s no cinema house here,” I tell Achyutananda.

“They went to Mathura to see it,” he says. “Everybody. Some even went as far as Agra. They loved it. Whatever they see in newspapers and movies is taken as Vedic truth. Once TV arrives, the government can mold them like putty.”

“The movie was government backed?”

“I doubt it. Probably just some crackpot out to make money and take a shot at America and ISKCON. Anyway, we’ll be hearing ‘Dum-maro-dum’ some more. It’s everywhere—Delhi, Calcutta, Bombay. More people know it than the national anthem.”

“But they’re insulting Srila Prabhupada,” I protest, “and the maha-mantra, equating it with some hippy dope chant.”

“Some people are very jealous of Srila Prabhupada,” Achyutananda says. “They know that he’s building a big international temple at Raman Reti, and they want to stop him. There’s no telling what little tricks they’ll be pulling. They’re very envious.”

Just before we enter Radha Damodar, we hear sudden screams. We turn to see children stampede down the street. Then we see the creature who sent them running. It’s a young man dressed like the ghastly goddess Kali. His body is painted black, his teeth are filed to points, and a long plastic tongue hangs from his mouth. Around his head is a garland of tiny wooden skulls.

Somehow, he has cleverly attached an extra set of papier-mache arms, which he moves along with his real arms, so that he resembles the four-armed goddess. In one of his real hands he flails a machete, and in the other he holds a copper pot for donations. A black gown extends down to ankles decorated with jangling bells. Suddenly, he breaks into a

vigorous dance. There is much violent stamping and gesturing. After all, Kali, material nature, is out to wreck us, to delude and finally kill us, to somehow get us to surrender to Krishna's lotus feet. Kali is a ghastly mistress. The impersonator has even absorbed some of her qualities in minute portions, thankfully. I perceive a ghostly aura hovering above him, shimmering with the jangle of ankle bells.

When I throw a rupee into his copper pot, Achyutananda disapproves. "You shouldn't give him anything," he says.

"You've been in India too long," I say. "He's making some interesting points."

"Like what?"

"Like, 'All men must die.'"

"You didn't know that?"

"I keep forgetting it," I say.

Achyutananda turns away and walks toward the Radha Damodar gates. "Come on," he says. "I'll help you clean your dhoti."

CHAPTER 10. Radha Damodar Pastimes

I go downstairs to Srila Prabhupada's rooms, where Yamuna is cooking his n-ddday prasadam. In the cooking alcove, separated from the rest of the room by a low brick wall, a fat, gray-haired Indian woman squats beside a wok of sabji. Prabhupada sits outside on the patio. Through the verandah, I can see Sruta Kirti massaging his head with mustard-seed oil.

The elderly woman says something in Hindi and removes the wok from the fire. Her face, though round and chubby, is Prabhupada's feminine counterpart.

"You've met Pishima?" Yamuna asks me. "She's Srila Prabhupada's younger sister." Of course! Pishima looks at me through hornrim glasses, smiles, and shakes her head back and forth. I offer obeisances, and she returns them with a namaskar, then resumes cooking.

I already feel that I know her. She's the favorite grandmother type, the kind who pampers grandchildren with affection and candy. Her name is Bhavatarini, but all the devotees call her Pishima, "auntie." Like Prabhupada, she looks as if she's never had an unkind thought in her life. Her brown eyes are expressive and loving.

Prabhupada returns inside from his massage. Pishima begins talking to him in Bengali, and for a moment it seems they are arguing. Then Pishima shakes her head and breaks into a laugh. She obviously adores Srila Prabhupada, and though seeming to scold him like a mother, still pays him the respect due a sannyasi.

"Pishima's a wonderful cook," Yamuna tells me. "She's been teaching me Prabhupada's favorite recipes."

"Yes, she's very expert," Srila Prabhupada says. "Especially with kachoris."

"Prabhupada liked kachoris so much that his parents nicknamed him Kachoridas," Yamuna says.

"That's a fact," Prabhupada laughs. "And now my fat sister is spoiling me with her kachoris day and night, so that I'll become as fat as she is."

Pishima is the only family member Prabhupada has maintained relations with after accepting sannyas in 1959. I'm surprised by her resemblance to him. I had always thought that his face defied duplication.

Prabhupada is served prasadam, and Yamuna and Pishima start cleaning up the cooking area.

"Pishima is teaching Yamuna to cook," Prabhupada says. "She knows many first-class preparations. When Yamuna learns the art, she can compile one cookbook of pure Vaishnava recipes. It should sell many copies in America, no? Some people were requesting such a cookbook when I was in Hamburg. Once they try these Vaishnava recipes, they will give up cooking all those nasty things. What do you think, Hayagriva?" "Vegetarianism is becoming a fad," I say, "but I doubt that most Americans or Europeans will give up meat-eating."

“Ritu prapta kosati na kansiti,” Prabhupada says, quoting Bhagavad Gita. “When one is shown something superior, he will give up his nonsense.”

“Some people in America are getting interested,” I say.

“And in India also,” Prabhupada says. “Because of centuries of Muslim and British influence, many Indians forgot their heritage. Now they are free to take up Vedic culture again. And they’ll do it. We just have to re-ndnd them by setting an example. They’re imitating Americans now because America is the number one country. Once they see you Americans seriously taking up Krishna consciousness, they’ll follow.”

“The government’s afraid that young Indians will imitate American hippies,” Shyarnsundar says.

“Yes, that’s a danger,” Prabhupada says. “What the great do, others follow. For that reason I went first to America to start this movement. Now I’m trying to interest the Indian government to help us push it here. ‘What do you want?’ I ask them. ‘Devotees or hippies? Krishna bhaktas or drug users?’ Unfortunately, they can’t agree on anything. So now you young American devotees must show them.”

“Some Indians are suspicious,” Shyarnsundar says. “They think that we’re either hippies or spies.”

“That’s nonsense. They may say like that, but let them prove it. Let them come to our functions and live with us. Then they will see. Now America has the technology and India the Vedic knowledge. Together, you can make the earth as good as Vaikuntha, the Kingdom of God.”

“Is that what’s called Ram-raj?” Sruta Kirti asks.

“Yes, real Ram-raj,” Prabhupada says. “Gandhi used to have one popular saying: ‘Swaraj means Ram-raj.’ They were thinking that Independence would solve everything, that the British were to blame for their problems. They didn’t consider that many countries have been ruling themselves for years, and still the people are dissatisfied. That means no Ram-raj.”

“Now it’s been twenty-five years since Independence,” I say, “but Ram-raj looks a long way off.”

They can have Krishna-raj immediately,” Prabhupada says, “if the government just takes up this movement.”

Suddenly, I remember the myriad dark faces of the workers of Faridabad, the phantoms of migrants sitting idly in slums, the men sharing a bidi and worrying how to keep their wives and children from starving, and contemplating countless other problems unknown to Westerners-like gathering sufficient dowry to marry off their daughters. Perhaps in Vedic times, such people would have had their niche in a society centered around Rama or Krishna, and they’d be enjoying Ram-raj within and without. Now their culture is fractured by centuries of foreign occupation and crippled by mass poverty. They struggle from day to day, looking for work, chasing unattainable rupees, sharing a few puffs of bidi, and wondering if Ram-raj will ever come again.

After prasadam, Srila Prabhupada announces that he'll be resting. Sruta Kirti closes the shutters and turns out the light. Yamuna and Pishima finish wiping up the floor, then carry out remnants of prasadam to distribute and the dirty dishes to wash.

"Maha!" Yamuna calls, and we all take some remnants from Srila Prabhupada's plate. They always prepare huge plates, from which he eats sparingly. Prabhupada always eats less whenever he thinks he's gaining weight. Once he told us that his spiritual master, the lean, ascetic Bhaktisiddhanta Saraswati, would immediately caution a disciple who was overeating: "You are getting fatty." And the disciple would fast until Bhaktisiddhanta reminded him to eat again.

It's the custom in India to rest or nap after the noonday meal. Between two and four in the afternoon, the hottest time of day, shops are often closed, and people need little encouragement to get off the streets.

Achyutananda and Pradyumna sleep in the shade on the roof. Though I slept little last night, I feel wide awake. I sit with Gurudas and Yamuna and ask them about the first time they ever came to Radha Damodar.

Yamuna laughs. "Oh, Gurudas, do you want to remember that? It was so austere."

"When was that?" Gurudas asks. "February or March?"

"February," she says. "February, 1970. That was when you and I received that bulky manila envelope, registered, from Srila Prabhupada. Remember?"

"I remember the key," Gurudas says. "Prabhupada sent us this six-inch-long black key in the mail. It was the key to his rooms here. He wanted us to come here, clean up his rooms, and burn all his old business papers."

"His rooms hadn't been opened since 1967," Yamuna says, "the year Kirtanananda took sannyas here. So, when Gurudas, Giriraj, and I opened the door, there were two inches of dust over everything. As you see, Radha Damodar doesn't have any glass windows—just some iron bars and shutters. You can't imagine how much dust from the streets can accumulate over three years. The dust made the room look like another world with strange forms like sculpture. We wrapped our heads with cloth and made little holes for breathing. It took us hours to carry out buckets of soot and dust. "

"What about his old papers?" I ask. "Did you really have the heart to burn them?"

"We were instructed to, Prabhu," Gurudas says. "We went down to the river with all his papers, mostly business transactions, and all of his notebooks. Some of the most amazing things were in them, though."

"Yes," Yamuna says. "Prabhupada's given us some indication of his past life, but those notebooks contained the details of his activities. There were many handwritten ledgers. In those days, rupees were hardly ever used. In the 40s and 50s, transactions were mostly in paise. A paise for this, a paise for that. Srila Prabhupada once said that bookkeeping means writing down every day what you take in and what you spend. He methodically wrote down everything, whether it was two potatoes, charcoal, or oil, or whatever. A lot of ledgers went back to his pharmacy days in Calcutta, Gorakpur, and Allahabad. They show Prabhupada's determination and thoroughness in everything he did. He was very honest, and every paise was accounted for."

“Those would be invaluable for biographical purposes,” I say.

“Would have been,” Gurudas says. “Like I say, we carried them all down to the river. We took a bath and then built a gigantic bonfire, and there burned the papers as he requested.”

“Oh no!”

“Later, Srila Prabhupada wrote me,” Yamuna says, “thanking me for burning them. That was in February, 1970. Then, in December of ’71, Prabhupada inaugurated Delhi preaching activity by attending a maidan pandal. During this time I developed intense hepatitis and had to stay in bed. Srila Prabhupada had me removed from a closet in the Delhi women’s quarters and set up in a hospital bed in the room next to his quarters. He would check on my fever and diet daily and prescribe the necessary medicines himself. By the end of the program, I was able to sit up, but I was still very weak.”

“When did he return to Vrindaban?” I ask.

“At that time. From Delhi, we accompanied him to Vrindaban. We went in a coach, and Srila Prabhupada went in a typical Indian Ambassador. As usual, the senior men crammed in the back seat, and Prabhupada rode up front next to the driver. We were ready to roll when Prabhupada suddenly got out of the Ambassador, came over to the bus, and escorted me to his car. The men in the back had to squeeze over.

“Of course, entering Vrindaban by any means is soul-searching, but in Srila Prabhupada’s presence, sentiments are intensified. We broke the journey on the outskirts of Braja Mandala, where the Delhi road enters the boundary at Kosi. We gathered around the village well, and I took out a stainless steel tiffin for Prabhupada’s breakfast. Prabhupada even mentioned that he broke the journey here on many previous occasions, as did Srila Bhaktisiddhanta Saraswati before him. Now the peaceful atmosphere there is disturbed by a tea stall and blaring Indian cinema music, but in Srila Prabhupada’s presence we were immune to all material vibrations. It was like sitting on the petals of a lotus as it floated over the material ocean.”

“Did you stay here then?”

“No,” she says. “We stayed at the guest house owned by one Mr. Saraj near the crossroads of Gandhi Marg and the road going out to Raman Red. At that time, Yadubhara and Vishakha were initiated. Srila Prabhupada traveled to Barsana, where Radharani lived, and was carried by palanquin to Man Mandir. On the journey back to Vrindaban, Prabhupada’s car broke down, and he had to ride in the bus with the devotees.”

“You weren’t cooking then, were you?” Gurudas asks.

“I remember you still had hepatitis.”

“Right,” she says. “Malati was cooking while I was recuperating. She was clever and innovative under all circumstances, always managing the most amazing feats to get prasadam ready.”

“That was our second trip to Vrindaban,” Gurudas says. “Our third was this year, in March.”

“Where did you come from?” I ask.

“Up the east coast from Madras,” Yamuna says, “through Vishakapatna, Jagannatha Puri, Calcutta, and Mayapur, where they had the groundbreaking ceremony. At that time, we got word that it was possible to get the land at Raman Reti, so Prabhupada sent Gurudas and me here. Oh, then we had no place to stay, and had to rent a room at Saraf Bhavan, where we had stayed in ’71. Then, in April, Srila Prabhupada came with some disciples, and he stayed in Saraf Bhavan with us.”

“So, when did you finally move into Radha Damodar?”

“That’s the most amazing story,” Yamuna says, shaking her head in wonder. “You know, this entire Radha Damodar Temple—even the garbha-griha, where the Deities stand—is split down the middle. There’s a legal arrangement whereby the Sevaites, the descendants of the Goswamis, have the birthright to worship here. One half of the temple is by law under the jurisdiction of Gourachand Goswami and the other half under Madana Mohana Goswami, who is based in Jaipur. Well, last April, Srila Prabhupada called a meeting at Saraf Bhavan, and invited Gourachand Goswami, Madana Mohana Goswami, Dr. O.B.L. Kapoor, and Krishnadas Babaji, a mendicant baba who travels all around the Vrindaban area. So, all these people gathered at Saraf Bhavan, and the atmosphere in that room was extraordinary. Somehow, Srila Prabhupada managed the miraculous. Somehow he got Madana Mohana Goswami to agree to let us five here at Radha Damodar until our Krishna Balarama Mandir is constructed at Raman Reti.”

“However did he manage that?”

“I don’t really know,” she says. “They conversed in Hindi for a long time, and as soon as Madana Mohana agreed, Prabhupada said in English, ‘We’ll put it in writing.’ Since there was no electricity then for our typewriter, Prabhupada told me, Write this down.’ I’d previously been a calligrapher by trade, and I wrote out an agreement document. Then they all gathered around and signed it. This was miraculous because these men were not accustomed to meeting and discussing matters in a spirit of cooperation—believe me. Immediately after the agreement was signed, we moved in here. Prabhupada made Kshirodakshayi president, Gurudas vice-president, and me secretary.”

“What was summer like?” I ask. “I’ve heard some incredible accounts.”

“None exaggerated,” Gurudas says. “This past summer was the most austere time in our lives. It was 120 plus, and these rooms here on the rooftop were like brick ovens. Notice, there are no fans here.”

“The heat was inconceivable,” Yamuna says. “It never went under 110, and if it registered 120 outside, these rooms were 130. Srila Prabhupada’s rooms downstairs weren’t quite as bad.”

“Our president believed in austerity to the core,” Gurudas says. “He wouldn’t even allocate money for fans. And Srila Prabhupada instituted only dahl soup and chapatis for daily fare. A little fruit in the morning. And that was all we’d eat. Brijbasis try to finish cooking as early as possible, so the day’s main meal is over by 9:30 a.m.”

“By 10:30, the dahl would be foaming with bubbles,” Yamuna says. “It would actually have scum on it from fermenting in the heat. And the yoghurt we bought at seven o’clock would be sour by eleven. You can escape cold by building a fire, but there’s no escaping

the heat in Vrindaban. It's all-pervading. I used to actually cry in the afternoons because there was no relief. I'd weep! If you dipped a gamsha in water and put it over your head, it would be dry in five minutes. You'd have to sleep at night with a bucket of water on each side and dip the cloth in and lay it over yourself. Of course, you never really slept. You just lived in suspended animation, floating on waves of heat. We didn't use mattresses, which were like heating pads. Just mats."

"Why didn't you fix up Prabhupada's rooms with fans?" I ask.

"Oh, when we moved in, Prabhupada's rooms were a mess," Yamuna says, "even though we dusted them out in February, '71. The paint was chipping off, and his asana looked a hundred years old. It had actually been eaten away by worms. I redecorated the rooms, painting them saffron and white and writing the maha-mantra in Sanskrit around the top of the wall. We also got Prabhupada a new bed, and made that little brick partition between the cooking area and his writing area. But he didn't want fans. At that time, the courtyard where he's lecturing was all rubble, piles of bricks right by the samadhi of Rupa Goswami. Oh, the Indians preserve nothing! We knew we had to get the courtyard ready for his lectures, so we did the coolie work in the morning when it wasn't so hot. We built the brick wall up so it would look neat for pictures, and made a flat place for Srila Prabhupada to sit and give lectures. Unfortunately, we don't have facilities for devotees, and they're flooding in now every day."

"I guess they'll just have to sleep out where they can," Gurudas says.

"The rooftop's great," I say.

"Oh, now every place is nice," Gurudas says. "No heat, no mosquitos, no cold, no rain. During October and November, Vrindaban's perfect. Then December starts getting a little cold. Not really cold by American standards, but it seems colder because there are no heating facilities."

"I'll never again complain of cold," Yamuna says.

"Is it true we might move into a palace?" I ask.

"The Maharaj of Bharatpur said that we can use the Laksmi Rani Kunj Palace down by Kesi Ghat," Gurudas says. "We're just waiting for his official confirmation."

"I hear it's enormous," Yamuna says, "a real eighteenth century palace with big walls and gates. Right on the river. And it's just a ten-minute walk from here."

As we talk through the afternoon, I hardly notice the passage of time. Finally, Achyutananda comes and tells Yamuna that Srila Prabhupada wants to see her. He'll be lecturing this afternoon in the courtyard.

* * *

Achyutananda and I go down to the corner for a lassi, a kind of sweet yoghurt milkshake, good and cold. Brijbasis think we're mad; they never touch iced drinks in October. On the way back to Radha Damodar, I avoid the street children. When one little girl says, "Hare Krishna, Hare Ram," I find myself waiting to hear the refrain: Dum-marodum. But it doesn't come.

Srila Prabhupada walks into a packed courtyard to deliver his lecture. People sit crosslegged, knee to knee. They even line the perimeter of the concrete patio. The

monkeys swing to and fro in the branches of the mango tree, and they chatter until Prabhupada enters. Then, astonishingly, they shut up.

Prabhupada sings from Bhaktivinode Thakur's Gitavali: "Jaya Radha-Madhava."

Everyone responds, and the courtyard echoes loudly in praise of Krishna.

After this invocation, Prabhupada hands a copy of Nectar of Devotion to Pradyumna and tells him to read from the preface, where we'd left off this morning. Pradyumna sits very tall in lotus position and wears his glasses halfway down his nose. He looks very scholarly as he reads about the stages of devotional service.

"So, in devotional service there are three stages," Prabhupada says, interrupting the reading. "The kanistha-adhikari, the madhyam-adhikari, and the uttama-adhikari, or beginning, middle, and advanced stages. In the beginning, kanistha-adhikari, the devotee engages in Deity worship, makes offerings to the Deity, cleans the floor, et cetera. This isn't to say that Deity worship is lower than meditation. It's just the beginning stage.

"Sometimes the kanistha-adhikari thinks that he has realized Krishna just because he has worshiped the Deity nicely, but he must make further advancement. When we say 'Krishna,' we do not refer to Krishna alone, but to all of His energies and paraphernalia. When we say, 'The king is coming' we don't mean that the king is coming alone. His ministers, secretaries, queens, soldiers—everyone is coming. Similarly, Krishna is the root of all emanations, and when He comes, His devotees also come with Him. When we recognize Krishna's devotees and pay them respects, we are further advanced. If a pure devotee comes, the pujari can immediately stop the aratik and go to receive him. Krishna is satisfied more when His devotee is worshiped. That's a fact.

"Yasya prasada bhagavat-prasado yasya prasadan na gatih kuto'pi. The spiritual master is the representative of God because he's engaged twenty-four hours daily in Krishna's service. The spiritual master is considered as good as Hari because he's Krishna's most confidential servant. Worship of the spiritual master is not artificial or concocted: it's recommended in all the Shastras. Advanced devotees accept this and treat the spiritual master accordingly.

"Although the spiritual master is offered respects like Hari, he doesn't think himself Hari. He considers his disciples to be his spiritual masters. He thinks, 'Krishna has sent me so many spiritual masters.' He doesn't even think of himself as a guru but as a servant to his disciples, because Krishna has given him the task to train them.

"When one is advanced, he can see the importance of other devotees. An advanced devotee never offends another devotee. That is a very serious offense. Therefore we address one another as 'Prabhu.' This should not simply be spoken with the lips. It should be realized. One should think of other devotees as his prabhus, his masters. Not that he should try to become master himself. We should always be willing to offer respects not only to other devotees but to everyone. Everyone. Why? Because every living entity is originally a devotee of Krishna. Circumstantially, being covered by the modes of nature, he seems like a demon, but his original nature is that of Krishna's servant.

"The process of bhakti really begins when one is self-realized. Before that, if one engages in Deity worship yet thinks that he is the body and does not give respect to devotees, he is

at the first stage, kanistha-adhikari. Although seated on the material platform, he's trying to improve his condition by following the directions of the spiritual master and Shastra. "We should not remain perpetual neophytes. We should try to advance to madhyam-adhikari. On this platform, we distinguish between four different kinds of living entities: Krishna, Krishna's devotees, innocent people, and atheists. We should not superficially say, 'In my view, everyone is the same.' Of course, that is the last stage, but because we are neophyte, this is not our vision. This vision of the maha-bhagavat should never be imitated. Imitation is artificial.

"In the second stage, that of madhyam-adhikari, one treats all types of men according to their position and tries to increase his love for the Supreme Personality of Godhead and also make friends with the devotees. He doesn't envy the devotees. If a devotee is superior, we should take lessons from him; if equal, we should make friends with him; and if lower, we should try to help him.

"A madhyam-adhikari does not simply give respect to other devotees: he teaches others to become devotees as well. This means preaching. A preacher should approach others and say, 'You're wasting your life in material activities. You should become Krishna's devotee.' This is preaching. One should preach Krishna consciousness to the innocent. The atheists should be avoided because as soon as an atheist hears about God, he becomes envious and vicious.

"At the last stage, that of maha-bhagavat or uttama-adhikari, one doesn't see devotees and nondevotees. He sees everyone as a better devotee than himself. Nor does he pretend to have this consciousness. No. He actually thinks like this. He's naturally humble: he wants to pay respects to everyone, and he wants no respect for himself. If one wants respect for himself, he's still at the secondary stage. The maha-bhagavat is ready to give respect even to an ant.

"When one attains this highest platform, there's no more friend, no more enemy, no more preaching. The maha-bhagavat sees everyone engaged in the Lord's service, with the exception of himself. This platform, however, should not be imitated. It must be sincere, not superficial.

"Those who are preachers must remain on the second platform, that of madhyam-adhikari. Even when a maha-bhagavat wants to preach, he must come down to that second platform. He cannot remain on the highest and preach. He plays the part of second-class devotee. For instance, in the Bible, Lord Jesus Christ said, 'I have many things to say, but you are not qualified to understand them.'

"We should follow in the footsteps of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu and the six Goswamis and gradually learn this process explained in the Bhakti Rasamrita Sindhu. Unless we can understand the literature of Rupa Goswami, we cannot properly render devotional service to Krishna. Thank you very much."

The lecture concludes, and we offer obeisances. Even before we have a chance to rise, a loud voice suddenly says, "Question!"

"Yes?"

"What is the relationship between the disciple and the spiritual master?"

There's a silence. The person who asked the question is a newly arrived devotee. I haven't even learned his name yet. He's a short boy with thick glasses, a shaved head, and a fiery red sikha so long that he must have been a hippy before shaving up. The silence lengthens. This isn't a question to ask Srila Prabhupada personally—especially after initiation—for the answer is found in every one of his books. Whenever a devotee asks such a basic question, Prabhupada often roars, “You have not read my books?” I remember when we asked a similar question back in 1966, just before the first initiation. Prabhupada had shocked us by saying, “The student accepts the spiritual master and agrees to worship him as God.”

Now, Srila Prabhupada turns to me and says, “How do you answer him, Hayagriva?” “The disciple does whatever the spiritual master asks,” I say. “His relationship is that of servant to master.”

“That of a menial servant,” Prabhupada says. “Even if the spiritual master asks him to clean the stoolhouse, he will do so.”

“It's said that the spiritual master is the well-wisher,” the boy continues. “What does this mean?”

“Krishna is the friend of everyone,” Prabhupada says. “If I deliver the message to you that Krishna is your friend, I also become your friend. This is friendship: preaching Krishna consciousness. When you are in danger, no one can give you protection but Krishna. Therefore He is your only friend. Our business is only to deliver the message of Krishna and point out that Krishna is your friend. He's also the proprietor. Whatever you claim as your property will be taken by Krishna when you die. To educate people that Krishna is the proprietor is real friendship. Just spread this message of Krishna, and you become the friend and well-wisher of all people. To become a spiritual master is not very difficult: we simply have to carry the message of Krishna with no adulteration. I'm just a peon delivering the message of Krishna to you. Although I personally may be the greatest fool, since the message I am delivering is from your dearest friend, I also become your dearest friend. Is that clear?”

“Yes, thank you,” the boy says loudly.

I lean forward and tap Achyutananda's shoulder. “Who's that?” I ask.

“Kulashekar Prabhu,” he says, “from London.”

Prabhupada looks at the audience. He answers a couple of questions from Indian visitors, then takes up the kartals and leads another kirtan.

After evening aratik, the devotees crowd into Srila Prabhupada's room. Prabhupada sits quietly, and no one speaks. Even silence is relishable in his presence. Yamuna serves cups of warm milk with honey and bowls of spiced puffed rice. We offer Prabhupada obeisances, and he says, “Jai! All glories to the devotees.” Then we leave his room. I retire to the rooftop and sit and watch the waxing moon rise slowly over the mango trees.

CHAPTER 11. Raman Reti

While the moon still hangs over the misty plains and the dawn begins to light the streets, Achyutananda and I walk down to the river.

We pass through Loi Bazaar, chanting our rounds. Women sweep the streets and men stand around tea stalls, sipping milky tea from clay cups and smoking bidis and talking. From houses and temples come the sounds of kirtan: cymbals, drums, and the chanting of morning mantras.

Already the sweets vendors are soaking balls of sugar and condensed milk in big woks of bubbling ghee. We pass by Shahji Temple and the tall, gray concrete walls of Maithun Kunj, Nidhuban. Monkeys leap from rooftops to the wall and back. They shake the electric poles, and live wires touch and burst into sparks.

Almost hidden in a corner near Maithun Kunj is the small but well-tended Radha Vamsi Gopala Temple. Srila Prabhupada lived here off and on from 1956 to 1962. Just before Kesi Ghat, we pass the Jugal Kishore Temple. Its red sandstone tower—built in the style of Madana Mohana—glows like redwood in the early light. For some reason, Jugal Kishore is permanently closed. It was constructed in 1627—the last year of Jahangir’s reign. Builders used the same type of red sandstone found in Delhi’s Red Fort. The building appears in good shape, though the Moguls defaced some of the facade, revealing the bricks beneath. Around the doorway are carvings of peacocks and lotuses, and Krishna lifting Govardhan Hill.

We sit on the steps of Kesi Ghat and chant. Old women dressed in white saris walk past, chanting their rounds. Pilgrims are already bathing on the opposite shore, which is sandy and more inviting than Kesi Ghat, where one enters deep water after descending the last step. Here, the Jamuna flows slowly but steadily. Little whirlpools form and disappear, withered garlands float by, and sometimes a huge turtle sticks his nose up, then dives back under, receding in the depths.

I wet my hand and sprinkle drops on my head three times—perfunctory but effective. A few drops of Jamuna water is potent enough to wash away all the sins of millions of lifetimes. For Vaishnavas, the Jamuna is even more sacred than the six other holy rivers of India: the Ganges, Godavari, Saraswati, Narmada, Sindhu, and Kaveri. By the Lord’s power, the water of the Jamuna includes their water, and one bath at Kesi Ghat equals one thousand in the Ganges.

Women, fully clad in saris, wade into the water. They hold their nose and close their eyes, submerge and come up quickly, then hurry back ashore.

Nearby, Krishna killed the demon Kesi, who had been sent to Vrindaban by King Kamsa. Kesi assumed the form of a gigantic horse and entered Vrindaban with mane flying and hooves digging up the earth. With one shrill whinny, he terrified the world. Krishna promptly challenged him to fight. Kesi charged the Lord with great speed, intent on trampling Him under his hooves, but Krishna caught hold of the demon’s legs and tossed

him a hundred yards. Kesi landed with such force that he passed out. Regaining consciousness, he charged Krishna with his mouth open, determined to devour Him, but Krishna stuck His fist into Kesi's mouth and knocked out his teeth. Then the Lord's fist began to burn Kesi's throat like a hot iron. The demon perspired, his eyes bulged in their sockets, his legs thrashed, and he passed stool and urine. When he gave up his vital force, Krishna extricated His hand. The demigods were grateful to see the demon dead. They showered flowers upon the earth and beat kettledrums in praise.

Today, Kesi Ghat is one of the most picturesque places in Vrindaban, thanks partly to the Maharaj of Bharatpur's Lakshmi Rani Kunj Palace. This enormous eighteenth century edifice stands on the waterfront. Below the palace, winding along the river, are passageways supported by carved sandstone columns and archways. The stone walkway along the river passes by a series of alcoves built under the palace and opening out onto the ghat. In their shadows, priests smear Hanuman deities with bright orange sindhur. The ceilings and walls are sooty from sacrificial fires. The Vrindaban parikrama also passes by here, merging with the palace walkway.

While we chant our rounds, the sun bums the haze off the river. I strip to my undershorts and jump in. I hold my breath, thrash to the surface, try to swim against the current, then grab for the ghat steps and pull myself out.

"Jai! All glories to Jamuna Devi!"

The dip was refreshing. I sit beside Achyutananda on the steps and continue chanting japa.

Soon, half a dozen little boys circle us, staring at what must look very strange to them: Americans with sikhas, dhotis, and beadbags, chanting on the steps of Kesi Ghat like babajis. They look intently at my size twelve tennis shoes. They chatter and giggle.

"Chant Hare Krishna, Hare Rama," Achyutananda tells them.

"Hare Krishna, Hare Rama," the boys respond. "Hare Krishna, Hare Rama." They jump up and down and start competing to see who can chant the fastest and loudest.

"I guess it's time to go," I tell Achyutananda.

"Yes. Prabhupada will be lecturing. Afterwards, if you want, we can go out to Raman Reti."

We retrace our route through the streets. Kirtans still pulsate from houses and temples. At Shahji's busy corner, money changers set up stacks of coins—five, ten, twenty, twenty-five, and fifty paise. From here we turn down a narrow lane. Lepers shake their nickel-plated cups and cry out, "Baksheesh, baksheesh, baba." We pass the Mirabai Temple, erected in honor of the sixteenth century Mewar poetess who worshiped Lord Krishna in the mood of a gopi. Within is a murti of Mirabai chanting and playing kartals before Radha and Krishna. One more block, and we're back at Radha Damodar.

Srila Prabhupada is ready to give his lecture. I walk into his room and pay obeisances.

"So, you have been enjoying Vrindaban?" he asks.

"Yes, Srila Prabhupada."

"Achyutananda Maharaj is an expert guide," he says. "He has actually become a Brijbasi. Together you can compile one article on Vrindaban for Back To Godhead."

“Well, I’m slowly learning,” I say. “This morning we went to Kesi Ghat, and passed the place with a high wall around it and all the monkeys.”

“Nidhuban,” Prabhupada says. He stands up, and Sruta Kirti places a chadar over his shoulders. Prabhupada looks weary from writing all night. In his room are Gurudas and Yamuna, Vishakha with her camera, and Kulashekar, the new boy from London.

We follow Prabhupada into the temple, pay obeisances to Sri Sri Radha Damodar, and pass through the narrow doorway to the back courtyard. A lot of people are waiting.

When Prabhupada enters, the devotees pay obeisances. Many Indians follow suit.

“Jai Sri Krishna!” Prabhupada says, joining his hands. He sits on a cushion, picks up a pair of cymbals, and chants “Jaya Radha Madhava.” Shyamsundar arranges a microphone in front of him. After chanting, Prabhupada tells Pradyumna to read from where we left off in the Nectar of Devotion. Pradyumna reads about the development of love of God.

“Even if we have no family, the loving propensity is there,” Prabhupada says, “and one keeps a cat or dog to love. By nature we want to love somebody else. That somebody else is Krishna. But without information of Krishna, our loving propensity is limited to certain circles. Therefore we’re not satisfied. That loving propensity for Krishna is within everyone. In the material field, we love somebody for his giving something. That is not pure love. Pure love is described by Lord Chaitanya Mahaprabhu in his mood of Radharani: ‘O Krishna, You either embrace me or trample me under Your feet or neglect me or make me brokenhearted by not being present; still, at any time throughout my life, life after life, I love You unconditionally.’ That is real love, and that love is existing in everyone’s heart. By this devotional process, it is revealed. That potent love for Krishna can be reinstated again by the prescribed method of kirtan. That is the version of Rupa Goswami.

“Since you are sitting here listening to me, you have a little taste of love for Krishna; otherwise, why should you waste your time here? To evoke that love, you have to associate with devotees and become a little enthusiastic. You have left your country and come with me here to India not for any material profit but to increase your Krishna consciousness. This is enthusiasm. I went to your country at the age of seventy, a time when nobody leaves home. This is enthusiasm. ‘Yes, I must go,’ I said, and because I went, you now have information. Such enthusiasm is the basic principle.

“Krishna is beyond our senses. As we purify our senses, we can touch, taste, and see Krishna. Not that we can do this all at once. Like Sanatan Goswami—he was talking to his Deity. So, as we advance in spiritual consciousness, Krishna will talk with us directly. The Deity will talk with us. Krishna is giving us a chance to talk with Him, to see Him, to smell Him, to taste Him, to experience Him in so many ways. And gradually, as we advance, we can see Him directly, just as we are here directly talking. That will come. First we must approach the bona fide spiritual master, then inquire. In this way we can advance, and Krishna will be fully manifest.

“It’s in our interest to utilize everything for Krishna. We should not see matter as separate from Krishna. Actually, it is not. When we see things as separate from Krishna, that is materialism. And when we see them as the energy of Krishna, that is spiritual vision. If

we utilize matter for our sense gratification, it is material. Things are material or spiritual depending on our consciousness.

“It doesn’t matter what we are by material calculations. Haridas Thakur was born in a Muslim family, and Rupa and Sanatan Goswamis were rejected by the brahmin community, but Chaitanya Mahaprabhu collected all these exalted personalities together because they knew of Krishna. It doesn’t matter whether one is born in a low family. The path of Krishna consciousness is open to everyone. The Shastras order, my Guru Maharaj orders, and Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu orders that all over the world, in every town and village, this mission be taken up. It’s a glory for India that people from foreign countries are accepting Krishna consciousness. Thank you very much.”

We gather on the porch in front of Srila Prabhupada’s rooms. A breakfast of bananas, apples, halavah, and curd is served on plates made of leaves. As more devotees arrive, cooking becomes more time consuming for Yamuna and Malati, our chief cooks.

Last night, three boys arrived from Hawaii: Prithu Swami, Sesha, and Premananda. Prithu used to be a suntanned hatha-yoga surfer. Independent of ISKCON, he encountered Prabhupada’s books and began teaching from them on the island of Maui. He attracted some other surfers—including Sesha and Premananda—and became their guru. Prithu announced last night that he’s surrendering to Prabhupada. He wants to be initiated as soon as possible.

Also arriving yesterday were Vaikunthanath and his wife Saradia, American devotees from New York, initiated three years ago. Veda Vyas, a young man from Boston, also arrived. He’s a gung-ho type mainly interested in “making Lakshmi [money] for Krishna.”

“Now the devotees are really pouring in,” I tell Achyutananda. “It seems that those beautiful, intimate days with Srila Prabhupada at the old Second Avenue storefront are gone.”

“You should have seen what it was like in Delhi,” Achyutananda says. “Then you’d appreciate this one-on-one contact here. It’s getting more rare, you know, to get to be alone with him. Anyway, Haya, if you want to see Raman Reti, let’s move.”

We go down to the street, and a half dozen ricksha boys start jangling their bells.

Achyutananda selects the strongest looking carriage. We both squeeze onto the narrow seat, determined to save money. To the amusement of the boys, half of me hangs over the side. All the stopping and starting in the crowded bazaar forces our boy to get off and push, but once we’re on the road heading east toward the Mathura-Delhi highway, he pedals along at ten miles an hour.

We pass many large cement-block buildings shaded by eucalyptus, neem, and banyan trees. These are ashrams where gurus live with their students: Sri Krishna Bhakti Ashram, Vrindaban Sodha Ashram, Sapta Rishi Ashram. Facing the road are tall masonry walls with broken glass cemented on top to discourage dacoits. Brahmacharis clad in saffron robes work in flower beds, aerating the earth around marigolds, bougainvillea, and the sacred tulasi. From within the ashrams come the ring of cymbals and the chanting of mantras.

Peacocks strut around the walls, and perch on the branches of the great trees. Sometimes they trumpet, sometimes call out like cats—meeYOW meeYOW meeYOW—and sometimes coo like pigeons and caw like crows. They can even make a strange clicking-clacking-slapping noise, like two flat boards being struck together. Rhesus monkeys scamper along the road and swing from branch to branch in the trees or sit in family groups, picking bugs off their children.

Students squat outside the walls of the Institute for Oriental Studies. They smoke bidis and talk.

“That’s the school of one of Prabhupada’s godbrothers,” Achyutananda informs me. “And there’s our property across the street.”

Our ricksha stops at a three-acre clearing where some excavation is going on. Tiny mules carry packs of sand from a quarry to the excavation site. Boys fill little wicker baskets with sand, using clay cups for shovels. Women come and go from a well, carrying pitchers of water on their heads.

“There’s Sudama,” Achyutananda says. “He oversees the project.”

Our ricksha-walla waits for us. We walk over to the middle of a field where three devotees are supervising the digging of a long trench. Two Indian workers are measuring distances with string and trying to determine whether the trench follows a straight line. Beneath a tamal tree are primitive brick huts, a long table, and the smouldering remnants of a cowdung fire.

The devotees offer obeisances, which we return. I recognize Sudama from the old days at the San Francisco temple. The others are introduced as Lokanath and Hrishikesh. They are also from California.

“I heard you were here,” Sudama says, his blue eyes wide open, his face flushed. “So, when did you arrive?”

“The day before yesterday,” I say.

“And how do you find Vrindaban?”

“Transcendentally enlivening, Prabhu.”

Sudama looks puzzled. “Anyway, welcome to Raman Reti,” he says. “As you might know, Raman Reti means ‘pleasant sands.’ It’s not so sandy here, but go about a kilometer toward the river, and you’ll find yourself in the old river bed.”

“I hear that Krishna and Balarama used to play here,” I say.

“Right. That’s why Srila Prabhupada decided to build a Krishna-Balarama mandir. Now we’ve just started on a temporary building to house devotees and workers. Then we can start on the temple.”

“How long do you think it’ll take?”

“Three or four years, with luck. A devotee from Amsterdam has already drawn up the blueprints. It’s really fantastic. And Prabhupada also wants an international guest house and gurukula here.”

I watch the workers carry buckets on their heads to a bamboo scaffold. A boy loads up tiny burros with sandbags, and the burros take the sand to an old tub, where cement is being mixed.

“At this rate, it’ll take four decades,” I say.

“You’d be surprised,” Sudama says. “What we lack in equipment, we make up for in hands. Next week we’ll be taking on a dozen more workers.”

“There are problems, though,” Lokanath says. “If a man mixes concrete, he won’t hammer nails, and vice versa. If a man sweeps, he won’t do anything else. A cook will only cook. A burro driver will only tend burros. You need a man for each job, even if that job’s pouring you a glass of water.”

“It’s maddening,” Sudama says.

“There are caste systems within castes,” Hrishikesh says. “They’re all sudras, but within that caste there are

hundreds of subdivisions. It’s very complex and exasperating.”

“I can imagine.”

“Apart from that,” Sudama says, “people are constantly trying to cheat you because you’re a foreigner.”

“I have to stand over the workers all the time,” Lokanath says. “Otherwise they’ll put too much sand in the concrete mix, or even steal a tool, or hammer in four nails where there should be six, then steal the leftovers. But we’re moving along. Srila Prabhupada comes out about once a week to check on progress.”

Sudama offers us some Ayurvedic herbal tea, and we sit in the shade beneath the tamal tree and talk.

“Supposedly, there are only three tamal trees in all Vrindaban,” Sudama says. “One is down by the Jamuna, and they say Krishna jumped off it into the river when He fought Kaliya. And another is in a forest somewhere. This is the third.”

“Tell him about the bull,” Achyutananda says.

“Oh yes,” Sudama laughs. “That’s already a Vrindaban legend. When we first came here, a very mean bull was living under this tamal tree. He was famous as a sadhu killer, and he thought this land was his. He wouldn’t let any other living entity on this side of the road. So, as you might know, Srila Prabhupada instructed us to perform sankirtan from Radha Damodar to Raman Reti every day. When we first came here chanting and ringing cymbals, the bull was furious. He stomped the ground and charged us, and we had to run for our lives.”

“Lokanath almost got gored,” Hrishikesh says.

“For seven mornings in a row we confronted the bull with sankirtan,” Sudama continues.

“Then the bull disappeared and never returned. The people who live around here say it’s a miracle.”

Two Indian brahmacharis suddenly come over and offer obeisances. They introduce themselves as Gopaldas and Ramananda. They’re around eighteen years old and come from Bihar province.

“These are our go-betweens with the workers,” Sudama says. “They interpret for us because most of the workers don’t speak a word of English, and we don’t know Hindi.”

“We’ve read your article about New Vrindaban in Back To Godhead,” Ramananda tells me. “When you go back, can we come?”

I explain that passage is very expensive and visas are difficult to get, but the boys talk about going to America as if it were Nepal.

More tea is poured, and Sudama tells us of the difficulties in finalizing the property deed in ISKCON's name. It's a very involved undertaking to buy land in India, where space is at such a premium. Land ownership is complicated by contingencies unheard of in the West. If the local magistrate of Akbar the Great allowed a certain family to live on a property, that family has some claim to it.

"In India, families live on the same land for hundreds of years," Sudama says, "and it's extremely difficult getting someone to move off property, even when you have a clear deed in your hand. If property is uninhabited, people start squatting there, and you have to find them a new place before kicking them out. Even then, they demand astronomical sums of money. And then there's the usual bureaucratic red tape. Also, it's in your own interest to start on good footing with your neighbors, for obvious reasons."

After some time, Achyutananda and I wish everyone good luck and take our leave. The ricksha carries us back via the river path. Along this route, it's obvious why the area is called Raman Reti. A broad expanse of fine, grayish sand runs parallel to the river. Only a few papaya trees and date palms grow here.

I find myself imagining Krishna and Balarama at play here, running and wrestling, mimicking peacocks and playing a Dwapara-Yuga version of soccer. I wonder if it was sandy like this in those days. Five thousand years is a long time, and topography changes radically over such vast periods, especially around a river. Even chatras and ghats constructed only one and two hundred years ago are left high and dry. Over the centuries, this area became sandy as the river changed course.

We travel by ricksha as far as possible down the parikrama. Then we strike out on foot, walking leisurely for a half hour down to Kaliya Ghat and Madana Mohana, past Imlitala, and then back to Radha Damodar.

At Radha Damodar, a flurry of activity greets us. Devotees are loading blankets and mattresses onto rickshas and stacking luggage beside the gateway.

"What's going on?" I ask Shyamsundar.

"It's just been confirmed," he says. "We're moving into the Maharaj of Bharatpur's palace at Kesi Ghat. What a godsend! There's no more room for devotees here."

On the Radha Damodar rooftop, devotees are painting and decorating Gurudas's room for Srila Prabhupada. The noise in the courtyard has been disturbing Prabhupada's writing; therefore he's moving upstairs.

I pack my luggage. Everyone considers it quite a treat to be invited to a Mogul palace, overlooking the very spot where Lord Krishna relaxed after killing the Kesi demon.

"Prabhupada says that the demons of doubt will be killed for everyone who lives there," Malati tells me.

I hurry to finish packing and to get settled in a room before nightfall.

CHAPTER 12. The Kesi Ghat Palace

At Lakshmi Rani Kunj, Kesi Ghat, the palace of the Maharaj of Bharatpur houses the Deity of Thakur Lakshmi Mohan. The palace can be entered only through the main gate, which faces the street near the Jugal Kishore Temple. Within, there are upper and lower rooms opening onto a courtyard, a fifty-foot square with a marble floor and open roof. A mango tree grows in the center of the courtyard. Magnificent tracery adorns the archways and balconies above: winding vines and lotuses carved in brown sandstone, executed in the Mathuran style of the eighteenth century. From the rooms facing the west, one can look out over Kesi Ghat and the Jamuna River.

A central three-arched altar is raised about five feet off the ground floor. This altar is not being used. The Deity of Thakur Lakshmi Mohan is kept in a small room next to the pujari's. The palace temple is considered closed, but the Deities are always attended. Within the palace lives an old man who serves as both palace watchman and pujari for the Deities. In the afternoon, he plays harmonium and chants Hare Krishna. His voice and the wavering reeds of the harmonium echo within the stone walls like an elegy for the maharajas of ages past. His lonely chant rises from the old deserted palace, once vibrant with life.

Those maharajas will never walk the earth again. Though their progeny bear the title of kings, they are factually like other citizens. When the British withdrew from India, they left no less than 560 princely states. Thanks to British laissez faire, the maharajas ruled as they had in medieval times, yet they depended solely on the British for existence in the modern world. In the twenty-five years since Independence, they've been fighting for their lives against a Central Government that considers them an irritating anachronism. Now, instead of commanding thousands of subjects, the maharajas can hardly afford to employ enough servants to maintain their grand estates. Piece by piece, the Central Government has been chopping away at their legacies, taxing the maharajas into bankruptcy and forcing them to sell some properties to pay off taxes on others. Therefore the Maharaj of Bharatpur not only wants us to use the Kesi Ghat palace; he would like very much to sell it to us.

I spend most of the morning cleaning and arranging my room. I've a room to myself on the ground floor, and Achyutananda has a room nearby. Other single men have also moved in: Dwija Hari, Vidura, Prithu Swami, Sesha and Premananda, Veda Vyas, Yosadanandan, Kulashekar, Paramahansa, Guru Kripa, Parivrajakacharya, and new arrivals: Krishnadas, Shivananda, and Pariksit. Grihasta couples (householders) live upstairs: Gurudas and Yamuna, Shyamsundar and Malati, Vaikunthanath and Saradia. From my room, I can look out over the Jamuna and straight down at Kesi Ghat and the bare plinths where chatras once gave shade to holymen as they read Shashtra. Now hatha-yogis utilize these plinths during the day, performing their yogic exercises and bathing.

In the afternoon, Achyutananda and I go down to the ghat. One of the hatha-yogis offers us a golfball-size piece of bhang—cannabis ground into a paste with sugar, ginger, and other spices. "If you eat that, you'll die," Achyutananda warns me. I watch the yogi roll the ball between his hands and then swallow it whole, washing it down with Jamuna water.

We take a boat to the other bank, where the water is cleaner and not as deep. Here we bathe, submerging ourselves three times, as customary. I remember Srila Prabhupada's warning against bathing in the sacred waters to get rid of bad karma and then going out to accumulate more, like the elephant rolling in dust to dry itself after bathing, and ending up dirtier than before.

We return by boat to the palace. As soon as we enter, Shyamsundar runs up to inform us that the eccentric London devotee, Kulashekar, got into a row in the marketplace. A boy was beating a cow with a stick, and Kulashekar descended on him with all the justified anger of the great Vedic monarch, Maharaj Pariksit.

At the advent of the age of Kali, Maharaj Pariksit encountered a black sudra beating a cow and bull with a club. Three of the bull's legs were broken, and the cow was trembling in fear. The cow represents mother earth, and the bull represents religion. They are always sanctified and worthy of protection.

Maharaj Pariksit became very angry and decided to kill the sudra, but the sudra surrendered and begged for mercy. The compassionate monarch then spared his life and condemned him to live only in sinful places. Actually, the sudra was the personification of Kali, and his appearance signified the end of Dwapara Yuga and beginning of Kali Yuga.

"Kulashekar grabbed the boy's stick and slapped him in the face," Shyamsundar informs us. "The people who saw it are furious, and word's spreading that one of our members attacked a child. Srila Prabhupada was informed."

"Any retaliations?"

"No. But we should be wary. Just watch where you're going. Stick to the main roads, and if you have to go out at night, take a ricksha and don't go alone."

"And what did Srila Prabhupada say?"

"He said we should chant Hare Krishna and not be disturbed. If we rely on Krishna, he says, Krishna will protect us."

I was afraid of something like this happening. The Brijbasis are easy-going people, but such an incident might provoke them.

"Where's Kulashekar?" I ask.

"In his room," Shyamsundar says. "He won't come out, and he's locked himself in."

"Why not send him to Delhi?" I suggest. "At least for a while, until things cool down."

"I'll try," Shyamsundar says, then goes to Kulashekar's room to convince him to leave.

It's already four-thirty, time to attend Srila Prabhupada's evening lecture. Achyutananda and I put on fresh robes and tilak and leave for Radha Damodar.

As we walk past Jugal Kishore Temple, rocks bound across the cobblestones and land at our feet. A half dozen college students are standing down the block. The rocks must have

been thrown from a rooftop. The students couldn't have thrown them without our noticing. Suddenly, more rocks land beside us. I look up at the rooftops but see no one. "Let's get out of here," I tell Achyutananda.

We turn and head back to the palace.

"Dum-marodum," one of the boys shout.

"C.I.A.," shouts another.

We resist the urge to run, not wanting to appear intimidated. Still, the effect is the same. We're afraid.

But if we hole up in the palace, we miss Prabhupada's lecture. Didn't he advise us to go about our duty and rely on Krishna to protect us?

"Let's go down to the river and cut over," I suggest.

"Good idea," Achyutananda says. "There's no one down there now."

We turn and half-run half-walk around the corner of Kesi Ghat to the river. Then we take the walkway past the alcoves and through the winding passageways above the steps of the ghat. I can see that the current is flowing swiftly and strongly. There's no safety railing. In India, no one ever posts warning signs. The attitude seems to be, "Look out for yourself."

We cut up from the river at Chir Ghat and then walk to Shahji Temple. I begin to feel more comfortable once I see that life in Loi Bazaar is going on normally. We hurry past the lepers and the Mirabai temple, and then arrive at Radha Damodar. By my watch, the rapid walk took eight minutes.

We enter Srila Prabhupada's new upstairs quarters, offer obeisances, and tell him about the rock throwing. He sits quietly, listening with his eyes closed. When we finish, he opens them slowly and looks at each of us.

"This is all Maya's trick," he says. "She's trying to divert you from your Krishna consciousness. Because we are attacking Maya with our preaching work, she's trying to impede. So, go ahead with your duty, and rest assured that Krishna will protect you."

"Actually, the only danger is in traveling back and forth," I say.

"Then you may live here," he tells me. "Pradyumna and Sruta Kirti are in the room next door. You can stay with them. Or you can stay down in my rooms."

Now I feel ashamed. Moving back to Radha Damodar would be cowardly. Obviously, all the devotees can't hide behind the spiritual master.

"That's all right, Srila Prabhupada," I say. I don't think there's any real danger yet. Just a couple of hooligans, that's all."

"Achha! Now it's time for the lecture."

We follow him down to the back courtyard. The crowd is the largest thus far, thanks to the big influx of devotees in the past day.

Srila Prabhupada chants the opening prayers, and Pradyumna reads from Nectar of Devotion about the basic relationships a devotee can have with Krishna.

"There are five basic rasas," Prabhupada says. "Rasa means the mellow, or the taste, that we enjoy in every activity. Whatever you do, you must enjoy some taste to do it. There are twelve rasas, out of which five are primary and seven secondary.

“Krishna is willing to respond to any rasa. Any way you want to deal with Krishna, He will deal with you. That is His position. Putana wanted to kill Krishna, but she was given the position of Krishna’s mother and allowed to nurse Him, and Krishna sucked out her life force along with her poisoned milk- Whatever Putana’s intention, because she came to Krishna as a mother, He accepted her.

“We may choose to be Krishna’s enemy, but factually He is not anyone’s enemy. The gopis came to Krishna out of love, and out of love they were purified. Krishna is just like the sun, which soaks up water from a urinal. The sun is not polluted, but the urinal becomes purified. So, just try to approach Krishna somehow or other, and your life will be successful. It doesn’t matter if you approach Him out of kama or krodha, lust or anger. As soon as you divert your attention to Krishna, that is love. It may be perverted, like Kamsa’s, but that doesn’t matter.

“Kamsa was always thinking of Krishna, wondering when He was going to come kill him. In this, he was Krishna conscious, but he was thinking in terms of killing Krishna. Still, Krishna is so kind that Kamsa was given liberation. This is the special kindness of Krishna. If the mind is always fixed on Krishna, then the senses will always be engaged in Krishna’s service. The mind, after all, is the center of the senses and all activities.

“When the material contamination is washed off, the spiritual body is revealed. Spiritual senses are there, but they are covered by the material energies. The living entity has hands, legs—everything spiritual. Unless the spirit soul has hands and legs, where have these hands and legs come from?

“The soul therefore has its own form, which we cannot see at the present moment. So actually, I’m not seeing you, and you’re not seeing me. When your father dies, you say, ‘My father’s gone,’ and lament, but where has he gone? The body may be lying on the floor, yet we say he’s gone. What is gone is something else. That which has left has never been seen. We’ve just seen the outward body. We are not even seeing one another. If I can’t see you, a part and parcel of God, how can I expect to see God? You cannot see Krishna with these blunt senses. The senses must be purified.

“Whatever you are seeing now is illusion. You are actually not seeing. Bhagavad Gita says that the sage does not see a learned brahmin and a dog; he sees both the dog and brahmin with equal vision because he doesn’t see the dress. He sees the spirit soul within the brahmin and the dog. That’s Brahman vision. When one has that transcendental vision, devotional service begins. Not that with blunt senses one can serve God. Krishna is the Supersoul. He cannot be served by matter; He has to be served with spirit.

“Krishna is not exposed to everyone. That is not possible. You cannot serve Krishna if you’re not a devotee. Krishna will accept whatever you offer Him—a flower, some water. For worshiping Krishna, there’s no impediment. If you want to worship demigods, much paraphernalia is required, but the poorest man in any part of the world can offer his love to Krishna.

“Still, we cannot approach Krishna with our material consciousness; therefore our consciousness has to be changed. Without being fire, you cannot enter fire. Without being Brahman, you cannot approach Brahman. Hrishikena hrishikesa sevanam. The senses

must be purified by being attached to Krishna. If you sit near the fire, you become warmer, warmer, warmer. If you put an iron rod into fire, it becomes red hot, and then it becomes fire. Similarly, if you keep always in touch with Krishna, you become Krishnized. Thank you very much.”

* * *

After the lecture, we follow Srila Prabhupada up to his rooftop room. A lot of Indians visit, and he talks to them in Hindi. In the middle of the conversation, the lights go out, and people fumble around—someone trips over something—until Shyamsundar arrives with a flashlight and some candles. Electrical failures are common in India, and especially in Vrindaban during Kartik, when the influx of pilgrims draws a lot of power. Usually, the problem is fixed within thirty minutes, but sometimes the lines are out for the night.

The candlelight transports us back to the days of the Goswamis. They too must have sat in this same spot and read Shastra by candlelight and the light of the waxing Kartik moon. Tomorrow night is Rasa-Lila Purnima, the full moon night of the rasa dance. All Vrindaban will turn out for the reenactment of Krishna’s dance with the milkmaids. The Indian visitors dominate the conversation, and Srila Prabhupada is obliged to speak in Hindi. Achyutananda. and I decide to return to Kesi Ghat. The moon is just beginning to rise, and as yet has not shed its light on the dark, narrow streets.

We see a cycle-ricksha in the shadows. Achyutananda flags it over, and we get in. The ricksha-walla turns around to ask for specific directions, and as he does so, the lantern light from a passing tonga strikes his face. I gasp. He has Draculean fangs.

“Jesus! Krishna! Rama!” I exclaim.

We start moving, bouncing down the dark cobbled street past Shahji Temple and the lepers,

“Did you see his face?” I ask Achyutananda.

“He has fangs,” Achyutananda says, as astonished as I.

“At least two inches long,” I say.

“Maybe he’s a Rakshasha. They do exist, you know.”

“A Rakshasha ricksha-walla? Where’s he taking us?”

“To the palace, I hope.”

I find myself glancing up at the dark outlines of rooftops, looking for a possible rock thrower. Why has the charming Vrindaban atmosphere suddenly turned ghastly? Have we committed some offense against the holy dham?

When we reach Kesi Ghat, lights are back on. In the dim light I see the flash of fangs as the ricksha-walla turns to collect his money. His upper lip seems fixed in a permanent snarl, and the fangs—his upper canine teeth—extend almost an inch below his lower lip.

“Ghastly!” Achyutananda says. The ricksha disappears into the night.

Malati has prepared a big wok of hot milk with bananas and honey. We sit in the palace courtyard, drink the milk, and discuss the busy day’s events. Then we retire.

In my room, I look out the window over Kesi Ghat. Now the moonlight spreads across the Jamuna. Bats fly in erratic circles from the palace parapets. The sands of the opposite

shore seem to glow, and from time to time I hear the splashing of turtles. Despite the many advantages of the palace, I already miss Radha Damodar's open roof, where I could study the constellations and watch their progress across the sky. But tonight I would not watch for long. Chanting on my red japa beads, I fall asleep before completing one round.

CHAPTER 13. The Rasa-Lila Grounds

After mangal aratik, Srila Prabhupada calls me upstairs. He's sitting behind a new desk, which is decorated with bouquets of marigolds. Before him are a dictaphone and the books used for translating Srimad Bhagavatam. Because of frequent power failures, he's been using a battery-run cassette recorder instead of the dictaphone, and one of the girls has been transcribing his dictations by typewriter.

I offer obeisances and sit on the floor before him. He chews on a neem twig, and from time to time he spits the splinters into a container beside the desk.

"So, how are you finding Vrindaban?" he asks.

"Very enlivening, Srila Prabhupada."

"And you are chanting your sixteen rounds?"

"Yes."

"Now you are not feeling disturbance?"

"The holy dham is most purifying," I say.

"It's very important not to commit offenses while in Krishna's abode," he says.

I say nothing. He's spoken several times recently of offensive behavior, and I feel that his words are directed specifically to me. It's the natural condition of the fallen living entity to feel guilty.

"It's very serious," he says. "The holy dham is special. If a devotee commits offenses here, what hope is there?" He tosses the neem twig into the corner wastebasket. Then he looks back at me. It's impossible to return his gaze. I look down at the floor.

"This boy Lokanath—I hear he is smoking ganja.

Oh no! Lokanath is one of the American boys staying out at Raman Reti with Sudama. Yesterday morning, when Achyutananda and I visited, I met him for the first time. He seemed to be seriously involved with construction.

I look up from the floor. Srila Prabhupada's eyes do not waver. The fresh white tilak on his face is perfectly applied, as always.

"I don't know," I say. "This is the first I've heard."

"I think he's been influenced by some of those Shivaites," he says. "They live near Raman Reti and grow ganja."

"We were out there yesterday," I say. "I didn't see any smoking."

"You may see or not see," he says, "but it's going on."

I'm thankful when Shyamsundar enters. He usually tends to such problems.

"This boy Lokanath is smoking ganja?" Prabhupada asks.

Shyamsundar looks surprised. He shakes his head, as if trying to wake up after a long sleep.

"He is?"

"If this continues, our whole project will be spoiled," Prabhupada says.

“I’ll look into it, Srila Prabhupada,” Shyamsundar says. “From what I understand, Lokanath is rendering very valuable service. He’s a professional mason and really the only one who knows what he’s doing out there.”

“That may be, but if he’s not following the regulations, what can we do?”

“The boys out there are somewhat isolated,” Shyamsundar says. “They need more of your association.”

“They should come every morning to my lectures,” Prabhupada says. “That much they must do. Otherwise, working, working, working. ... How are they different from the karmis?”

Shyamsundar rocks back and forth nervously. His face looks pale and drawn. I begin wondering how Srila Prabhupada found out about the ganja and the Shivaites. There are very few Shivaites in Vrindaban compared to the rest of India. Mendicant Shivaites rarely follow the brahminical rules of cleanliness. Shunning baths, they smear their bodies with ashes, carry tridents, and walk about cremation ghats like ghouls. In Varanasi, one sees them everywhere, especially down at the ghats, where they sit puffing great clouds of ganja and charas from clay chillums, simple pipes shaped like funnels. “Bom Shankar!” they shout when they light up, dedicating their smoke to Varanasi’s patron deity, Shiva, lord of ghosts and Rakshashas. Prabhupada has said that such ganja-smokers are not even bona fide devotees of Lord Shiva, for they try to imitate their lord instead of serve him. “Before you imitate Lord Shiva by smoking ganja,” Prabhupada once said, “you just drink an ocean of poison, as Lord Shiva did. But that you cannot do.”

Shyamsundar stops his nervous rocking. His frown indicates that he knows no easy solution. “I’ll inform Sudama,” he says at length. “They’ll have to make special arrangements to come in by ricksha.”

“That can be done,” Srila Prabhupada says, “for a few paise.”

“But what should I do about Lokanath?”

“That, you decide. But his nonsense cannot continue. And we must have some assurance. Not that he just says, ‘I won’t smoke.’”

“He might get angry if I confront him,” Shyamsundar says. “First I’ll speak to Sudama.”

“If he resents our principles, he can go elsewhere. Let him establish his own principles to do as he pleases. Now, another thing. What about this boy Kulashekar? If what he did was not justified, he must make some restitution.”

“He slapped a boy in the face right in the middle of Loi Bazaar,” Shyamsundar says.

“We’d have to find the boy. Then—”

“So, just wait for now,” Prabhupada says. “The boy was not injured?”

“No. It was just a slap. But reactions were very negative. Yesterday, rocks were thrown at us near Kesi Ghat.”

“Ah. I think there was some other provocation. Why should they attack our men? Not everyone was responsible.”

“They lump us all together as foreigners.”

“Therefore this ganja smoking must stop. Caesar’s wife must be beyond suspicion. As devotees, whatever we do reflects on this movement of Lord Chaitanya Mahaprabhu. So we must very carefully avoid nonsense.”

“Yes, Srila Prabhupada,” Shyamsundar says. “I’ll do my best.”

“Now, Hayagriva, what editing work are you doing?” I look up to see him smiling. His mood has changed as quickly as he’s changed the subject. At one second a thunderbolt; the next, a rose.

“Well, I’m still on the Sixth Canto of Bhagavatam,” I say. “I’ve about eighty pages of manuscript to go.”

“So, you can write an essay on Chaitanya Mahaprabhu’s Sikshastakam, how you are realizing.”

“I’m afraid my realizations aren’t very profound, Srila Prabhupada,” I say. “All I know is what you tell me.”

The Sikshastakam is the only writing Lord Chaitanya Mahaprabhu left to posterity. The Lord attained fame as a great scholar in His youth and inspired the Goswarnis to write many volumes on bhakti-yoga, but He Himself wrote down only eight short verses. It was unnecessary to write more. Like the “Sermon on the Mount,” the Sikshastakam contains the essential message of a great teacher.

“Anyway, I’ve given some interpretations, I believe, in my Teachings of Lord Chaitanya,” Prabhupada says. “So you can elaborate on them, and we can publish it in Back To Godhead.”

“I’ll start right away,” I say.

“Now, time for the morning walk.”

This morning, Srila Prabhupada does not walk down the river toward Madana Mohana, as usual. Instead, to commemorate Rasa-Lila Purnima, he walks around the corner to Seva Kunj. It was here that Krishna danced with the gopis. When Krishna noticed the beauty of the kumkum reddish moon, He decorated Himself with fragrant mallika flowers. He remembered the gopis’ prayers to have Him as their husband and began playing His flute. The gopis rushed from their homes to join Him.

Today, these grounds are surrounded by a high masonry wall. We follow Srila Prabhupada within, where there’s a small rasa-lila temple known as Ranga Mahal. A mural depicts Lord Krishna massaging the feet of Radharani.

“This is called Seva Kunj,” Srila Prabhupada says. “Seva means service, and it was here that Krishna rendered service to Radha. The gopis did not know that Krishna is the Supreme Personality of Godhead. They simply accepted Him as the most beautiful boy of Vrindaban and considered Him their paramour. Otherwise, how could they have accepted service from Him? When Krishna enjoyed the rasa dance with the gopis, He was only eight years old, and many of the gopis were married, because in those days girls were married very early. Still, these gopis were attracted to Krishna’s beauty, and when they heard Him playing His flute, they became lusty to satisfy His senses.”

We walk around the grounds, and Prabhupada points to a small pond deep down at the bottom of a concrete shaft.

“Krishna created this pond by stamping His foot to quench the thirst of Lalita, one of the gopis,” he says. “Krishna is the husband of everyone because He’s the supreme enjoyer. The loving exchanges between Krishna and the gopis are eternally taking place in the spiritual sky, Goloka Vrindaban. But here in the material world they are pervertedly reflected in sex play between boys and girls. This perverted reflection is abominable. It is deadly poison to imitate Krishna’s rasa lila even in dream or imagination.”

Srila Prabhupada turns and walks on. Bushes line the marked path, and monkeys scamper around the white and purple bougainvillea. These grounds are the monkeys’ domain. When the gates are closed at night, they alone remain to witness the rasa dance said to take place here.

Prabhupada scoffs at this belief, however. “We should not concoct such stories,” he says. “Krishna danced here five thousand years ago. There’s no Shastric evidence that He dances here every night. That dance is going on eternally in the spiritual sky, but not here. These stories are invented by simple people and sahajiyas.”

We finish circumambulating the grounds. Then we follow Prabhupada down past Shahji Temple to Maithun Kunj at Nidhuban. These grounds, also surrounded by a high wall, encompass a whole city block. Monkey tribes scamper wildly about. To bring food in here is to invite attack. Indeed, carvings of monkeys over the archway warn pilgrims what to expect.

It was here that Rupa and Sanatan Goswamis brought Emperor Akbar blindfolded. The emperor had a mystical experience, and he was so impressed that he encouraged construction of the first great Goswami temples: Madana Mohana and Govindaji. It was also here that Haridas Swami discovered the Deity of Banki Behari, perhaps the most popular Deity in Vrindaban today. Krishna rested here with Radha after the rasa dance, and Radha playfully took His flute.

On a small altar beneath an open pavilion is a Deity of Radha playing a flute. She’s attended by Lalita and Vishakha, the principal gopis. In front of Haridas Goswami’s samadhi is a checkered marble floor. I ask Srila Prabhupada if Krishna danced here also. “No,” he says. “Radha and Krishna rested here, that’s all.”

And, saying nothing more, he completes his circumambulation of the grounds.

Srila Prabhupada continues his morning lectures in the back courtyard of Radha Damodar. Pradyumna reads from Nectar of Devotion:

Great devotees are compared with sharks in the great ocean of nectar and do not care for the various rivers of liberation. Impersonalists are very fond of merging into the Supreme, like rivers that come down and merge into the ocean. ...

“It doesn’t matter what course a river follows,” Prabhupada says, “because ultimately it merges into the ocean. And that is liberation. So, this is a favorite analogy of the Mayavadis. But to be valid, all points of an analogy must be consistent. Rivers merge into the ocean, true, but again the water is evaporated by the scorching heat of the sun and becomes clouds, and then again falls down. Impersonal realization is also like this. But if you reside in the ocean of the nectar of service to Krishna, you will always feel transcendental pleasure.

“Jiva Goswami compares merging to a green bird flying into a green tree. To the imperfect eye, it appears that the bird is no longer existing. Similarly, the small spiritual living being appears to merge with the spiritual sky, but the individuality is still there. This fragment of Brahman is eternal, sanatana. It cannot be cut into pieces. There’s no question of merging, of losing that individuality. Individuality will remain.

“In the Second Chapter of Bhagavad Gita, Krishna explains that all these kings and warriors were existing in the past, they exist in the present, and in the future they will also exist. So merging does not mean losing individuality.

“Once we go to the spiritual world, we don’t want to come back. We stay with Krishna and dance with Him and play with Him, or serve Him as tree, as plant, as water, as cows, as land, as cowherd boys, as father, mother, or as gopis. Once we go to Krishna, we live forever with Him in some capacity. Let me live in Vrindaban in any capacity. It doesn’t matter: just let me live there. In the ocean of nectar we will always reside, eternally, continually, without any cessation.

“So, Rupa Goswami says that we must enter that ocean of nectar, never to return to the rivers. Sometimes in the ocean there are whirlpools, compared to arguments by logicians. Rupa Goswami warns that we should not be deviated by the arguments of karmis, jnanis, and yogis. Let them do their own business. We give them respect, but we don’t accept their path. We should be fixed up in bhakti. That is recommended.”

A big male monkey suddenly jumps from the mango tree onto the ground, scampers about, then runs back up into the tree, chattering. Srila Prabhupada. cries, “Hut! Hut!” and the monkey bounds over to the rooftop and out of sight. The audience laughs.

Pradyumna continues reading:

The author of Bhakti Rasamrita Sindhu, Srila Rupa Goswami, very humbly submits that he is just trying to spread Krishna consciousness all over the world ... for the benefit of suffering humanity.

“Yes. Our main business is to serve the acharyas: Chaitanya Mahaprabhu and His direct disciples, Rupa Goswami, and their disciples. This Society is attempting to create a society of devotees all over the world without consideration of caste, creed, or color. One must be a devotee of Krishna and know the science of Krishna. Then he can preach to others. People should not think that we are proselytizing for Hinduism.

“In Bhagavad Gita you won’t find the word ‘Hindu,’ nor in Srimad Bhagavatam. This is a later invention. Our system is varnashrama dharma. That is our Vedic system. It’s applicable everywhere. It’s God’s creation, like the sun. The sun is visible everywhere. It’s not an American sun or an Indian sun. In our Society there are boys and girls coming from Jewish groups, Christian groups, Mohammedan groups, but when they come here, all of them become the servants of Krishna. That is Krishna consciousness. Thank you very much.”

* * *

We eat midday prasadam at the Kesi Ghat palace. Afterwards, I take a nap and dream—if such a vision can be called a dream—of a woman dressed in radiant gems. Her face is hideous, specked with warts, her nose long, her red, bushy hair disarrayed, her long

scarlet nails curled toward her palms. She writhes like a serpent. She ascends from the earth and falls back, as if performing some necromantic dance. Her shape changes at will—at one moment large, another quite small. “Hee hee hee hee,” she laughs, like a witch stirring a cauldron full of bat wings and toads. She expands to gigantic proportions. Her bright gems sparkle red, blue, and green, and she weaves back and forth, filling the universe with terror. “Hee hee hee! PuTAHna!” she screams. And I awake.

Putana!

I lie a long time on my back, looking up at the ceiling. What a frightful dream, and yet how wonderful! The Putana witch was the first of numerous demons sent by Kamsa to kill baby Krishna. Putana was expert in the black art of killing babies by ghastly methods. As soon as Kamsa learned that Krishna was in Gokula, he sent Putana there to deal with Him.

Putana changed her shape into that of a beautiful young woman, then went to Krishna to offer Him her poisoned breasts to suck. “This child is so powerful that He can destroy the whole universe,” she thought. Still, she took Krishna on her lap and pushed her poison-smearred nipple in His mouth. Then Krishna, with His eyes closed, took the breast and sucked out all the milk and Putana’s life air as well.

“Let go! Let go!” Putana screamed. She then assumed her real feature as a gigantic demon twelve miles long and fell to the earth, dead. Her body smashed trees, and the earth and firmament shook. The noise terrified all the residents of Gokula. Her reddish bushy hair was scattered, her teeth appeared like ploughed roads, her nostrils like mountain caves, her breasts like small hills, her eye-sockets like wells, her thighs like river banks, her hands like bridges, and her stomach like a dried-up lake.

This dream puts an end to my nap. I sit on the side of the bed and look out the window at the river. Strange, how images arise so vividly in the mind during dreams. It’s as if they lay submerged, just waiting for their cue. Then they bob up.

Tonight, I’ll be up late. I get out of bed and change into a clean dhoti and kurta. It’s time to return to Radha Damodar. This afternoon, sannyas initiations are scheduled, and this evening the full moon rises. Rasalila celebrations will be lasting late into the night.

CHAPTER 14. The Dance

Guru Kripa had no idea that he would be offered sannyas upon arriving from South India last week. When Prabhupada heard of his successful preaching among the Mayavadis and Shivaitees in Madras and Bangalore, he said, “Now, being a sannyasi, you must continue this nice preaching work.”

“But Srila Prabhupada, I’m not a sannyasi,” Guru Kripa said. “I’m just a brahmachari.”
“What? You’re not sannyasi? Then immediately you must take sannyas.”

As soon as Srila Prabhupada made the announcement, two American brahmacharis, Paramahansa and Parivrajakacharya, begged to be awarded the renounced order at the same ceremony. The prospect of eternal celibacy didn’t deter them at all.

“I’ll consult some of the devotees,” Prabhupada told them.

The other devotees, however, objected.

“Everyone wants sannyas to remain somewhat elevated,” Gurudas said. “The more sannyasis there are, the less important the position.”

“Srila Prabhupada, these boys haven’t accomplished anything,” Shyamsundar argued.

“Let them prove themselves. They were just initiated last year. We don’t even know who they are.”

But Paramahansa and Parivrajakacharya were determined. They went to Prabhupada and said, “We’re going to Vietnam, and we want sannyas.”

“Oh, the war is on,” Prabhupada said. “You must be sannyasis to preach there.”

And so it was settled.

We gather in the Radha Damodar courtyard for the initiation. The induction of three Americans into the renounced order attracts a large crowd of Indians. Many devotees, not finding room to sit in the courtyard, watch from the rooftop. In Vrindaban, a sannyas ceremony is always something of an event, especially during the festive Rasa-Lila Purnima. People always gather to offer obeisances to a new renunciate and wish him good luck on his spiritual voyage.

Srila Prabhupada gives a brief talk on the methods of renunciation. Then he turns to the sannyas initiates.

“These American boys are working for Krishna,” he says. “They’re not working for their community or country or whatever. Neither is Krishna their God, according to common understanding. In the dictionary it’s said that Krishna is a Hindu God. But these boys are not working for a Hindu God. They’re working for Krishna. Krishna is neither Hindu nor this nor that. Krishna is the Supreme Personality of Godhead. Because these boys have understood in this way, they’re working for Krishna without any motive. Not only here, but all over the world. Why? Krishna consciousness is there dormant in everyone. We simply have to hear Bhagavad Gita and Srimad Bhagavatam from the representative of Krishna for that consciousness to be awakened. It’s very pleasing to the ear and the heart to hear about Krishna from Krishna’s devotee.”

Prabhupada then watches as Achyutananda Swami officiates. The ritual begins.

Achyutananda lights the sacrificial fire and chants the Sanskrit mantras. Sesame seeds, barley, and ghee are poured on the flames, and we chant: Vande'ham sri-guroh sri-yuta-pada-kamalam sri-gurun vaisnavams ca. "I offer my obeisances unto the lotus feet of my spiritual master and unto the feet of all Vaishnavas."

Obeisances are also offered unto the major teachers in the discipular succession. As each prayer is concluded, the congregation chants the word "svaha" in unison. More sesame seeds, barley, ghee, and kindling are thrown onto the fire. The flames leap high into the air. Then bananas, also to be placed on the fire, are distributed to the three sannyasis and others. As soon as the monkeys see them, they swoop down out of the trees. They snatch half a dozen bananas before we can chase them off.

The fire sacrifice ends, and the Indians come forward to offer the new sannyasis obeisances by touching their feet. Then they partake of the prasadam—tiny slices of banana.

Achyutananda tells me that he'll be surprised if Paramahansa and Parivrajakacharya last a year.

"Their attitude's all wrong," he says. "At least Guru Kripa was asked by Srila Prabhupada, but those others just want the prestige and maha plates."

"Frankly, I don't see how a twenty-year-old can renounce sex for the rest of his life," I say. "He doesn't know enough."

"I had a close call myself," Achyutananda says, "two years ago."

"Oh?"

"But Krishna saved me."

"You're really an inspiration, Maharaj," I say. "How do you do it?"

"I meditate on the fact that the human body is a bag of stool, pus, blood, urine, and bile."

"Yamunacharya would be proud of you," I say, "but sometimes that method doesn't work."

"There's also a system of yogic exercises," he says. "Cold showers also. And diet's important. Avoid high protein and oily foods."

"Tell me about the exercises."

"Oh, not now. That won't help you either, if your mind's in the wrong place. The whole secret is to keep your mind fixed on Krishna by chanting. If you don't do that, nothing will help. Now, let's go find out where those rasa dances are."

During the full moon night officially marking the end of Sarat (September-October) and the beginning of Kartik (October-November), the people of Vrindaban celebrate Krishna's dance with the milkmaids of Braja. Dances and plays are performed at various temples and pandals. Sometimes, professional dance troupes come from as far away as Bengal and Orissa. The main attraction, however, is the maha-rasa-lila performed by the local boys. Occasionally, an all-female troupe will visit. To avoid any tinge of eroticism, the sexes are never mixed.

We take a ricksha to the Radha Madhava Mandir, a palatial temple of brown sandstone. It was built by the Maharaj of Jaipur and completed in 1917 after thirty years' labor. Indeed,

it is Vrindaban's most opulent and grandiose temple. Filigree designs—lotuses, vines, chakras—adorn the exterior archways. Within the temple proper, the Deities of a golden Radha and black Madhava (Krishna) are worshiped according to the doctrines of the Nimbarka sampradaya. Sixteen cream-colored marble pillars give the temple a feeling of solidity. Colorful enamel designs of vines and flowers are set in the marble over a triad of altars. Many of the designs are copied from those in the Taj Mahal.

A stage is set up beneath great neem trees in front of the temple's main entrance. The temple archways serve as backdrops to the drama. Phosphorescent blue lights illumine the stage, and the archways framing the balconies glow softly golden. It is a befitting atmosphere for Krishna's timeless dance in the spiritual realm.

The boys—ranging in age from six to eighteen—are all splendidly attired. They must have spent many hours on their makeup and dress. Their faces are painted with kajal and white dots to set off their eyes. Krishna is the most elaborately dressed of all. A diadem with peacock feathers crowns His head, and His body is clothed in yellow silks. Bells decorate His ankles, and red kumkum powder stains the bottoms of His feet. Golden armlets and bracelets encircle His arms, and emerald earrings shaped like sharks hang from His ears. His lotus eyes are outlined with kajal, and His red lips and tongue are brightened with betel juice. Garlands of marigolds and miniature roses hang around His neck.

The gopis are dressed in colorful silk saris with ornate gold-thread embroidery. Their eyes are beautified by the clever application of kajal. Bracelets, ankle bells, anklets, armlets, nose rings, earrings, and necklaces adorn their slender bodies.

Six musicians sit to the front-left side of the stage. They play tabla, mridanga, cymbals, harmonium, violin, and sarangi, a stringed instrument that makes a haunting, ethereal sound. The lead vocalist looks like a chai vendor, but he's a versatile master of bhajans. The boys number about twenty in all. The boy playing Krishna seems to retain a remarkable transcendental detachment to the dance. Being Absolute, Krishna is nondifferent from His name, form, pastimes, and representation. Even His picture is considered identical with Him. Although no human being can ever become Krishna or merge with Him, the boy playing His part is spiritualized by association with the Lord. The drama itself is quite simple: Sri Krishna requests Maya Devi, goddess of the material energy, to assist Him in the rasa dance. Maya Devi happily agrees to do so in various ways: she creates an appropriate atmosphere while Krishna expands Himself into many forms to dance with each gopi. The love and affection of each gopi increases as each one thinks that Krishna is dancing with her alone.

Then Kamadev, the god of sex, bets Narada Muni that he can excel anyone in love's art, including Krishna Himself. However, after Kamadev comes to Vrindaban and sees Krishna, he understands that He is no ordinary rival. He then challenges Krishna to compete at the rasa-lila grounds.

When the gopis hear Lord Krishna's flute, they ran to meet Him, but He requests that they return home to serve their families. The gopis refuse, for they consider Krishna to be their all-in-all. Krishna then starts to dance, and each gopi thinks that Krishna is hers

exclusively. Their love is expressed by mudras: the subtle gestures of eyes and hands, raised eyebrows, smiles, and stances.

While they dance, Kamadev arrives. He draws his bow and arrow to shoot Krishna, but the Lord simply glances his way, and Kamadev faints. Then Kamadev's wife, Rathi Devi, carries the defeated sex-god offstage. The dance continues. After a while, Krishna disappears to humble the gopis' pride.

Separation from Krishna causes the gopis to become deranged. They imitate Krishna's pastimes: His killing of the Putana witch, and His loving exchanges with Nanda Maharaj and the cowherd boys. They roll about the stage in fits of sorrow. Meanwhile, Krishna pays Radharani special attention, decorating Her face with kum-kum powder and braiding Her hair. This makes Her very proud. To humble Her, He deserts Her also. Thus the Lord drives Radharani and all the other gopis mad.

When their pride is finally dissipated, He reappears. The gopis celebrate with an even more ecstatic dance. Then Krishna imitates the dancing of peacocks. He flourishes an enormous fan of peacock feathers and dances on His knees, swirling like a dervish. He leaps high into the air and spins around and around, feathers flying, gravitation itself seeming suspended by His divine will. This energetic display brings the audience to its feet, applauding.

For five hours, the boys dance. Their bare feet stamp in unison and ankle bells jangle as they dance hand-in-hand in a circle around Krishna. Their extraordinary gestures and expressions revive memories of childhood play. Most of the boys are pre-adolescent, and their dance evokes those pure days of joy before the sexual impulse awakes.

How happy we were then! How fortunate to be able to remain eternally eight years old, like the Kumaras! At that age, the anxiety of hankering and lamenting are unknown.

Anxiety belongs to that strange world of adults. When such boys play Krishna and the gopis, the love evoked is ethereal.

The dance continues until one in the morning. Then an aratik is offered on stage to Radha and Krishna as They sit on a throne of flowers. For the time being, the boys are considered the embodiment of the Lord. After the aratik, prasadam is distributed.

People begin walking home and hailing rickshas. Achyutananda and I take a ricksha back to Kesi Ghat. The temples and shops roll by quickly, as in a dream. Buildings look like iridescent stage props in the bright moonlight.

"So, what did you think of that, Haya?" Achyutananda asks.

"They were empowered," I say. "They were Krishna."

"Who said?"

"Prabhupada said that even the thought of Krishna is nondifferent from Krishna. That boy playing Krishna was more than a thought."

Luckily, the palace gate has been left open. We have to pound for a long time on the interior door before the old caretaker opens it. All the devotees are asleep. We were the only ones who went to the dance.

As I go to my room, I tell Achyutananda not to wake me for mangal aratik, less than three hours away.

“I must get some sleep,” I tell him.

But I find myself lying wide awake in bed. I stare out the window at the moonlight over the Jamuna. In the quiet night, I still hear the ankle bells ringing, as palpable as my own heartbeat.

CHAPTER 15. The Parikrama

Achyutananda waits until sunrise to wake me. Then he suggests going on parikrama. “It’s nearly fourteen kilometers,” he says. “We’ll have to hurry to finish in time for Prabhupada’s lecture. Bring your camera.”

We start walking at a lively pace across an open area where mendicants congregate to beg from pilgrims going to Kesi Ghat. At Sudam Kutir, there’s a temple and dharmasala housing brahmacharis and guests. A lively kirtan is in full swing. One boy is dancing in the center of the room, raising his arms in the air like Lord Chaitanya. Another boy plays mridanga, another strikes cymbals, another beats a gong, and an old man plays harmonium. “Jai Ram, Sita Ram, Sita Ram, Sita Ram,” the congregation chants. The men encourage us to dance, and we join in. The dancing boy’s face lights up with bliss. “Jai Ram, Sita Ram, Sita Ram, Sita Ram.”

It’s a wonderful, spontaneous dance, and people don’t want us to leave. Some men follow us out into the courtyard, where babajis sit drinking chai around a banyan tree. They ask me to photograph them. When I explain that there’s not sufficient light, they look puzzled. Achyutananda also explains in Hindi, but somehow the message doesn’t get through—so I take their photo anyway.

We continue south down the parikrama, passing through paved streets and crowded buildings. The smoke of cowdung fires rises from kitchens where water is being boiled for chai. The standard breakfast of the poor in Vrindaban seems to be chai, a few slices of bread for dunking, and bhaji, spiced chickpeas.

We arrive at Tikariraj Ghat. A brown sandstone gateway leads to the Tikarirani Radha Krishna Temple, whose main tower is adorned with no less than eighteen small steeples. The temple was completed in 1871 by a Bihari queen named Indrajit Kunver. Beside it stands a small temple to the goddess of the Jamuna River and a Rama temple called Kausalendra. The Vrinda Vatika Garden is also here. Elderly widows sit chanting japa beneath a giant banyan near the Chaitanya Kutir Ashram. From within come the sounds of kirtan.

The parikrama turns away from the river bank and runs past cultivated fields. Despite the sandy soil, hibiscus flowers blossom profusely. At Adi Bhadra Narayan Temple, we’re offered a plate of bhaji. We eat, take some photos, and leave a small donation at the Deity’s feet.

A boy drawing water from a pump beneath a grove of neem trees stops to stare at us with wide-eyed curiosity.

“Mee-yow, mee-yow, mee-yow,” peacocks call, as if to imitate cats. I’ve never seen so many peacocks.

“They’re more active in the early morning,” Achyutananda says.

“When do they spread their feathers?”

“Just before the rainy season, when the clouds are thundering. Also when they mate. The males do a little dance and show off their plumage.”

I try to photograph a group of four peacocks, but they run away like shy celebrities. We continue walking, past date palms and a pond full of black water buffalo.

“Buffalo spend most of the time cooling off in the water,” Achyutananda explains.

“Because their skin doesn’t have pores, they sweat into their milk. Cows are in the mode of goodness, but water buffalo are in passion. Their milk’s plentiful, thick, hard to digest, and delicious.”

“They seem to be a favorite work animal around here.”

“They’re very useful. And their stool is used all around Vrindaban for fuel, like cow dung.”

A grove of small trees with tiny star-shaped flowers captures my attention.

“Those are parijata,” Achyutananda says. “Most aromatic and auspicious.”

“And those trees?”

“Guava.”

So they are. I’d like to pick a few, but in India there are always at least six eyes on you.

We pass on.

At the Jagannatha Dev Temple, an old man runs out to inform us that Lord Chaitanya Mahaprabhu Himself sat under the banyan shading the temple.

“Sometimes people establish places according to their whims,” Achyutananda says. “Like at Chir Ghat. But the major places were established by Lord Chaitanya and the Goswamis.”

“Well, this tree might be five hundred years old,” I admit, “but when they talk about five-thousand-year old trees—”

“The understanding is that the tree is spiritualized by Krishna’s touch,” Achyutananda says. “According to Brahma Samhita, there’s no past, present, or future in Vrindaban at all.”

We continue walking past more guava groves to a wooden Hanuman temple with gay blue trim and brightly colored paintings over the door. A pujari is offering a ghee lamp to the deity. I snap some photos, and we move on, past a number of small farms. Men plow the fields with oxen and water buffalo. Here, the sand along the parikrama path is very fine, in contrast to the cultivated soil enriched with tons of cow dung. A lot of verbenia bushes grow wild along the perimeter of the fields.

A twenty-foot deity of Hanuman stands at the end of a big field. Hanuman carries the mountain with healing herbs, which he brought from the Himalayas to Sri Lanka to revive Rama and Lakshman. A group of brahmacharis sits at the base of the deity chanting: “Rama Raghava, Rama Raghava, Rama Raghava, raksha mam! Krishna Keshava, Krishna Keshava, Krishna Keshava, pahi mam.” Before I take photos, two of them run into their hut to change into fresh dhotis and comb their hair.

“Hanuman’s very popular here,” Achyutananda says. “That’s why the monkeys are tolerated.”

From this point, the parikrama route turns from south to west. We cross a broad cornfield and arrive at the Vrindaban-Mathura road. Then we pass a Hanuman ashram, where men busily sift rice grains through screens. Boys with sticks drive a herd of white cows into a goshala. Dust from the herd rises in the early morning air.

“It looks like a scene out of Prabhupada’s Krishna book,” I say. “It could be Krishna’s times.”

“Most of Braja is still rural,” Achyutananda says. “Mahaban, Talaban, Nandagram, Khadiraban, Kamaban, Bahulaban, Madhuban. They’re all still peaceful and beautiful.”

We arrive at Raman Reti. Instead of visiting the construction site, we follow the parikrama north, toward the river. Peacocks sit atop old masonry walls, appearing to enjoy the shade of the big asvattha trees. The trees have heart-shaped leaves.

“Neem and asvattha trees are auspicious,” Achyutananda points out. “And when they’re grafted together, as they are here, they’re super auspicious.”

The parikrama once again turns sandy and runs between retaining walls made of mud. Then it again changes course, this time turning to the east and paralleling the river. The river itself is still out of view, but ancient chatras overlooking the remains of ghats tell us that the river once flowed here centuries ago. Pink and purple hibiscus abound. Banyans grow out of old masonry walls that enclose the grounds of spacious estates. Here, the trees are shady and plentiful. Instead of small farms, there are big manors, converted into ashrams and rooming houses. Moss growing on the walls creates the impression that nothing here has changed in the past hundred years.

Indeed, one expects to see a British memsahib, attended by servants in spotless white, descend from a hansom with parasol in hand. Instead, Indian women draw water from pumps and shout loudly to frighten birds out of the mango trees, lest the birds eat all the fruit. Broad pampas grass, topped by feathery tassles, grows high along the path.

We pass by more Hanuman deities in concrete temples no larger than closets. They’re smeared with orange sindhur, and the walls are covered with sindhur hand prints.

“People say that when they rub sindhur on Hanuman, he becomes happy and grants their wishes,” Achyutananda says. “He’s the only one they put sindhur on, except the cows on Gopashtami Day. White cows covered with sindhur hand prints are highly auspicious.”

The minty aroma of tulasi is thick in the air. It mingles with wisps of smoke from cowdung fires. Side paths run off the parikrama into the abundant underbush, where cobras lurk. Bearded sadhus sit outside their huts and recite Sanskrit slokas. Cows are tied to posts next to the holymen’s mud-and-straw abodes.

We pay obeisances to the holymen, saying: “Namoh brahmanya devaya go brahmana hitaya cha jagad hitaya krishnaya govindaya namo namaha.” “I offer my respectful obeisances unto Lord Krishna, who is the wellwisher of the brahmins and the cows, and of all living entities in general.”

We arrive at Dwadashadipya Hill, the hill of twelve suns, the highest spot in all Vrindaban. The red sandstone of Madana Mohana glows warmly in the early morning light. Here, along the parikrama, stand some dozen well-preserved chatras. Patties of cowdung are stuck on their columns to dry in the sun. Some of the chatras now serve as

homes for squatters, who have put charpoys, under them. Peacocks and parrots make their nests beneath the crowns.

Between the parikrama and the river stand little mud-and-straw houses with gardens that flood during the monsoon. People bathe beneath the water pumps or in the river. Women hurry along, carrying wicker baskets of twigs on their heads. Old sadhus, their eyes sparkling, walk by with jaunty strides. A woman squats and hammers bricks into small chunks. Music from a harmonium and the voices of children chanting mantras float from the temples.

“Hare Krishna, Hare Rama,” schoolboys cry out to us.

Bougainvillea bushes shade Shiva lingas. Palmettos wave in the gentle morning breeze. Pilgrims crowd into boats to cross to the opposite bank, where the river is cleaner and not as deep. At Kaliya Ghat, we offer obeisances to a Deity of Krishna beneath a big kadamba tree. From its branches, it is said, Krishna jumped into the river to dance on Kaliya’s hoods. Now the river runs about fifty yards from the tree.

Finally, we reach our starting point—Kesi Ghat.

“Two hours and five minutes,” Achyutananda says. “Not bad at all. But we’ll have to hurry to Radha Damodar.”

* * *

We arrive in the middle of Srila Prabhupada’s lecture. The three dandas of the new sannyasis rise prominent above the gathering. A danda is a staff composed of four bamboo poles wrapped in a saffron cloth. The poles represent the surrender of body, mind, words, and actions to Krishna. In the Gaudiya sampradaya, for ten years—or until he attains the elevated paramahansa stage—a sannyasi is required to carry a danda wherever he goes. During these years, he must travel and preach.

The monkeys swinging in the mango tree chatter louder than usual. We offer obeisances to Srila Prabhupada. There’s no room to sit in front. We have to sit in back, beside Rupa Goswami’s samadhi. Out of respect, the little old women have stopped circumambulating the courtyard during the lectures. They stand beneath the trees at the rear of the courtyard and listen, although they don’t understand a word of English.

“We have to acquire spiritual energy through the mercy of guru and Krishna,”

Prabhupada says. “Krishna is within us as chaita-guru, and when we are serious, He comes out as the spiritual master. There is no difference between siksha-guru and diksha-guru and Krishna. Krishna manifests Himself externally as siksha-guru and diksha-guru.

“Krishna existed before the creation. Then Krishna Himself instructed the first guru, Brahma, because there was no other living creature. Then He instructed others through Brahma. Therefore the original guru is Krishna. The same Krishna was guru to Arjuna. By Shastric conclusion, Krishna is the original guru, the guru of everyone. Whoever accepts the authority of Bhagavad Gita also accepts, imperceptibly, Krishna as guru. Therefore the bona fide spiritual master represents Krishna, speaks for Krishna, and canvasses for Krishna. Who can deny it? It is not difficult. But, if in my heart there is something else, then I will be cheated by a fraud.

“Krishna is in everyone’s heart. Krishna can understand. We cannot hide anything from Krishna. This is not possible. Krishna and the living entity are sitting side by side, just like two birds sitting on a branch. One bird is eating the fruit of the tree, the other bird is witnessing. As soon as you become serious to know about Krishna, Krishna can understand. ‘Now My friend is very serious. Let Me find a bona fide guru for him.’ It is double mercy: Krishna’s mercy and guru’s mercy. Krishna says, ‘Here is guru, My representative, You take shelter of him, and you’ll get Me.’”

After the lecture, we gather in Srila Prabhupada’s room on the rooftop. The three new sannyasis sit before Prabhupada’s desk. They look a little awkward carrying dandas, which can be very cumbersome in small rooms.

Sudama, Lokanath, and Hrishikesh are also present. Lokanath’s ganja smoking has evidently been discussed; Lokanath doesn’t look cheerful at all.

“Srila Prabhupada’s sending Lokanath to Hyderabad,” Shyamsundar tells me. “He wants him to make arrangements for his visit there next month.”

Lokanath is given another chance to prove himself in a different atmosphere, away from the influence of the Shivaites. Prabhupada doesn’t overlook our offenses. That would be to neglect us. No. He cares for us like the sick children we are. We are far from perfect and hardly worthy of being called his sons, but Prabhupada loves us.

He has taught us that, like soldiers on a battlefield, we’re all subject to being knocked down, wounded, and even killed. When a comrade falls, we should rush to help him, knowing that each soldier is precious to the general. How often Srila Prabhupada has shed tears when Maya Devi snatched one of his soldiers! May the day never come when we rejoice to see a godbrother fall, eager to usurp his post or proud to esteem ourselves elevated by comparison.

Prabhupada now gives a special darshan to recently arrived disciples. I chant japa and circumambulate the samadhis of the Goswamis. Prabhupada has requested that we circumambulate them at least three times in the morning after his lectures. Many Western devotees feel rather clumsy walking down the dirt path between the samadhis. It seems at times that our Western bodies were not built to navigate the narrow passageways nor pass under the low arches. I sometimes bump my head and elbows trying to keep up with the little old women at Radha Damodar.

“Radhe Shyam, Radhe Shyam,” they chant, touching the tulasi pots, the altar steps, the samadhis. “Hare Krishna, Hare Rama,” I chant, following in their footsteps. Some of the women are bent completely in half from a lifetime of hard work. Some barely reach my waist. But I no longer feel self-conscious or very different from them. After all, the soul, that tiny spark of Krishna, is the same in everyone. “The humble sage, by virtue of true knowledge, sees with equal vision a learned and gentle brahmin, a cow, an elephant, a dog, and a dog-eater.” Thus spoke Lord Krishna to Arjuna on the battlefield.

I finish my three circumambulations, then look in on Yamuna and Pishima in the downstairs kitchen. They are just completing breakfast preparations.

“Oh, Hayagriva, I have to tell you something,” Yamuna says. “I’ve told only Gurudas. I still don’t know whether to believe my eyes.”

“What’s that?”

“Well, do you remember that monkey Haladar?”

Haladar? A number of monkey faces flash through my mind. All the monkeys look pretty much the same to me, as I assume people must look to them. Having lived on the Radha Damodar roof for so long, Yamuna has become familiar with the clan of some twenty resident monkeys. In fact, she and Gurudas have had many laughs naming monkeys after the old San Francisco temple gang.

“I don’t exactly remember Haladar,” I admit.

“She’s the one with the kind of lackadaisical, slow and shuffling personality,” Yamuna says. “She comes for prasadam like clockwork.”

That’s nothing distinctive. Living entities are like that in the holy dham—very regulated. If you throw a chapati in midair at noon, the same bird will come down at noon every day to catch it. Every day, white cows enter the front gates of Radha Damodar, circumambulate the Deities, and then walk back out, performing a parikrama you can set your watch by. One monkey comes every morning to the courtyard, sits in the mango tree with his hands folded, listens to Srila Prabhupada’s lecture, and then leaves when it’s over. One elephant is said to fast on every Ekadasi. Such activities are commonplace in Vrindaban.

“Anyway, I don’t remember her,” I say at length.

“Haladar has been accustomed to taking prasadam in my room every Tuesday and Thursday,” Yamuna says, “the same room Prabhupada’s in now. So, she came around this morning, as usual, and started swinging on the bars of the window and jabbering monkey-talk. I was standing outside the door, just about to take Srila Prabhupada some hot milk. He couldn’t see me, but I could see him sitting inside, leaning on a cushion, very relaxed, with one knee up and one knee out.”

“I get the picture,” I say.

“So ... well, then—O Hayagriva, you’ll think I’m crazy.”

“Come on,” I say. “You can’t stop now.”

“Well, this is the truth, so help me. Suddenly, Srila Prabhupada started talking to Haladar in pure, unadulterated monkey-talk.”

“No!”

“Yes! It was a language, and Prabhupada spoke it in the same tone, same meter, everything. So, when Haladar heard this, she grabbed both window bars, stuck her ears out, and stared at him in amazement. Then—and I swear it!—Srila Prabhupada and Haladar had a discussion.”

“A discussion?”

“A discussion,” she repeats. “Prabhupada was so relaxed conversing in monkey-talk, and the conversation went back and forth for some time. I just stood there, afraid to move, afraid to interrupt. I thought of Lord Chaitanya talking to animals in the forest. I knew I was witnessing something unique. I even felt privileged. Then, the most amazing thing of all happened.”

“Oh?”

“After talking for some time, Haladar left. She’s never ever left before without taking prasadam. It’s completely against her monkey nature. ‘Srila Prabhupada,’ I said, ‘I don’t believe what I just saw. What went on?’ And Prabhupada replied, ‘I told her to go away and not bother me anymore.’”

Yamuna laughs and shakes her head, still amazed. She takes a pot of steaming kicchri off the fire. Pishima, who speaks no English, looks at me, smiles, and continues rolling dough for chapatis.

“Now, don’t dare mention this to Srila Prabhupada,” Yamuna says. “Don’t say a word to anyone. Really, the devotees won’t know what to make of it. Especially the new people.”

“What’s one to think? Obviously, Prabhupada’s a superb linguist.”

“Please. Promise not to tell anybody.”

“Not even Achyutananda?”

“All right,” she concedes. “Achyutananda will understand.”

When I go up to the rooftop, I immediately tell him. I repeat Yamuna’s account word for word, but Achyutananda’s not at all surprised.

“In previous yugas, this was commonplace,” he says. “Monkeys, bears, and other animals used to converse with humans all the time, and nothing was ever thought of it. Lord Ramachandra talked with monkeys, and Lord Krishna with bears. Also, Rama talked to Jatayu, king of the vultures. And Chaitanya Mahaprabhu got deers and tigers to chant Hare Krishna.”

“True,” I admit.

“Children sense this, don’t they? They love reading comics with talking animals. And these are modeled on Buddhist Jataka tales, and Hitopadesh and Panchatantra.”

“Hayagriva!” Gurudas shouts from the corner of the roof. “You’re being called.”

I go over and look down at the street below. Vishakha is sitting in a ricksha. As always, she has her camera.

“Are you and Achyutananda ready?” she asks. “We should leave now to get the early sunlight.”

“We’ll be right down,” I tell her. Then I turn back to Achyutananda: “It’s Vishakha. I forgot that we’re to go photograph temples and Deities. I hope you’re not too tired.”

“I’m ready,” he says. “Where to?”

“Well, we’ve been to Govindaji, Madana Mohana, Imlitala, Radha Madhava,” I say.

“That leaves just 4,996 others.”

“Jai! Why not start downstairs?” I suggest.

“You mean photograph the Radha Damodar Deities? The pujaris will scream.”

“Let them. The Deities enjoy being photographed.”

“All right with me,” he says. “It’s up to Vishakha.”

We then go down to convince Vishakha to come in to photograph Their Lordships Sri Sri Radha Damodar.

CHAPTER 16. Touring Vrindaban's Temples

Professional like her husband—the gaunt, taciturn Yadubhara—Vishakha was born holding camera and film. Usually, with such husband-wife teams, one partner is rich in qualities lacking in the other. Not so with Yadubhara and Vishakha. Whatever can be said about one applies to both.

They are both devoted to Srila Prabhupada and Lord Krishna. They are a pair of introverted, intellectual, ectomorphic, taciturn, patient, stone-faced perfectionists. Apart from tiny smiles, nary the trace of an emotion ever crosses their faces. This is miraculous in Vrindaban, where one is constantly being tested. In the course of a Vrindaban day, a photographer encounters anger, jubilation, frustration, and depression, but if such emotions affect Yadubhara and Vishakha, their stone faces never let you know.

A couple of monkey stories illustrate Vishakha's qualifications. The male monkeys at Radha Damodar sometimes become very aggressive. One day, when Vishakha and Yamuna were taking pots of sweet rice to Prabhupāda, a rather vicious male monkey jumped right at them. Yamuna screamed loudly, threw the pot in the air, and ran.

Vishakha, however, covered her pot and, saying nothing, took it to Prabhupada.

“This is a study of two natures,” Srila Prabhupada said, and laughed and laughed.

At another time, during an evening darshan, a monkey snatched some bananas that had been brought to Prabhupada. For numerous reasons, no one ever tries to take food back from a monkey, but Vishakha suddenly jumped up, grabbed the bananas, and covered them with her chadar. Prabhupada also witnessed this unprecedented event, but it was so outrageous that he made no comment at all.

If Vishakha can retrieve bananas from a monkey, she can certainly photograph the Radha Damodar Deities.

“If I try it, the pujari might react violently,” I tell Achyutananda. He agrees. Vishakha's the one.

Her face set like a Mount Rushmore President, Vishakha walks up the seven steps to the altar. There are no less than three sets of Deities in the dim alcoves: the Deities belonging to Chaitanya Mahaprabhu's biographer, Krishnadas Kaviraj; expansions of Jiva Goswami's original Radha Damodar Deities; and Jayadev Goswami's Deities. These Deities are guarded by strict smarta-brahmins, and photographs have never been allowed. Before the pujari can protest, Vishakha takes five pictures. The lamp flashes like a strobe at the Avalon Ballroom.

“No photos! No photos! No! No! No!” the pujari shouts, waving his arms. The temple goswamis jump to their feet, but it's too late. Vishakha is already walking out to the street.

“Good shots?” I ask.

“Yes,” she says, giving a tiny smile. That's all. just a typical Vishakha-Yadubhara smile, lips closed.

“Great! We can put them in Back To Godhead. So, where to next?”

“Our next-door neighbor,” Achyutananda says. “Radha Shyamsundar.”

We walk a half block to a temple established by Shyamananda Prabhu, a direct disciple of Lord Chaitanya Mahaprabhu.

The three oldest temples in Vrindaban, all built of dark red sandstone, are Madana Mohana, Govindaji, and Radha Gopinath. In addition to Radha Ramana, Radha Gokulananda, Radha Damodar, and Radha Shyamsundar, these are Vrindaban’s seven original temples. All other Vrindaban temples—which Brijbasis number at five thousand—expand from these.

Like Radha Damodar, the exterior of Radha Shyamsundar Temple is very modest. The courtyard is a bit larger than Radha Damodar’s, and instead of three arches, the altar has five. Tulasi grows in the courtyard, and the samadhi of Shyamananda Prabhu is nearby. Most of his disciples were from Jagannatha Puri, Orissa, evident by the plaques in Oriyan script bearing the names of temple donors.

“It’s said that Shyamananda Prabhu acquired Srimati Radhika’s tilak in exchange for Her lost ankle bell,” Achyutananda informs us. “To save the original Deities from the Muslims, the devotees took them to Jaipur.”

There’s nothing to photograph here. The altar doors are closed, and no one seems to know when they’ll open.

“Let’s go to Radha Ramana Temple,” Achyutananda suggests. “It’s more lively.”

Ricksha boys argue over who’s to take us. We end their argument by walking. Radha Ramana is only a short walk, en route to Kesi Ghat.

We enter the temple compound through an archway leading in from the street. The new temple building for Radha Ramana was completed in 1826 by Shah Kundan Lal, the same architect who built Shahji Temple.

Two-story buildings enclose the first courtyard, shutting out direct sunlight. We enter a second courtyard and behold the Radha Ramana Temple wedged in between a couple of buildings. The facade is built of light brown sandstone, and the main archway is decorated with spiraling lotus designs.

Radha Ramana was founded by Gopal Bhatta Goswami, who met Lord Chaitanya Mahaprabhu when the Lord was traveling in South India, near Tiruchirappali. Lord Chaitanya converted Gopal Bhatta’s father from the worship of Lakshmi Narayana to the worship of Krishna, and Gopal Bhatta wanted to accompany the Lord on His arduous trip through India. Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, however, told the boy to join Rupa and Sanatan Goswamis in Vrindaban.

“First, go to the sacred Gandaki River in Nepal,” the Lord told him. “There you will find a salagram sila, an expansion of Lord Narayana. Take that sila to Vrindaban, and wait for Me there.”

These silas are the Lord’s expansions in the form of small, black stones.

When Lord Chaitanya did not return to Vrindaban, Gopal Bhatta and the other Goswamis were saddened. In 1542, the night before Rasa-Lila Purnima, Gopal Bhatta felt very morose, thinking that while the other Goswamis were decorating their Deities with

dresses and crowns, he could worship the stone only with sandalwood and tulasi leaves. That night, however, Gopal Bhatta was told in a dream to go to the box where he kept the salagram. In the place of the one stone, he found eleven silas and the Radha Ramana Deity now present before us.

This self-manifesting Deity is only about twelve inches high. He is finely contoured, especially at the chin-line and mouth, and He has big lotus eyes, curved upward a bit. The heavy epicanthic folds remind me of Nepalese Buddha eyes. He stands in His tribhanga position, a threefold bending curve, one leg crossed over the other, a stance that is Lord Krishna's famous trademark. This beautiful shiny black Deity is remarkable, especially considering that He's not sculptured by anyone's hand.

A silver crown on a small throne is placed on His left for Radharani. Since Radha Ramana is self-manifested, the devotees feel that it would be inappropriate to put a sculptured Deity of Radharani next to Him, although the Deity is the same whether sculptured or self-manifesting. The pujaris have prepared a place for Radharani just in case She wishes to appear. "She is visible in your heart," they reply when asked about Her presence.

Silver articles on the altar include ornate thrones, trays, peacocks, and elephants—all for the Lord's pleasure. In the temple courtyard is the samadhi of Gopal Bhatta Goswami. A white marble arch nearby marks the sacred spot where the Deity manifested, and the box in which the salagram was kept hangs from the same tree where Gopal Bhatta Goswami had first placed it. Obviously, Radha Ramana is a living temple, not just a monument or a business run by families who profit from the Deities.

"The descendents of the original pujaris here are still quite learned in Vaishnava philosophy," Achyutananda tells us. "They maintain this temple gorgeously, preach the holy name, and distribute prasadam. And they regard Srila Prabhupada highly."

"Prabhupada has come here?"

"Oh yes. They've often invited him to their functions, and he always attends."

The links between Radha Ramana and Prabhupada's ISKCON go way back. Gopal Bhatta Goswami was one of the great acharyas of the Gaudiya Vaishnava sampradaya, to which ISKCON belongs. And it seems that the grandfather of the present pujari knew Bhaktisiddhanta Saraswati. Moreover, Gopal Bhatta Goswami's book, Sri Hari-Bhaktavilas, conceived by Sanatan Goswami, is ISKCON's standard reference book for householder duties, Deity worship, mantras, holidays, and many other aspects of devotional life.

The priests at Radha Ramana give us a warm welcome, offering us some charanamrita, rose-scented water that has bathed the Deity. After sipping it out of the right hand, we sprinkle the remaining drops over our heads. We are then given chanori, little balls of white sugar candy. I offer obeisances to the Deity and chant the mantra Srila Prabhupada taught us in San Francisco in 1967: Govinda jai jai, Gopala jai jai, Radha Ramana Hari, Govinda jai jai. "All glories to Govinda, all glories to the cowherd boy Gopala, all glories to Lord Hari, the enjoyer of Radha, all glories to Govinda." This, then, is Radha Ramana, Krishna, the enjoyer of Radharani!

The pujaris gladly let us photograph the Deity. Like Srila Prabhupada, they believe in broadcasting the Deity's glories in all ways, including the modern. The Deity has been dressed in fine clothes and freshly garlanded, and the priests are happy to share His beauty.

We again pay obeisances to Sri Radha Ramana, then walk over to nearby Radha Gopinath Temple, which shares the same courtyard with the Mahaprabhu Temple.

Radha Gopinath was initially built in 1589 under the direction of Madhu Pandit, whose samadhi is in the courtyard. The Deity Gopinathaji manifested Himself to Paramananda Bhattacharya, guru of Madhu Pandit. During Aurangzeb's time, the Deity was removed to Jaipur. The red sandstone temple that originally stood here corresponded in style and dimensions to Madana Mohana, and was composed of three towers. The existing pyramidal red sandstone tower was built in 1821 by Nanda Kumar Ghose, who also built the new Madana Mohana addition. All three original towers were leveled along with the roof. The gateway entrance to the courtyard collapsed a hundred years ago.

"There's an interesting story connected to the Gopinath Deity," Achyutananda tells us. "It appears that Srimati Jahnvi Devi, the wife of Nityananda Prabhu, used to come here for darshan. One evening, in the presence of all the assembled Vaishnavas, the Deity of Gopinath jumped off the altar, took Jahnvi into the Deity alcove, and closed the curtain. When the curtains were opened, Jahnvi Devi was gone, and Sri Gopinath was standing on the altar as usual."

"She must have been a really elevated devotee, Vishakha says.

"To say the least. She's the gopi Ananga Manjari in Krishna's pastimes."

We cross the courtyard to the Mahaprabhu Temple. The Deity of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, nearly seven feet tall, is named Sri Amia Nimai Gouranga. The pujaris are friendly and offer us prasadam in the form of bhaji, spiced chickpeas.

We then walk down the street to the Radha Gokulananda Temple, across the street from the Radha Vamsi Gopala Temple, where Srila Prabhupada lived from 1954 to 1962.

Radha Gokulananda was founded by Lokanath Goswami, whose samadhi is also here.

There are also the samadhis of Narottam Das Thakur and Vishvanath Chakravarty Thakur, who wrote the beautiful "Gurvashtakam" prayers sung every morning in honor of the spiritual master.

The following sets of Deities are worshiped here: Radha Vinod, who were the Deities of Lokanath Goswami; Radha Vijaya of Vishvanath Chakravarty Thakur; and the Sri Chaitanya Deity of Narottam Das Thakur. The temple itself is not very architecturally inspiring, but its spiritual significance enlivens us.

"Now we can take rickshas to Banki Behari," Achyutananda suggests. "It's on the other side of Loi Bazaar."

Two ricksha boys appear, as if summoned by telepathy. Achyutananda and I squeeze into one ricksha, and Vishakha and the camera equipment go in the other. The boys compete in a race down the crowded streets of Loi Bazaar.

Banki Behari, constructed in 1874, is perhaps the most popular temple in Vrindaban. There are many stories surrounding the Deity, and pictures of Banki Behari are seen

throughout Vrindaban in shops and tea stalls and over doorways. His color is blackish, and He stands in His tribhanga stance. The name “Banki Behari” means “Krishna, the supreme enjoyer.” As He stands with His eyes opened wide and His flute to His mouth, He indeed appears to be enjoying. His legs, visible through a translucent dhoti, seem ready to carry Him dancing through the streets.

Banki Behari is also a self-manifesting Deity. Haridas Swami (1441-1537), a great musician in Akbar’s court, dreamed one day that a Deity of Krishna was pleading to be unearthed from the bottom of Vishakha Kund in the grove of Nidhuban. When Haridas went digging, he found Banki Behari.

Haridas Swami—not to be confused with Namacharya Haridas Thakur—has been described as a faithful follower of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu. It’s said that when he was given a chintamani stone, which turns whatever it touches into gold, he threw it into the Jamuna. This promptly turned the river’s sand into gold dust and furthered the Swami’s reputation as a renunciate.

Once, thieves stole Swami Haridas’s salagram sila, thinking it to be the chintamani. Finding it materially useless, they threw it away. Haridas went looking for it, and the stone spoke from under a bush to reveal its whereabouts. From that day, Haridas miraculously received a golden coin every morning. He utilized this money for temple offerings, and whatever remained he spent on grains to feed the fish, peacocks, and monkeys.

“Once, Banki Behari walked off the altar to follow a great bhakta out of the temple,” Achyutananda tells us. “Since then, the darshan curtain is opened and closed quickly, lest the Deity do it again.”

The temple of Banki Behari reminds me of a small-town American bank—does “Banki” suggest this?—and the clocktower in front underscores this impression. Perhaps this is appropriate, for Banki Behari’s popularity has made the temple rich. Consequently, the Deity’s decorations are opulent, and His dress is changed several times a day.

From here, Achyutananda leads us a couple of blocks to the Radha Ballabha Temple, built in the early seventeenth century during the reign of Jahangir. Aurangzeb wreaked havoc here also, but much has been rebuilt. Now the temple is only a monument and stands abandoned at the end of a large courtyard. Its Deity has been moved next door to the new Radha Ballabha Temple, architecturally unworthy of its predecessor.

The original Radha Ballabha is built with the same type of red sandstone as Madana Mohana. It successfully fuses both Hindu and Muslim themes. Many of the carvings are patterned after those at Govindaji. The exterior is adorned with a similar panoply of horizontal designs, and the interior is covered by a similar vaulted ceiling—a combination of dome and spire. But whereas Govindaji’s dome is round, Radha Ballabha’s is oblong. Down each side wall runs a series of seven multifoil Saracenic arches, above and below, totaling twenty-eight in all.

This temple was financed by a Bengali named Sundara Das, who was a Delhi treasurer and a disciple of Braja Chand. Since Sri Hari Vamsa, founder of the Radha Ballabha sect,

was the father of Braja Chand, the old men outside the temple refer to it as the “Hari Vamsa Mandir.” The descendants of Hari Vamsa also run Banki Behari.

When Hari Vamsa decided to renounce the world, he set out alone on the road to Vrindaban. En route, he met a brahmin who presented him with two daughters and insisted that he marry them on the strength of a divine command received in a vision. This brahmin also gave Hari Vamsa a Deity of Krishna called Radha Ballabha. Since no Deity of Radharani was presented, Hari Vamsa placed a crown on his altar to represent Her.

After some time, Hari Vamsa abandoned the Madhvacharya sampradaya and founded his own system, emphasizing devotion to Radharani. He wrote one poem of 170 Sanskrit couplets entitled Radha Sudha Nidhi. This poem appears erotic to materialists, but in fact it is a hymn of praise to Radharani.

The samadhi of Hari Vamsa is in the courtyard of the new Radha Ballabha Temple. Next door is a small Radha Krishna temple executed in a Victorian design. Here, old men sit in a circle, playing cymbals and chanting.

“If we wait, we might hear some classical bhajans,” Achyutananda tells us. “This temple’s famous for them.”

“Let’s go across the street,” I suggest.

“That’s Radha Jivan Ballabha,” Achyutananda says. “Everybody calls it the ‘Calcutta Temple.’”

Constructed in the last century, the Radha Jivan Ballabha Temple follows the Banki Behari style, reminiscent of nineteenth century American banks. It’s a two-story, rectangular, light brown sandstone building, and within its small courtyard are fifteen upper archways and six lower. Small, intricately carved balconies extend around the top. Two latticed windows are also finely carved in brown sandstone. Marble steps lead up to the tri-arched altar, housing the beautiful Deities of Radha Jivan Ballabha: a golden Radharani and a black Krishna.

After this, we walk around the corner, and to our surprise we find a small, ancient temple of Lord Nrishingha, the half-man half-lion incarnation of Krishna. The stone-carved Deity is brightly painted. His lion-face doesn’t appear as terrifying as that of the traditionally ferocious Nrishingha.

Seeking immortality for his material body, the demon Hiranyakashipu performed such severe austerities that he managed to get certain boons from Lord Brahma: immunity from death by man-made weapons, by man, and by beast; immunity from death during both day and night, indoors or outdoors, on land, on sea, or in the air. Since no one but Krishna can directly grant immortality, Hiranyakashipu had to be content with these indirect boons. Thus feeling safe from death, he tried to kill his own son Prahlad because the boy was Krishna’s devotee. But Krishna protected Prahlad.

“How is it you don’t fear me?” Hiranyakashipu asked his son.

“My dear father,” Prahlad said. “The source of my strength is also the source of yours and everyone else’s: the Supreme Personality of Godhead.”

“And where is this God of yours?” asked the demon. “Is He in this pillar?”

“Yes, my dear father. He’s here; He’s everywhere.”

Hiranyakashipu angrily struck the pillar with his sword, and behold! Lord Nrisingha (neither man nor beast) leaped out, seized the demon, dragged him to the threshold of the building (neither indoors nor outdoors), set him on His lap (neither land, nor sea, nor air), and, in the twilight (neither daytime nor nighttime), tore out his entrails with His claws (not a man-made weapon). Thus the Lord, who can never be outwitted, simultaneously killed the demon, protected His devotee, and honored all the boons of Brahma.

We bow down before the Deity and chant Tava kara kamala vare. ... “Oh my Lord, Your hands are very beautiful, like the lotus flower, but with Your long nails You have ripped apart the wasp Hiranyakashipu. Unto You, Lord of the universe, I offer my humble obeisances.”

Achyutananda then suggests visiting the Gopisvara Mandir.

“A Shiva temple?” I ask.

“Right. Actually, there are only three other Shiva temples in the whole of Braja. In Mathura, there’s the Bhutesvara Mahadev, about two hundred years old, and at Kama there’s Kamesvar, and one Shiva mandir at Govardhan called Chakraliswar.”

Vaishnavas worship the Supreme Personality of Godhead only as Vishnu, Narayana, or Krishna. Vaishnavas consider Lord Shiva to be the greatest of the demigods—as well as the destructive aspect of God manifest in the material world—but not the complete Godhead. In worshiping Lord Shiva as the Supreme Person, Shivaites are at loggerheads with Vaishnava philosophy.

During his 1969 reception at London’s Conway Hall, Srila Prabhupada argued with Shivaites. He insisted that Shiva should be honored as a great devotee of Lord Vishnu, but not worshiped as the Supreme Lord. “Shiva is a demigod,” Prabhupada said, “and demigod worship is discouraged in Bhagavad Gita. Just worship Krishna. Then all the demigods, including Lord Shiva, will be automatically satisfied.”

At Gopisvara, the Shiva linga is reputedly five thousand years old. It was installed by Vajranabha, Krishna’s great-grandson. Vairanabha was a friend of the illustrious Maharaj Pariksit, Arjuna’s grandson. During Maharaj Pariksit’s reign in Hastinapur and Indraprastha, Vajranabha went to Vrindaban and established many temples. Crowned King of Mathura, Vajranabha built a temple at Krishna’s birthplace there. The present Gopisvara Temple was built about a hundred years ago by the Maharaj of Gwalior. The building itself is a plain thirty-foot square. A hallway with a marble checkered floor runs around the center square where the Deity resides. Before the Deity are a white marble Nandi (Shiva’s bull), Ganesh (Shiva’s son, whose severed head was replaced with that of an elephant), and Parvati (Shiva’s consort). In the center of the altar is the shining silver Deity, a life-size head of Shiva. A cobra expands his hood over Shiva’s head. I ask the pujari where the linga is, and he informs me that the entire head is considered the linga. When Lord Krishna performed the rasa dance, He covered the whole area of Vrindaban with yoga-maya so that impure eyes might not fall upon the sacred dance. Anyone with purusha-abhiman, or the male’s attitude of an enjoyer, was excluded. Only females could enter. Lord Shiva and Parvati came, but only Parvati was admitted. All four entrances

were guarded by yoga-maya, and Shiva was barred. When Shiva asked what he could do to enter, he was told to pray to the River Jamuna to transform him into a female. Jamuna duly provided him with ornaments and a sari, and Lord Shiva returned dressed as a beautiful woman. Thus assuming the attitude of a gopi, he was allowed to enter. Because he appeared so beautiful, Lord Krishna called him “Gopisvara,” the best of the gopis. Radharani was also pleased, but She revealed Shiva’s identity. Shiva was then allowed a position as gatekeeper of the rasa-lila grounds. Thus, by the grace of Lord Shiva, Gopisvara, we are granted the darshan of Krishna’s rasa dance and are cured of the purusha-abhiman, the enjoying spirit.

“I’ve heard that after bathing in Mana Sarovar, Shiva actually took a gopi form,” I tell Achyutananda, “not that he just dressed as a gopi.”

“There are different accounts,” Achyutananda says. “The most popular is that Shiva simply dressed as a gopi but was betrayed by the cobra around his neck.”

In front of the temple sit three members of Shiva’s hordes: men with long beards and matted hair. Ashes from ganja chillums are smeared over their faces and arms, and stuck in the ground beside them are long tridents. One of them rolls out bhang on a kneading board, as if it were dough. This dough, however, is greenish-black, and very potent. They ask for baksheesh, and I give them a half rupee each. One of them pulls a clay chillum from a little pouch and offers us a smoke, which we decline. He lights up anyway, not needing an excuse, and they pass the chillum around, saying, “Bom Shankar!” just as a drinker might say “Cheers!” They touch their foreheads with the chillum and then take long drags. Ganja smoke billows out of their nostrils and fills the air.

Children begin to gather. “Dum-marodum” one says. Then the other kids pick up the chant: “Dum-marodum! Dum-marodum!”

“We’d better leave,” Achyutananda says, “lest we become victims of association.”

It’s already mid-afternoon, and the streets of Vrindaban are beginning to heat up. Shopkeepers close their doors for a couple of hours and lounge about drinking chai or take a nap, dragging their charpoys into the shade of trees and buildings. I begin to feel tired by just watching them.

“So, what now?” I ask.

“Well, tomorrow we must go to Radha Kund,” Achyutananda says. “It’s the most auspicious day of the year. All the sacred rivers of India will be flowing there.”

“Jai!”

“And then there are lots of places in Mathura.”

“Sounds great.”

“And next week is Govardhan Puja. Everybody goes on Govardhan parikrama. Pilgrims from all over.”

“Haribol!”

We take a ricksha back to Kesi Ghat. In front of the palace, Dwija Hari is trying to supervise the distribution of prasadam. Hundreds of beggars, lepers, and pilgrims have

gathered for free kicchri and an apple, and Dwija Hari struggles to get them to wait their turn and sit down after getting served.

“Listen here, people. Now you ain’t gonna get nothing until you line up over there and stop your pushing ...”

It’s blissfully quiet inside the palace courtyard. I hurry to my room, but before I collapse on the bed, Achyutananda comes over.

“Quick! Look out the window!” he says. “You won’t believe it.”

I have to look twice to make sure. Floating down the sacred Jamuna toward Allahabad is the mail from the Vrindaban post office, thousands of letters drifting downstream.

“My God! What happened?”

“Some mailman took sannyas,” Achyutananda jokes.

I ponder the significance of thousands of messages flowing down the holy river. Toward what? To be lost in the sands? Eaten by fish and turtle? Perhaps a few will be snatched out of the flow by curious children too young to even read them.

“There go my letters home,” I sigh.

Silently I pray that Goddess Jamuna will speed them along to oblivion. In the holy dham, one should not be anxious to communicate with that other world out there.

CHAPTER 17. A Pilgrimage of Braja Mandala

No other religion can claim a holy land as all-encompassing and intricate as Braja Bhumi, the land of Krishna. A hundred years ago, Mathura's British magistrate-collector, F.S. Growse, a staunch Catholic, noted, "Almost every spot is traditionally connected with some event in the life of Krishna or Radha." (Mathura: A District Memoir)

There is much controversy over the location of the sites of Krishna's pastimes. Growse implies that the holy places were not established as places of pilgrimage until the arrival of Rupa and Sanatan Goswamis: "Till the close of the sixteenth century ... there was only here and there a scattered hamlet in the midst of unclaimed woodland. The Vaishnava culture there first developed into the present form under the influence of Rupa and Sanatan. ... (Mathura: A District Memoir)

Yet the scholarly Alberuni (973-1048), who entered India in the wake of Mahmud of Ghazni, wrote that Mathura "was crowded with brahmins and venerated because Vasudeva was born there and brought up in a place in the neighborhood called Nandagola [Nandagram or Gokul]." A hundred years later, Laksmidhara, minister of the Gahadavala King Govinda Chandra, (1100-1160), described twenty-five sites—including Govardhan, Nandagram, Vrindaban, Bhandiraban, Radha Kund and Kaliya Ghat—as famous places of pilgrimage.

When Rupa Goswami wrote his Mathura Mahatmya some four hundred years later, fifteen of the sites mentioned by Laksmidhara could no longer be identified. Rupa Goswami listed seventy holy places and stated that the Mathura region covers a 160-mile area and Vrindaban a thirty-two-mile area. Sanatan and Jiva Goswamis also contended that the Mathura-Vrindaban region was much larger during Krishna's day.

Krishna's Mathura-Vrindaban certainly covered a very wide area, for Srimad Bhagavatam says that it took Akrura from sunrise to sunset, driving a chariot pulled by "horses as swift as the wind," to go from Mathura to Vrindaban—a distance of ten kilometers today. Srimad Bhagavatam also describes the terrain as mountainous. The Jamuna River flowed beside Govardhan Hill, which was situated in Vrindaban itself. Also, Mathura and Vrindaban were on opposite sides of the river.

Narayana Bhatta, a contemporary of the great Goswamis, stated that holy places were often manufactured by people for various religious and economic reasons. Some 250 years ago, Narahari Chakravarti, describing the pilgrimage of Srinivas Acharya, listed no less than 334 holy places. Today, most of these places cannot even be traced.

Whatever the case, mundane speculation is never spiritually rewarding. As Srila Prabhupada said, the holy dham reveals itself to us in proportion to the progress of our Krishna consciousness. There is nothing mundane about Braja. It defies cartographers. It cannot be measured by surveyor-chain and alidade nor confined by latitude and longitude. The great Rupa Goswami described Braja as a lotus: When it blooms fully, the different sites of Krishna's pastimes appear to be distant from one another. But after

sunset, the lotus contracts, and the places come closer together to facilitate the meeting of Radha with Krishna. Such is the geodetic vision of a pure devotee.

The lotus of Braja Mandala resembles the planet Goloka Vrindaban in the spiritual sky. Its sacred places—woods, groves, ponds, wells, hills, and temples—should be visited in a fixed order. However, this is difficult today. Due to the twentieth century's population explosion, places are not as well defined as they used to be. Village spills into village and town into town, and the pilgrim has a hard time knowing when he's leaving one place and entering another.

Roadsigns are rare in India, and few pilgrims today can discern the lotus of Braja.

Nonetheless, it's there, unfolding like a childrens' puzzle that challenges you to find 108 green birds in a green tree. When you first look, you promptly see five or six birds. Then you find three or four more. "A hundred and eight?" you marvel, and hunt for more. So it is with the myriad lotus petals of the holy dham.

Pilgrims can buy little Hindi guidebooks to help them on their way. Such books usually list five hills, eleven prominent rocks, four lakes, eighty-four ponds, twelve wells, twelve bans (forests), and twenty-four upabans (groves).

The twelve bans are: Madhuban, Talaban, Kumudban, Bahulaban, Kamaban, Khadiraban, Vrindaban, Bhadraban, Bhandiraban, Belban, Lohaban, and Mahaban. The twenty-four upabans are: Gokul, Govardhan, Barsana, Nandagram, Sanket, Paramadra, Aring, Sessai, Mat, Uchagram, Kelban, Sri Kund, Gandharvaban, Parsoli, Bilchhu, Bacchaban, Adibadri, Karahla, Ajnokh, Pisaya, Kokilaban, Dadhigram, Kotban, and Raval.

Unfortunately, some of the names have changed over the years. Madhuban has become Maholi; Talaban has become Tarasi; Bahulaban, Bathi; Khadiraban, Kaola; and so on. Still, one should not be discouraged. All of these places share in Lord Krishna's absolute nature. If the pilgrim can visit at least one of them in the proper spirit, he receives the benefit of visiting them all. In fact, the whole Mathura-Vrindaban region is so spiritually powerful that the mere desire to go there is liberating. "If a man decides in his mind, 'I will go live in Mathura,' he will be freed from the wheel of samsara simply by having such thoughts." (Mathura Mahatmya)

The twelve bans are generally associated with Krishna's pastimes, and the twenty-four upabans with Radharani's. All of the traditional sites of Krishna's childhood pastimes take place at Mahaban, which is the same as Gokul. Gokul is also considered an upaban, so there's apparent overlapping. The site of Krishna's infant pastimes, for instance, is known both as Mahaban and as Gokul. Mahaban is a ban, and Gokul is an upaban, yet they are one and the same place.

Krishna's four special abodes are Mathura, Mahaban, Govardhan, and Nandagram.

Radharani's are Vrindaban, Raval, Radha Kund, and Barsana.

In 1553, before the past two centuries of deforestation, Narayana Bhatta listed 133 bans: 91 on the right bank of the Jamuna and 42 on the left. He also described specific Deities presiding over each ban: Balarama over Mahaban, Gopinath over Kamaban, Damodar over Talaban, Keshava over Kumudban, Hayagriva over Bhadraban, Janardana over Belban, Yasodanandana over Nandagram, and so on. Infinity is an attribute of Krishna.

As one begins to inspect the holy dham, he beholds infinity unfolding, like a lotus with countless petals. “There’s more to Vrindaban than meets the eye,” Srila Prabhupada said. And, indeed, the pilgrim soon finds this out.

The pilgrimage of Braja Mandala traditionally begins in Mathura. According to the Hari Vamsa Purana, Mathura is shaped like a half moon with Visrant Ghat at its center. Its perimeter is eighteen miles—though sometimes said to be ten—and the parikrama route approximately nine miles. Mathura is celebrated in Vedic history as the birthplace of Veda Vyas (at Krishna Ganga Tirtha), and the place where Bali Maharaj performed his sacrifice to control the universe (at Bali Tirtha). Also, Durvasa Muni came here after being chased all over the universe by the Lord’s sudarsan chakra (disc). Durvasa then begged forgiveness from Ambarish Maharaj for having offended him. When Lord Chaitanya Mahaprabhu entered Mathura in 1512, He fell into an ecstatic swoon. Then He took a bath at Visrant Ghat and visited the temple at Janma Bhumi, Krishna’s birthsite. It’s rewarding just to understand the Sanskrit etymology of place names. By doing so, one can learn of Krishna’s pastimes, the characteristics of the land, and the activities of its early inhabitants. Gokul means “a herd of cows”; Govardhan means “one who tends cows”; Mat means “a milk pail”; Dadhigram means “the village where yoghurt is made”; Braja has two meanings: “a herd” and “to go,” and refers to the comings and goings of the cowherds; Mathura, from the root-word math, means “to churn.” In the poetic descriptions of Mathura, the butter churn figures prominently.

“Braja Bhumi, a land of many pastures and healthy people, is rich in milk and vibrant with the sounds of the butter churn. The soil is always moist with a milky froth, and the stick of the butter churn sputters gaily in the pail as the milkmaids spin it around.” (Hari Vamsa Purana)

The 96-mile parikrama of Braja Mandala starts at Visrant (“resting”) Ghat, where Krishna rested after killing Kamsa. Today, Visrant Ghat is crowded with vendors, whose shops of religious articles extend almost down to the river. There are no temples here of any architectural or spiritual interest. Nearby is a natural water course, called Kams Khar, said to have been caused by the passage of Kamsa’s gigantic body. “When Kamsa’s body was dragged to the river to be burned, its prodigious weight, like the rush of a mighty stream, dug a channel.” (Vishnu Purana) It was also here that Lord Varaha rested after lifting the earth from the nether regions. He then spoke the Adi Varaha Purana to the Goddess Earth.

The Muslims, understanding the importance of Visrant Ghat, constructed a rack here to which they strapped Hindu pilgrims and circumcised them. Keshava Kashmiri (who had debated with Chaitanya Mahaprabhu) emerged from seclusion in Kashmir to lead a thousand disciples to Visrant Ghat. They quickly seized the rack, demolished it, and threw the parts in the river. When government troops attacked, Keshava Kashmiri and his outnumbered followers slew most of the Muslim soldiers and drove the survivors into the Jamuna, where they drowned.

From Visrant Ghat, the pilgrim proceeds southwest some three miles to Madhuban, where the village of Maholi is now located. Madhuban has a parikrama of three miles. It was

here that Rama's brother Satrugna killed the demon Lavana, son of Madhu, and founded the ancient city of Madhu Puri. In a small temple here, there's a Deity of Satrugna dating from Treta Yuga. During Satya Yuga, Dhruva Maharaj attained the darshan of Lord Vishnu at Dhruva Tila.

From Madhuban, the route continues southwest to Talaban, "the palm grove," site of the modern village of Tarasi, about six miles southwest of Mathura. Talaban has a parikrama of three and a half miles. Here, the ferocious demon Dhenukasura lived in the form of a jackass and prevented everyone from relishing the grove's delicious fruit. One day, petitioned by the cowherd boys, Krishna and Balarama went to confront the demon. Balarama shook the palm trees and knocked down all the fruit. Dhenukasura then rushed forward and kicked Balarama in the chest with his hind legs.

At first, Balarama said nothing. When the demon persisted, Balarama caught hold of his legs with one hand, whirled him around, and tossed him into the biggest palm tree in the forest. The demon was whirled with such force that he produced a violent wind that blew over a number of palms.

The demon's friends, also in the form of jackasses, then attacked Balarama and Krishna. The divine brothers caught them all by their hind legs, wheeled them around, and tossed them into the palm trees. In this way, Their Lordships created a unique panorama at Talaban: numerous jackasses of varied colors hanging from the tops of palms. The demigods from the higher planets appeared and beat kettledrums and sung hymns of praise.

Today the pilgrim won't find any palm trees. There's a Balarama temple and a small kund called Sankarsana Kund in honor of Balarama. Here, on the eleventh day of the bright half of Bhadra (June-July), a festival commemorates Balarama's pastime with Dhenukasura.

Next, the pilgrimage route turns northwest to nearby Kumudban, "place of the many water lilies." This is the smallest of the twelve bans, having a parikrama of only one mile. According to the Varaha Purana, Lord Kapila performed austerities here aeons ago. There's a small temple to Lord Kapila on the banks of the Padma Kund. The truths of all the scriptures are revealed to whomever bathes here.

Heading northeast, the pilgrim arrives at Bahulaban, which is seven miles from Mathura and has a four-mile parikrama. Here, the cow Bahula fell prey to a tiger. Bahula begged the tiger to spare her life for a few minutes while she went to nurse her little calf, and the tiger agreed. When Bahula returned as promised, the tiger turned into Lord Krishna Himself. Krishna had descended just to test Bahula's truthfulness. The Lord was so pleased that He made her one of His wives in her next life.

Today, the town of Bathi is located at Bahulaban. There's one small shrine called Bahula Gae, and there are two kunds—Sankarsana Kund and Krishna Kund.

Turning west, the pilgrim goes to Radha Kund and Shyama Kund, some sixteen miles from Mathura. Many Gaudiya Vaishnavas consider this to be the most sacred area in the entire universe. Rupa Goswami stresses the importance of these kunds in his

Upadeshamrita. When Lord Chaitanya Mahaprabhu discovered them, they were only small, shallow ponds in the middle of a paddy field.

Nearby, Krishna killed Aristasura, a demon in the form of a gigantic bull. The town of Aring, once called Aristagram, commemorates this pastime. After killing Aristasura, Krishna created Shyama Kund, and Radharani created Radha Kund. Today, thanks to Chaitanya Mahaprabhu's acclaiming the sanctity of the kunds, a village named Radha Kund has sprung up. It is populated almost entirely by Bengali pilgrims who have settled down.

Just two miles from Radha Kund on the road to the town of Govardhan is Kusum Sarovar, "Flower Lake," a 460-square-foot artificial lake, site of magnificent cenotaphs, chatras, and ghats. Scenes from Krishna's Govardhan pastime are painted within the dome of the main cenotaph. It was at Kusum Sarovar that Radharani and other gopis picked flowers before going to Radha Kund to meet Krishna. According to Skanda Purana, Krishna's beloved cousin Uddhava resides here in the form of grass. Behind the cenotaphs is a small temple containing the deity of Uddhava, dating from the time of Lord Krishna.

Near Kusum Sarovar is Naradaban, where Narada Muni practiced a special mantra to gain the audience of Radha and Krishna. After some time, Narada was informed by Vrinda Devi that this divine vision could not be seen in his present body. Vrinda Devi then took Narada to the northwestern ghat of Kusum Sarovar. Narada bathed there, and his body was transformed into that of a gopi. Thus Narada beheld Radha and Krishna. After Narada had his darshan, Vrinda Devi took him to the southeastern ghat, where he bathed and regained his male form. Narada was cursed to roam eternally and not remain in any one place longer than it takes to milk a cow, but Lord Krishna suspended this curse to allow him to write the Bhakti Sutras. Krishna affirmed that since the holy dham does not exist within the three worlds, the curse does not apply there. A small temple to Narada Muni marks the spot where the sage wrote his glorious discourse on bhakti-yoga.

From here, the pilgrim approaches the most famous place in all Braja—Govardhan Hill. The parikrama around Govardhan runs some fourteen miles. Govardhan is Lord Krishna Himself manifest as a hill, just as Ananta Sesha manifests as Charanpari, Brahma as Barsana, and Shiva as Nandisvara.

Those expecting to find a hill of traditional dimensions will be surprised. The highest point is only about eighty feet high. Govardhan is a narrow range of hills, rising abruptly from the plain and extending southwest for some five miles. Just as the Jamuna is said to be decreasing in volume, Govardhan is reportedly shrinking at the rate of a mustardseed a day. The hill is highest at Aniyora and Jatipur, where Krishna stood when lifting it on the tip of the little finger of His left hand.

Before starting the fourteen-mile parikrama around Govardhan, the pilgrim first bathes in Manasi Ganga, located in the town of Govardhan, and takes darshan of the Haridev Deity in the Haridev Temple.

One day, when Krishna and Balarama were playing on the banks of the Jamuna, a demon named Vatsasura assumed the form of a calf and mingled with the herd. Knowing that

this demon intended to kill Him, Krishna sneaked up behind him, seized him by the tail, whirled him around violently, and threw him into a tree, killing him. Krishna then told His friends that He would have to bathe in the Ganges for purification: Vatsasura was a demon, but he was nonetheless in the form of a calf. Not wanting to leave Braja, Krishna manifested the Ganges from His mind and then bathed in it. Therefore this lake is called Manasi (“mind-manifesting”) Ganga.

When Nanda Maharaj informed his son that he was going to the holy Ganges to bathe, Krishna told him that he needn’t go so far, because the Ganges was manifest in Braja as Manasi Ganga. They all then bathed in Manasi Ganga and offered aratik to the lake. Radha and Krishna also enjoyed boating there. The Deity of Manasi Ganga resides in a temple located on the banks.

At Chandra Sarovar, “Moon Lake,” Lord Brahma joined Krishna and the gopis in their dance. Brahma was so enraptured that he forgot the fleeting hours and allowed the night to last for six months. For Lord Brahma, one day consists of a kalpa, a thousand cycles of four yugas, or four billion, 420 million earth-years. And the same period equals Brahma’s night. Therefore, to Brahma, the six-month dance was just a brief spin.

Lord Brahma permanently resides at Brahma Kund, located behind the Haridev Temple. On the eastern side, Indra resides; Yamaraj, god of death, on the northern side; Varuna, god of waters, on the west; and Kuvera, god of wealth, on the north. At Chakratirtha, Lord Krishna summoned His disc, the sudarsan chakra, to generate the heat of a thousand suns and evaporate all the rainwater dropped by Indra’s samvartaka clouds. At the same time, Ananta Sesha appeared in all four directions and drank up whatever flood water remained.

Within Chakratirtha is a Shiva temple, Chakraliswar Mandir, where Lord Shiva remains to protect the residents of Govardhan. Next door is Sanatan Goswami’s bhajan kutir, the small dwelling in which Sanatan lived and worshiped Lord Krishna. From here, Sanatan would go forth daily on his parikrama. One day, Lord Krishna in the form of a cowherd boy appeared and said, “You’re too old now to go on parikrama.” He then gave Sanatan a rock from Govardhan bearing His footprint. That rock is kept at Radha Damodar Temple. Because mosquitoes were constantly harassing him, Sanatan decided to move. Then Lord Shiva, disguised as a brahmin, appeared and assured the saint that mosquitoes would no longer bother him. To this very day, mosquitoes cannot be found here. This alone makes Govardhan unique on earth.

As the pilgrim continues on the parikrama around Govardhan, he reaches the town of Aniyora, “the other side.” Here, Krishna performed puja to Govardhan Hill.

Madhavendra Puri discovered the Deity of Gopala at nearby Sankarsana Kund. This Deity is presently being worshiped at Nathdwar in Rajasthan.

When Govardhan Puja is celebrated, thousands of pilgrims walk along the parikrama, at least for a short distance. Since the hill is Krishna Himself, no one is allowed to walk around it with shoes on. The fourteen miles is sheer torture for people with tender feet. The more wealthy pilgrims take a tonga when their feet give out. After recuperating, they walk again for a while, then catch another tonga when tired. Sometimes sadhus perform

dandabat parikrama, falling flat on the ground like a stick (danda), marking a line in the sand, arising, then falling flat again, moving forward one body length. This process takes from ten days to two weeks. When rounds of japa are chanted between prostrations, it takes much longer. Sometimes the performer wears a basket of 108 stones around his neck. He places one stone down, offers obeisances (dandabats), and repeats the process until the stones in the basket are used up. Then he puts them back in the basket, moves forward one body length, and starts all over again. This austerity takes some two years. Heading northwest from Govardhan, the pilgrim arrives at the westernmost point in his journey, Kamaban, the “love forest.” Kamaban is thirty-seven miles from Mathura, and its parikrama is fourteen miles. The Pandava princes—Yudhishthira, Arjuna, Bhima, Nakula, and Sahadeva—spent their childhood here. Of the eighty-four kunds in Kamaban, the most important is Vimal Kund. The presiding Deity of Vrindaban, Vrinda Devi, who resides at the Govinda Temple here, is another form of the goddess Lakshmi, Lord Vishnu’s eternal consort. Out of love for Vishnu, Lakshmi assumes the form of a tulasi plant (vrinda) and grows at His lotus feet.

When the Goswamis first arrived in Vrindaban, Rupa Goswami discovered Vrinda Devi growing on the banks of Brahma Kund. He installed a Deity-form of the sacred plant in a small temple adjacent to Govindaji. This Vrinda Deity was caught up in the great exodus of Deities in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Because of rampaging Muslims, many Deities were moved from Vrindaban and Mathura to safety.

In anticipation of Aurangzeb’s raids, the Keshava Dev Temple Deity was to be taken to Mewar, but the Deity’s chariot wheels sank into the earth at the obscure Rajasthani village of Siarh, now the famous Nathdwar, and the devotees understood that the Lord wished to remain there. Similarly, the Maharaj of Jaipur took Gokulnath and Gokul Chandrama from Gokul to Jaipur, where They remained until the nineteenth century. The Deity of Madana Mohana was also moved, and Bal Kishan was taken from Mahaban to Surat. Vrinda Devi was to be taken to Jaipur, but upon reaching Kamaban, the Deity refused to leave the holy dham, and so remains to this day.

At the Luk Luk cave, the cowherd boys played blindman’s bluff, and at Aghasura cave, the demon Aghasura was killed. Aghasura, the younger brother of Putana and Bakasura, was angry at Krishna for having killed his siblings. Aghasura assumed the form of a serpent, and, utilizing the yogic mahima-siddhi, increased his length to eight miles. Aghasura then expanded his mouth from the earth to the clouds. When the cowherd boys saw him lying on the road awaiting them, they said, “This appears to be a great serpent waiting to swallow us all. Just see! Is it not a big snake with a wide, all-devouring mouth?”

The cowherd boys, certain that Krishna would save them, marched into Aghasura’s mouth. Krishna also entered and began to expand Himself within the demon’s throat. Aghasura choked, his eyes bulged, and his life-air, having no place to go, exploded out of the top of his skull. The demon’s soul came out like a dazzling light, illuminating all directions, and hovered in the sky above. When Krishna and the cowherd boys walked out of the demon’s mouth, that effulgent light instantly merged into Krishna’s body.

Although sinful, Aghasura had been purified because Krishna had touched him; therefore he was awarded liberation.

“Devotees shun the liberation awarded to Aghasura,” Srila Prabhupada once told us, “because it is the monistic liberation of the impersonalists. Mayavadis think that ultimate liberation means merging into the effulgence of the Lord, but devotees know better. Devotees want to keep their individuality in order to serve Krishna with loving devotion. For devotees, the liberation of the impersonalists is hellish. In hell, you can still serve Krishna, but in that illusory impersonal oneness, there is neither love nor service.” From Kamaban’s Aghasura cave, the pilgrim turns east to Barsana. Since Radharani made Her appearance in Barsana, many magnificent temples have been constructed here in Her honor. Barsana is located thirty miles northwest of Mathura. Its parikrama is only four miles. In the Treta Yuga, Brahma asked Lord Krishna for the blessing of becoming the ground on which the Lord would walk during His pastimes with the gopis. Lord Krishna suggested that Brahma take the form of a hill in Barsana.

The great temple of Larily Lal, “the beloved,” namely Radharani, stands on the crest of this two-hundred-foot hill, which appears all the higher because it rises so abruptly out of the flat plain. Larily Lal and adjacent temples, also dedicated to Radharani, were all constructed in the last three hundred years. Each temple is grander than its predecessor. They form an impressive sight as the pilgrim walks up the hundreds of stone steps leading to the hill’s summit.

In contrast, the town at the base of the hill is poor and dusty. Still, the ruins of magnificent mansions attest to its glories during Rup Ram’s times. Before this, Barsana, if inhabited at all, was part of the village of Uchagram.

Rup Ram was a Katara brahmin who attained fame as a great scholar at the beginning of the eighteenth century. He received lavish donations from wealthy maharajas, including Bharatpur and Sindhia, and spent the money to beautify Barsana and other places in Braja. He constructed the town of Barsana and within it a marketplace with sixty-four walled gardens. No sooner had the town been built, however, than it was destroyed beyond all hope of restoration in the Mahratta wars of the mid-eighteenth century. These wars culminated in the defeat of the Hindus at Panipat in 1761. In flight from that battle, the Jats entrenched themselves at Barsana. The Muslims quickly routed them and destroyed the stately mansions in their search for hidden treasures.

Today, children swarm about the ruins. Many of the villagers have blue or green eyes, legacy of some northern invaders.

At nearby Sankari Khor, “the narrow passage” between the hills, Krishna and His cowherd friends waited for the gopis to come with their pails of cream and yoghurt. Blocking the narrow, rocky path, the boys insisted on a milk toll before letting the girls pass.

“We have no money for such a toll,” Radha protested.

“Well, what do you have to give?” Krishna asked.

“We’re poor milkmaids,” said the gopis, secretly enjoying Krishna’s banter. “We have only this yoghurt and cream.”

“So, you can give that.”

“But we must take it to the village for the sacrifice.”

“Then take another route. This is the toll road.”

“We can’t go any other way with these pails!”

The argument would finally end with Radharani and the other gopis pushing their way forward, and Krishna and His friends pushing them back. Just as the girls were winning, Krishna would knock the pot of yoghurt off Radha’s head. Then He and His friends would scrape the yoghurt off the rocks and eat it.

Every year, a festival reenacts this pastime. Hundreds of men from Nandagram are led by boys dressed as Krishna and His cowherd friends, and hundreds of women from Barsana are led by boys dressed as Radha and the other gopis. The gopis try to pass; the men block the narrow, rocky passage. There is much pushing and pulling, shouting and laughter. Finally, the boy dressed as Krishna knocks the pot off Radha’s head. Then hundreds of pots are broken on the rocks, and the yoghurt is eaten up.

This entire area is full of places where Krishna performed various pastimes with Radharani and the other gopis. When Radharani once wanted to see the dancing of a peacock, Lord Krishna Himself appeared in the form of a peacock and danced before Her. This pastime is depicted at Mor Kutir in a beautiful painting by a blind Gaudiya saint, to whom the pastime was revealed. At Sanket, “the place of rendezvous,” Krishna and Radha would meet privately. At Mana Kutir, Radha requested that Krishna sing Her praises. Krishna began to compare Her to a full moon, but Radha, infinitely more beautiful than the moon, felt insulted and left. Krishna then went to search for Her. After a while, She appeared dressed in His clothes, imitating Him.

“Who are You?” Krishna asked Her. “Identify Yourself.”

“I am Krishna,” Radha said, “the cowherd boy of Braja.”

“Nonsense,” Krishna said, feigning anger. “You’re just an imposter. I’m Krishna.”

“Really?” Radha scoffed. “If that’s so, then where is Your consort Radharani?”

“I’ll call Her for You,” Krishna said, whereupon Radha revealed Her true identity, and They both laughed merrily. Then They went to Radha’s girl friends, Lalita and Vishakha, and asked them to identify the real Krishna and Radha.

From Barsana, the pilgrim journeys north to Nandagram, situated some thirty-five miles northwest of Mathura. Nandagram has a parikrama of four miles. Some say that it was originally called “Nandigram” for Lord Shiva (Nandisvara), but Vaishnavas consider it named after Nanda Maharaj, Krishna’s foster father.

At the foot of Nandisvara Hill is Pan Sarovar, the lake where Krishna drove Nanda Maharaj’s cows for water (pani). Radharani used to cook for Krishna on the banks of this lake. She had received a benediction from Durvasa Muni by which Her cooking would free one from all disease. The bhajan kutir of Sanatan Goswami is also located here. Unknown to Sanatan, Radharani Herself would cook sweet rice for him daily, and Krishna, disguised as an ordinary cowherd boy, would carry it to the great Goswami. One day, Krishna told Sanatan that Deities of Nanda Maharaj, Mother Yasoda, Krishna, and

Balarama were residing in a nearby cave. Sanatan went there, took the Deities, and installed Them in a temple atop Nandisvara Hill.

Today, hundreds of wild monkeys scamper about Pan Sarovar, swinging in the trees and stealing clothes from unwary washerwomen.

At Ajnokh, Krishna penciled Radha's eyebrows with anjan ("mascara"), while She lounged on the grass. At Risaya ("thirsty"), Krishna was about to faint from thirst, and Radha revived Him with a drink of water.

In the courtyard of the Nanda Yasoda Temple atop Nandisvara Hill is a Deity of Lord Shiva. One day, Shiva came to visit baby Krishna, but Mother Yasoda turned him away because she feared that he might frighten Krishna. As soon as Shiva left, Krishna started crying, and He would not stop until Shiva returned and was allowed residence in the courtyard. Whenever Mother Yasoda fed baby Krishna, she gave the remnants to Lord Shiva. This custom is followed in the Nanda Yasoda Temple to this day.

In a stone house on the plain at the foot of Nandisvara Hill reside the Deities of Nrisingha, Varaha, and Narayana. It's surprising to discover that this house, which looks like a typical rural dwelling, is a temple whose Deities belonged to Krishna's foster father, Nanda Maharaj.

Walking east, the pilgrim comes to Khadiraban, "the acacia grove," situated thirty-two miles northwest of Mathura. Its parikrama covers about five miles. Then one passes through Kumarban and Javakban, where Krishna painted Radha's feet with red javak, a kind of dye. Next come Kokilaban, "forest of the cuckoo bird," and Charan Pahar in Little Bathan, where Krishna enjoyed relaxing and playing His flute. Here, Indra descended from the heavenly planets on his elephant Airavata, paid obeisances to Lord Krishna, praised Him, and asked His forgiveness for his offense at Govardhan. The Lord's lotus footprint (charan) is imprinted on a rock nearby.

The pilgrim then passes on through Dadhigram, where Krishna sported with the gopis while Balarama went ahead and waited at Bathan. Next is Kotban, the northernmost point in Braja's lotus fonnation. Heading south, back to home base, one passes Sessai and comes to the River Jamuna at Kelban. Following the course of the river, the parikrama leads to Biharban and Chir Ghat, where Krishna stole the clothes (chir) of the gopis while they bathed. Near Vrindaban's Kesi Ghat, there's another Chir Ghat that commemorates this pastime, but this ghat at Biharban is considered by Jiva Goswami to be the actual location.

The next stop is Nanda Ghat. Here, Nanda Maharaj was arrested by the servants of Varuna, god of waters, and taken deep into the watery abode. Varuna accused Nanda of bathing at the wrong astronomical time. Krishna and Balarama rushed to Nanda's rescue, and Varuna received Them with all respect. He then admitted having arrested Nanda Maharaj simply to see the Supreme Personality of Godhead. Varuna knew that Krishna would come to rescue His foster father.

"My dear Lord," Varuna said, "I think that it was Your plan to show me Your mercy by Your presence here. Please forgive the offense of my servants. Your father may return with You immediately."

The adjacent village of Bhaygram is named for the terror (bhay) experienced by the Brijbasis upon learning that Nanda Maharaj had been captured.

Next is Bacchaban, where the demon Bakasura appeared in the form of a crane with a long, sharp, pointed beak. The cowherd boys were watering the cows in the river when they saw Bakasura, who was as big as a hill and as strong as a thunderbolt. Bakasura immediately attacked Krishna and swallowed Him up. The cowherd boys were breathless with fear. Suddenly, Bakasura felt a burning sensation in his throat due to the glowing effulgence of the Lord. This forced him to throw Krishna up. He then tried to kill Krishna by pinching Him in his gigantic beak, but Krishna killed him by bifurcating his mouth as easily as a child splits a blade of grass. From the sky, the demigods showered fragrant cameli flowers upon the Lord, and the cowherd boys ran forward to congratulate Him. From here, the pilgrim continues south to the two villages of Vasai, where the gopis were first subdued (basai) by love for Krishna. At Bhatron, Krishna showed compassion upon the wives of the brahmins.

“Please go beg some food at those brahmins’ houses, dear friends,” Krishna told the cowherd boys. “Because they’re not Vaishnavas, they’re striving for elevation to the heavenly planets. They’re so busy chanting Vedic mantras that they can’t even chant My name, although the very purpose of Vedic knowledge is to find Me. Since they’re not attracted by My name, you’d better ask them for food in the name of Balarama.”

The proud brahmins wouldn’t even speak to the simple cowherd boys. When the boys returned empty-handed, Krishna suggested that they go see the brahmins’ wives. “Their wives are always chanting My names,” He said. “Go tell them that Krishna and Balarama are hungry. I’m sure they’ll give you all the food you want.”

As soon as the wives heard that the divine brothers were hungry, they quickly prepared a feast and delivered it to Krishna, despite the objections of their husbands. They had heard so much of Krishna, and He was so dear to them, that their minds were always absorbed in Him. At last they could see Him face to face and embrace Him to their hearts’ content. After Bhatron, the pilgrim arrives at Vrindaban proper. Here, one can spend many weeks visiting temples, ghats, kunds, and other areas where Krishna had His pastimes.

From Vrindaban, the pilgrim crosses the river to Belban (Sriban), which is ten miles from Mathura and has a parikrama of three miles. There’s a Lakshmi temple here commemorating the spot where the goddess of fortune, Lakshmi, wanted to become a gopi. For this reason, she performed austerities in this forest. During Krishna’s time, many bael trees grew here, and Krishna used to picnic in their shade with His friends. One night, when Krishna and the cowherd boys were asleep, a great fire broke out and threatened to consume all the Brijbasis. As the flames approached, the Brijbasis took shelter of the Supreme Lord, praying, “O dear Krishna! Save us from this devastating fire! You are our only shelter.”

Always compassionate to His devotees, Krishna sucked up great draughts of air and easily swallowed the flames.

Continuing south along the eastern bank of the Jamuna, the pilgrim arrives at Bhandiraban. This is nineteen miles north of Mathura and has a parikrama of four miles.

Bhandir Kupa is a well that Krishna made by pushing His flute into the earth when the cowherd boys were thirsty.

One afternoon, when the cowherd boys were tending cows at Bhandiraban, the strongest of the demons, Pralambasura, entered their company in disguise. Of course, Krishna recognized him as a demon and began to think of ways to kill him. Externally, however, He received Pralambasura as a friend.

Krishna then suggested that the boys form two wrestling teams. They wrestled vigorously, and Balarama's team won. Krishna and His team, which included Pralambasura, had to carry the victors on their backs. Pralambasura decided to carry Balarama away and kill Him. To avoid Krishna, he started running through Bhandiraban with Balarama on his shoulders. Suddenly, Balarama became as heavy as a mountain, and Pralambasura was forced to assume his real form. The demon's body touched the clouds, his eyes blazed like fire, and his sharp teeth flashed.

Balarama then understood Pralambasura's intent. He squeezed the demon's neck with His legs so he couldn't escape and struck him repeatedly with His fist. Blood poured from Pralambasura's mouth, and he fell down dead. When he landed, the earth shook. The cowherd boys ran to see what had happened, and they were astonished by the ghastly scene. They praised Balarama's strength and embraced Him, and the demigods appeared and showered Him with flowers. After this, Balarama went to Bhandir Kupa, drank from the well, and rested.

It was at Dangoli that Krishna dropped His staff (dang). Further on, one arrives at the villages of Piparauh, named for shady banyan (pipal) trees that line the southern route. Lohaban, only four miles east of Mathura, has a parikrama of three miles. It was here that the demon Lohajanghasura was killed, and Jarasanda was defeated here by Krishna eighteen times. There's a pond here named Krishna Kund, and also a Radha Gopinath temple.

Five miles southeast of Mathura is Raval. According to some accounts, Raval, not Barsana, is the place where Radharani first appeared. Once, after ten thousand years of austerities, Suchandra and Kalavati gained the audience of Lord Brahma. Brahma offered them a boon and Kalavati requested Lord Vishnu's consort for a daughter. After consulting higher authorities, Brahma announced that Radharani, consort of Lord Krishna, would become their daughter.

During the Dwapara Yuga, Suchandra and Kalavati, in the form of Virsabhanu and Kirtida, became the parents of Radharani. Like Lord Krishna, Radharani wasn't born in an ordinary fashion. One day, when Virsabhanu and Kirtida went to the Jamuna to bathe, they saw a dazzling light surrounding a little girl standing on a lotus in the middle of the river. They were then informed by Lord Brahma that this girl was Radharani, the original Lakshmi, the goddess of fortune.

Mother Yasoda learned of Kirtida's new daughter and went to congratulate her. She took baby Krishna along. The divine couple first beheld one another when Krishna crawled to Radharani's cradle and pulled Himself up to see what was within.

The pilgrim next arrives at Bandigram, named after Mother Yasoda's two faithful servants, Bandi and Anandi. From here, the parikrama continues southward to Mahaban (Gokul), scene of the sweet infant pastimes of Krishna. At Brahmand Ghat, Balarama and the other children told Mother Yasoda that Krishna was eating pieces of clay from the river bank. Mother Yasoda ran to the river to tend to Krishna. Looking in His mouth for dirt, she saw the entire creation: the moon, stars, planets, mountains, oceans, the basic elements, the demigods, the three modes of material nature, the ten directions, and infinity. She also saw herself nursing Krishna on her lap. She was awestruck, but she quickly concluded that she must be tired or dreaming and so ignored the vision and wiped the dirt from Krishna's face.

Chaurasi Khambha, Nanda Maharaj's house, is also at Mahaban. After Krishna's birth, Vasudeva carried Him from Kamsa's prison to Kolo Ghat on the western bank of the Jamuna. There he crossed and walked directly to Nanda Maharaj's house. The existing building commemorating this dwelling is situated on a hill. Here, Krishna spent His early childhood. Along the side of the hill are small mud and straw temples denoting the spots where Krishna killed demons like the witch Putana and the whirlwind demon, Trinavarta. Ordered by Kamsa, Trinavarta assumed the form of a whirlwind, picked up baby Krishna, and raised a great dust storm. The atmosphere grew so dark that Yasoda couldn't see Krishna and so began to cry. Trinavarta carried baby Krishna on his shoulder high into the sky, but Krishna became so heavy that the whirlwind stopped. The demon's eyes popped from their sockets, and he fell down dead. When Trinavarta hit the earth, he landed with such force that his limbs were smashed. The Brijbasis ran to the spot and were surprised to see Krishna playing on the demon's gigantic body. They quickly picked the Lord up and embraced Him.

One day, while Mother Yasoda was churning butter, baby Krishna broke all the pots of yoghurt and ate the contents. He also stole the butter from the pots that hung from the ceiling and gave it to the monkeys. He was so naughty that Yasoda tried to bind Him with rope, but regardless of how much rope she used, she always found it about two inches short. Perspiring from the labor, Yasoda finally managed to tie the Lord to a large wooden mortar. This made Krishna very angry. "Now I'll do something more mischievous than ever," He thought.

Dragging the huge mortar behind Him, Krishna crawled between a pair of arjuna trees that stood in the courtyard.

In their previous lives, these trees were Nalakuvara and Manigriva, sons of the wealthy demigod Kuvera. Like many rich men's sons, Nalakuvara and Manigriva became addicted to wine and women. One day, when they were sporting naked with girls on the banks of the Mandakini Ganges, the sage Narada appeared. The brothers were so drunk that they didn't even attempt to cover their nakedness. Narada felt compassion for them and terminated their false enjoyment by cursing them to become trees until the moment that the Supreme Lord Himself would liberate them. Thus Nalakuvara and Manigriva stood in Nanda Maharaj's courtyard as arjuna trees.

Knowing all things, Krishna crawled between the trees. The mortar lodged between them, and the Lord pulled forward. The trees immediately came crashing down. Then two effulgent beings, blazing like fire, emerged and began to sing Krishna's praises.

The Brijbasis rushed into the courtyard. Some children told how the mortar lodged between the trees, but most people did not believe that Krishna pulled them over. They all took baby Krishna on their laps and gave thanks that He was not hurt.

Traditionally, after visiting Mahaban, the pilgrim completes the parikrama of Braja Mandala by returning to Visrant Ghat in Mathura to bathe and rest, as Lord Krishna Himself did after killing Kamsa.

Upon completing this ninety-six-mile parikrama, the pilgrim has hopefully killed all demonic desires within his heart. The great lotus of Braja is unfolding infinitely. May it always be revealed in the hearts of the devotees, wherever they wander on this earth.

CHAPTER 18. Radha Kund

After breakfast prasadam, Achyutananda and I go to Loi Bazaar to shop for kurtas and pajamas. The khadi shops are located adjacently, four in all. When the owners see me deliberating, they begin clamoring for patronage.

We take off our shoes and enter a small, open-front shop where thousands of kurtas, pajamas, vests, dhotis, and chadars are stacked. All of the material is spun by hand in individual homes (cottages, hence “khadi”), a practice encouraged by Gandhi, who used his spinning wheel to arouse civil disobedience against the British. By patronizing the cottage industry in India, one supported home industry instead of British factories. Khadi cloth—silk, cotton, and wool—is sturdy and handsome, and its colors are conservative, coming mainly in white, gray, and brown. It’s subject to the small flaws of homespun cloth, but only the most picayune would object.

The store owner, a smiling little man, with inch-thick glasses and buck teeth, welcomes us with a flourish, inviting us to sit on the spotless white cotton sheets that cover the floor.

“Tea?” he asks.

“We don’t take intoxicants,” Achyutananda explains, “but we’ll have sweet lassis.”

A boy is sent running to a nearby milk-walla for clay cups of that delicious, icy, sweet yoghurt drink. The store owner claps his hands and shouts orders to another boy to bring kurtas and pajamas for my inspection. As we sip lassis, the boy unfolds clothes. “Bhas! Enough!” I finally say and select the first pair of kurtas and pajamas I had my hands on. The boy will have to spend the rest of the morning refolding everything. The white cotton long-sleeve kurtas cost only eleven rupees each, and the pajamas, also of white cotton, cost seven rupees, less than a dollar. Khadi’s a real bargain.

When we leave, the man in the Deity shop across the street beckons to us. These shops, which abound in Vrindaban, specialize in Deities of Radha and Krishna, statues ranging in height from seven inches to three feet. The Deities are composed of eight different types of metal and are cast according to scriptural regulations. Large or small, they all look very much alike: Krishna standing in His tribhanga pose, one leg crossed in front of the other, His arms raised to hold His flute to His lips, and Radha standing with one hand down and the other lifted, palm extended in benediction. Once installed in a temple according to Vedic ritual, the statues become worshipable as archa-vigraha, Krishna incarnate.

“I promised to get some Deities for New Vrindaban,” I tell Achyutananda.

“This is the best dealer,” he says. “Srila Prabhupada recommended him—Hari Prasad.”

Hearing his name, Hari Prasad offers us namaskars, shaking his head back and forth in delight. He’s a fat, middle-aged brahmin, and it appears by his red-stained mouth that his one passion in life is chewing betel. What else? Day after day, year after year, like everyone else in Loi Bazaar and countless other bazaars in India, he sits in his niche,

which happens to be the biggest niche in Loi Bazaar. His open storefront is crowded with shiny gold Deities. Hari Prasad must be Krishna conscious.

Again a teenage boy runs out for lassis. But Hari Prasad doesn't stop there. He also feeds us rubbri, deliciously sweet condensed milk, served on a banyan leaf. Pointing to a painting of a long-bearded ancestor, he assures us that his family has been making and selling Deities for over two hundred years. Moreover, this tradition will continue, for he introduces the young man attending him as his son, and the teenager as his grandson. The niche will always be filled.

"What size Deities do you want?" Achyutananda asks.

"About eighteen inches high," I say, and he translates. Hari Prasad gives orders, and his son begins carrying Deities from the back room. The statues are identical, save for facial expressions. They weigh about ten pounds each without the bases. Krishna is somewhat larger than Radharani. The eyes, painted shells shaped like lotus petals, are glued on.

"Will not fall off," Hari Prasad says when I inspect the eyes.

Fortunately, the choice is not difficult. I spot the Deities I want.

"Those are the ones," I tell Achyutananda.

"Good. If you feel that strongly about Them, it's auspicious. It means They're choosing you."

Hari Prasad also seems pleased with my choice. "Achha!" he says, setting the Deities aside.

"How much?" I ask. "Kitna?"

"One hundred seventy-five rupees," he says in English.

"So much!" Actually, I'm surprised they're so cheap. "Isn't some concession possible?" This English, Hari Prasad does not understand. As Achyutananda translates, Hari Prasad shakes his head and chews the betel concoction. Then he says in English, "All right. For you, one hundred sixty."

"One fifty," I say.

"Achha!" he says, meaning agreement in this case, knowing that he'll fleece me on the accessories. His real profit lies in Deity clothes and ornamentation. No wealthy man wants to dress the Lord and His consort in anything but the best attire available, and in this Hari Prasad excels. His son opens box after box of silk clothes embroidered and decorated with "jari"—gold and silver filigree. Hari Prasad first arranges the clothes on the Deities. Next come rhinestone and imitation pearl anklets, waist bands, wristlets, armllets, brooches, necklaces, earrings, and, finally, the crowns topped with plumes and peacock feathers. These items, delicately fashioned, are made by Brijbasi craftsmen proud of their art. When everything is in place, my Radha and Krishna look like transcendental royalty indeed.

The bill rockets to four hundred rupees, expensive by Indian standards—about sixty dollars American. After the usual dickering, I get him down to 350.

"Another lassi?" Hari Prasad asks, giving a crimson smile.

"Of course" Achyutananda says, and the boy fetches the lassis as his father wraps up the purchase and grandfather counts the money.

We carry Their Lordships and Their raiment as far as Shahji Temple. Afraid of dropping Them, we catch a ricksha back to Kesi Ghat.

We make arrangements at the palace to attend Radha Kund Puja, a celebration in honor of the origin of Radha Kund and Shyama Kund. For Gaudiya Vaishnavas, Radha Kund is the most sanctified place in the entire Braja Mandala, and tonight is the holiest time of year for bathing there. After moonrise, thousands of pilgrims will crowd into the little town to wash away their sins.

In the late afternoon, we leave: Achyutananda, I, and Mr. and Mrs. Dey, Indian friends of ISKCON, in one taxi; Gurudas, Yamuna, Shyamsundar, and Malati in another; and the brahmacharis—Pradyumna, Kulashekar, Veda Vyas and Uddhava—in a third.

Radha Kund is located about twenty-two kilometers west of Vrindaban, and only two kilometers from Govardhan Hill. The paved highway from Vrindaban is a narrow, straight line across the plain.

Along the road, feathery tassles of pampas grass wave in a gentle breeze. Some fields are too dry and sandy for cultivation, and they lie barren. Wherever there's a water supply—a canal or pond—farmers cultivate wheat, alfalfa, and sugar cane. The people have no twentieth century amenities, and their little dusty villages seem frozen in time. Oxen plow the fields, and boys gather alfalfa in their arms to feed the cows. Women draw water from the village wells, filling clay pitchers and carrying them on their heads. No engines or radios break the peace. Here, life goes on as it did in Krishna's day.

About midway to Radha Kund, the road is blocked by hundreds of camels. Baby camels scamper clumsily after their mothers, who graze on tree limbs. The Rajasthani herdsmen insist on our taking photos.

"They're en route to Hardwar," Achyutananda says.

"That's a long camel drive."

"There's a drought in Rajasthan."

We continue heading directly west, then turn off the main highway at Radha Kund. The town of two thousand is now packed with about ten thousand pilgrims, and the dusty village road that runs past bicycle repair shops, souvenir stands, and chai stalls is so glutted with human traffic that we have to leave the taxis and strike out on foot. There is much noisy hawking of religious wares. For the Bengali populace of the town of Radha Kund, this is the biggest day of the year: their most important religious festival.

Perhaps the original Bengali settlers were inspired to come here in search of those spiritual treasures described by Srila Bhaktivinode Thakur:

The banks of Radha Kund are made of billions of conscious, ecstatic wish-fulfilling philosopher's stones, and surrounding the kund are hundreds of beautiful transcendental gardens and groves. All the trees and creepers in those gardens are made of coral and rubies, and the fruits they produce are diamonds and pearls. And their branches are bending down to the ground due to being overburdened with millions of these lovely gems. My small cottage shines beautifully within that most enchanting garden called Svananda Sukhada Kunja. Living here, I sing Krishna's holy name, and greedily hanker for that time when I will get to serve Him and His associates. (Gita Mala)

It's purifying just to hear how Radha Kund and Shyama Kund came to be. After Krishna had killed Aristasura—a demon in the form of a raging bull—Radharani and the other gopis told Him that He would have to bathe in all the holy places to atone for the sin of gohatya, the killing of a cow or bull. Because Krishna didn't want to leave Radharani, He decided to summon all the sacred rivers there. First, He created a hole by striking the earth with His heel. Immediately, all the presiding deities of the sacred waters appeared, and torrents gushed forth from all quarters to form the pond known as Shyama Kund. Krishna then informed the gopis that Aristasura wasn't a real bull at all but a demon disguised as one; therefore Radharani and the gopis should also bathe in all the holy rivers to wash away the sin of siding with a demon. Radharani became very upset at this. "If Krishna can make a kund, then so can I," She told the other gopis.

Radha and thousands of gopis then broke their bangles and started scraping the earth with them. Soon, the pit was completed, but it remained dry. When Krishna began to laugh and chide them, the gopis formed a two-mile line to Manasi Ganga and brought water to fill the hole.

Again, the presiding deities of all the sacred waters appeared, and they asked for Krishna's permission to enter Radharani's kund.

"You'll have to ask Radharani's permission, not Mine," Krishna said. "In fact, I think I'll be freed from the sin of gohatya only by bathing in Radha's kund."

At this, Radha forgave Him, and Krishna and all the gopis frolicked in the sacred ponds. This story is related in the Gopala Champu of Srila Jiva Goswami.

After Chaitanya Mahaprabhu rediscovered the kunds and proclaimed their sanctity, Raghunatha Dasa Goswami went to live on their banks. Each kund measured only twelve feet square during the sixteenth century. Raghunatha had the kunds enlarged because he knew that many pilgrims would eventually come to bathe. During the excavation of the kunds, Yudhisthira Maharaj appeared to Raghunatha in a dream.

"Please don't cut down the trees around Shyama Kund," he requested. "My four Pandava brothers and I are living there as trees and performing worship."

Since Raghunatha allowed the trees to remain, Shyama Kund appears irregular today, unlike the perfectly rectangular Radha Kund.

Each kund covers about two hundred square feet. Radha Kund is separated from Shyama Kund by a retaining wall rising just above the water. This wall is topped with ornate columns. A chatra shades the pada cheena of Radha and Krishna—marble footprints molded according to scriptural descriptions—installed by Bhaktisiddhanta Saraswati.

Like his father, Bhaktivinode Thakur, Srila Bhaktisiddhanta stressed the importance of Radha Kund. During their day—fifty to a hundred years ago—this village didn't exist, and the kunds must have sparkled with crystal clear water.

Raghunatha Dasa Goswami dug a well so that the kunds would not be used for washing clothes and dishes, but the townsfolk do their washing here nonetheless. Their detergent creates a green scum on the water's surface. Great slimy turtles stick their heads up from the black muck and then disappear.

The samadhis of Sri Raghunatha Dasa Goswami and Sri Raghunatha Bhatta Goswami are here. There is also a small Radha Krishna temple containing a Deity discovered by Raghunatha Dasa while he was excavating. In addition to Bhaktivinode Thakur's bhajan kutir—a little cottage where the great saint worshiped the Lord—there's the bhajan kutir of Raghunatha Dasa.

Once, while Raghunatha Dasa was absorbed in chanting, tigers came to drink from Shyama Kund. Then Sanatan Goswami arrived and was astonished to see Lord Krishna standing by Raghunatha. The Lord was smiling and protecting the saint from the tigers. Raghunatha was unaware of this. When the tigers left, so did Krishna. Sanatan then told Raghunatha that he should build a small cottage so that Krishna would not have to come and stand guard. It's this cottage, or kutir, that is still standing. Beside it stands the kutir where Krishnadas Kaviraj wrote Chaitanya Charitamrita, the definitive biography of Lord Chaitanya Mahaprabhu. In that great transcendental literature, he stressed the importance of Radha Kund:

Of all the gopis, Radharani is the dearest. Similarly, the lake known as Radha Kund is very dear to the Lord because it is very dear to Srimati Radharani. ... Of all the gopis, Srimati Radharani is certainly the most beloved. In that lake, Lord Krishna and Srimati Radharani used to sport daily in the water and have rasa dance on the bank. Indeed, Lord Krishna gives ecstatic love like that of Srimati Radharani to whomever bathes in that lake even once in his life.

As we push our way through the narrow street, children offer us small bars of blackish clay from the kund's bottom. The clay is used for marking the body with the Lord's names. I buy one for twenty-five paise, and other vendors rush forward, hawking prayer beads, carved sandalwood statues of Radha and Krishna, and colored prints of Krishna and demigods.

Though thirsty, we find nothing drinkable: no bottled water, no fruit, no soda pop, no milk. The little stalls along the road sell only chai. Mr. Dey breaks down and buys a cup. "I'm sorry, gentlemen," he says. "Tea is the one thing I can't give up. I simply must have it."

Achyutananda informs me that each year, as pilgrims arrive here from Bengal, some stay on. I wonder how they'll ever manage to survive here, considering the scarcity of jobs, rupees, and basic resources like food, clothing, and housing. Now the weather is pleasant, but soon cold December nights will come, followed by the heat of May and June, when the North Indian plain becomes an oven.

The moon rises. We make our way through the crowds to the steps of the ghat and down to the water.

"Are you going in?" I ask Achyutananda.

"No," he says. "Srla Prabhupada told us that we should honor the sanctity of the kunds by not bathing in them."

We stand on the bottom step of the ghat and scoop up three handfuls of water, then sprinkle it over our heads while reciting mantras of obeisance to Srla Prabhupada and Radha and Krishna. By this one gesture, we've bathed in all the holy waters on earth.

Many Indians, however, completely submerge themselves, closing their eyes and holding their nose. Most do not wade out very far, fearing that they may encounter the turtles or sink into the black muck. Some simply look at the green scum on the surface, then turn away. Is it that Krishna has allowed this scum to form in order to discourage materialists from bathing here? To guard against the encroachment of Kali Yuga? To keep out rock and roll, motorcycles, and radios? Or does it simply result from people washing out their clothes and bad karma?

The transcendental reality of Radha Kund and Shyama Kund is revealed to pure devotees like Srila Bhaktivinode Thakur. To us conditioned souls, the situation appears quite different. Since everything in the material world is topsy-turvy, the most pure in the spiritual universe appears unattractive in the material. The real nature of the kunds is invisible to material vision. We see them as we see the world: as far as our understanding permits. Standing on the banks, we cannot perceive the miracles being wrought. We can glimpse only perverted reflections, the residue of all the bad karma left behind by pilgrims. We do not consider how miraculous it is that the kunds can absorb sinful reactions so swiftly, like a gigantic sponge.

Achyutananda shows us the place where Lord Chaitanya sat after discovering Radha Kund. Chaitanya arrived at Aristagram (now Aring) during His parikrama of Braja Mandala. He asked the people where Radha Kund was, but they didn't know. Since Chaitanya was Lord Krishna Himself, He could remember its exact location 4,500 years after His pastimes here. The people, however, thought Him mad when He bathed in shallow ponds in the middle of paddy fields and declared them to be the sacred kunds. "After bathing, the Lord sat here and offered His prayers," Achyutananda says, halting before a banyan tree over a little shrine containing a picture of Lord Chaitanya's footprints.

We offer obeisances before the shrine, then walk back to the taxis. During the ride back to Vrindaban, we are all content to sit silently and relish the remarkable feeling of freedom born of contact with those holy waters.

CHAPTER 19. Mathura Pilgrimage

The next morning, Achyutananda and I walk to the tonga stand near the bus terminal and select the rig with the strongest horse. The tonga drivers are still asleep on the seats of their rickety two-wheel carriages, and we have to wait for our driver to arise, douse his face at the corner pump, drink some chai, and light his first morning bidi with Chavi matches. The matches break, flare, and fizzle before accidentally lighting. Scores of tiny holes burned in the driver's clothes attest to many a bidi and the hazards of Chavi matches.

Finally, the horse's skinny legs are trotting to Mathura. There's not much morning traffic on the road: mostly cowherds on their way to goshalas for milking and boys cycling, carrying milkpails tied to their bikes.

About two kilometers out of town, we turn down a dirt road leading across a broad expanse of sandy field. About a kilometer across the field, abruptly rising from the fine sand, is a small hill covered with ganger shrubs and cactus and crowned by an abandoned temple. The morning sun, shining golden through hazy clouds, colors the sand bright orange.

The temple, weather-worn and neglected, seems lonely and majestic overlooking the plain. A crumbling ghat, surrounded by a masonry wall, once led into the river. This was once Akrura Ghat. Now the river flows half a kilometer to the east.

Our tonga stops, and the horse begins to nibble at the ganger shrubs. We step down to view the temple closer.

"This is where Akrura had his vision," Achyutananda says.

The pious Akrura, a member of the Yadu dynasty, was Lord Krishna's uncle. When Kamsa learned that all the demons he'd sent to Vrindaban had been killed by Krishna and Balarama, he requested Akrura to bring the divine brothers to Mathura to see the city's beauty and enjoy the wrestling matches. In reality, Kamsa planned to have a giant elephant trample Them as soon as They entered the city.

Although Kamsa revealed his plan, Akrura agreed to go because he was eager to see the Lord's beautiful face. He had heard that many sages had been liberated from the material world just by seeing the shining nails of Krishna's lotus feet. Akrura knew that Krishna was the Supreme Lord and that Kamsa could pose no real threat. He looked forward to the touch of Krishna's lotus feet on his head and the awakening of love for Krishna within his soul.

"Krishna is the Supersoul in my heart," Akrura thought, "and He knows that I'm His unalloyed devotee, even though I'm acting as His enemy's messenger. Surely He'll embrace me and call me Uncle. As soon as He touches me, my whole life will be glorious."

En route, Akrura lost all sense of time. As soon as he entered Vrindaban and saw Krishna's footprints, he jumped from the chariot and began to roll on the ground in ecstasy and weep.

Srila Prabhupada has told us that Akrura's entry into Vrindaban is exemplary. Like him, we should smear our bodies with the dust of the earth as soon as we enter Vrindaban, not caring for our material status or the opinions of others.

When he arrived at Nanda Maharaja's house, Akrura saw Krishna and Balarama face to face, and his greatest dreams were fulfilled. They had returned from the day's herding of cows, and They were both shining in youthful splendor. The lotus-eyed Krishna, whose complexion was dark, was dressed in yellow garments. The lotus-eyed Balarama, whose complexion was white, was dressed in blue. They had just finished bathing, and Their strong limbs were smeared with sandalwood pulp.

Akrura jumped out of the chariot, fell flat on the ground, and touched Krishna's lotus feet. He could hardly speak. Tears of bliss flowed from his eyes, and he fell into an ecstatic swoon. Krishna bent down, picked His uncle up, and embraced him. Then Balarama embraced him, and the brothers led him by the hand to Their home. There They honored him with presents and delicious food. After Akrura had finished eating, Balarama gave him a leaf with betel nuts and other cooling spices to chew.

Akrura told Krishna and Balarama that Kamsa planned to kill Them. The brothers merely laughed. Krishna even invited His foster father Nanda Maharaja and all the cowherd boys to accompany Him to Mathura for a Dhanur-yajna ceremony.

The gopis, however, did not take the news of Krishna's departure so merrily. Their faces turned black from anxiety, and their hearts pounded. Some immediately fainted. They convened and lamented Krishna's cruelty: How could He leave them behind for the company of the big-city girls?

The gopis wept at the thought that Krishna would never return. Then, out of frustration, they condemned Akrura for taking Krishna away. They also condemned all the cowherd boys and men, and even the demigods, for allowing such a calamity. They wept all night, thinking that they would never again see Krishna's lotus face and dance with Him in the sweet tulasi grove at Seva Kunj.

They had to do something; separation would be intolerable. In the morning, when the time for departure came, the gopis surrounded the chariot and blocked the way. Krishna told them not to grieve, for He would return after annihilating the demons in Mathura. Then Akrura drove the chariot off, and the gopis followed it in their minds.

The chariot headed directly to the banks of the Jamuna. Krishna and Balarama bathed in the river, then rested in the shade of a banyan tree while Akrura went to bathe. As Akrura stood in the water chanting Gayatri mantra, he suddenly saw Krishna and Balarama before him. Surprised, he returned to the banyan tree and saw that the brothers were still relaxing on the chariot. Surely he had only imagined seeing Them in the water!

Akrura went back to finish his bath. Again, he saw Krishna and Balarama in the water, this time surrounded by demigods. Then he saw Lord Krishna reclining on the coils of the serpent Ananta Sesha, who had thousands of hoods. Sesha's complexion was white, and

He was clothed with blue garments. As the fourarmed Mahavishnu, Krishna wore a jeweled helmet and was decorated with bracelets, gems, golden armlets, and anklets. His four hands held the sudarsan disc, a conchshell, mace, and lotus flower. The Lord's eyes were dark, and His face was extremely beautiful. His body was strongly built, His chest and shoulders were broad, His navel was deep, His abdomen marked with three lines, His hips, legs, and arms were powerful yet graceful, His hands and feet as soft as lotus petals, His toenails dazzling. Across His chest hung a brahminical thread and a garland of fragrant flowers. His intimate associates stood before Him with their hands joined in prayer: the four Kumaras, Sunanda and Nanda, the nine learned sages, Prahlad and Narada, and the demigods Brahma and Shiva.

Struck with wonder, Akrura offered prayers in a faltering voice. "You are the Supersoul of everything," he said, "but no one knows Your transcendental form. Everyone within this material world is covered by the modes of goodness, passion, and ignorance. Only You are beyond these modes, O my Lord.

"O Supreme Person, You are the basis of everything. Fire is Your mouth, the earth Your feet, the sun and moon Your eyes, the sky Your navel, and the directions Your ears. Space is Your head, the demigods Your arms, the oceans Your abdomen, the wind Your vitality, the clouds and vegetation Your hair, the mountains Your bones and nails, the days and nights the twinkling of Your eyes, the progenitors Your genitals, and the rains Your semina.

"As the tortoise Kurma, You held up Mount Mandara; as the boar Varaha, You rescued the earth from the Garbhodaka waters; as the lion Nrishingha, You saved Your devotee Prahlad from the demonic Hiranyakashipu; as the winged horse Hayagriva, You killed the demons Madhu and Kaitabha; as the dwarf Vamana, You covered the universe in two steps; as the brahmin Parasurama, You annihilated the proud kshatriyas twenty-one times; as the perfect monarch Lord Ramachandra, You defeated Ravana; as Buddha, You baffled the atheists; and as Kalki, You chastised the meat-eating barbarians of Kali Yuga. You have also appeared as Lords Vasudeva, Sankarsana, Pradyumna, and Aniruddha.

"My dear Lord, somehow or other I have approached Your lotus feet. This is Your mercy upon me. Your transcendental, eternal form is full of knowledge. By meditating upon You, one can understand everything. You are supremely powerful, the Supreme Brahman, the Supreme Person, Supreme Controller, and Master of the material energies. O Vasudeva, resting place of the creation, O Supreme Personality of Godhead, O Supreme Soul in everyone's heart, I offer You my humble obeisances. Please protect me."

When Akrura came out of the river, Krishna smiled and asked whether he had seen anything unusual.

"My dear Lord," Akrura said, struck with wonder. "On seeing You, I've seen everything."

It was near this spot that Akrura beheld this vision of Mahavishnu and uttered these prayers. Even now his words must still be vibrating through the atmosphere, across the plain. Now, five thousand years later, the river has receded out of sight. Only the sands remain, a few cactus, and the morning breeze blowing across the plain from the west. How lonely the abandoned temple! Parrots and crows nestle undisturbed in its nooks, and

its gray stones are pockmarked from monsoon wind and rain. Its main tower is perhaps thirty feet high, simple and unpretentious, tapering in the Vedic style, pointing to the blue infinity of the sky.

I take a couple of photos, then hear cowbells and look up to see a little cowherd boy watching us, his eyes big with wonder. How strange we must seem to him, here in his domain! I motion for him to stand beside the cows. Some of the cows have been garlanded. Astonished to receive attention from a foreigner, the boy stands beside them. As I focus the lens, he smiles.

Achyutananda and I get back in the tonga, and the horse starts trotting across the field, kicking up the sand. As I look back, my head bent under the canvas top, I see the boy staring after us, amazed. Surely this is a unique morning for him, something to tell his family about.

Again on the main road, the tonga takes us the remaining eight kilometers to the crowded, narrow streets of Mathura.

“Why were the gopis so disturbed when Krishna went to Mathura?” I once asked Srila Prabhupada. “It’s only ten kilometers away. They could have walked there to see Him.” “In Vedic culture, girls did not roam about independently,” Srila Prabhupada said. “When Krishna left Vrindaban for Mathura, it was as good as His leaving the universe. The gopis knew that they would never see Him again except in Vaikuntha.”

Our driver turns down a crowded street to Janma Bhumi, Krishna’s birthplace. To our understanding, no less than four great temples have stood here. The first was built about five thousand years ago by Vajranabha, the son of Lord Krishna’s grandson Aniruddha. The second temple was supposedly built about 400 A.D. by the powerful Chandragupta Vikramaditya, and required two hundred year’s toil by the world’s most skilled workmen. It was destroyed by Mahmud of Ghazni in 1018. According to a Sanskrit inscription on a stone slab discovered in the area, a third temple was built by a citizen named Jajja in 1150 A.D., when King Vijayapalavadeva ruled Mathura. This must have been the temple visited by Chaitanya Mahaprabhu in 1515. It was destroyed by Sikandar Lodi, who died immediately thereafter, in 1517.

Next came the great Keshava Dev Temple, completed by Raja Virsinghadeva Bundela in 1619, during the beneficent reign of Jahangir. Keshava Dev stood 250 feet high, and during Diwali its ghee lamps could be seen from Agra, some fifty-six kilometers away. This infuriated Aurangzeb, who ordered the temple razed in 1669. Just as the Spaniards forced the Aztecs to demolish their pyramids and use the very same stones to construct cathedrals, Aurangzeb used Keshava Dev’s sandstone for his mosque.

Today, Aurangzeb’s mosque is the only edifice standing at Janma Bhumi. At the rear of the mosque, we enter a small subterranean chamber, discovered intact in the early 1950s. It was here that Lord Krishna is believed to have been born. A large door leading from this chamber into the mosque proper has been closed off. Especially since Independence, the Hindus have been outraged that the mosque still stands over Krishna’s birthsite. Now they even speak of liberating Janma Bhumi by knocking it down. Indeed, anti-Muslim riots break out from time to time over this issue.

Soon, flush against the mosque, construction will begin on a monumental Radha Krishna temple, financed by the Birla and Dalmia families and guided by Hanuman Prasad Podder of Gita Press fame. When completed, it will tower over the mosque. This will no doubt infuriate Aurangzeb's spirit soul, wherever it roams.

Achyutananda and I buy garlands of marigolds, and a brahmin priest offers the garlands by reciting mantras before a picture of baby Krishna. The chamber is quite dim, lit only by ghee lamps. A boy throws chunks of frankincense into bell-metal braziers, veiling the priest in clouds of smoke. We offer obeisances, put some rupees in the hundi, and leave. Judging from the red sandstone used in the mosque, the great Keshava Dev Temple must have glowed in the morning sun. This sandstone seems to radiate its own light, like translucent paper covering a Chinese lantern. What unexcelled colors it gives off, like the warm, rich glow of redwood! The sandstone of Govindaji and Madana Mohana is considerably darker.

The traveller Jean-Baptiste Tavernier, who visited the Keshava Dev Temple in 1650, wrote:

After the temples of Jagannatha and Benaras, the most important is that of Mathura ... one of the most sumptuous edifices in all India, and the place where there used to be formerly the greatest concourse of pilgrims. The temple is of such vast size that, though in a hollow, one can see it five or six kos [ten miles] off, the building being very lofty and very magnificent. The stone used in it is of a reddish tint, brought from a large quarry near Agra. It splits like our slate, and you can have slabs fifteen feet long and nine or ten broad and only some six inches thick; in fact, you can split them just as you like ... and also have fine columns.

Our tonga takes us next to Ranga Bhumi, across from the main post office. It was here that the colossal elephant Kuvalayapida blocked Krishna's entry into the wrestling arena. When the elephant charged Krishna, the Lord ran behind him, grabbed his tail, and pulled him to and fro with ease. Then He slapped the elephant in the face and tripped him up. Maddened, the elephant again charged Krishna, intent on killing Him, but Krishna seized his trunk, flung him to the ground, jumped on his back, and broke it, killing both the elephant and its driver. Then Krishna pulled out one of the ivory tusks, and slung it over His shoulder. Thus He entered the arena, followed by Balarama and the other cowherd boys.

In the arena, Krishna was perceived in different ways. To the wrestlers, He appeared as a thunderbolt; to the general populace as the most beautiful person in the world; to the women as the most attractive male, Kamadev personified; to the cowherd men as their kinsman and fellow villager; to the kshatriya kings as the strongest ruler; to His parents as the most loving child; to the unintelligent as a mere boy; to the yogis as the Supersoul; to the Vrishni clan as its most illustrious descendant; and to Kamsa as all-devouring death.

The citizens of Mathura looked on Krishna's beautiful face as if drinking nectar from heaven. They embraced Him in their minds and relished the aroma and taste of His body.

Then Krishna and Balarama began to wrestle the gigantic Chanura and Mustika respectively. All the arts of wrestling—the holds, the throws, and blows—were masterfully exhibited. The boyish Krishna and Balarama, however, appeared to be no match for those huge men of stone, and the audience thought it an unenjoyable mismatch. Everyone was astounded when Krishna suddenly staggered Chanura with three powerful blows in the face. Krishna grabbed Chanura's arms and whirled him around like a ragdoll. By the strength of the centrifugal force, Chanura died. Mustika also dropped dead, vomiting blood after being struck by Balarama's fist.

Kamsa ordered other wrestlers into the arena, but they all met their death. Kuta was killed nonchalantly by Balarama's left hand. With His bare foot, Krishna kicked and split open the head of a wrestler named Sala. Tosala met the same end. In this way, with Their hands and feet, Krishna and Balarama killed all the wrestlers who assaulted Them. The other wrestlers fled. Victory drums beat, and the ankle bells of Krishna and Balarama jingled. For the demoniac, this was the knell of death.

Kamsa leaped to his feet. Furious, he ordered the confiscation of all the wealth of the Vrindaban cowherd men. He also commanded the immediate execution of Krishna's foster father Nanda Maharaj, Krishna's father Vasudeva, and Kamsa's own father, Ugrasena, as well as the prompt banishment of Krishna and Balarama from Mathura. Hearing these cruel instructions, Krishna jumped over Kamsa's guards and leaped upon the royal dais. Kamsa brandished his sword, but Krishna seized him by the hair, knocking the crown from his head, and dragged him down to the wrestling arena. There, He threw him on the sands, straddled him, and hit him repeatedly. By those powerful blows, Kamsa was killed.

Krishna then dragged Kamsa's body around the arena, just as a lion drags its prey after killing it. The crowd cheered.

Then Kamsa's eight brothers attacked Krishna, and Balarama quickly killed them all with the tusk of the elephant Kuvalayapida. No one else dared attack. Krishna and Balarama were victorious. The demigods appeared in the sky and showered Them with flowers. Krishna immediately freed His parents, Vasudeva and Devaki, from the dungeon where Kamsa had imprisoned them for over twenty years. He also freed Kamsa's father, Ugrasena, and restored him to his rightful throne to rule the great empire of the Yadu, Bhoja, Vrishni, and other dynasties. Under the watchful eyes of Krishna and Balarama, Mathura and the rest of the kingdom enjoyed a great renaissance. In the brothers' presence, the citizens were completely satisfied.

Srila Prabhupada has told us that when we hear of Krishna's pastimes, we should remember that the Lord is beyond mundane conceptions of good and evil. Krishna even broke His promise and fought in the Kurukshetra battle, and sometimes He gave Arjuna advice contrary to kshatriya etiquette. The defeat of Jayadratha, Kama, Bhishma, and Drona was engineered by Krishna through His advice to the Pandavas. The Lord is a law unto Himself. Still, He acts for the ultimate good of everyone. Krishna is God in full, revealing His supremacy over mundane conceptions of good and evil. He attracts us as

the Supreme Hero, who needs answer to no one, who is never disappointed, and who always emerges triumphant in love and war.

After Ranga Bhumi, the tonga takes us as close as possible to Visrant Ghat, where Krishna bathed and rested after killing Kamsa. Traffic on the narrow, congested streets comes to a standstill, and we tell the driver that we'll walk the rest of the way. He tilts his head in agreement, welcoming a tea break.

Kartik pilgrims crowd the street leading down to the ghat. Vendors of religious articles surround us, holding up japa-mala beads and blocks of tilak from the riverbank. Hawkers of agarbatti, beadbags, ivory, and sandalwood try to lure us into their shops with cries of "Look see, Baba. Just looking. No money. Hare Krishna! Cheap-cheap. Come. Looking only."

The shops extend down to the very steps of the ghat, where boys pull at our sleeves and offer to watch our shoes while we bathe. As we walk down the stone steps, people shout for us to remove our shoes, which we do. Not wanting to abandon our footwear to the boys, we stuff them in my camera bag. Beggars line the steps of the ghats and rattle their nickel-plated cups. Five-paise and ten-paise coins are stacked before them. Rowmen wave from their small wooden boats, offering to take us out to a better view of the ghat. "I'm just going to wet my head," I tell Achyutananda. "Are you jumping in?"

"No," he says. "I'll do the same."

I bend down and sprinkle water on my head three times, reminding myself of my unworthiness and the river's purifying effect. Behind me, I hear people laughing. This must be a familiar scene to them. Visitors to such ghats fit into certain categories: those who plunge in and even drink the water as if they're at the pristine pure Himalayan source; those who search out the cleanest spot, wade in to their waist, close their eyes, pinch their nose, clench their teeth, submerge themselves three times rapidly, and run out; and those who remain on the bank, dip their fingers in, and sprinkle a few drops on their head, leaving one to wonder whether they've been purified or polluted.

As I turn from my ritual sprinkling, I'm startled to see a man standing before me, arm outstretched, his index finger pointing directly at me, not two inches from my nose. His eyes fix me in a stare calculated to mesmerize. In his other hand, he carries a leather case and a long, sharp needle. He wears a scraggly beard and green-checked lungi. Only a Muslim wears such a lungi. My eyes meet his, and for a moment we're locked in a stare. What could he possibly want?

"Just looking, Baba," he says.

"Yes," I say. "Looking at you."

His finger shifts so that he no longer points at my nose but my ear. That's it! He wants to go poking in my ears with his needles.

"Cleaning," he says. "Just cleaning."

I draw back, covering my ears with my hands.

"Just looking, Baba," he says, grabbing at my ear. I knock his hand away. "Just looking," he repeats. "No cleaning. No money. Looking only."

“No looking,” I say. “No cleaning, no looking, no money, no nothing. Chale jao. Go away.”

He doesn't. He makes another grab at my ears, and I turn around and run back to the steps of the ghat. I've seen members of his earcleaning league before, pestering tourists on the beach at Jagannatha Puri. They seem to regard ear-cleaning as a religious duty, as if enabling us to better hear the Koran. Occasionally some naive foreigner or Indian tolerates their poking and scraping, ignorant of the dangers of punctured eardrums.

“I thought he had you for a moment there,” Achyutananda says.

“I've seen those guys in action before,” I say. “They can be very aggressive.”

In Vedic civilization, the ears are considered more important than the eyes. Through the ears, one receives transcendental knowledge.

“Massage, Baba? I make good Rajasthani massage. Five rupee only.”

I look up to see a boy, around eighteen, carrying a towel. and a bottle of mustardseed oil. He wears only a clean white lungi, and his innocent golden face is as round as a cherub's.

“Just what you need,” Achyutananda says. “Offer him three.”

“No three,” the boy says. “Good Rajasthani massage, five.”

“Okay, five if I like it, three if I don't,” I say. Of course, no one knows what a Rajasthani massage is. Nor a Kashmiri massage, nor Punjabi massage.

“Achha,” the boy says and spreads the towel on the sands. His cool hands immediately have a relaxing effect. A small crowd gathers. Massage is a Hindu art many practice but few know. At ghats, parks, and on beaches throughout India, masseurs ply their trade like the ear men, identifiable by their towel and oil bottles. Many are amateurs who can do more harm than good. I'm lucky. This boy has learned the art somewhere.

“What's your name?” I ask.

“Madhusudan,” he says. It's a name of Krishna, meaning “killer of the demon Madhu.”

“Hare Krishna, Madhusudan Prabhu.”

“Hare Krishna, Hare Rama.”

The hot mustardseed oil on the scalp feels like fire in the brain. Madhusudan's small hands work expertly. Crack goes my neck, relieved at last after the cramped tonga ride. My body is stroked, then rubbed, then kneaded like dough, buffed, pinched, drummed, whacked, and pummelled. My back is cracked in three places. After thirty minutes, all my nerve endings feel dilated.

I give the boy five rupees, plus two for a tip. This brings a bright smile. Then he pockets the money and hurries off, as if afraid I'll change my mind.

We start up the steps, but a skinny little man with a red turban sets a wicker basket before us. He squats beside it and removes the top. A cobra weaves its way upward, spreading its hood. The man begins playing a shenai, and the cobra moves in motion with the horn. I toss a half rupee on the steps. The cobra slithers out of the box, and the people draw back. The man picks up the cobra and lets him crawl around his shoulders. It's a timeless scene. Achyutananda and I decide to leave. At the top of the ghat steps, we pass a man sitting on a bed of nails. Beside him, a boy beats a drum and prods a monkey to dance. What a circus! At times, India seems to parody itself.

When we arrive at the tonga, the driver is curled up asleep on the seat. We wake him and return to Vrindaban. Our morning pilgrimage to Mathura is over.

CHAPTER 20. Govardhan Puja

October 28. Today begins my second week in Vrindaban, and a most auspicious day it is: Anna Kuta, Festival of Grain, a harvest celebration, the most joyous day of Govardhan Puja. This morning, all the temples are decorated with long strips of neem branches and wreaths of mango and tamarind. Flower garlands are strung throughout the temple courtyards. The Deities are dressed in Their best clothes, and huge quantities of food will be offered to Lord Krishna and then freely distributed to everyone. Today, thousands of pilgrims will circumambulate Govardhan Hill.

In Chaitanya Charitamrita, Krishnadas Kaviraj writes:

Of all the devotees, this Govardhan Hill is the best. O my friends, this hill supplies Krishna and Balarama, as well as Their calves, cows, and cowherd friends, with all kinds of necessities: water for drinking, very soft grass, caves, fruits, flowers, and vegetables. In this way, the hill offers respect to the Lord. Being touched by the lotus feet of Krishna and Balarama, Govardhan Hill appears very jubilant.

Govardhan Puja was established by Lord Krishna Himself in order to humble the demigod Indra. Being devotees, demigods do not usually forget Krishna's supremacy, but somehow, as chief of the demigods, Indra had become mad with power. Therefore Krishna decided to rectify him.

The Supreme Lord Krishna ultimately supplies everything to everyone. As long as He's worshiped, there's no need to worship the demigods or anyone else. To discourage demigod worship, Krishna argued in various philosophical ways, and the Brijbasis finally agreed to replace the sacrifice to Indra with a harvest festival, called Anna Kuta (anna=grain), in honor of Govardhan Hill and the brahmins.

"Prepare delicious food from all the grains and ghee collected for Indra's sacrifice," Krishna told them. "Prepare rice, dhal, halavah, pakora, puri, and milk dishes like sweet rice, sweetballs, sandesh, rasagulla, and laddhu. Then invite all the brahmins to eat their fill. After this, give them some money. Also give sumptuous prasadam to the dog-eaters and untouchables. Then give some to the animals, and give fresh grass to the cows. This Govardhan Puja will satisfy Me very much."

The Brijbasis, led by Krishna's foster father, Nanda Maharaj, began to worship Govardhan Hill by chanting Vedic hymns and offering enormous quantities of food. They gave the cows fresh grass, and, keeping the cows in front, began to circumambulate Govardhan Hill. The gopis rode in bullock carts and chanted Krishna's glories, and the brahmins blessed the cowherd men and their wives. Krishna was pleased to see that all His instructions were being followed. He assumed a great transcendental form and told the Brijbasis, "Govardhan Hill and I are identical." Then, in the form of Govardhan Hill, He devoured the offered food, and thus favored His devotees.

Of course, this infuriated Indra. He mounted his elephant Airavata and stormed across the sky, leading the dangerous samvartaka clouds. These clouds poured water incessantly, icy

winds blew, and lightning flashed. The terrified Brijbasis sought shelter at Lord Krishna's lotus feet.

"As My devotees, you always depend on My mercy," Krishna told them. "Now I will save you with My mystic power."

Krishna picked up Govardhan Hill with one hand, just as a child plucks a mushroom, and held it over all the Brijbasis. Like a great umbrella. Thus they were shielded from the torrents of Indra, and Indra himself, being humbled, returned to his abode.

We sit in Srila Prabhupada's room while he answers letters read to him by Sruta Kirti. It appears that the situation in Bombay will warrant Prabhupada's personal supervision. The owner of the land in (Bombay) Juhu is stalling. The Society has already given him 50,000 rupees deposit, but he's claiming that some of his kinsmen oppose the deal. Never before has he mentioned the involvement of other family members. Moreover, the devotees living in the straw huts have fallen sick with malaria.

"What to do?" Prabhupada asks. "As soon as you Western boys and girls come to India, you let yourselves be cheated. Then you get sick. Either stomach sickness or malaria. You don't know how to take proper care. What can be done? I'm an old man, and now our Society has become too big for me to manage personally. If I've committed some offense, it's that I've taken on too many disciples."

"That's your compassion, Srila Prabhupada," Pradyumna says. "You're too compassionate to let others suffer."

"It is my Guru Maharaj who is taking care. And he's under the guidance of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu. Let us go

to hell, if necessary, but let others be saved. That is the Vaishnava attitude."

After breakfast prasadam, Achyutananda, two European brahmacharis—Sukadeva das and Vasudeva—and I hire a taxi to Govardhan. By leaving early, we hope to avoid the crowds along the twenty-eight-kilometer road. Srila Prabhupada tells us that instead of walking the whole fourteen-kilometer parikrama—difficult for tender-footed Westerners—we can walk just a little distance around the Govardhan Deities, who reside near the hill on the road between Kusum Sarovar and the town of Govardhan.

"It would be nice to walk the whole parikrama," he says, "but whatever you do, Krishna will appreciate. Just walk the right direction, what do you call—?"

"Clockwise?"

"Yes. You cannot go backwards. When you stop, you must leave the parikrama."

On the way, we pass only a few pilgrims. The long, flat plain gives no indication of a hill's existence. Then, just after Kusum Sarovar, we see reddish brown rocks abruptly rising about twenty or thirty feet above the flat expanse. Some cactuses grow between the rocks.

"It's not very high," I say. "It looks more like a big quarry than a hill."

"Every day, the hill sinks into the ground to the measurement of one mustardseed,"

Achyutananda replies.

In Braja, it's not uncommon for great personalities to manifest themselves as hills.

Balarama, in the form of Sesha Naga, manifests as Charanpari, Shiva as Nandisvara, and

Lord Brahma as Barsana. Millions of years ago, during Satya Yuga, King Dronachal appeared as a mountain in Salmali, eastern India. He had a son, whom he named Govardhan. At Govardhan's birth, all the demigods showered flowers from the sky. When the sage Pulastya Muni saw Govardhan's lustrous beauty, he asked for the mountain-son as a gift. King Dronachal, weeping and trembling at the thought of separation from Govardhan, informed the sage that he could never part with him. Pulastya Muni raised his hand to curse the king in anger, but Govardhan suddenly announced that he would follow the sage on one condition: that he be allowed to remain wherever he was set down. Pulastya Muni agreed and carried Govardhan away in his right hand. As soon as the sage reached Braja, he set Govardhan down and went off to take his evening bath. Govardhan was overjoyed to be in Braja Bhumi. When Pulastya returned and tried to pick him up, he found that Govardhan had become so heavy that he couldn't be budged. It was then that the sage cursed Govardhan to sink into the ground to the measure of one mustardseed a day. At the time, Govardhan was twenty-four miles high. Today, he's only eighty feet tall at his highest point. This great sinkage gives some indication of Govardhan's immense age.

The mountain was transformed at the first Govardhan Puja five thousand years ago. According to the Govinda Lilamrita, Govardhan is shaped like a peacock. This can actually be seen when one consults a map. Radha Kund and Shyama Kund in the northeast indeed serve as the eyes of a gigantic peacock. The tip of its tail is at Panchari. Jatipur—currently the highest point and the place where Krishna stood to lift the hill—lies across from Aniyora, about one-third up the tail. Manasi Ganga is located midway up the body, and Kusum Sarovar is at the heart.

We leave our taxi just past the bathing tank at Kusum Sarovar. Many pilgrims are surprised to see Westerners at Govardhan Puja. They crowd around us, and there's no shaking them. We walk to a pandal that has a bright yellow canvas roof shading the Govardhan Deity. Sheets are spread on the ground, and pilgrims sit around a harmonium and chant.

When we take off our shoes and enter, all eyes turn our way, but the chanting goes on. We offer dandabats to the Deity, stretching out on the ground and reciting the mantras of obeisances to guru and Saraswati, the goddess of learning.

The Deity is formed from a stone rising out of the hill. Eyes and mouth have been painted on, and clothing draped over Him. Being the embodiment of the hill, the Deity is considered nondifferent from Lord Krishna Himself. We offer some rupees. The pujari, smiling, gives us chanori, those little white sugar balls. The pilgrims seem friendly enough. I take some photos of the Deity, and the pujari requests to get in the picture. Before long, I'm photographing dozens of giggling pilgrims and their wide-eyed kids. "This is getting out of hand," I tell Achyutananda. "Tell them I've no more film." Achyutananda translates, but no one believes him.

"One photo, one photo," they insist. I detach the flash and pack the camera away. Across the road, a herd of cows passes, led around Govardhan by proud herdsman. The cows are

covered with bright orange sindhur handprints, and spots, and the holy names of Vishnu. Today, they receive extra fodder.

Now the road is crowding up with pilgrims who have finished their morning bath at Manasi Ganga. Govardhan Puja attracts people from all over India. Caste and economic status are irrelevant. Maharajas, goatherds, knife sharpeners, fishermen, untouchables, industrialists, teachers, students, beggars, merchants, mango peelers, incense dippers, garbage pickers, peasant farmers, whatever—all walk barefoot around Govardhan Hill, equal in God's eyes, members of the world's largest democracy, Krishna's immense family.

Today, the maharajas, brahmins, teachers, and other upper class gentlemen are the disadvantaged ones. They survey the ground before walking, trying to avoid pebbles, thorns, and sizzling hot rocks. Others—the barefoot echelons of ricksha-wallas, cowherds, and peasants—walk merrily along, chanting and offering obeisances before the little shrines along the way, bowing down to the ground and touching a particularly holy stone reminding them of Krishna and Balarama.

According to Krishna's original directions, food is prepared and distributed liberally. Everyone is fed as much as he can eat: raita (chopped cucumber with yoghurt), milk sweets, potato kachoris, samosas, and cauliflower pakoras. Some temples even invite people to sit before plates made of leaves while boys serve big helpings of halavah (farina with sugar, ghee, and nuts), sweet rice, various saffron-flavored sweets—from those purple-flowered saffron fields of Kashmir—dhal soup, rice, chapatis, curried squash, crispy peppery papadams (which look like big potato chips), spinach with curds swimming in ghee, clay cups of watermelon juice and limeade, big white rasagullas (sweet rose-scented cheeseballs that squeak when you bite into them), gulabjamuns, and jelebis, pretzel-shaped sweets of flour, pure sugar, and ghee, congealed on the outside but still hot and liquid inside.

What a variety of physiognomies now crowd the road! The tall, hawk-nosed, mustachioed Rajasthanis lead their families to the parikrama. These were the Rajput warrior clans that controlled northwest India for thousands of years and served as a formidable buffer against the Persians. The men wear turbans—usually pastel colored, sometimes bright orange—and the women wear the traditional mirror-skirts, embroidered and studded with tiny bits of reflecting glass, complemented with big chunky necklaces of jade, ivory, and garnet, enormous silver earrings, and thick silver bracelets and anklets weighing 100-200 grams each.

There are also many Bengalis, golden complexioned, with refined features. The women are dressed in pastel saris and tend to be chubby. Bengali men, lean and handsome, prefer pencil-thin mustaches, in contrast to the Rajasthani soup-strainer. Gujaratis also abound, often identifiable by their stainless-steel, multi-tiered tiffin lunch containers. Since their vegetarian cuisine is the best in India, they bring it along. Even a few Nepalis—short, muscular, round-faced Mongoloids—walk around Govardhan, observing everything with tiny smiles, and giggling when they see us. Yes, what a wonderful celebration is Govardhan Puja!

“So, where should we leave our shoes?” I ask Achyutananda.

“Carry them,” he says.

“Can we trust these kids to watch them?” I ask.

“No.”

“Shoes, shoes, shoes,” one of the kids starts chanting, understanding our dilemma. “One rupee, watching.”

If I lose my shoes, I’ll never find replacements. Size ten is the limit in India. I open the camera kit, take out the camera, and put our shoes inside.

“Photo, photo,” the kids chant, jumping up and down. They follow us to the parikrama, a narrow dirt path through cactus and big red stones.

In my entire life, I’ve never walked very far barefoot, except on a beach. As I start along the path, the kids point at my feet and laugh. Kids the world over are natural sadists.

The parikrama offers no relief. The tiny pebbles are sheer torture.

“I’m not going to last very long,” I tell Achyutananda.

“It’s a long way to Aniyora,” he says.

“No. I mean, I’m not going to make two kilometers. Maybe not even a hundred yards.”

When I try walking, my toes crumple up to relieve the pressure. The body will do anything to avoid pain. Suddenly, I’m holding my foot and stifling a cry of anguish: I’ve stepped on a thorn. It won’t be the last, judging by all the cactus.

The kids laugh as I extricate the thorn. At least I’m amusing someone. But how will I ever get the spiritual benefit of going on the parikrama? The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.

“Go on ahead,” I tell Achyutananda. “I’ll just sit around here and chant japa. Krishna understands.”

“Then I’ll meet you back at the pandal,” he says. “We’ll go into town later.”

Agreeing, I head back.

I offer namaskars to a bearded, long-haired sadhu performing the dandabat parikrama. Between prostrations, he chants Hare Krishna on 108 beads while standing on one leg, one foot placed behind the opposite knee. Then he moves forward one body length and stretches out on the ground. How wonderful to be able to perform such an austerity! I find myself envying him and wishing for such a birth next lifetime.

After putting my shoes back on, I sit on the roadside beside the pandal, chant japa, and wait for Achyutananda.

He returns sooner than expected. Obviously, his feet are killing him.

“Those pebbles are torture,” he says.

“Even old ladies passed us by,” I say. “What’s wrong with us?”

“We’re Yavanas; they’re yogis,” he says.

“And what happened to Sukadeva and Vasudeva?”

“They’re walking a little further, then taking another taxi back. Let’s go into town.”

The same taxi drives us about three kilometers into the town of Govardhan. On the way, we pass the Maharaj of Bharatpur’s summer palace, one of the finest examples of Mathura carving in existence. Today, no artist can be found to carve sandstone lattice

windows, peacocks, or any of the other designs adorning the two-hundred-year-old palace and cenotaphs. The art is lost. Still, the buildings stand, neglected yet magnificent.

The town of Govardhan itself is a one-street village centered around Manasi Ganga.

Leading to the Manasi Devi Temple are numerous restaurants and scores of pan, cigaret, soda, and chai stands, all catering to pilgrims.

At the entrance to Manasi Ganga, we check in our shoes. Within an open-sided pavilion are the holy bathing tanks, crowded with pilgrims. We push through them to the water, sprinkle a few drops on our head, then push our way back out.

“Actually, we’re supposed to bathe here before going on parikrama,” Achyutananda reminds me.

Outside, we hire another taxi. From the town of Govardhan to the Radha Kund turnoff, we creep along, the taxi’s horn blaring for the people and herds of cows to make way. As they do so, I think of the first Govardhan Puja. Basically, little has changed: Lord Krishna is here, the cows are here, and the Lord’s devotees are here. Thanks to my pampered Western body, I could not walk very far on parikrama, but I feel blessed by just seeing the hill and the great flow of devotion around it.

The enormous tank at Kusum Sarovar is now filled with bathers. We stop for a glass of sugar cane juice mixed with ice and a pinch of lime—delicious and cooling. After Radha Kund, the traffic begins to thin out, and soon we’re racing across the plain to Vrindaban.

CHAPTER 21. The Silver Swing

I'm awakened from an afternoon nap by the palace caretaker.

"Men come, sahib," he says, pointing urgently toward the palace gates. "Go see." Most of the devotees are at Radha Damodar. Kulashekar stays in his room, chanting. Malati washes clothes and tends her child Saraswati, and Achyutananda naps on a charpoy in the shade of the courtyard corridor.

Outside the gates stand three men. In the truck behind them is an ornate silver swing, the kind used to swing the Deities during certain temple festivals. One of the men explains that they're delivering it as a gift from the Maharaj of Bharatpur to Srila Prabhupada's Radha Krishna Deities.

I've never met the famed Maharaja who is letting us use his palace, but I've heard of him from Yamuna. Of course, he's fabulously wealthy, owning numerous palaces around Bharatpur, including some in Govardhan and Vrindaban. Reportedly, he never fails to complete the Govardhan parikrama every year. He maintains a small army to guard his palaces and castles, a personal bodyguard with a .45, and a cellar full of French wine and Lowenbrau for guests. He's very fond of driving his fleet of Rolls Royces—the classics made in the 20s and 30s—at breakneck speed around Braja. His gardens are beautified by dancing peacocks.

His interest in ISKCON began when Gurudas and Yamuna cultivated his friendship, and the Maharaj hosted them in Bharatpur.

"The Rolls we were in was so long that it had three sets of doors," Yamuna told me.

"There were crystal chandeliers and red velvet sofas inside, and the driver seemed so far away. The Maharaj had invited Gurudas and me to stay in his palace at Bharatpur, and one day he took us on a tour of Braja Mandala in this Rolls. At our many stops, temple Sevaites blew conchshells, to herald the Maharaj's arrival. In Gokul, one of the pujaris made a mistake right in front of the Deities, and the Maharaj was offended. He ordered them to bring him some ghee, and then he emptied out all the hundred-rupee notes he'd brought to donate, poured ghee on them, and set them on fire. Believe me, the Sevaites were shrieking their heads off. The Maharaj left, furious, and for a long time in the limousine he didn't speak. Finally, he said, 'You have to put them in their place, or they don't respect you.' That's the kind of man he is."

And that's the man donating the silver Deity swing. His representative waves some papers and informs me that someone must sign for the delivery.

The swing glitters in the morning sun. The four corner posts measure at least five feet tall, all silver, carved with lotuses and winding vines. The top silver beams are also intricately carved with images of cows, peacocks, and elephants, and the double seat has purple satin cushions and carved silver backings. There must be hundreds of pounds of silver in it, all told. It's a unique swing, all right. Who can guess its value?

“Achyutananda Swami is here,” I tell the representative. “He knows the Maharaj personally. Please wait.”

I hurry back into the palace and awake Achyutananda.

“It’s a magnificent silver swing,” I tell him, “for Prabhupada’s Deities.”

Groggy with sleep, Achyutananda washes his face, then goes out to the truck. He admires the swing and talks to the representative in Hindi. The man again waves the papers, and the conversation becomes quite heated. I’m surprised to hear them suddenly shouting at one another, Achyutananda shaking his head and the representative waving the papers. Finally, all the men get back in the truck and drive off, silver swing and all.

“What happened?”

“They wanted me to sign,” Achyutananda says. “Can you imagine what a swing like that’s worth? If I sign, I’m responsible. I told them to take it directly to Srila Prabhupada.”

But later in the afternoon, when we go to Radha Damodar, there’s no swing in sight.

“Didn’t some men come here with a silver swing?” Achyutananda asks Srila Prabhupada.

“No,” he says. “What is that swing?”

“The Maharaj of Bharatpur sent a silver swing to the palace,” Achyutananda explains. “It was a gift for your Deities. The men wanted me to sign for it. I told them to bring it over here.”

“You did not sign?”

“No. There’s no place to keep it safely in the palace. I was afraid it might be stolen.”

“But now they have taken it back to Maharaj,” Srila Prabhupada says. “Do you know what that means?”

“I told them to bring it here,” Achyutananda says.

“Do you know what that means?” Srila Prabhupada suddenly shouts. Achyutananda turns pale.

“I ... I ...”

“The Maharaj will be insulted,” Srila Prabhupada says. “We have refused his gift.”

“I didn’t refuse it,” Achyutananda objects. “I told them to bring it here.”

“You refused to sign.”

“But I know how the Maharaj is,” Achyutananda says.

“He’s so particular about these things. Had something happened to the swing, I’d be blamed.”

“So now we have lost the swing,” Srila Prabhupada says. “And the Maharaj’s friendship. You think that’s good?”

“No. I’ll go to the Maharaj myself and explain,” Achyutananda says, apprehensive. “I’ll tell him everything.”

“What will you tell? That you refused his gift?”

“No. That there was a misunderstanding.”

“It’s you who misunderstands,” Srila Prabhupada says. “He has been insulted. He will not even receive you.”

“He’s never refused me,” Achyutananda says. “He’s always treated me very openly.”

“But that was before you insulted him. Now you’ve lost the swing.”

“I thought I was doing the best thing, Srila Prabhupada,” Achyutananda pleads.

“It was stupid,” Srila Prabhupada says. “You were simply thinking of yourself: ‘Oh, I might be responsible.’ Why should you not be responsible for such a nice gift for Radha and Krishna?”

“I was thinking of protecting it, Srila Prabhupada.”

“Nonsense! Stupid! How protect? You have lost it, that’s all.”

“I’m sorry, Srila Prabhupada.”

“Sorry you may be, but what to do? Have you not thought of that?”

“No.”

“Immediately you must go and apologize to the Maharaja. Accept the responsibility. And try to get the swing back.”

Achyutananda is shaken. It’s very serious to provoke the spiritual master’s displeasure, let alone his anger. When we leave Prabhupada’s room, Achyutananda can hardly find his way to the gates of Radha Damodar. Only one thought obsesses him: Get that swing back.

“What now?” I ask.

“The Maharaja is at his Bharatpur palace,” he says. “Yesterday he went on Govardhan parikrama. Today he’s probably resting. Let’s get a taxi by the tonga stand.”

Soon we’re dashing in a rattling Ambassador taxi to Bharatpur, some forty kilometers southwest. At the Maharaja’s palace, however, one of the guards informs us that the Maharaj just left for Delhi.

Not satisfied with this, Achyutananda calls for the Maharaj’s personal secretary, a Mr. Dutt, who makes us wait a half hour at the main gate before shuffling out in white pajamas and slippers.

“The Maharaj is on business in Delhi,” he informs us in impeccable English. “We don’t expect him back until this evening. Is there any message?”

“Please tell him that Achyutananda Swami was here,” Achyutananda says, “and that it’s very urgent.”

“You might come tomorrow evening,” the secretary suggests. “He won’t be so busy then.”

“Do you know anything about the silver swing?” Achyutananda asks.

“Swing?” I can see by his smile that he knows all about it. “What swing?”

“A silver swing for Srila Prabhupada’s Deities,” Achyutananda explains. “The Maharaj had it delivered this morning to the Lakshmi Rani Kuni Palace.”

“I’ll mention it to the Maharaj,” he says.

“Do you know whether the swing’s here?” Achyutananda persists.

“No, I wouldn’t know,” the secretary smiles, knowing perfectly. “You see, I’m in the office all day answering mail. Come tomorrow night, please.”

And he shuffles back to the courtyard of the magnificent sandstone palace.

“The swing is probably still in the truck,” I tell Achyutananda, “and probably parked in one of those garages over there.”

“Let’s go back,” Achyutananda says, frustrated, and now fifty rupees poorer. Another trip will cost another fifty rupees, but there’s no stinting. The swing must be recovered at all costs.

That evening at the Radha Damodar, hardly anyone speaks to Achyutananda.

“Prabhupada took very little prasadam this afternoon,” Yamuna says, worried. “He even said to me, ‘Now we’ve lost the Maharaj of Bharatpur. How stupid!’”

It was Yamuna who spent so much time cultivating the Maharaj’s friendship. For the first time in their relationship, the Maharaj was about to help the Society in a big way. And now this is threatening to spoil it all.

“Just last week the Maharaj told me how suitable the Lakshmi Rani Kunj Palace is for ISKCON devotees,” Yamuna says. “I think he was really considering donating it. But now who knows? You can’t imagine how temperamental that man is. He’s insulted over the tiniest discrepancy. Now the government’s giving the maharajas so much hassle over their properties. Every year their holdings and prestige dwindle, and this makes them very paranoid and defensive. They really believe in the divine right of rajarsis in a world where democracy and communism are devouring them. All they have to cling to is their sense of honor. That’s why they’re so defensive, so easily offended.”

Alas, it appears that Yamuna’s prognosis is correct. The next day we learn that the Maharaj is insulted indeed.

The bad news comes via one of the Maharaj’s assistants visiting Vrindaban on his Govardhan Puja pilgrimage of Braja. Sitting before Srila Prabhupada, he informs us that the Maharaj indeed believes that his gift was unappreciated.

“Just see!” Srila Prabhupada says. “And he’s right. It was all due to stupidity. A simple boy. He did not know. Of course, ignorance is no excuse. Where’s Achyutananda?”

“At the palace, Srila Prabhupada,” I say.

“Such a foolish thing!” Prabhupada says. “Why can’t you boys learn? Why can’t you use a little common sense? Why do I have to personally tend to everything?”

Alarmed at causing an uproar, the assistant tries to pacify us. “I’m certain that Achyutananda Swami can rectify the situation,” he says, “just by explaining to the Maharaj.”

“Explain what?” Srila Prabhupada asks, astonished. “Explain that he rejected his gift?

What a wonderful gift for Krishna! He should have signed happily. No wonder the Maharaj is furious. He’s a kshatriya, a descendant of the warriors of Kurukshetra. Such warriors would fight over the slightest point of honor. You would not dare refuse Arjuna or Bhima. No. The Maharaj has been offended. He will never speak to us again.”

When I return to the palace and relate this to Achyutananda, he sits for a long time with his face in his hands.

“You’re on close terms with the Maharaja,” I tell him. “Think of some good story. You didn’t refuse the swing. It was someone else.”

“The men in the truck knew me,” Achyutananda says sadly. “The Maharaj knows.”

Shyamsundar and Gurudas come from across the courtyard.

“Can you really get in to see the Maharaj?” Shyamsundar asks frankly. “Or are you bulling us?”

“No,” Achyutananda says. “He’s always been very hospitable and treated me with respect.”

“Maybe I should try to talk with him,” Gurudas suggests. “We have a good rapport.”

“Let’s get a taxi to Bharatpur now,” Shyamsundar decides.

We comb the streets from Kesi Ghat to the bus station but find no taxis available. Finally, we have to get a tonga. Shyamsundar and Gurudas ride in back, and Achyutananda and I crowd next to the driver. As usual, I strain my neck by having to lean forward under the canvas top.

The horse trots his fastest, prodded by the swift cracks of a bullwhip. Still, it takes thirty minutes to traverse the ten-kilometer road to Mathura. By the time we arrive, the sun has set. Along Mathura’s streets are hung tiny colored lights in celebration of Yamaraj Puja, the festival of Yamaraj, god of death. Today, thousands of brothers and sisters bathe together in the Jamuna. By so doing, they’re granted a long life by Yamaraj.

Traffic on the narrow streets comes to a standstill as brothers and sisters come and go from Visrant Ghat. Our tonga, clumsy at best in any traffic, now becomes an encumbrance. Achyutananda pays the driver, and we all four set out on foot looking for a taxi.

We push our way through the crowds to the center of town. The streets are lined with brightly lit buildings where vendors sit crosslegged, consuming the minimum space in their small shops. Around them are stacked a variety of products, from religious articles to betel nuts, soda pop, oranges, milk sweets, and cigars. Throngs of children buy papier-mache death-skull masks and run about trying to scare one another.

All the taxis are occupied; the little five-man Ambassadors are crammed full with passengers. Achyutananda has to offer a twenty-rupee bribe for a driver to dump a family. The family protests, of course, but the driver pulls them out. As we hop in, they stand in front of the car shouting in Hindi, insisting that Achyutananda pay them damages.

“Bharatpur,” Achyutananda tells our macho cabbie, a husky, grizzly Sikh who welcomes a long drive out of Mathura. “Maharaj palace. And jeldhi-karo! Hubbahubba! Fast-fast!” Again we’re racing across the plain, our headlights shining on pilgrims scurrying off of the road and into the tall pampas grass. The dim headlights barely enable the Sikh to avoid hitting stragglers. Oddly, he doesn’t seem to care, although he’ll be dragged out of the taxi and stoned to death if he hits anyone.

Soon we’re at the gates of the Bharatpur palace. A guard challenges us, and Achyutananda identifies himself as the guru of the Maharaj. Before the guard gives his go-ahead, Achyutananda tells our driver to pass into the courtyard, which he does. We’re then surrounded by soldiers in Napoleonic uniforms decorated with gold braid and epaulets. They train their rifles on us and order our driver to halt. He does so promptly. Bayonets glitter, reflecting the floodlights on the palace parapets. Achyutananda, beyond fear, thinks only of the silver swing. He gets out of the taxi.

“The Maharaj is expecting us,” he says. “We’re disciples of His Divine Grace Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada.”

One of the guards informs us in English that the Maharaj is seeing no one, absolutely no one, without exception.

“Tell him Achyutananda Swami’s here,” Achyutananda says. “The Maharaj will see me.” The guard sends a soldier running off to the palace. Achyutananda tells our driver to defy the soldiers and head down to an area where a half dozen Rolls Royces are parked, but the Sikh wisely refuses. He looks about, wanting out. Soldiers behind us block the way. “Go on, go on,” Achyutananda tells him. “They know me. There’s no problem.”

The Sikh simply nods his head and clasps the steering wheel. Beads of sweat trickle from under his turban.

Mr. Dutt comes shuffling out in slippers and pajamas. “Maharaj is not here now,” he says. “He returned from Delhi and then left again, just a short while ago. I suggest that you write to make an appointment.”

Suddenly, car lights swerve our way, and a red Rolls Royce thunders down the drive and heads toward the main gate.

“That’s him!” Achyutananda shouts. “That’s the Maharaj!”

Achyutananda jumps back in the taxi and tells the Sikh, “Follow that red Rolls! A hundred rupees if you catch it.”

As the soldiers stand aside, the Sikh turns the taxi around. Once outside the palace compound, he regains his courage and decides to have a go at the hundred-rupee jackpot. But it’s not so easy. The Rolls speeds down the narrow, bumpy highway, its horn blaring and pedestrians parting before it like the Red Sea before Moses. Campfires flicker for miles, and their smoke clouds the countryside. The Rolls doesn’t even slow down for the congestion at the Govardhan turnoff.

“Faster!” Achyutananda tells our driver. “Faster! We’re losing him.”

The Sikh floors the little Ambassador, and sixty miles an hour never seemed so fast. Our headlights strike the back of an unlit ox-cart—cause of many a night collision—and I brace for the impact, but our expert Sikh swerves just in time.

“That’s it!” Achyutananda cries. “We’re catching up.”

And indeed, we close in rapidly. The Maharaj is now only about fifty yards away.

“Stick your head out when we pass,” Achyutananda tells me, “and tell them to pull over. Just yell ‘Haribol!’ He’ll know it’s us.”

This is a logical request, since I’m in the left front seat. Closing the gap, the Sikh pulls over to the right to pass. The flimsy car shudders from the strain.

I remember the .45 automatic on the Maharaj’s bodyguard.

“Hey, forget it!” I say. “I might get my head blown off.”

“No, just yell ‘Haribol!’” Achyutananda insists.

I’m relieved of the decision. As soon as we start to pass, the Maharaja opens up the Rolls’s mighty engine, and leaves us far behind in a cloud of dust and exhaust.

“Oh, Krishna!” Achyutananda sighs.

The tail lights recede across the dark plain, fade, and disappear.

It's the last we ever see of the Maharaj of Bharatpur.

CHAPTER 22. The Siege

As word of our prasadam distribution spreads, more and more Brijbasis gather outside the Kesi Ghat palace to eat. Malati and the Indian brahmachari Vidura prepare kicchri and chapatis over a cowdung fire in the palace courtyard. Today, a larger crowd than usual gathers before the palace gates.

A portion of the food is offered to the Deity at the noon aratik at Radha Damodar. Then it's ready to consume. Dwija Hari supervises the hard part-the distribution. He's always fighting with simple villagers who somehow feel that they're being cheated.

"Now, I want you all to sit along this wall here in a straight line," he says to people who understand no English. The women and kids give him the most trouble, crowding around the food distributors. Mothers shout at Dwija Hari for picking up their kids and sometimes frightening them. Dwija Hari refuses to serve the food until everyone's seated. The kids jump up and down in front of the big stainless steel woks, waving their plates and clay cups. Vidura, the Indian brahmachari, pushes a kid away when he tries to dip his hand into the hot kicchri. The kid lands on his bottom and starts crying, and his mother runs to his defense, screaming at Vidura. Two more women join her, yelling like furies. Dwija Hari tells them to be quiet and sit down. When Vidura translates, they scream all the louder.

Dwija Hari orders the distributors to take the food containers back inside the palace. As soon as they do this, even the normally quiet peasant men start shouting.

At the palace gates, there's an invisible line that one should not cross without invitation. To cross it is to enter the front compound, which acts as a buffer for the flimsy interior door. Dwija Hari positions himself just before this line. Three wrinkled, bearded peasants wave their fig-leaf plates in front of his nose, but Dwija Hari doesn't budge. People jostle one another to see what's happening with their food.

The shouting gets worse as the people get hungrier and angrier. Word spreads around Vrindaban that there's a row at Kesi Ghat. Students from Shankara Baba's university appear. The students shove their way to the front of the crowd and begin yelling slogans in Hindi.

"American imperialist-dogs and Pakistanis are planning to invade India," Achyutananda translates for me. "The American heirs of the old British Empire are killing other Asians in Vietnam. Just like the British, the Americans favor the Islamic state of Pakistan.

Americans steal food from starving Indian children. Americans aren't in Vrindaban to feed the hungry. Americans are just spying. They plan to store missiles in the towers of Madana Mohana. Why else are they taking photos?"

The people believe the students. Before long, they're chanting, "C.I.A., C.I.A."

Achyutananda and I enter the interior door and bolt it. The palace caretaker sits in front of the Deities chanting japa.

“I told you, such people are too much envious,” he chides us. Indians say “too much” for “very” or “a lot.” “You should never feed such harijans, sahib. Now they want to kill you. What did I warn you? Now they kill me too.”

“Maybe we should try to distribute the food,” I suggest.

“We can try,” Achyutananda agrees.

We dump kicchri on the plates and rush them to Vidura, who hands them to the people crowding around the gate. The sight of an Indian helping the Americans infuriates the students and some of the peasant men. They shake their fists and threaten to cross the gateway.

“Come back in,” we shout to Vidura. “Forget the prasadam.”

He runs back inside, slamming and bolting the door behind him. Achyutananda and I run upstairs to the front rooms. From the windows we can see Dwija Hari guarding the line. He looks like a defender of the Alamo. A very frightened Shivananda and Uddhava stand behind him.

“What now?” I shout down.

“Get word to Radha Damodar,” Dwija Hari shouts back.

But how to get out of the palace? The front gate is the only exit. Now the crowd forms a barricade, standing scores deep. The students continue to goad the people on.

I run down to my room and look out the window. Below, the ganja smokers and bhang eaters are bowing before the Shiva lingas and reciting their prayers. If I jumped out the window, I’d land right on the lingas.

“Come out front!” Achyutananda calls. “Hurry up! They’re throwing rocks.”

I ran across the courtyard and unbolt the door. Outside, Dwija Hari shoves against men who are steadily pushing him back. Uddhava’s been hit on the shoulder by a rock.

“Come on, get inside,” I tell him.

We can’t allow the mob to enter the front compound. Only the gate can keep them out. Somehow, we have to push the crowd back and close the big gate.

Achyutananda comes running out with his sanniyas danda. This is the first time I’ve ever seen him with it. He gives it to Dwija Hari. Swinging it in a semi-circle, Dwija Hari shouts a battlecry—“Eeeaaaah!”—and charges the astonished crowd. When they fall back, we try to close the gate, but the peasant men rush forward and stop us. Again, Dwija Hari swings the danda, and this time we push the iron gate closed and bolt it. Then the people stand outside and glare at us. Their sudden silence is even more frightening than their shouting. We’ve locked them out of a palace built by the blood and sweat of their forefathers. We’re the enemy. We’ve invaded their home, but now they have us trapped.

Suddenly, the mob begins shouting again, even more vigorously. I’ve never heard such angry shouting. What did we ever do to them? We were only trying to serve a little prasadam.

Even women and children shout. On their face is the wild, defiant look of Apaches. Are these the obsequious Hindus who served me lassis while I shopped? Like a young elephant just realizing its strength, they shake the gate.

The students begin throwing rocks in earnest. They're in luck. Right next to Jugal Kishore is a big quarry. Rocks fill the air, and we all run inside to save our lives.

"Dear Krishna, protect us," Dwija Hari prays. We naturally look to him as our military leader. "They must know at Radha Damodar by now," he says. "They must have sent for help."

"Who?" I ask. "Who send for whom?"

"The devotees for the police."

"But how can they know?"

"Srila Prabhupada knows," he says. "Don't think he doesn't. Everybody knows."

A steady barrage of rocks hits the palace walls. Malati grabs Saraswati and runs up to her room on the second floor. The brahmacharis look to Dwija Hari. Kulashekar is nowhere in sight. I turn to Achyutananda.

"What do we do now?"

"Pray," he says.

"We're supposed to pray only for more devotional service," I say.

"Well, you have to be alive to render it."

"Oh, Srila Prabhupada, you gotta get us out of this," Dwija Hari prays.

I hope you bolted that gate securely," I tell him.

"Of course! What do you think I am?"

"Come on," Achyutananda tells me. "Let's go back up."

Again we go upstairs and look down on the mob.

"Now, are you seeing the Supersoul in their hearts?" Achyutananda asks.

"Yes," I say, "controlling them by the mode of passion."

"So, Krishna will protect His devotees."

Students push their way to the gate. Using a big log for a battering ram, they begin striking at the lock.

"What's happening, men?" Dwija Hari runs to the window. "Oh my God! Sweet Krishna save us! It'll break like an egg. We gotta do something."

The students run at the gate with the log, and I hear a loud thud. The gate still holds.

More students arrive with a bigger log. They strike again in the same spot, and again it holds. Again and again they charge until the gate bursts wide open.

"Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna, Krishna Krishna, Hare Hare," we chant.

The mob swarms into the front compound. Children jump up and down, shouting, and women dance in circles. The students shake their fists in the air and make victory signs. The main hurdle, the iron gate, is overcome. The students waste no time kicking at the flimsy interior door.

"Know that that which pervades the body is indestructible," Dwija Hari says, quoting Bhagavad Gita. "No one can destroy the imperishable soul."

His sudden, inexplicable calmness is inspiring. Could it be his Marine training?

"Maybe we should welcome them with prasadam," he says, smiling. "After all, they're Krishna's parts and parcels."

“I know no one but Krishna as my Lord,” Achyutananda prays, “and He shall remain so even if He handles me roughly by His embrace or makes me brokenhearted by not being present before me. . . .”

What do they intend to do? Vandalize the palace? Rough us up? Kill us? A mob—a body without a head—is capable of anything. Maybe they’ll spare Malati and the child Saraswati. Indians love children so. But in 1857, the kids got it too.

“They’re calling us monkey-faces,” Achyutananda says.

I remember Indian kids calling me that back in ‘65. I thought my beard made me look simian to them, until I was informed that it was my white face, not the beard. I was shocked the next time I looked closely at the pink face of a Rhesus monkey.

“Tumkojindha marega! Tumkojindha marega!”

“Death to Americans! Death to monkey-faces! Krishna for Indians!” Achyutananda translates.

“Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna, Krishna Krishna, Hare Hare,” we chant.

The screaming and shouting intensify. Something different is happening. I hear the roar of truck engines. People inside the compound shove to get out; people outside shove to get in. Suddenly, I see men in brown khaki pushing through the crowd with lathis. It’s the military.

“Jai! My devotee never perishes,” Achyutananda says, quoting Lord Krishna.

As soon as the crowd sees the soldiers, they scatter in all directions. The soldiers swing their lathis. Within two minutes, the area is cleared.

“Well, now! Did you see that?” Dwija Hari exclaims. “Vanished! Not a soul on the street! Now ain’t that just something!”

The Great Assault on Lakshmi Rani Kunj Palace even receives a brief notice on an inside page of The Times of India.

DISTURBANCE OVER FOREIGNERS

Inspector Dilip Kumar of the Mathura District Police acknowledged that certain disturbances over the presence of foreigners in the District have been reported Thursday p.m. Crowds objecting to the residence of foreigners in the Vrindaban area disbanded peacefully upon arrival of Army Patrol Unit 685. No arrests filed.

“You’re lucky,” we’re told later. “The soldiers just happened to be passing by.”

CHAPTER 23. Reconciliation

The day after the soldiers dispersed the mob, Srila Prabhupada calls a meeting with his godbrothers Dr. O.B.L. Kapoor and Gourachand, and two district leaders, Mohan Prasad and Swami Tapasyananda. Of course, Gourachand, who must be in his eighties or nineties, simply adds his seniority and name, staring out of thick glasses and saying, “Jai Radhe! Jai Rupa Sanatan ki jai!”

It’s the engineer Mohan Prasad, with all his political connections, who really helps out. Within hours, he arranges for the collector magistrate of Vrindaban and two members of the panchayat, a kind of city council, to meet in Srila Prabhupada’s downstairs rooms at Radha Damodar.

The magistrate, Rakesh Sharma, is a rotund, goodnatured brahmin who makes a good income from raising and selling wheat and sugar. He’s very impressed with Prabhupada. During the conversation, he bends forward occasionally to touch Prabhupada’s feet. He recognizes him as Vrindaban’s foremost sadhu and international ambassador.

Mr. Sharma praises Prabhupada’s Bhagavad Gita As It Is, and offers to help finance the Hindi version, scheduled to be printed next year. When Prabhupada points out that most commentators try to take the glory away from Krishna, Mr. Sharma agrees. “Yes! Yes! That’s exactly what I’ve been telling my family all these years. No one listens to me. I tell them, ‘This commentator envies Krishna. He wants Krishna’s position.’ Of course, the young people today aren’t even interested, and my wife tells me that so much philosophy gives her a headache. Sometimes I discuss Gita with the pandits at Banki Behari. Now, at last, here’s a Gita I can recommend.”

He touches his forehead with the copy given him by Prabhupada.

After speaking a little on Bhagavad Gita, Prabhupada frankly raises the question: “What happened at the Kesi Ghat palace?”

“Part of the problem is that the people of Vrindaban don’t understand your mission,” Mr. Sharma says, ready for the question. “If we can only explain that this is Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu’s movement, their attitude might change.”

“I invite you to come here and live with us,” Prabhupada says. “You may talk with any of my men and decide they are not brainwashed. They’re not even taking cigarets or other drugs, not coffee or tea even. Now, who’s making these accusations?”

“We’re looking into that, Srila Prabhupada,” Mr. Sharma says. “We realize that defamation is going on. It’s regrettable. It will pass. But I assure you that your bhaktas will walk the streets of Vrindaban safely, like all our citizens. This anarchy will stop.”

One look at Rakesh Sharma tells you that he’s a man who knows exactly where to apply pressure, when, and how much. His family has been among the brahminical elite of Vrindaban-Mathura for centuries, since the days of Akbar and before. Mr. Sharma is a charter member of the Sri Krishna Janma Bhumi Trust, and is presently helping wrestle Krishna’s birthplace away from the Muslims. He informs Srila Prabhupada that within

the next ten or fifteen years, a magnificent Radha Krishna temple at Janma Bhumi will dwarf Aurangzeb's mosque.

"The golden age of Hinduism is upon us, Srila Prabhupada," Mr. Sharma says. "And you are our foremost leader. I assure you that it will be your Bhagavad Gita As It Is that will be sold at the Janma Bhumi Mandir."

The mandir, he boasts, will rival the great Keshava Dev Temple destroyed by Aurangzeb. "If only that rascal Aurangzeb could know!" Mr. Sharma says, rubbing his hands. "He couldn't tolerate any building higher than his own. Now our sikhara will look down on his idgah."

"Kalayavana was burned to death by the great sage Muchukunda," Prabhupada says.

"Kalayavana was chasing Krishna to kill Him. Those were his last thoughts: 'Now I will kill Krishna.' So they say that this Aurangzeb was Kalayavana still trying to kill Krishna by knocking down Krishna's temples and destroying the Deities. Now those opposing Lord Chaitanya's movement are like Aurangzeb. We're saying openly that Krishna is God, and they're not liking. Therefore they say we have come as hippies, as spies, as ... what you call?"

"C.I.A.," Gurudas says.

"Yes. Government agents. Of course, that's ridiculous, as you can see for yourself."

"Yes. Where is the man who says like that?" Mr. Sharma demands, challenging an imaginary foe. "Let him step forward. I will personally kick his face."

"No one ever comes forward," Gurudas says.

"I will make an announcement, then," Mr. Sharma says, "that I personally certify such allegations completely unfounded. That will put an end to it, I promise."

Rakesh Sharma then stands before Prabhupada, his hands joined, and stoops to touch Prabhupada's feet one more time.

"Thank you," Prabhupada says, offering namaskar.

"Your accomplishments are shining beacons for all Brijbasis," Mr. Sharma says. "You are our foremost citizen, Lord Krishna's devotee. The people of Vrindaban love, admire, and respect you. A few jackals may be barking, that's all. The people will see that your honor is proclaimed."

The next morning, Srila Prabhupada is visited by police inspector Nagendra Kumar, who also offers his obeisances by touching Prabhupada's feet. His words are brief. The disturbance at Kesi Ghat came to his attention yesterday, only minutes after the mob dispersed. An investigation is underway. Four additional foot police will be patrolling the area between here and Kesi Ghat. There will be no more mob demonstrations in Vrindaban. We can walk the main streets safely during the day. Nighttime advice always stands: Stay home.

"We've questioned a number of students," inspector Kumar says. "There are elements here that we are watching."

And, after paying obeisances again, inspector Kumar roars away on his Rajdoot motorcycle.

* * *

In the evening, Srila Prabhupada speaks to the largest audience ever to assemble in the courtyard. There is no extra seating space. Everyone is curious to see whether Prabhupada will mention the incident at Kesi Ghat.

“This spiritual platform of Krishna consciousness is the only one on which we can unite,” Prabhupada says. “Only when we are purified of false designations can we unite in the service of the Lord. That is the Vaikuntha platform, the Vrindaban atmosphere. In Goloka Vrindaban, the birds, bees, the water, trees, flowers, cowherd boys—everyone’s center is Krishna. That is Vrindaban.

“In Vrindaban, the cowherd boys did not know that Krishna is the Supreme Personality of Godhead. They simply loved Him with all their heart and soul. That is Vrindaban. If we but come to that point of Krishna consciousness and learn how to love Krishna, the whole world will become Vrindaban.

“Unfortunately, even in Vrindaban, at the present moment, because our desire is for something other than Krishna’s service, there are so many distractions. The center is missing.

“Our purpose should be to serve Krishna with our senses purified of false designations. This is the transcendental stage. A Vaishnava should not be considered European or American. No. These boys and girls have forgotten that they have come from Europe and America or that they once belonged to a Catholic group or Jewish group. Similarly, we should forget, ‘I am Hindu, I am brahmin.’

“We have to become designationless. We should forget all these false identities. We should not think, ‘Oh, these are foreigners. Why have they come? Let me pick some quarrel with them and try to drive them away.’ So many nonsense things are going on for want of actual spiritual education. This is not good. At least for Vrindaban, this is not good. People have not been educated properly with the Vrindaban spirit; therefore, things are happening like that.

“The senses freed from designations in the service of the Lord—that is Vrindaban life. That is Vrindaban atmosphere. If there’s any purpose other than this, it’s difficult to utilize the opportunity and good fortune of living in Vrindaban.”

Srila Prabhupada looks up. I sense discomfort and embarrassment among the Brijbasis. He motions to Pradyumna, who begins reading from Nectar of Devotion:

As long as one identifies himself as belonging to a certain family, a certain society, or a certain person, he is said to be covered with designations. When one is fully aware that he does not belong to any family, society, or country, but is eternally related to Krishna, he then realizes that his energy should be employed not in the interests of so-called family, society, or country, but in the interests of Krishna. This is purity of purpose and the platform of pure devotional service in Krishna consciousness.

What a revolutionary statement! Once, on Second Avenue, Prabhupada told us, “They don’t really understand what I’m saying. If they really understood, they would kill me.” Prabhupada continues: “This Krishna consciousness movement proposes that nobody should think of himself as belonging to a certain family, sect, or nation. All these designations have created havoc in the world. Just because I live in this country for

twenty or thirty years, I think it's mine. But I'm a guest here. Actually, everything belongs to Krishna. But when a person is not educated in Krishna consciousness, he thinks he is the owner. This is maya.

“People from all parts of the world will come to Vrindaban because they are hearing about Vrindaban and Krishna. Naturally, they are very anxious to visit. But if we don't receive them, if we remain sectarian, it will be unfortunate. So, please hear my request. Those who are inhabitants of Vrindaban should be prepared to receive these foreigners who are being educated in Krishna consciousness. They should be received and welcomed. That is my request.

“A devotee is always pleased to see another devotee. When an Indian is in a foreign country and sees another Indian, he goes up to him and says, ‘Oh, wherefrom are you coming? How long are you here?’ Similarly, as soon as we see a devotee, we should be eager to welcome him and talk with him about Krishna. As soon as devotees meet, they talk about Krishna and try to understand Krishna. Bhaktas take great pleasure in such exchanges. You should be happy to see another devotee. Talk with him about Krishna, and forget all these false designations. Thank you very much.”

No one asks questions after this lecture. Srila Prabhupada goes up to his room, and some devotees follow. He sits behind his desk for a long time, saying nothing. We sit before him, chanting softly.

“It's very sad,” he says at length. “So many of my countrymen have forgotten this Vedic culture, although Chaitanya Mahaprabhu says that it is the duty of everyone born in Bharatavarsa to spread Krishna consciousness. But now they are simply wanting material amenities. So it is up to you boys to push this movement. Do it, and the glory is yours.” Srila Prabhupada continues with his schedule, translating from two a.m. until four a.m., bathing, and attending mangal aratik in his room for his Deities. He then takes his sunrise walk down to the Jamuna and along its banks toward Imlitala and Madana Mohana, then returns to Radha Damodar to give his morning lecture on Nectar of Devotion. After this, he takes breakfast, holds darshan for disciples, answers letters, and gets a massage from Sruta Kirti in the warm morning sun on the rooftop. After the massage, he takes rest, lying on the bamboo mat behind the low desk in his small upstairs room.

When he awakes in the afternoon, he resumes literary work, sometimes calling me in to advise me on a particular translation or to give me new work for editing. Now he's eager to print more cantos of Srimad Bhagavatam, his life's magnum opus. Only five of the twelve cantos have been completed. Since his annotations are much longer than the text itself, the project is formidable. “It will fill some forty to fifty volumes,” he says. He also wants to see his translation of Chaitanya Charitamrita, which will run over a dozen volumes, printed and distributed-now, in his lifetime. At age seventy-six, Prabhupada is pushing hard to finish these great literatures.

Yet, he still gives morning and evening darshan, talking on Nectar of Devotion and Srimad Bhagavatam. After this, disciples gather in his room for informal talks, which go on until Sruta Kirti serves hot milk and papadams and announces that Srila Prabhupada

must take rest. He then sleeps from nine or ten p.m. until one or two a.m., when he gets up and starts translating and annotating again.

After the assault on the palace, we look even more to Prabhupada for direction.

“What do we do now, Srila Prabhupada?”

“Just go ahead with your work in Krishna consciousness,” he says. “Krishna will protect.”

We follow his advice, letting events shape themselves. It’s amazing to watch, really.

Prabhupada doesn’t have to do anything. “For the devotee,” he says, “Maya Devi stands with folded hands, just waiting to render service.”

The magistrate and police inspector were but the first in a long procession of helpers and well-wishers. Now, after the morning lectures, Sruta Kirti has to ask the devotees to wait until Prabhupada has finished seeing all his Indian visitors. Many are swamis, gurus, and temple administrators. Despite occasional theological differences, they align themselves behind Prabhupada, all recognizing him as a rare mahatma, a great soul, a Vaikuntha personality transcending schools and sects.

And Prabhupada is pleased with their backing. He receives them all graciously, smiling and inviting them to stay and take prasadam, offering chairs to everyone, though no one accepts them. All sit on the floor with Prabhupada before his little altar of Radha Krishna. Never is the trouble at the palace mentioned. Nor is any philosophical or religious subject. It’s not necessary. Everyone knows where everyone else stands. Simply by their presence, these leaders give us their backing. In Vrindaban, a sadhu like Prabhupada is still respected as the intimate associate of Lord Krishna, worthy of all the respect paid the lotus-eyed Lord Himself.

The spiritual importance of many of the men who call on Prabhupada does not escape the notice of the townfolk. Everyone knows why they have come. They’re not men who go out of their way for nothing. Indeed, they’re rarely seen on the streets at all. Many are grand, majestic men, spiritual guides whose purposes are never disappointed because they’re always in agreement with Krishna. They know that common men follow in their footsteps, and they’re always careful to act in an exemplary way.

The assault on the palace diffused a lot of tension, and people are more relaxed in our presence—indeed, almost jovial, as if we have a joke in common. Within two days, I notice a change of attitude. For me, it begins when the banana-walla on the corner gives me ten bananas instead of eight. He’s a dour boy who never smiles, and for a moment I think he wants more money. He wraps the bananas in newspaper and makes sure I notice: “Fen, Baba, not eight.” The tiny bananas don’t weigh many extra grams, but they sure brighten my morning.

Other devotees begin to notice similar gestures. The corner tailor doesn’t charge Malati for a hem in Saraswati’s skirt. A milk-walla goes out of his way to give Yamuna a carton with a more recent bottling date. The ricksha-wallas don’t complain when we pay them only the correct fare. Vendors have change for a hundred-rupee note. Bank tellers begin speaking better English. Aerograms are available at the post office. Devotees are offered ten percent discounts on khadi clothing—dhotis and kurtas. The soda-pop-walla stops

demanding exorbitant bottle deposits, saying instead, in English, “Bring back.” Our dairy milk inexplicably tastes richer. And, most important, the rocks stop flying.

Vrindaban doesn’t have a local newspaper, but no matter. The tongues of Loi Bazaar spread information fast, and probably more accurately. From niche to niche, from block to block, the news and its editorials circulate.

To our happy surprise, we emerge from the palace assault if not as heroes, at least as good guys. We didn’t harm anyone, we didn’t call the police, and we didn’t file any charges. The students simply made fools of themselves—a couple got bruised up—believing ridiculous rumors now discredited by the magistrate and police. Who knows how such rumors start? Best forget them. Srila Prabhupada is Vrindaban’s most illustrious guru, Krishna’s pure devotee. How can he possibly be fooled? If he vouches for the sincerity of the foreigners, that’s enough.

When I go buy some kurtas in Loi Bazaar, the little smiling shopkeeper says, “Oh, trouble at Kesi Ghat? Too much dacoits these days. Last year they gave my father-in-law trouble.”

Hari Prasad, the vendor of Deities, beckons me over and asks if I’ll be wanting any more clothes for my Radha Krishna.

“Oh, I think not, thank you,” I say.

“Is it true?” he asks. “Your Prabhupada is buying Jaipur Mandir?”

“Not to my knowledge,” I reply.

He shakes his head from side to side in that Indian way, as if to discard the rumor, then says, “Good mandir. Good for you. You buy.”

We notice the additional police patrolling, walking around Shahji Temple. They are middle-aged men with big mustaches, and they lounge at the corner chai stall at Shahji’s and keep their lathis tucked in their belts. They patrol from Maithun Kunj to Kesi Ghat. In the afternoon, Malati gives them herbal tea and kachoris at the palace.

There’s another shift around eight in the morning, and they get sweet ginger tea. Of course, our public prasadam distribution has been temporarily suspended.

A week after his initial visit, Magistrate Sharma returns and happily tells Prabhupada that his wife and children are joining him every evening for darshan of Bhagavad Gita As It Is.

“I read eight verses every night,” he says. “In English. In that way my daughters are also learning that language.”

After informing Prabhupada that he wants to receive him and all the devotees at his home, Mr. Sharma says, “Everyone of importance here undergoes a kind of trial by fire, Prabhupada. You have just come from yours without a bum.”

“Krishna protects His devotees,” Prabhupada says.

“Yes, but it’s also due to everyone’s regard for you. The years you lived here, you made a very big impression. We’ve been keeping up with your activities abroad. They are quite wonderful. We know that no one can act so wonderfully for Krishna without His help.”

“It’s Lord Chaitanya’s potency that is pushing this movement, not mine,” Prabhupada says.

“But you’ve done so much alone.”

“I’ve done very little, actually. Now that these boys and girls are pushing this movement all over the world, the honor is going to them. I’ve not manufactured them or given them money. They have come of their own free will, with their own money. They are professional men, not beggars. Krishna has sent them to me because this is something an old man cannot do alone: open centers, build temples, print and sell books. What power do I have to do such things? But Krishna has all power. He sees that these boys are sincere; therefore He’s providing success for this movement. This movement cannot be stopped because it is identical with Krishna.”

“I think some people are beginning to understand that, Prabhupada,” Mr. Sharma says. And, once again placing his hands on Prabhupada’s feet and then on his own head, the magistrate takes his leave.

CHAPTER 24. Last Days

The next two weeks pass quickly: cool November nights and clear days. Now, many of the devotees are returning to their temples in Europe and America, leaving by bus or tonga to Mathura and then by train to Delhi. The cornucopia of fall festivals has run out: Janmashami, Rasa Lila, Radha Kund Puja, Govardhan Hill Puja, and Yamaraj Puja. Now cold winter nights will come occasionally, nights when the Himalayas themselves do not seem tall enough to block those icy winds sweeping down from the Siberian plains. Sometimes peasants freeze to death on the coldest nights of December and January. Mud and grass huts offer little protection. Some people are caught where they live out the year—in the open. Most North Indians make no preparation at all for winter. They wear the same dhotis and kurtas of spring and summer, the same sockless thongs for footwear.

Whenever it's bitter cold, the people wrap themselves in wool blankets and cluster around the fires of chai shops and betel-nut stalls and complain about the weather as if it were something unusual and will change in a few hours. In the course of a winter's day, much chai is drunk. "Tomorrow it will warm up," people say, knowing well that there's no reason why it should.

November is therefore relished: the diminishing pleasant days before the cold nights. People linger outside after sunset, going to and coming from temples and shops, or loitering in the street drinking chai and smoking bidis. Then, at ten, everyone retires. No clock is ever needed to tell Indians that it's bedtime. In all the towns and villages throughout the subcontinent, in diverse castes and tribes, lights go out at ten p.m. It seems to have been the custom since the dawn of creation.

"When Brahma's day is manifest, this multitude of living entities comes into being, and at the arrival of Brahma's night, they are all annihilated. Again and again the day comes, and this host of beings is active, and again the night falls, O Arjuna, and they are helplessly dissolved."

The message of the universe is clearly broadcast day and night, with the comings and goings of Brijbasis from home to work and back. No drunken playboys prowl the streets in sports cars with their radios blasting rock and roll. No. At the most, during the pleasant Kartik season when the aroma of kadamba is in the air and the peacocks meow like cats, a Vrindaban boy squats before a chai stand and sips tea. No girls stroll by hoping to be admired. No drug pushers are seen, no prostitutes, no alcoholics, no hamburger stands, no cinemas, nothing to distract the mind from pleasant contemplation of the mystery of life, of Lord Krishna's great drama unfolding day by day.

Rakesh Sharma fulfills his promise by hosting Srila Prabhupada and the devotees at his home, a rambling one-floor concrete structure with a tile roof. The three servants work hard tending to a hundred guests—panchayat members, small-business men, Vrindaban Lions and Rotarians—all eager to meet Prabhupada.

Srila Prabhupada sits on a table spread with a silk Kashmiri rug, and we sit at his feet on rugs covered with clean white sheets. He begins chanting Hare Krishna, and we follow. His rich baritone voice projects clearly through the room, summoning Krishna. We repeat the holy names softly at first, then become enlivened by the force of that voice brimming with devotion. The side conversations cease as everyone listens to Prabhupada. Striking cymbals together, he closes his eyes, concentrating on the holy names. His brow furrows, and his whole frame shakes. Everyone's attention rivets to his face, radiant and happy, shining with the glow of seeing Krishna everywhere.

The guests sit crosslegged on the white sheets and join the chanting. At least for the time being they have forgotten their file cabinets and appointments.

Prabhupada speaks briefly of his mission in America and his hopes to spread Krishna consciousness in India. He invites all the guests to help with his projects at Raman Reti and in Bombay and Bengal.

Afterwards, Mr. Sharma tries to stage the kind of reception in which people normally mingle and chitchat over cocktails. Instead, we're served watermelon juice. I soon understand why alcohol is usually served at this point. An embarrassing encounter follows, with the panchayat members and businessmen looking the devotees straight in the face, and the devotees looking back.

The man exchanging looks with me has spent his life in an enviable niche at the State Bank of India. He's a home owner with a big family, a member of various societies for commerce and education, an adherent of Western values, but too far removed from the West to know anything about its culture. He stares at me for a moment as if I'm on display in a zoo, marked "Westerner." How strange I must seem to him!

I sense his embarrassment. How can I reject what he's laboring so hard to get? Is there some fraud? Are the world's promises empty? In his eyes I sense a kind of urgent appeal: "My God, man, level with me! Don't let me run all the rest of the way for nothing."

He doesn't ask. He knows the answer I must give. He's heard Srila Prabhupada talk. He knows what's required. My standing before him with dhoti and sikha tells him what I've decided for myself.

The banker looks down at his watermelon juice as if it were a martini. The moment to speak has passed. He's safe to smile, say, "Hare Krishna," and sidle toward the verandah, where his friends have gathered.

Still, no one can shake off Prabhupada's presence. It clings to the businessmen and politicians even on the verandah. Soon I look up and see all of them sitting there in silence, holding empty cups, their fingers sticky with watermelon juice. They stare at Prabhupada the way American kids stare at television.

The reception at Mr. Sharma's is our last engagement at a private home. The following day, Prabhupada announces that he's departing for Hyderabad November 15, a week away. From there he will go to Bombay and Calcutta. What else can he do? The devotees are being cheated out of their downpayment for the Juhu property. The malaria must have affected their reasoning. They're letting the wily negotiators walk all over them.

Prabhupada invites me to Hyderabad. He wants me present for editing, since he's going full steam ahead on Srimad Bhagavatam. He even threatens to stop writing if we don't catch up. I make special trips into Mathura to mail registered packets of manuscripts to the press in Los Angeles. The stacks of letters cluttering the floor remind me of the mail floating down the Jamuna, and I wonder whether the manuscript will ever get through. After stamping on the postage, I wait to see the stamps cancelled and the packet thrown into the outgoing heap. I keep carbons of everything.

Three days before departure, we accompany Prabhupada to Imlitala, where we're received by Nityananda Swami and some of Prabhupada's other godbrothers. They've prepared a grand feast. Brahmacharis set buckets of prasadam before the Deities on the altar: curried rice with almond slivers, sweet rice, banana fritters, mung bean soup, squash sabji, cauliflower pakora, potato kachoris, a spinach sabji, sweet-and-hot mango pickle, raisin chutney, and buckets of cold watermelon juice with lemon rinds.

The pujari, a stooped, wiry old man, rings a bell and places a portion of each offering before the Deities of Radha and Krishna. Waving sticks of incense, he recites oblatinal mantras. The altar doors are then closed to allow the Deities to enjoy the feast in private. In the courtyard, Srila Prabhupada sits in an upright wooden chair beside Nityananda Swami and other godbrothers and talks for a long time in Hindi. Prabhupada speaks in a different tone than when speaking to us. When I hear his natural, free-flowing Hindi, I have to look up to make sure the voice is his.

He and Nityananda have such an intimate, time-tested relation that they don't even have to acknowledge what each other says. Prabhupada discourses for a long time on a subject, and Nityananda sits listening, his face expressionless, until Prabhupada stops talking. He continues to sit for a while before indicating that he understands and agrees. Then he discourses for a while in a low voice, and Prabhupada leans forward on his cane and says, "Hm. Hm," as if punctuating Nityananda's sentences.

Then, gesturing toward us, Prabhupada says in English: "And just see my men! They are all very expert. In their country they all have cars and know how to drive. Hayagriva is a professor, Achyutananda is expert in Hindi and Bengali, Shyamsundar is a student of philosophy, Gurudas is a photographer. They are all capable men. They had everything—money, education, all the Western amenities—but still they were not satisfied, frustrated by material nature. So, from the beginning they started coming.

"Krishna was attracting them. He said, 'Here, My dear boys, you just give up all that nonsense. You come to Me.' And, being intelligent boys, they came. They kept attending classes and listening, and printing our Back To Godhead magazine, and chanting in the parks and at so many engagements in New York and Los Angeles and San Francisco. Now we have nearly sixty centers around the world. Krishna is pushing this movement because these boys are sincere. They may not pronounce sabdha correctly; after all, they're Westerners, and all this is foreign to them. But that's not important. Krishna is listening to them. That is their success."

I'm almost provoked to interrupt Prabhupada and say that all potencies are coming from him, but I remain silent, knowing that he takes great pleasure in praising his devotees to outsiders.

A brahmachari announces that it's time to honor prasadam. When Prabhupada sees them preparing him a special table, he stops them. He'll have none of that. He'll eat seated on the floor with his godbrothers.

The brahmacharis, robust boys with thin mustaches, set fig-leaf plates on the floor of the dim corridor leading from the kitchen, a cool and convenient place to eat. Prabhupada sits on the floor beside Nityananda and the other monks and waits for the brahmacharis to serve.

Achyutananda, Shyamsundar, Gurudas, Sruta Kirti, and I eat in the sunny garden. Hands drop kachoris and banana fritters before us as fast as we can eat them. The banana fritters, dipped in honey, are delicious. Midway through the feast, the electricity goes off, and the brahmacharis light candles and put them along the corridor. There's no idle chatter.

Everyone honors prasadam in thoughtful silence.

Srila Prabhupada wards off after-dinner sleep by walking along the river. He's especially gracious to the elderly, speaking to each in Hindi, inquiring about the welfare of each.

Most of his godbrothers—the direct disciples of Bhaktisiddhanta Saraswati—are old and sick. With untiring patience, Prabhupada listens to their hoarse voices. Who else would pay attention to these poor old souls? Prabhupada nods and sometimes pats their shoulders, as if to say, “Oh well, it's not all that bad, is it?”

I wonder if in my old age I'll be sitting in a temple somewhere with my aged godbrothers recalling these days with Prabhupada. How remote all this will seem then! In the twenty-first century, what boys and girls will listen to us tell of tongas, rickshas, palaces, maharajas, silver swings, bazaars, and the people and festivals of yesteryear's Vrindaban? Who will believe it? Or will Vrindaban remain forever unchanged, caught in a devotional time-warp in which rajarsis build chatras to attract wandering sages, and Deities walk off their altars after some great bhakta?

“How peaceful it is here!” I tell Achyutananda. “I wouldn't mind tearing up my passport and living out my days in that ashram over there.”

“You'd love it,” he says, “until your traveler's checks run out.”

Later that afternoon, Prabhupada tells us that our temples should use Imlitala as a standard to aspire to.

“Their devotion is very rare,” he says.

* * *

November 14. Srila Prabhupada's last night in Vrindaban. Tomorrow, he goes by private car to Delhi, and I'm to leave by taxi for the Mathura train station to catch the Agra Express to Delhi. I'm to meet Prabhupada on Greater Kailash at the home of a Mr. Agarwal.

In the evening, we attend a farewell gathering at Radha Ramana. Magistrate Sharma and the temple's head pujari speak a few words in appreciation of Prabhupada's international achievements.

“By the potency of Lord Krishna’s pure devotee,” Mr. Sharma says, “Krishna and Balarama will once again be manifest for us on the very spot where They sported in the sands.”

Prabhupada chants the “Jaya Radha Madhava” prayers and plays cymbals. He sits before a silk tapestry of Krishna lifting Govardhan Hill. Only the Lord’s face can be seen in the painting. The rest of His body is covered with garlands of lotuses. On the little finger of His left hand, He balances Govardhan.

“Krishna does not have to struggle like Atlas,” Prabhupada once said.

Beneath the hill, the Brijbasis seek shelter from the torrents of Indra. They stand before Lord Krishna with their hands joined in devotion. Also seeking the hill’s shelter are white cows decorated with sindhur hand prints. Although the rains of death pour all around them, the Brijbasis and their cows are not disturbed.

Sitting on a mat before the tapestry, Prabhupada is so positioned that Krishna’s feet seem to rest on the top of his head. As he sings with his eyes closed, he blends into the painting, joining the Brijbasis under the shelter of Govardhan. I can almost hear Indra’s heavy rain and the rumbling of the samvartaka clouds. “Datta. Damyata. Dayadhvam,” the thunder rolls. “Charity. Self-control. Compassion.” “Krishna! Krishna!” the lightning bolts flash.

Speaking in English, Prabhupada thanks Mr. Sharma and his Radha Ramana hosts for their kind words, and assures everyone that he will soon return.

“By good fortune, by pious deeds in your past lives, you have got association with Vrindaban,” he says. “Now you must realize the true Vrindaban atmosphere. just as Krishna’s name is identical with Krishna, so are His pastimes, His entourage, His holy dham and His paraphernalia. Vrindaban is not different from Krishna. When He descends, Vrindaban descends with Him.

“The future of Vrindaban on this planet is now very bright. Mr. Sharma spoke of a Hindu revival, and now these European and American boys and girls are taking interest. So, we must be very careful to see that the Vrindaban atmosphere is maintained according to the standards of Rupa and Sanatan Goswami. Don’t allow the influences of Kali—illicit sex, meat-eating, intoxication, and gambling—to enter here. Maintain your Krishna consciousness, and transcend the idea that ‘I am Indian, I am Hindu, American, brahmin, brahmachari, sannyas, whatever.’ In Vrindaban, the only identity is ‘I am Krishna’s servant.’ Live in that consciousness, and the real, pure, eternal Vrindaban, full of bliss and knowledge, will be yours. Thank you very much.”

When Prabhupada finishes, I expect him to turn and join the cowherd men under Govardhan Hill. Taking off the heavy garland of marigolds, he pays obeisances before the Deity of Radha Ramana. The Lord’s big lotus eyes look out from both Deity and tapestry. Sruta Kirti starts to wrap a light woolen chadar around Prabhupada.

“That’s all right,” Prabhupada says, then pulls the chadar over his shoulders.

He gives our hosts a farewell smile, then walks out into the street to the waiting ricksha boy, who whirls the bicycle pedals, eager to be on his way.

CHAPTER 25. Departure

I dream that I'm in a temple. A pujari is making an offering to Radha Krishna Deities. Krishna stands in His tribhanga pose, one leg crossed over the other. His face is that of the Radha Ramana Deity. His lotus feet have dark tops, red bottoms, and He wears pearl anklets. One foot lies flat; the other is bent across the leg that supports the body's weight. I meditate upon those lotus feet. Govindam adi-purusam tam aham bhajami. "I worship Govinda, the primeval Lord ..." May His lotus feet be forever engraved upon my mind and heart. May they rise into consciousness like the sun, to brighten my days. ...
O Krishna, give me the only thing worth having: Your devotional service. Please let me serve You eternally. Don't let me forget You, in whatever body I inhabit, on whatever planet. ...

Suddenly, I awake. The night is dark. No light filters in through the palace window overlooking the Jamuna. Are those the sounds of the all-night kirtan? Yes. "Radhe Shyam, Radhe Shyam, Hare Krishna, Hare Ram." The words blow in with the river breezes. It seems that mantras are eternally resonating in the Vrindaban atmosphere. What a wonderful dream! The thought of Krishna is no different from Krishna. When Krishna and Balarama entered the wrestling arena, the people of Mathura relished the taste of Their bodies. Thinking of the taste of Krishna is the same as tasting Krishna, and thinking of the people of Mathura enjoying the thought of that taste is the same as enjoying it yourself.

When Krishna's lotus feet danced on the hoods of the great serpent Kaliya, the Lord smiled. Spiritual strength never has to struggle. "I am the strength of the strong." When Pralambhasura carried Balarama off on his shoulders, Balarama gripped the demon tightly and smashed him to death with His fist.

"O Balarama, Lord Sesha Naga, couch of Vishnu, reservoir of spiritual power, grant us the strength to battle Maya Devi."

By my watch, it's one a.m. In nine hours, I'll be on the Taj Express racing toward Delhi. How I'd love to stay in Vrindaban! Some day soon I'll be back. And perhaps one day I'll come and throw my passport to the winds and live on rice, dhal, and chapatis, and spend day and night writing books, following in the footsteps of the Goswamis. That will be the time I buy a one-way ticket, and enter Vrindaban like the old men and widows, and leave only when the ashes from my pyre float down the Jamuna toward Allahabad.

Yes, I hear the all-night kirtan distinctly now—the voices, drums and cymbals. "Radhe Shyam, Radhe Shyam, Hare Krishna, Hare Ram." They'll be chanting tomorrow night when I'm in Delhi, and the week after that, when I'm in Hyderabad, and the month after that, when I'm in Calcutta, and in the springtime, when I'm back in America. They will still be chanting years hence, when I'm ready to throw my passport away and stay until my ashes flow downriver. And even then, the chanting will not stop.

I linger on the shore of consciousness, hesitating to plunge into an ocean of dreams. Why the clinging? The distant drums and cymbals seem to push me. These sounds of kirtan are our link to God. Why should we think that God is there only in silence, when we close our eyes? He's always there, in dream, wakefulness, and sleep. Only the dust of these daytime dreams clouds our vision, like specks of dust rising across the North Indian plain, clouds of that gray, exhausted earth no longer nourished by Himalayan snows—dry earth, dry soil. ...

Those magnificent hawks flying around Govardhan: the parikrama doesn't bother them. With their keen vision, they swoop down and strike time's serpents, then rise and disappear into a blue sky. Time, swallowed in space: Garuda devouring the serpents of Kali Yuga. Space, our friend, waiting to receive us. And Krishna, waiting for us beyond time and space. ...

Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna, Krishna Krishna, Hare Hare. I don't sleep well the night before journeys. Is it anxiety? Anticipation? Ho hum. Hare Rama, Hare Rama, Rama Rama, Hare Hare. Thinking of the hawks, I again plunge into a sea of dreams.

O Thou!

"O Krishna, please remove the effulgence of Your transcendental rays so that I can see Your form of bliss."

Where I am, I know not. The landscape in the background must be Goloka Vrindaban because before me sits the Lord. Somehow I have come upon Him. He is reclining on a rock. He sees me and smiles. He wears ear pendants, a necklace, and a golden helmet studded with jewels. Peacock feathers crown His helmet. In one hand He holds His flute. His garments are yellow, like lightning, and His complexion resembles a cloud brimming with rain on a summer afternoon. His eyes are dark, His hair raven black and long. He's the most attractive person inside or outside the creation. He's the source of the creation. He is Krishna, the Supreme Personality of Godhead.

He stands up, as if about to come greet me.

"My Father!" I cry out. "Son, Brother, dearest Friend, Beloved, my ... everything!"

He disappears. In His place, a message appears: "I can be your super-everything."

I awake and turn on the light. Everything in the room seems to be covered with gems. Everything shimmers with luminosity. I turn out the light, he awake in the dark, and ponder the meaning of the vision until I'm called to mangal aratik.

"I can be your super-every thing. I can be your super-everything." The words obsess me, reverberating like a mantra as I walk for the last time from Kesi Ghat to Radha Damodar.

"By Me, in My unmanifested form, this entire universe is pervaded," Krishna told Arjuna, imparting the most confidential knowledge. "All beings are in Me, but I am not in them. And yet everything that is created does not rest in Me. Behold My mystic opulence! Although I am the maintainer of all living entities, and although I am everywhere, still My Self is the very source of creation."

That is the essence of the Bhagavad Gita's teachings. Some people say that God is everything, and their philosophy stops there. Krishna tells Arjuna that He is certainly everything, but He also exists in His eternal form beyond everything. That is real

transcendentalism. With transcendental humor, Krishna put the essence of the Upanishads and the Vedas on the T-shirt of that airport coolie. As soon as I landed in India, the lotus-eyed Lord was communicating.

How dull I am! For almost a month, I've been in Krishna's own abode, in the Lord's very house, in Krishna's very presence, and not been aware of it. For a month? Or since I was born, and infinitely long before that? How strong is my conditioning!

It's true! It's all true! Everything Srila Prabhupada has said is perfectly true! What a fool I am! It's all there in the books; it's vibrating in the air in perfectly clear language. It's no secret. Bhagavad Gita has all the clarity of a cloudless Vrindaban morning. It's not some mysterious hieroglyphic. It's there in Sanskrit, in English, in Hindi, in all languages.

What keeps us ignorant? The dust on the mirror of the mind? Inordinate desires? What stops us from hearing properly? Maybe I should have let that ear-man clean out my ears. Maybe we need thousands of ear-men to clean the wax from the ears of humanity.

"Everybody wants to see God," Prabhupada once said. "But why are you stressing your seeing? A sleeping man cannot see. But he can hear. Hearing is more important in this Kali Yuga when everyone is asleep. Even asleep you can hear someone saying, 'Jiv jago! Wake up! Get up! Get up off the lap of the Maya witch!'"

After aratik, I chant my rounds in the Radha Damodar courtyard. Dawn brightens the sky. I go up to Srila Prabhupada's room. Sruta Kirti is packing, and Prabhupada is seated behind his desk. No one else is in the room. I offer obeisances.

"Jai! Hare Krishna," Prabhupada says.

"I had a wonderful dream last night," I say.

"Oh?"

"I dreamed of Krishna."

"That is no ordinary dream," he says.

"It's the first time I've ever dreamed of Krishna," I say.

"Dreams of Krishna and the spiritual master are not ordinary," he says. "If the spiritual master gives you instructions in a dream, you should follow them."

"It was all very clear," I say. "Not like a regular dream at all. And when I woke up, I could remember it all."

"Jai! When you are in full Krishna consciousness, you think of Krishna always. You act for Krishna, you breathe for Krishna, you see and hear Krishna, you touch and taste Krishna, you smell Krishna, you dream of Krishna. Krishna is everything for His devotees. That is Krishna consciousness."

"I'll never forget that dream," I say.

"Yes. That is Krishna's blessing. Never forget Krishna."

"There was also a message," I say. "He said, 'I can be your super-everything.'"

"Your what?"

"Super-every thing."

"Yes," Prabhupada laughs. "Super-everything. That is Krishna. Everything and more than everything. He's in every atom of the creation, and He's also there in His abode, Goloka Vrindaban. That is Chaitanya Mahaprabhu's philosophy: achinta-bheda-bheda-tattva."

“So, Srila Prabhupada, I must go back to Kesi Ghat, pack, and get to the train in Mathura.”

“You are having Mr. Agarwal’s address?”

“Yes. On Greater Kailash.”

“Achha.”

“So, Krishna willing, I’ll be seeing you in Delhi, sometime this afternoon.” I offer obeisances. “Nama om vishnupadaya krishnapresthaya bhutale srimate Bhaktivedanta swamin iti namine.”

“Jai! Param vijayate sri-krishna-sankirtanam.” He takes off his garland and puts it around my neck as I kneel before him.

“It’s been wonderful here in Vrindaban, Srila Prabhupada,” I say. “It’s been a great privilege and blessing to be with you in the holy dham.”

“Thank you,” he says. “Now, take this Vrindaban atmosphere with you. Vrindaban is always in the heart of the devotee. Carry it with you.”

“I’ll try. But I forget so easily.”

“Just chant Hare Krishna. Wherever there’s chanting, there’s Vrindaban.”

“Thank you, Srila Prabhupada.” I offer obeisances again, touch his lotus feet, and leave. En route to Mathura, the tonga takes me through Loi Bazaar. Another typical Vrindaban morning! The shops are just beginning to open. Merchants arrange their wares, and women sweep the dusty streets with straw brooms. Dogs stretch, shake themselves awake, and begin hunting for food. Drums beat and cymbals ring out from a corner temple. Our little horse trots down the road past the Radha Madhava Mandir and Akrura Ghat.

I sit with my feet on my duffel bag. Wrapped in a box beside me are the Radha Krishna Deities for the New Vrindaban Community in West Virginia. Their clothes and decorations are packed separately. Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna, Krishna Krishna, Hare Hare.

“Wherever You are, there is Vrindaban.” That’s what one of the Goswamis told Lord Chaitanya Mahaprabhu. Hare Rama, Hare Rama, Rama Rama, Hare Hare. Boys herd cows down the paths leading from the road. The cows stop to graze on ganger shrubs. I can smell their clean aroma, hear the shouting of the boys and the ringing of cowbells. Govindam adi-purusam. ... Govinda: He who gives pleasure to the cows, He who pleases the mind and senses. Krishna: He who attracts the soul. “Krish” is a scraping sound, the sound of sins being cleansed from the lives of His devotees.

Now it’s back to Delhi, Indraprastha, and the Kali-Yuga world consciousness. This road to Mathura goes on to Delhi, then to Hyderabad, Calcutta, Bombay, New York, and on and on. Who can ever know where these roads lead, or what pleasures and pains, ecstasies and agonies await us? Whatever happens, I’ll never forget Krishna. I’ll remember all these beautiful days here, Kartik days in the presence of Srila Prabhupada, the great master of bhakti-yoga. Yes, unforgettable these days in Krishna’s abode....

The tonga driver sings to himself, and the horse beats a lively rhythm on the road. I hear Prabhupada's voice, repeating, insisting, "Take Vrindaban with you. Take Vrindaban with you."

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"My sleep is troubled, filled with dreams as strange as opium visions. I levitate like a demon out of the Ramayana, rising off the floor and into the air. Through the latticed window I hear the sounds of car horns, the cries of vendors, the beeping of motor rickshas. Do I wake or sleep?"

Smells of incense and steaming chapatis drift in from the street. Soon again, I dream. Somehow caught in the southwest monsoons, I struggle through flooded streets and seek refuge at the New Govardhan Hotel. The manager hands me the guest register. It's a new form required of all foreigners, and my hand soon aches from writing. There must be hundreds of pages to fill out. The questions asked by the Central Indian Government become more detailed and personal: Do you chant while bathing? Do you ever cheat?

I awake, and the dream pops like a bubble. Groggy from jet lag and nightmares, I lie on my back, unable to move. Where am I?"

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