

[Sadhus Hold Open Heaven's Gate At Braj](#)

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A Rare Glimpse into the Joyously Austere Life Of Two Dozen Souls
Abiding in Lord Krishna's Realm

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First-time visitors to Vrindavan, a small township of Uttar Pradesh, might mistakenly think they were in an ordinary Indian city. But as they wandered the streets and conversed with those who dwell here, they would soon discover that Vrindavan is unmistakably extraordinary. It is a land of saints, and the home of God.

Often called the "Town of Temples," Vrindavan is a spiritual nerve center, with over 5,000 temples and thousands of sadhus, Hindu monks, living within its boundaries. While some carry cellular phones and drive Maruti cars, many live without electricity or water, things for which they simply have no use. Uppermost in their minds is the name of God, which they chant day and night.

Even the common people of Vrindavan emulate the example the sadhus have set. People do not greet you with "Namaskar," "Good Morning!" or "How do you do!" They just utter two magical words: "Radhe, Radhe." Even a rickshaw puller overtaking another will not ring his bell or blow his horn, but just utter, "Radhe, Radhe." Imagine if all of India's drivers followed suit--the streets would thunder God's name!

Sent on assignment, I stayed for four dear days with Vrindavan's ascetics in an effort to glean their daily disciplines, glimpse their spiritual fervor and seek out their message to humanity. Many holy men here are totally withdrawn from worldly concerns and would not normally grant interviews. But by the generous grace of Sri Krishna, they did so for Hinduism Today.

Vrindavan is nestled in a crook of the holy Yamuna river, eleven kilometers from Mathura city and 136 kilometers south of Delhi in Uttar Pradesh. It is the heart of Vraja Mandala, known as Mathura district or, commonly, Braj. The townships of Braj are none other than the sacred sites of Lord Krishna's activities, believed to be eternally connected with the supreme manifestation of consciousness--epicenters of bliss, joy and divine contact. Here we present a few of the mahatmas, great souls, who grace this land and enhance its eminence.

Baba Chander Shekar Das, 71, has given diksha (initiation) to very few people, but it is said he has over 300 devotees. It is also said that he threatened to blind himself to convince his parents to allow him to become a renunciate. They had no choice. Baba's cottage has no electricity, and he normally does not speak much. But when I told him Hinduism Today was dedicated to promoting Hinduism worldwide, he granted me a few minutes. "I am happy with whatever I have. I recite God's name all the time. I do not believe in caste. I need no outside help or assistance except for a little food--this tummy is the dog which I have to feed. I took sannyas when I was just 21. For the last 50 years I have resided in Vrindavan. Until a few years back, I used to go for bhiksha (seeking alms). Now, I never go out of my kutir, small cottage, and I eat only a few morsels with water. A devotee has given me this small place to stay but I am ready to leave it at any moment. Nothing is fixed in my life. However, I usually get up at 2am, have an

early-morning bath and after that spend all my time reciting God's name. I have left the world. Why be attached? My biggest message to your readers is to recite God's name. This can only be done in the company of noble souls, realized souls and sadhus."

Swami Maheshanand Saraswati, (photo on page one) a senior saint and trustee of Vrindavan's well-known Akhandanand Ashram, says, "Sri Vrindavan Dham is the lila bhumi of Lord Krishna. This place has a special significance for India and the world. Those who reside here--be they saint, sannyasi or grihastha--do so because of what is happening inside Braj, not because of the external surroundings. They are here because our scriptures exhort them to live here for their salvation.

"I get up at 2:30am, for chanting, meditation and a parikrama (circular walk) around Vrindavan. Then we have routine morning programs and discourses at Akhandanand Ashram. Lunch is at 11:15am, followed by rest, study and more discourses in the afternoon, when I also spend time caring for the cows in our gaushala. Then it is time to have darshana of Lord Krishna in Bihari Ji's Temple, supper and a satsang at 8pm. In Vrindavan, everything revolves around Radha and Krishna. There is a saying here that Lord Krishna is the only male here in Vrindavan and the rest of us are his saktis (female companions).

"The saints who live in cottages mostly cook their own food. Those who depend on bhiksha, alms, get so much food that they cannot consume all of it. They give a part of it to the cows.

"Life's circumstances most likely cannot be changed, but one can definitely change oneself and one's attitude. We cannot avoid sorrows and sufferings. But we can develop the courage and strength to deal with life's pains. That is within our hands."

Swami Pragyanand Saraswati, also of Akhandanand Ashram, holds a doctorate in Vedanta from Banares Hindu University. "The main thing that everyone fears is sorrow. But if one is leading a materialistic life, one cannot be free of sorrows. There may be temporary solutions to material problems, but the complete removal of sorrow is only possible through leading a spiritual life. In Vrindavan you will see sadhus without proper clothing or good food, but they are happy and problem free."

Regarding the living conditions in Vrindavan, Swamiji says, "Everything is dependent on God here. As the mother cow automatically gives thick milk for the new-born calf and light milk for a mature calf, so too God provides food for everyone. None go hungry. There are innumerable instances here where the wealthy have discarded all the comforts of life and beg food for their existence. They wear only ordinary clothes and spend their time in chanting the name of God. The Vrindavan ashrams do charitable work. Akhandanand Ashram has 300 cows, 30 saints and 175 workers staying here. At our ashram we have a dispensary which treats 200 to 250 patients daily.

"Unfortunately, in the big cities of India, people are leading a very materialistic life, far away from spirituality. Our Guru, Swami Akhandanand Ji Maharaj, who established this ashram, was also a great scholar and had over a hundred sannyasin disciples. Now we are trying to interact with the city dwellers. Many of the saints of Akhandanand Ashram are now in Calcutta and Bombay giving discourses on Vedanta.

Swami Amarand Das, a resident of Bhagwat Niwas Ashram, 83, a former physician, says, "Every soul has the right to remember God and an atmosphere should be created so that everyone can pursue this. It will be better if the remembrance of God is done under the guidance of some mahatma or saint. I think it was God's call which inspired me to become a sannyasi

when I was 53. When this call came, I did not bother about my career at all."

Baba Vishnu Das, 83, of Bhagwat Niwas Ashram is one of Vrindavan's longest residents. But few know that he is a painter and has painted hundreds of pictures depicting the various places where Radha-Krishna lila [divine sport or play] is believed to be still going on in Vrindavan. He says, "I have been in Bhagwat Niwas for the last 70 years. I have not stayed one night outside this place. I teach Radha-Krishna lila to my disciples and followers. At different places in Braj, different lilas take place. In a day there are 24 hours and there are 8 kalas (periods). It is known to me what lila takes place during each kala. Our tradition, the Gaudiya Sampradaya, doesn't wear the gerua, red-brown, clothes which the other saints wear. Another unique aspect of Bhagwat Niwas is that a group of our sadhus go to get bhiksha from the residents of Vrindavan, and all in the ashram eat whatever comes to us in this manner. Don't forget, the human body has been given to human beings for remembrance of God. All must live in peace and remember God always.

"Unfortunately, all is not well here. This ashram was donated by one Banarasi Devi to my guru, Kripa Sindhu Ji. The trust deed requires all disputes to be settled by the senior saints of the Gaudiya Sampradaya. But since two of the eight trustees passed on, there has been a dispute in the reappointment. One trustee who wishes to appoint his own men has filed suit, taken it to court and brought in the police to harass us. Outside forces are after this valuable ashram land. Outside elements want to use this land for commercial purposes and make money."

Sri Sri Pada Babais a saint, an educationist and philosopher all rolled into one. His close associates do not know much about his past life or age. They told me that he eats and sleeps very

little. Baba heads Vraja Academy, which was inaugurated in 1978. The Academy's frequent symposia on Indological, academic and ecological subjects have attracted a large number of Western and Asian scholars. Baba says, "The message of the saints of Braj is that you must empty yourself and get immersed in the lilas (pastimes) of Radha and Krishna. If we are lost in some other thought, then we cannot immerse ourselves in the consciousness of Braj, in which there is a constant flow of bliss. If one transcends the boundaries of space and time, one can certainly experience the invisible Radha-Krishna lilas taking place in Braj. If you talk to a saint or even an ordinary man of this area, he will tell you that the lilas are taking place right now--at this very moment. The real life of Braj lies beyond the distinctions of woman and man. The saints of Braj are living this very life. When Radhashtami is celebrated at Radha's birthplace, Barsana, the emotions are so powerful that compassion and love are flowing in the air. This can be felt at all the festivals in Braj, which has a strong tradition of temple worship and festivals. In South India, devotion is governed by rules and laws. But in Braj, God is taken in a different way. In Braj He is treated as sakha, friend, or even mother or beloved. The devotion of love is a gift of Braj, as it was born here.

"The message of Upanishads is that the individual and God are one. The moment one is able to recognize and understand this fact, at that very point Hinduism is established, and not before that. There is a need to eliminate the enmity which has been created due to fundamentalism. We have to bring into our fold the entirety of humanity. The great men of our culture have always advocated breaking through the limitations of the world to awaken the eternal values behind these limitations of country, time, seeing oneself as separate from others and good and evil forces. That awakening must first take place at the individual level. This will then bring awakening in society."

Swami Keshav Dev Hari Ji Madhuris the chief trustee of Hari Nikunj Ashram and is the editor and publisher of a quarterly Hindi magazine entitled Iswar Prapti, meaning "approaching God." People know him as "Bhagda Ji," his original name. He told me, "From Bombay I came here as a vanaprasthi. At the age of 75, I took sannyas as per Hindu tradition. Our Hari Nikunj Ashram was established 30 years ago. Ashram activities include publishing a spiritual magazine, running a dispensary and serving food daily to 25 to 40 sadhus. They sit and eat and are not given food to carry with them. This system of making saints sit and eat started in 1975, when, during Mrs. Gandhi's regime, begging was made a punishable offence. Our saints who went out for bhiksha were equated with beggars and harassed. So, certain ashrams, including ours, decided to have the sadhus stay and eat their meal rather than roam with a bowl and get harassed by police.

"Most people and saints living in Vrindavan have a clear cut aim. And most certainly it is not to earn money. People come to live here with the strong belief that if one leaves the body in Vrindavan, one is liberated from the cycle of 84 lakhs of births and deaths as different creatures on this planet. One thing we must always keep in mind is that we have this physical birth to serve mankind. Everything else becomes insignificant. If someone is hungry and thirsty here, it does not matter. He is happy."

Sri Aveshesh Swami, 44, is in charge of Anupyati Gita Ashram, Vrindavan, and he is also special correspondent of the Punjab Kesari, a Hindi daily newspaper which has several editions and very wide readership in Northern India. He told me, "I took sannyas at the age of 21. In Haridwar saints are more egoistic, whereas in Vrindavan the saints are more devotional. In Haridwar they believe in Aham Brahmasmi, meaning 'I and God are one.' What dominates there is jnana, and in Vrindavan

it is bhakti which dominates. In bhakti it is God who is everything. But in jnana one thinks that one's soul is the most important thing. So in the path of jnana there are more chances of becoming arrogant. However, the saints here are more devotional due to the influence of the atmosphere. In bhakti the devotee says 'I am nothing, the Supreme Being is everything.'

"I get up around 3:30 every morning and do meditation, puja and japa. After that, ashram activities start. We have a Sanskrit school for children and also a children's hostel. Then I also attend to visitors and seekers of knowledge. My guru is Swami Gitanand Ji Maharaj. He also has ashrams in Haridwar, Panipat, Delhi and Kurukshetra."

"Life is not very comfortable for the saints of Vrindavan. There are few facilities. However, in the last few years things have improved a lot. That is because Delhi and Vrindavan are coming closer due to better transportation. The rich and wealthy people of Delhi and Punjab keep coming here. These people donate a lot of money and they are also investing a lot of money in building ashrams and flats in Vrindavan. But still a lot more needs to be done. Electricity supply is very erratic here. Similarly there is always a shortage of water here. It is in fact a near crises situation. The government is not giving proper attention to the problems of the saints here. They are mostly dependent on their devotees who provide them with all sorts of help. But due to the increase in development, the crime level has gone up. Sometimes we are under tremendous pressure from the criminals to not expose them. But we cannot suppress the facts or news and therefore face a lot of risks also."

Swami Atul Krishna Goswami, 75, of Sri Shanta Teerth Ashram: "I took sannyas 11 years back. Udipi's main Acharya, Vidya Teerth Maharaj, is my guru. We have 550 children studying with us, to whom we provide uniforms and stationary. The life

in Vrindavan, unfortunately, is not very different from the other cities in India. The reason is that everywhere politics is dominating. Due to this we are going away from our ancient traditions and culture. We are actually going far from our own Self. It grieves us that the coming generation is not getting the requisite samskaras. We used to sit with our elders, gurus and teachers, but today's generation has no time to sit and deliberate with us. They do not agree with our views. Neither are they willing to make any adjustments. Vrindavan is not properly cleaned. We cannot offer you clean drinking water. It is often polluted by the sewage, making our lives miserable. But we can offer you pure milk."

Sri Ganapati Dasa, Vice President, ISKCON, Vrindavan told me, "This center was started by our founder Srila Prabhupada in the year 1975. Prabhupada said that what we normally see in Vrindavan are ugly roads, pigs roaming on the streets and garbage here and there. But this, he said, was the materialistic vision. We have to develop the spiritual vision through which we can see that lilas are still going on. In fact they were always going on in the past, they are happening now and they will continue into the future. He said, 'when you come to Vrindavan Dham, be careful. The good karma of pious activity multiplies. But if you do something bad, that also multiplies a thousand times.' So we should be very cautious here and not take things easy. If you cannot make things better, please go to some other place. For your own sake, do not do undesirable things here."

Swami Hari Mohanis 20 years old. "I left home in 1992 after the Babri Masjid incident. When I went to Ayodhya I saw the saints chanting Harinam (God's name) all the time, I wanted to do the same and was inspired to become a sadhu. I also had the desire to chant God's name all the time. I took sannyas from Sant Nritya Gopal Das Ji of Ayodhya. I am very happy with

this life. My search for God has begun. I have answers to my questions 'Who am I? From where have I come? Where am I to go?' "

Swami Sehchari Sharan,31, told me, "I am from Nimbark Sampradaya. I took sannyas at age 21. I don't do any yoga, but keep myself busy doing Thakur Ji's puja. I am enjoying my time here. I want to get liberated from this world, this is the reason I chant God's name all the time."

Swami Ram Janak Das,35, member of the Bharat Sadhu Samaj, told me, "The place where I am staying has five kutirs [hermitages] with saints from different sects. My message is to live in this world without getting attached to the material things. Be like the milk maid, who walks along gossiping, yet keeps her mind attuned to the four milk pots (God) balanced on her head. Bharatji said that all the world's wealth and property belongs to God. Our duty is to share whatever wealth we have with our father, mother, children, society and nation. And if we fail in this duty, we are cowards who have betrayed God, because everything belongs to Him. So serve humanity to the extent you can."

Sri Shyam Lal Hakimis an old grihastha resident of Vrindavan. Author of several books on religion, he established a printing press which is now run by his sons. He says, "All kinds of saints are living here. The saints are busy with meditation, chanting God's name and doing saintly things. I have been staying here since 1948 and we have had many wonderful experiences on this holy land. I have real peace here. Inspired by the holy men here, I have devoted myself full time to studying scripture and writing. Vrindavan is a beautiful place from a spiritual point of view. I am quite emotional about my relationship with Vrindavan, its saints and its people, because I have led such a blissful life in these holy surroundings. So, the most important thing is that anyone who establishes the right contact with this

place and the holy men here will feel blissful."

Swami Shantanand Ji Vedpathiof Shrotmuni Nivas: "I took initiation in childhood after going to the satsang of Swami Krishnanand of Amritsar, who inspired me towards spirituality. I have been in Vrindavan for twenty years.

"My message is that the craving for material comforts of life will not take you anywhere. The sure-shot formula for attaining peace is not to run after worldly things. The only path is the path of spirituality. And Vrindavan is a fantastic place for spiritual aspirants. The overall atmosphere of Vrindavan is so surcharged with spiritual vibrations that it compels one to turn to God."

Sri 1008 Rangacharya Ji Maharais the president of the Shri Rang Mandir, Vrindavan's Trust Board. He is a married person, but has deep knowledge and understanding of the scriptures. He says, "My day goes in God's remembrance, japa and puja. Certain wrong things have come into our society. For instance our marriages have become very ostentatious and expensive. Here we are missing the essence of what our religion says. Faith is the answer to the crises we face today. We must develop unshakeable faith in God and that will solve many of our problems."

Shah K.S. Guptaone of the senior trustees of Shah Ji's Temple said, "This magnificent temple (pictured on page one) was built by my forefathers from Lucknow entirely from Italian marble. It is a blend of Greek, Mughal and Hindu architecture. An average of 1500 people visit here daily. Basanti Kamra, a special room, is a real attraction. The ceiling and walls are painted with multicolored oil paintings. This room is open for darshan only twice a year." The family who constructed the temple had their pictures engraved on the temple floor, in order to receive the blessings of the Krishna devotees who

walked on them.

Dr. Shiv Prasad, City Magistrate, Mathura, who was visiting Vraja Academy, told Hinduism Today, "Sadhus are citizens like all others of India. What can we do especially for them? By and large the Government of India is involved in looking after their welfare, but again, the question is what can the government do? There are so many dharmashalas and ashrams which look after the welfare of the sadhus."

Arun Kumar Sinha, District Magistrate, Mathura, explained the government's general approach. "Saints here have an infrastructure of their own. They are revered and respected by society and the government's role is supplementary. We provide them basic facilities such as electricity and water."

In the Company of Saints

There are and have always been many holy men and women within the Sanatana Dharma. They are considered holy because of their loving surrender to God and the Gods, their dedication to our faith, their accomplishments and profound realizations. Their knowing is more important than their learning, their purity more essential than their position. It is very difficult to be so disciplined and devoted, and so we honor and love those who have attained God's grace, and worship the divine within them. In an effort to include as many sadhus as we could in this article, the space we allotted to each is admittedly too short. To these great souls we apologize for any possible unintentional offense. We truly hold in our hearts the ancient Yajur Veda's unequivocal affirmation, "Without regard for themselves, without urges and efforts, absorbed in contemplation and established in the higher Self, they endeavor to remove evil deeds and surrender their bodies by renunciation. Such is a paramahansa, such indeed is a paramahansa!"

Rajiv Malik, one of Hinduism Today's India correspondents, lives in Delhi. He is married, a free-lance journalist and part owner of a textile show room.

Sidebar:

Radha-Krishna Lila Sadhana and Belief

"Five thousand year ago, the supreme personality of God, Krishna, with the grace of Radha, who is the life essence of Krishna's all greatness, revealed the most intimate Divine Bliss to the Gopis, the cowherder saints of Braj district on the full moon night of Sharad. On that particular night Krishna, Radha and all the Gopis danced and sang together in an extremely divine and playful manner. The lilas of Radha-Krishna are eternally happening in the heavenly realm. Our descended masters advise us to meditate with eyes open or closed, imagining with loving feelings that one is sitting in the Divine Vrindavan, watching the lilas of Radha-Krishna while continuously reciting their name."

--Swami Prakashanand Saraswati, Barsana Dham, Texas, USA.

Hinduism Today wishes to thank Swamiji for his help in arranging contacts for this article