

[a Dham Blooms in Texas](#)

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Swami Prakashanand Saraswati's International Society of Divine Love Cultivates a Hindu Haven in the Lone Star State

A 90-foot pink and gray granite temple tower rises above the trees just off a winding road in the pastoral hill-country near Austin, capital of Texas, USA. This is the Shree Raseshwari (Radha Rani) Temple, sitting gracefully at the center of the 210-acre Barsana Dham Ashram founded by His Divinity Swami Prakashanand Saraswati. Inspired by Shree Swamiji's vision, devotees and supporters nationwide have helped to transform the ashram into a thriving spiritual center.

In 1990, Swamiji chose this site with the vision of creating a devotional representation of the holy land of Braj in the Western world. Sushree Meera Devi, a sannyasini, explains, "The land of Braj, near Delhi, is the appearance place of Radha-Krishn and is a sacred place of pilgrimage. The district encompasses Mathura, Vrindaban, Barsana and Govardhan and has many holy sites related to Radha-Krishn's divine activities. "The first time I entered Barsana Dham, my heart stopped," shares sannyasini Hari Dasi. "It looked exactly like Barsana, India. The main temple there, Shriji Mandir, sits on a hill, surrounded by Gahavar forest where Radha's palace existed. I couldn't believe that I was seeing these sites at our new US ashram."

Landmark of devotion

Twinkling lights, colorful banners and beautiful flower garlands adorn the ashram and temple during the main religious festivals of the year: Janmashtami and Radha ashtami are celebrated with elaborate enactments of Radha and Krishn's appearance and childhood leelas; Divali with thousands of lights shining on the buildings, trees and walkways, and with a spectacular fireworks display; Holi with

gulaal turning every person and plant in its path red with color.

At each celebration, Swamiji reveals the deeper spiritual meaning of the festival for the people who attend, many coming from communities miles away. In addition to the celebrations, the temple serves the community as a place of public worship with Wednesday, Saturday and Sunday satsangs. "The satsang and nam sankirtan are truly a devotional experience," shares Raj and Geeta Goel. Mrs. Suzanne Ward confided, "The first time I met Swamiji the experience was deep and intense. My family's life has been completely transformed. My husband, two children and I now spend time at the ashram everyday. We have found the spiritual home we had always been looking for." The temple doors are open to anyone who loves God.

Some devotees have had magical, mystical moments. Pier Ligon, a Miami nurse recounts, "Once, when visiting Barsana Dham, I dreamed I was in Mother Yashoda's courtyard. Lord Govinda was dancing and playing. He was about two years old and beautifully decorated. He started running towards me. He came closer and closer until He had almost reached me. I opened my arms to catch Him. Just as He was going to touch me, I woke up. My whole body was rippling with loving emotion. It was pouring out of my heart and vibrating all over my body. It was so real; I had been so close to Him." Julian Christopher, an actor from Los Angeles revealed, "One evening I began to repeat Krishn's name with a strong desire to be heard. During this open-hearted plea, I felt the hand of God touch me on my shoulder. A day or so later, while walking on the beach, time disappeared and I was completely absorbed in a joyous blissful satisfaction that is difficult to explain. Now I live and serve at Barsana Dham with a contented heart. I am grateful for my life."

Such life-changing experiences never seem out of place in the ashram where devotees strive to serve God in every task. Baking bread, stringing garlands and caring for the herb, vegetable and flower gardens--each day residents and guests engage in many such services. "Service is teaching me to long for the love of Radha Krishn," explains Kamini Ramchandani from Singapore. Even the children understand the importance of service and enjoy helping around the ashram. "When I do service, I feel the grace of Swamiji and Radha Krishn," says six-year-old Jason. The ashram food is fresh, simple, vegetarian, and eaten in silence.

A place of pilgrimage

Barsana Dham is becoming a unifying force for Hindus throughout Texas. Groups such as the Vallabhacharya Preeti Seva Samaj and Hindu Worship Society of Houston, the Mahila Mandal of San Antonio, and the Caribbean Hindu Association of Dallas are among many groups who have arranged special day trips to the ashram. In October of 1994, over 2,000 devotees from around the state and the country came to take part in the temple's inauguration celebrations.

"Saturated with the gift of bhakti, Swamiji fills the hearts of his devotees with devotion," Swami Buaji, a renowned yogi, said of Swami Prakashananda during the celebrations last year. "When he breathes, he breathes new hope and joy into the lives of humble souls."

In a recent letter, Austin Mayor Bruce Todd wrote, "We extend our heartiest congratulations on the occasion of the completion of the first Hindu temple in Austin. May your future be bright as you excel in the coming years and spread your spiritual message. Thank you for adding so much to our community."

The temple organized a special open house in response to the growing community interest. During the two-hour period over 1,000 visitors, two television crews, local newspaper reporters and neighbors were enthralled by the majestic temple architecture, intricate hand work of the nine resident silpis (temple artisans), traditional Indian foods and video presentations about the history of Barsana Dham and philosophy of raganuga bhakti.

The Shree Raseshwari Radha Rani Temple's 84 columns support five levels of walkable roofs enclosed by decorative hand-cast ballisters. Pink marble sweeps along the verandah that wraps around three sides of the 35,000 square foot structure. "The temple grows more exquisite each time I visit," writes a visitor from Seattle.

At the temple's foundation laying ceremony, October 11, 1992, Swamiji declared, "This temple will hold its own uniqueness and importance because it will be the first temple in the world to represent the actual glory of Radha as Mahabhao." This year thousands will witness a divine event when the moorti pratishtha mahotsava (deity establishment ceremony) of Shree Raseshwari Radha Rani is held on October 7th and 8th, 1995. "The time has now come when faithful souls will receive the path of

Krishn-love, provided they are not possessed with the intellectual fancy of instant enlightenment and keep their hearts and minds open to receive this message," says Swamiji. "Krishn ras is bliss. Just drink."

Five thousand years ago, the raganuga tradition was re-established on this earth when Shree Radha Krishn descended with innumerable saints to the holy land of Braj in North India. They were called Brajwasis. These saints simply loved Krishn more than their own selves. This natural love is called rag. Anuga means to follow and bhakti means devotion. To follow that pattern of Brajwasis' love for Radha Krishn is called raganuga bhakti, which Swamiji translates as "divine-love consciousness." He explains that it is not something added to life, it is a way of life--a divine-sweetness which can be tasted in every walk of life.

Divine daily satsang

The morning and evening satsang of prayer, chanting, philosophy and arati are at the heart of life in Barsana Dham. Fresh flowers surround the deities of Radha Krishn, who are in a loving raas pose. Their decorations shimmer by the arati light waved before them as devotees, gathered for satsang in the Shree Raseshwari Temple, sing the praises of the divine couple. In evening discourses, Swamiji speaks of the Gita, Upanishads, Brahma Sutras or Bhagwatam. Or he may give an entire lecture engrossed in describing Krishn's flute, Radha's decorations, or Their divine leelas. "Swamiji is very affectionate, scholarly, and one of the greatest spiritual leaders I have ever come across. He explains the most difficult philosophy of devotion in a very simple way," asserts Dr. Om P. Mandhana, an engineer from Austin, Texas.

"Swamiji was once describing a divine scene where Shyama Shyam, surrounded by gopis, were swinging under a flowering kadamb tree on the banks of the Yamuna River," says Ram Prasad, from Canada. "As he spoke, I began to experience it. The excitement of its charming beauty was so great that every pore of my being felt Their love."

Shree Swamiji's upadesha

When Swamiji is in residence at Barsana Dham, after regular satsang there is also time for devotees and guests to receive answers to their spiritual questions.

Devotee: "Swamiji, could you explain the raganuga bhakti lineage?"

Swamiji: "Our tradition of raganuga bhakti is eternal. It comes from the Vedas. Around 3,202bc Krishn Himself descended on the earth planet in His Divine form and Ved Vyas re-established the same knowledge through the Bhagwatam which continues until today. Five hundred years ago, the descension of Radha in the form of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu further revealed, rejuvenated and established this form of devotion which became the guideline for the devotees of today. This tradition is called achintya bhedabhed vad.

"In Vrindaban, I experienced the direct Grace of Radha Rani, which was further elevated when I went to Barsana. So, in fact, Shree Radha Rani is my supreme Spiritual Master, although I had taken sannyas in a traditional Vedic way from Jagadguru Shankaracharya of Joshimath in 1950 at Allahabad."

Devotee: "Swamiji, what is the requirement of taking sannyas?"

Swamiji: "There are two kinds of sannyas, Vedic sannyas and Vaishnav sannyas. Vedic sannyas was re-established by Adi Shankaracharya about 1,500 years ago where he made definite disciplines. For instance only a male, born in a brahmin family, can take Vedic sannyas, and he is distinguished by the surname saraswati, ashram or teerth. There is an offshoot of Vedic sannyas called dashnami with surnames giri, puri, bharati, ban aranya, parbat or sagar. There is also a system of taking sannyas in Shaiva and Shakta religion. For any kind of sannyas the requirement is true renunciation and true longing for God's vision. There is no vow to be repeated when taking sannyas. It is an internal devotional qualification.

"Vaishnav sannyas relates to the religions of Radha Krishn, Bhagwan Ram and God Vishnu. Anyone, male or female, can take Vaishnav sannyas if he so qualifies. But to become a preacher sannyasi one has to study scriptures, philosophy and Sanskrit slokas for a considerable length of time. In our organization there are some

sannyasi preachers who went through such a training period and were doing wholehearted devotions for many years under my guidance."

Devotee: "Swamiji, when do you expect to finish the temple?"

Swamiji: "We are going to celebrate our biggest main function, the deity establishment ceremony this year on the 7th and 8th of October. By that time most of the temple work will be finished. Still, there will be a lot left to be done. I'm not worried about that because it is Radha's work and I'm sure it will be accomplished.

"We have employed a permanent draftsman to do the drawings according to our requirements and suggestions. We also used a few architects to help us in certain areas, but mainly the whole concept of the temple was our own."

Devotee: "Swamiji, can you speak on the spiritual meaning of service?"

Swamiji: "The word service doesn't sound very good in the world. Master and servant. Boss and subordinate. But service in the devotional world is something that cannot be described in any words. They all serve each other. Krishna and Radha also serve the saints of their abode. Serving is the nature of love. If you love someone, you think of doing something for him to please him. To love means service. This loving service is raganuga devotion."

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Sidebar: H.D. Swami Prakashanand Saraswati

by Sushree Meera Devi

His Divinity Swami Prakashanand Saraswati, lovingly called Shree Swamiji by his devotees, was born in January, 1929, in a religious and respectable brahmin family of Ayodhya.

Keeping his devotional feelings deep in his heart, Swamiji continued his formal studies. At the age of twenty-one, in 1950, he entered the renounced order of sannyas. Seeing his esteem of renunciation and deep feeling of God-consciousness, in 1952, the Jagadguru Shankaracharya of Joshimath, one of the most renowned religious thrones of India, offered that Swamiji be the successor. He politely refused, saying that he had given his life for the service of Radha Rani so he could not live forever in Allahabad. His final desire was to go to Vrindaban.

Following the strict discipline of sannyas, he lived in the Himalayas (Joshimath, Badrinath, Rishikesh, Haridwar, etc.), forests of Amarkantak, near the Narbada River, Allahabad and Kashi for about four years. Later, he went to Vrindaban and then to Barsana where he spent over 18 years in loving devotion to Radha Krishna in the deep woodlands of Braj. The Divine Will of Shree Radha inspired him to come back into the world and help the souls looking for God realization. With Shree Radha's Grace, he started giving discourses on divine-love-consciousness. In 1971 he decided to spread the message of Radha Rani in an organized way. He founded the International Society of Divine Love in 1975 in India. Since then Swamiji has traveled around the world many times. In 1978 he formed the Society in New Zealand and in 1981 in the US.

Swamiji's state of "conscious ecstasy" is quite evident. In 1976 when he was touring England, a leading physicist of London, C. Maxwell Cade, writer of *The Awakened Mind*, witnessed the ecstatic state of Swamiji in the first meeting. Dr. Cade was doing psycho-biological research for the past eight years on meditation and the altered states of the consciousness of the mind. He writes, "Those who have close contact with His Divinity know that he remains continually in his Divine-Love transcendence. This corresponds to what Carl Jung termed 'the Transcendent Function.'" Further, he expresses his amazement and says that he "had not seen anyone who could equal Swamiji's feat of touching a number of subjects on the head and immediately raising their pattern of consciousness by two levels, from the ordinary waking state into the advanced fifth state. In at least one of these subjects, the higher state persisted for three days and was an unforgettable experience."

Swamiji is humble and forgiving. Although he teaches devotion to Radha Krishn, he has regard for all the religions and all the saints who have shown the true path to God.