

Chapter 7

Re-examining Ecological Aspects of Vrindavan Pilgrimage

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You have seen the forest filled with flowers glowing with the rays of the full moon; Made beautiful by leaves of trees, playfully shimmering from the gentle breeze off the river Yamuna

Schweig (2005, p. 31)

Pilgrimage is a journey made to a sacred place as an act of religious devotion. A prominent and creative activity in many religions, it is one of the oldest forms of travel. Pilgrimage is already a statement or action of flows of faith through travel within, beyond and across borders. It shows how beliefs can be moved, altered and managed to meet the differing needs of pilgrims and the pilgrimage destination. The process also illustrates how pilgrimage can go wrong; different priorities and foci produce different necessities and concerns. These are often exacerbated where vastly dissimilar cultures are in contact and where important yet disparate religious, social and ecological issues are at play. In pilgrimage, boundaries and borders are created, invented and reinvented, pushed and sometimes broken. This chapter presents a situation where the physical, spiritual and ecological aspects of a specific pilgrimage location are pushed to their limits and how modern precedents such as those enabled by modern transportation and religious tourism meet traditional religious and ecological values.

Perspectives in religious anthropology, religious tourism and pilgrimage studies have witnessed dramatic change over the last few decades. These have occurred in parallel with changes in other modern technological contexts. Internet pilgrimage (Hill-Smith 2009; MacWilliams 2002), science fiction pilgrimage (Porter 2004) and amusement park pilgrimage (Hendry 2007) all reinterpret the Durkheimian notion of the sacred as 'non-ordinary' experience (Durkheim 1965; Turner 1986). These approaches introduce a movement away from a pilgrimage invented and warranted by religion to one borne of fresh hi-tech ideals and industrialized journeying. Recent

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volumes in anthropology chronicle this break from the traditions and habits of clergy-based and conventional travel to holy sites for emancipation, redemption or salvation (Badone and Roseman 2004; Kitiarsa 2008; see also Chap. 8 by Pacey, Chap. 6 by Millie and Chap. 2 by Reuter in this volume). These works have commonly evolved and arisen out of similar contexts to this volume – scholars meet to discuss topical issues, share personal experiences, collaborate and work together. Such intellectual situations can themselves be interpreted as pilgrimage encounters. The days are gone where travel to a remote ashram was essential and even a prerequisite for enlightenment and progress on one's chosen path.

Although contemporary interpretations of belief systems representing idealized and symbolic rather than actual representations of place employ prevailing forms and norms such as megachurches (Chin 2008) and the merchandizing of religious paraphernalia to distant diaspora (Sinha 2008), the traditional method of physical movement to a sacred place is still the most common and instinctive of all pilgrimage processes (Coleman and Eade 2004; Coleman and Elsner 1995). Basso (1996) proposes a method to arrive at an understanding of place, its meaning and its spirituality, by being reflective and tapping into the relevance and vibration of the place names given by the original inhabitants. By observing the natural and divine practices of the Western Apache and reinterpreting how they relate to their land through language and inherited wisdom, he suggests being slow, introspective and open to listening to the ancestors who knew the land intimately. Similarly, in their volume dedicated to the ethnography and practice of walking, Ingold and Vergunst (2008) depict the pilgrim both as 'impressionable', i.e. being open to receiving the sense already present in a space-place and 'impressioner', one who impresses something of the sacred onto the space-place by dint of their contemplative presence where they walk and think. Thinking and feeling are also more subtle and abstract views and interpretations of pilgrimage (Hill-Smith 2009; Shinde 2008) where a degree of knowing of the sacred is achieved through direct connection with the place we traverse and upon which we meditate.

I explore this form and approach to pilgrimage, which I term 'traditional pilgrimage', in this chapter. I aim specifically to contextualize a significant body of literature dealing with ecological and theological aspects of the Krishna cult and incorporate this with a personal process of pilgrimage. As a secondary aim, I explore whether scriptural descriptions are playful analogies and metaphors describing what once was (or might be imagined), or whether they are tools that can be utilized to provide a reinterpretation of understanding the (potential) effects of modernization and its influence on the state of religious pilgrimage in Vrindavan.

Vrindavan: The Divine Forest Grove

Vrindavan, northern India, the medieval Hindu pilgrimage town associated with the legend of Radha and Krishna, is a pertinent and illustrative case study for observing and understanding literal and metaphorical notions and concerns of modern

pilgrimage. My initial attraction through pilgrimage to Vrindavan was personal, not as a pilgrim alone, but as an environmentalist – pilgrim. In 1998, I travelled to Vrindavan to work on World Wide Fund for Nature – India's (WWF-India) *Vrindavan Conservation Project* (VCP) (see Nash 1998). But what began as an environmental interest became a philosophical passion. While the work of WWF-India has concluded, my involvement with the area is ongoing and personal. The project was headed by noted local ecologist Sri Sevak Sharan, with whom I have continued to collaborate since the winding up of the VCP in late 1999. Our collaboration has focused on the development of a philosophical precept which we term the 'Vrindavan environmental concept'. One of our major tasks is to document the history and theory behind Vrindavan conservation, of which the VCP is one major chapter, and to synthesize and present a concise method of *sadhana* (spiritual practice) based on the lessons which have arisen out of the successes and failings of Vrindavan conservation.

The significance of Vrindavan as a place of cultural and spiritual significance has rendered it a *dham*, a highly charged place of divine congregation within Indian religion, thought and folklore. In past practices such as temple visitation by locals, chanting and donor seeking, and contemporary practices such as encouraging both domestic and international devotees, Vrindavan illustrates the environmental and sociological effects and impacts of the massive movement of people on remote and ecologically sensitive places.

Modern Vrindavan *dham* has not lived up to the descriptions of well-known medieval saints of the divine forest groves (Goswami 1991; White 1977). Open sewers, waste mismanagement, governmental corruption and sporadic development have rendered Vrindavan an ecologically disturbed and unhygienic place to live. Over the last 30 years, the outskirts of Vrindavan have been sub-divided into several housing colonies; the circumambulation path surrounding the town has been sealed, leading to increased vehicle traffic and the deforestation of previously remote areas. The recent construction of a transportation bridge over the Yamuna river has been perceived locally and internationally as unprecedented in its developmental and ecological harm.¹ The effect of this increased human load on Vrindavan provided the impetus for the development of an approach to environmentalism in Vrindavan, which has focussed on the preservation and reforestation of the sacred groves of the town. This philosophical perspective and environmental approach specific to Vrindavan is detailed below.

Re-examining the processes of pilgrimage (Coleman and Eade 2004) in light of current general theory and thought in Indian environmentalism (Chapple 1998) helps explain the reasoning behind Vrindavan environmental perspectives. Approaching Vrindavan pilgrimage and its related ecological aspects anthropologically demonstrates, first, the relationship between visitation to the pilgrimage location as a goal on the path of devotion and salvation (Haberman 1994) and the divine symbology of the pilgrimage location. Second, it highlights the mismatch between the ancient scriptural depictions and the 'real' contemporary manifestation of the pilgrimage setting, religiosity and the movement of pilgrims. Third, it illustrates the importance of understanding some axiomatic imports and assumptions of

Hindu scriptures and their role in influencing pilgrimage purposes and outcomes. In developing this argument, I report on data gathered during participant observation conducted in Vrindavan for over a decade.

A Brief History of Vrindavan Conservation

Vrindavan was founded in the early 1500s, and the remnants of this city planning are still present in the architecture and streetscape of the old town. Contemporary influences of pilgrimage, tourism and expanded development, however, have overwhelmed the town, now with a population of approximately 60,000. The environmental and social load on the town changed particularly with the establishment of the Hare Krishna movement (the International Society for Krishna Consciousness – ISKCON) worldwide in the 1960s and the associated influx of pilgrims to Vrindavan. From this time, Vrindavan has welcomed increasing numbers of Indian and non-Indian pilgrims to its limited geographical space. As a result, the many of the forest groves and meadows for which Vrindavan is famed have turned into housing and infrastructure developments. Pilgrimage to and contemplation in these groves are what attracted pilgrims to Vrindavan in the past. At the same time, the ancient temples in the older regions of the town have become increasingly dilapidated, the streets clogged with human and vehicle traffic, the general ambience of the town has become extremely disturbed and the environmental conditions within the town are poor (Shinde 2008; Haberman 2006). Sullivan (1998) has argued that as a consequence, Vrindavan pilgrims have been disappointed that they are unable to view the imagined landscape of Vrindavan depicted in religious scriptures:

Vrindavan is unusual, and faces special ecological problems...it is also a specifically religious problem for the devotee of Kṛṣṇa... Pilgrims come to Vrindavan with the hope of seeing Kṛṣṇa's land, that is, having darshan of God in the form of his ponds and forests... Devotees have cited the appearance of the region as causing despair...The conflict between descriptions in ancient devotional texts and the reality of Vrindavan today is stark. (1998, pp. 253–254)

The ecological mandate and conceptualization of Vrindavan conservation are integral to the theology of the Krishna cult and, specifically, the *Gaudiya sampradaya*, the tradition of Krishna worship originating from Bengal and associated with Sri Chaitanya's *sankirtan* (congregational chanting) movement (Sullivan 1998). ISKCON belongs to this theological lineage, and its beliefs and teachings are based primarily on the writings of Bhaktivedanta Swami (1992). The incorporation of ISKCON as an independent religious denomination in the late 1960s, encouraging thousands of non-Indian pilgrims to travel to holy places such as Vrindavan and Braj every year, has been a major factor in the increased human load on the area. Over and above previous pilgrimage estimates, in recent years, there has been a significant increase in Indian tourists, domestic and international, for both long and short stays (Shinde 2008; Sullivan 1998).

The prominent doctrinal presentation in ISKCON builds on scholarship into the aesthetics of *ras* (bliss, delight), the role of *leela* (play) in the personage of Krishna (Kinsley 1978) and the importance of Vaishnava poets in presenting the mysticism of the Krishna doctrine (Miller 1977). Although Sullivan (1998) does not make such links between these philosophical standpoints and ecological parameters explicit, these form the ontological basis and *raison d'être* for the evolution of what developed into the directives of several modern environmental perspectives in Vrindavan. I have not been exposed to all these environmental perspectives in Vrindavan, nor would this be possible considering the multifaceted approach to environmentalism in Vrindavan and the number of different perspectives. Here, I present only those with which I have knowledge based on my fieldwork in Vrindavan with WWF-India and subsequently. These can be summarized as follows:

1. Vrindavan is conceptualized both as the transcendental realm of Krishna and the physical environment. Both of these locations are very important ecologically, with the latter serving as a terrestrial representation of the former.
2. Religious and spiritual methods of understanding Krishna theology and its relationship to Vrindavan must involve ecological considerations.
3. The mismatch between scriptural depictions and the actual physical state of Vrindavan reflects a lack of balance in human priorities and human mismanagement.
4. Idealized stances including the idea that only the transcendental Vrindavan matters as opposed to managing and addressing the current ecological state of the terrestrial Vrindavan are not taken seriously.
5. Self-introspection (*sadhana*) and spiritual practice through service (*seva*) are integral to achieving a balanced personal state for the individual and hence a balanced ecological state with the natural and cultural world. Krishna's personal example of self-balance and its resultant nature-world balance serves as a model of personal ecological awareness creation and environmentalism.
6. In Vrindavan, nature is inherently divine. Trees, plants and animals are our teachers, and we should become aware of their divinity and worship them.
7. Ontologically, the actual location of Vrindavan provides the understanding that any place or environment, when perceived with awareness of its inherent divinity, is Vrindavan. The *raison d'être* of Krishna's incarnation as an environmentalist in Vrindavan is to teach and live this.

The description of the devotional characteristics and symbolization in scriptural and devotional injunctions has not been directly related to explaining the existence and outcome of environmental activities in Vrindavan. In contrast, instances of this detailed aesthetic and ecological imagery abound in the *rasika* (devotional) poetry of many medieval saints of Vrindavan (and see the scriptural example with which this chapter opened). However, as Sullivan (1998, p. 252) narrates, 'there is trouble in paradise today, on earth if not in heaven'. This mismatch requires a review of how development has negatively contributed to this state and how environmental groups have worked with the local community based on present, historical and scriptural ideals.

Development and Pilgrimage

Sullivan (1998) and Shinde (2008) present clear outlines of the history of the environmental activities in Vrindavan and particularly the influence of WWF-India. WWF-India's Vrindavan Conservation Project was instrumental in creating the initial environmental awareness in the town, involving religious institutions and the local community in large-scale tree planting and providing environmental education in local schools. By 1997, the project had established 12 nature clubs in Vrindavan schools and within the community, with 160 young members and more than 10 nurseries provided up to 150,000 saplings for tree planting in and around the town (Prime 1998). The VCP ran for almost a decade and was seen as a significant vehicle for linking religious and community values in environmental conservation. This was primarily because the heavy environmental and social load on the town had changed so dramatically as Krishna became a household name in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The 'environment of Vrindavan pilgrimage' (Shinde 2008) is shaped by broad socio-economic, religious and political processes that arise within and outside of Vrindavan. The external forces that influence Vrindavan, e.g. religious tourism, national and international environmental and social programmes, are rarely conducted in consultation with local politicians or the local community.

By the end of the 1970s, the Krishna consciousness movement had become one of the largest globalized new religious movements. It is a model example of flows of faith and presents a major problematic: how can the large gap be lessened between Indian and foreign members' understanding of the centrality of the relationship of Radha and Krishna, as a spiritual metaphor and dialectic, and a spirituality based ecological vision, similar to ecological perspectives from Vrindavan?

Movements with similar ontological bases continue to crop up which pose similar problematics.² I have attended numerous meetings over the past decade, met with government officials to discuss possible projects and incentives and written to international stakeholders with an aim to recruit 'men and money' for the continuation of similar work. My experience has shown that despite all the goodwill and good intentions to bring about change in Vrindavan, the town continues to remain a target for development and modern religious tourism rather than ecological regard. These overarching and powerful political and economic priorities reflect the greater priorities of contemporary India. In Krishna thought, the place of terrestrial Vrindavan and awareness of its natural beauty provide the conduit for pilgrimage to the transcendental Vrindavan: the earthly Vrindavan and its promise of a pristine natural environment is not only required, but it can lead us to the heavenly Vrindavan. A certain level of environmental awareness is required, and Vrindavan is scripturally posed as a place where the sanctity of relationships between humans and nature are upheld.

But there are pilgrimage-based and pilgrimage-influenced reasons why the town has suffered so badly ecologically and how this contrasts with the aim of the pilgrimage. Modern international pilgrimage to Vrindavan and the introduction of starkly differing international cultural perspectives on the worship of Krishna can

be summarized in the following ways (cf. Theodor 2000). First, ISKCON's institutional structure and the spiritual practice of congregational chanting and missionization activities it advocates internationally (Wuaku 2009) have strongly influenced the religious situation in Vrindavan. ISKCON-related properties make up a large proportion of the newly developed land particularly in the western region of Vrindavan. Second, ISKCON pilgrims from all over the world converge on Vrindavan several times a year, usually coinciding with Krishna festivals in March and October. They attend discourses, visit temples, purchase local products and crafts, consume food and water resources and inevitably undertake pilgrimage, a practice heralded as integral to Krishna worship. Modern services and facilities continue to provide for these pilgrims. Third, the philosophy originally taken outside of India by Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada in the 1960s posed Vrindavan as important to a pilgrim's spiritual practice and growth. While this philosophy has continued to adapt and change to suit modern trends (Shinn 1987), the existence of several factions within ISKCON has meant that more institutions, e.g. Gaudiya Vedanta Samiti, Vrindavan Institute for Vaishnava Culture and Studies, have developed not only encouraging more pilgrims to come to Vrindavan but also creating disparate philosophies and methods of undertaking Vrindavan pilgrimage. These newer philosophies have had a deleterious effect in creating continuity within ISKCON, and its factions and have seriously undermined the role of religious groups and leaders in taking responsibility for the economic, social and environmental effects that have resulted from increased human pilgrimage load.

Although originally Indian-based, these modern interpretations of Krishna belief have severely compromised the beauty prevalent in ancient descriptions of Vrindavan and Braj. The two million pilgrims per year (Sullivan 1998), along with the subdivision and development of previously forested areas, and a growing local resident population, have turned large tracts of forest and grove into ducts for open sewers. As Sullivan (1998, pp. 253–254) writes:

Obviously the degradation of the environment is an ecological problem, and a problem for the quality of life, but it is also a specifically religious problem for the devotee of Krishna. Pilgrims come to Vrindavan with the hope of seeing Krishna's land, that is, having *darshana* of God in the form of his ponds and forests. Devotees want to bathe in the Yamuna to gain merit... Deforestation and desertification are also a religious problem because one is to visualise oneself as a participant in Krishna's *lila* [sporting play] in the beautiful setting he creates for devotees eternally, but the earthly manifestation of Krishna's *lila* is not as inspirational or conducive to a sense of wonder as could be desired.

The co-existence of lofty scriptural ideals and metaphors, national and international pilgrimage load, and a mismatch between the modern life and practical village living by locals in town have also created conflict, with violence, mobbings and considerable corruption (Paramadvaiti 2010), renting the social, cultural and environmental fabric of Vrindavan. Ample international funds from international bodies, e.g. WWF-India, Friends of Vrindavan (an NGO set up by several British Krishna devotees in 1996), and consistent numbers of patrons and pilgrims, have not been able to curb this environmental destruction. I now describe some ontologies of Vrindavan pilgrimage.

Braj: Some Background

Vrindavan is in the Braj region of northern India. Braj, or *Vraja*, translates as ‘movement’ in Sanskrit. Other meanings are to wish, bend, turn, shun and renounce. Braj can also mean attraction, magnetism or pull, highlighting the import of Braj pilgrimage for the devotee seeking the *darshan* (sacred viewing) of their *ishta* (worshippable lord, i.e. Krishna) in his own abode. Braj is the terrestrial hermitage and the representation of Krishna’s celestial abode, an earthly depiction of the divine pleasure groves where Krishna sported with his eternal consort Radha in times past. For Krishna devotees who aspire to salvation through the metaphoric merging with the divine couple, Radha-Krishna, pilgrimage to Vrindavan is a measure of their dedication to the path. Braj is the body of Krishna, and Krishna is embodied in Braj. The entire geographical area of Braj is thus considered sacred.

The concept of Krishna pilgrimage and the mythic association of Krishna with the specific landscape of Braj have existed since circa the fourth century A.D. (Haberman 1994), although the physical landscape of Braj has only existed as a Krishna pilgrimage site since the sixteenth century (Shah 2007). *Parikrama* (circumambulation) is integral to the practice of Krishna pilgrimage. This ritual of devotional performance can be performed and enacted at various levels and scales, supposedly to achieve various spiritual benefits and ends in this world and the next. Within the 12 main forest groves dotted around Vrindavan or any other sacred grove within Braj, *parikrama* entails walking (normally clockwise) around significant features of the grove, such as prominent trees, topographical features and temples. By circumambulating these features, and being mindful of their inherent spiritual potency, the pilgrim remembers the spiritually surcharged pastimes that took place in these groves. The next level of pilgrimage takes place around the entire perimeter of the grove. Finally, the broadest level of pilgrimage is a circuit of Braj (Entwistle 1987), the *Braj Mandala Parikrama*, a ritual walk that takes approximately 1 month and is celebrated yearly by thousands of devotees in the *Kartik* month in late September to early October. This pilgrimage is the focal point of meditation and worship; the circumambulation of geographical, topographical and/or greater ecological features explicitly signifies the symbolic role and purpose of the devotee – to move from the periphery to the centre, i.e. from a state of seeking to a state of enlightenment.

While Braj pilgrimage generally attracts only those who worship Krishna, there is an invitation to, and for, all to seek out this *Kendra* (centre) and to find Krishna through the process of pilgrimage connected with the pastimes of Radha-Krishna. This process of pilgrimage occurs in the context of a place purportedly marked by an ecological awareness and balance that Radha-Krishna exemplified. In scriptural depictions (e.g. Haberman 2006), Radha-Krishna are presented quite ideologically as divine environmentalists, living a life in consonance with nature and outer society. Despite varying degrees of ritual rigour and theological perspectives in the different Krishna temple *sampradayas* (traditions) of contemporary Braj and Vrindavan, pilgrimage or *tirtha-yatra* (journeying to holy places) is a unifying

element. Whether on a small scale, e.g. encouraging local residents to visit the neighbourhood temple, or an international scale, attracting devotees to engage in Braj pilgrimage is central in all versions of Krishna worship. Entwistle (1987) represents Braj as the converging point of a Krishna devotee's pilgrimage focus (see below on centrifugal and centripetal movements). The specific pilgrimage to the 12 *vans* (forests) of Vrindavan is the culmination of a Krishna devotee's self-seeking through pilgrimage (Haberman 1994).

Environmental imagery is plentiful in academic and theological literature on pilgrimage. The associated spiritual achievement attached to performing such acts of devotion and penance, in highly charged and often distant sacred locations, is considered noble and worthy of respect. However, the very practical task of instigating stringent legislation and environmental ordinances is often missing or unclear. How these sites should be maintained and preserved for posterity is generally covered by the ideology and sentimentalism of sticking to the myth of 'Krishna: The Distant God' rather than 'Krishna: The Lover, Environmentalist and Real World citizen' in the here and now. This perspective of immanence (God is in the world, God is in nature, God is (in) the sacred groves of Vrindavan) incorporated with the perspective of transcendence (God is in heaven, God is in *Goloka* (planet of the cows), God plays in but eventually leaves Vrindavan) valorizes the claim that the actual pilgrimage place of Vrindavan is important and should be conserved and preserved. This forms the basis of much of the environmental work that has been carried out in Vrindavan over the past 30 years (Prime 1992; Sullivan 1998).

Dualities of Pilgrimage

Ontologically, *tirtha-yatra* (pilgrimage) represents the movement of two equal and opposite forces depicted in the *murti* (forms) of Radha-Krishna in Krishna cosmology and wider Hindu thought. Centripetal movement (*vraja*) by the devotee on the periphery towards the centre (*Kendra*, i.e. Krishna) is facilitated by undertaking spiritual pilgrimage to *tirthas* (holy places). This is complimented by the centrifugal movement from the centre signifying movement back into the world. Such a pilgrimage journey can be as short as a few minutes or hours or last several months or even years. A devotee's knowledge and experience gained by pilgrimage are then to be utilized in their worldly affairs and will help in their ultimate *moksha* (salvation). This is represented aesthetically in the depiction of the *ras mandala* or *ras lila* (circulatory loving play dance) of Radha and Krishna; in this divine portrayal, the devotee or devoted in the form of Radha, *prakriti* (feminine), goes on pilgrimage and unites through the practice of devotion (*bhakti yoga*) with and to the centre, Krishna, *purusha* (masculine). The periphery, symbolized in human form as a devotee and ultimately as *prakriti* (Nature herself), achieves the goal of the *Kendra* (centre). Simultaneously, *Kendra* or *Brahman* (spirit) is realized in the world through the eyes and heart of the self-realized devotee.

The scriptural representation of this *yoga* (union) of devotee (human, nature) with the object of devotion (Krishna, love) represents the ecology of Braj as the divine body of Krishna, with the *vans* (forests) considered to be the limbs or parts of Krishna's body. The *Bhagavat-purana* is the scripture revealed by Vyasadeva, the cosmic scribe, to appease himself from his dissatisfaction after scribing the entire Vedas, accepted by various denominations of the Krishna cult as their main theological directive. The *Bhagavat-purana* abounds with descriptions of Krishna as the valiant and noble environmentalist. He usurps violent and destructive demons, rides the Yamuna river of a poisonous snake and demonstrates by example how to live in consonance with nature and society. Numerous scholars have dealt with the ecological ordinances of the Krishna perspective (e.g. Prime 1992) and reflected on the idealistic picture of the relationship between religion, devotion, pilgrimage and faith vis-à-vis ecological matters. Below, using primary field data and observation of the modern pilgrimage town's current ecological state, I reflect on Sullivan's (1998) summary of the environmental history of Vrindavan. I aim to propose a model for understanding aspects of the link between local and global pilgrimage, the traditional understanding of the relationships between humans, nature and spirituality. Before I do this, I consider some recent theoretical perspectives on pilgrimage in order to understand what an ecologically aware Braj and Vrindavan pilgrimage might be.

Re-examining *Reframing Pilgrimage*

Hindu pilgrimage is generally associated with a focus on travel to several ancient holy sites where saints have performed austerities and penance (e.g. Bharati 1963). It does not focus on visiting a single locale such as Mecca for Muslims or Jerusalem for Jews and Christians. Rather, it recommends the contemplative wandering common in *parikrama* to numerous charged holy sites. This large spectrum of pilgrimage possibilities and eclecticism reflect the pantheism common to Hinduism and allow that such visitations may change with the seasons and even according to the devotee's own personal whim or convenience (Coleman and Elsner 1995). In *Reframing Pilgrimage*, Coleman and Eade (2004) address, re-dress and re-invent fundamental notions of 'the pilgrim', the pilgrimage target and how pilgrims cross over borders and boundaries of nation, culture and thought. Whether the pilgrimage sojourn is by motorcycle (Dubisch 2004), or whether pilgrimage actually involves a type of 'homecoming' (Schramm 2004), the pilgrim must absorb elements of the character and place of the pilgrimage. The process involves the direct relationship of and interaction between the pilgrim and the object or place of the pilgrimage. Pilgrimage to Braj, and specifically to Vrindavan and its environs, is a theological description and interpretation of direct pilgrimage to Krishna himself: Krishna and his holy land are one and the same. Like most other pilgrimages, too, Krishna pilgrimage involves an identity transformation or transformative experience, the most common for Krishna devotees from the USA and elsewhere in the 'north' is moving from a state of 'extreme unhappiness with their life' (Breckwoldt 1973, pp. 70–71) to one of purported enlightenment, peace and change

of identity (Squarcini 2000). In order for this transformation to take place, Krishna pilgrimage, it seems, must involve travel:

An underlying assumption of pilgrimage is that the land cannot be intensely known and experienced from a distance; it can be fully known, its story deeply appreciated, only by traveling the land itself. The physical immediacy of pilgrimage, the actual contact with the land intensifies the experience of appropriating the story of the land, learning to see its underlying, implicit structure, sensing its spiritually enlivening power. The experience can be lasting, transforming one's perspective permanently. (Kinsley 1998, p. 235)

Hopgood (1997, pp. 202–204) identifies six key pilgrimage ‘transformations’: physical transformation, temporal transformation, existential quest, tactile transformation/being ‘in touch’, journey completion and *communitas*. When expanding on temporal transformation, Hopgood (1997, p. 203) writes that this is a:

[t]ransformation back to a generalized or “mythical” past. The illusion to “the good old days” is useful in setting one's self apart from the current or ordinary into another frame and in seeking transformation through the sights, sounds, and feelings of this place and that “other time.” For the serious devotee, this illusion is not necessary, though it may be helpful [...].

I propose that the Vrindavan pilgrim is a ‘temporal transformation pilgrim’ because the quest of pilgrims is to realize Krishna, the environmentalist lover (Haberman 2006), now in his heavenly abode but still inherently present in his earthly home. The pilgrim's goal is to transform his or her life and existence. In doing so, the pilgrim is, at least in part, transforming his or her life through the act of pilgrimage in order to ‘set themselves apart’ from the ordinary into another frame. As Hopgood describes, pilgrims seek to merge into the ‘sights, sounds and feelings of this place’. This perspective is shared by Kinsley (1998, p. 235), who claims that Hindu pilgrimage:

is often a process of learning to see the underlying or implicit spiritual structure of the land; this often involves a change in perspective, a change that is religiously transformative. Pilgrimage is the process whereby pilgrims open themselves to the sacred power, the numinous quality, of the landscape, whereby they establish a rapport with the land that is spiritually empowering.

Even superficial perusal of the *rasika* (intensely devotional) poetry and theological literature of various traditions of the Krishna cult (see, e.g. Pauwels' 1996 analysis of the Hari-Ram Vyas tradition) see the natural environment as integral to the relationship of a united Radha-Krishna and the relationship between Radha-Krishna signifying the cosmic dualistic entity and its interaction with the world. Using the metaphor ‘the world is Krishna's body’, a devoted pilgrim, by definition, should be an ecologically conscious individual. This is in opposition to what ‘pious Hindus’ may believe that the mythical dimensions of their Beloved's landscape is more important than the ‘everyday’ perceptions of the incidental landscape where they happen to live. Kinsley (1998, p. 239) writes further:

Learning the story of the land can be transformative for the Ban Yatra [forest journey] pilgrim. In the process of the pilgrimage, the pilgrim comes to view Braj geography in a special way. Where we might see simply rivers, hills, ponds, and forests, the pilgrim sees a landscape charged with divinity, a land that was actually shaped by mythic events.

Vrindavan appears as a metaphor for a terrestrial heaven similar to many esoteric Christian traditions and other interpretations of heaven on earth, e.g. the earthly paradises depicted in Baha'i and Jehovah's Witnesses teachings, and as a literal case study in ecological management and awareness. Its theological history purports to be the quintessential example of pristine environmental stewardship involving humans, nature and divinity; it would seem that with the aid of human stewards the land of Vrindavan, with its Krishna myth and intrinsic blessedness, could bridge the gap between the distant and the far, the Transcendent and the Immanent and the East and the West via the process of pilgrimage and a type of modern environmental proselytizing about the significance of the town beyond the confines of India. Various schools of environmental thought in Vrindavan set about summarizing this theology as well as undertaking intensive conservation work to preserve the natural and cultural environment of the town.

Seven Levels of Human Ecology

In this section, I present a model incorporating several levels of pilgrimage and an understanding of flows of faith in a modern context that has developed from conducting fieldwork with Vrindavan environmental NGOs. This model challenges the relevance of previous research on the relationship between tourism and pilgrimage, and the possible secularization of pilgrimage. The model of human ecology provides a tool to observe pilgrimage in terms of a cycle. The preliminary philosophy of this model is presented in Sharan (1989, 1995) and is described for Vrindavan conservation in Prime (1992, pp. 19–22).

The cycle begins with the Divine or divinity and ends with ecology. The model treats humans as custodians to this balance. It illustrates how ecological and spiritual awareness can evolve from pilgrimage and how pilgrimage nurtures a holistic understanding and connection with nature. These levels occur simultaneously and incorporate each other to form a representation of a holistic totality or vision that sees beyond religion, geographical location, class or caste, or borders of any kind. Here, the seven levels or dimensions of human ecology are presented as an interpretation of pilgrimage. They are:

1. Divinity/spirituality – The world within and without is divine by its very nature.
2. Nature – This is the outer manifestation, the curtain, of this inner (divine) truth (§1).
3. Culture – All creatures learn from nature, and as human beings, we give and take from nature, and this becomes our culture.
4. Heritage – Specific cultural expressions are maintained over time; they become deeply embedded in our personal dealings and our environment, e.g. art, music, architecture, food and lifestyle.
5. Pilgrimage – A method where we can see differences and similarities across time and environments through physical, intellectual and emotional travel.

6. Human welfare – Pilgrimage helps us to realize that ultimately human beings share similar strivings, problems, needs, desires and will to find peace in life. This is related to human welfare in social and environmental domains.
7. Ecology – When human beings are in consonance with themselves, their close social group, greater society and nature, then the possibility of ecology and a balanced relationship between the human and nature is arrived at. Vrindavan is a prototypical example of this relationship. This ideal of human-nature-spirit interaction is termed *Vrindavan – The human sanctuary*.

I have worked with Sri Sevak Sharan on refining this model to form a theoretical description posing scientific, religious and pilgrimage-based questions as to why Vrindavan environmental perspectives and practical incentives have not lived up to their own expectations and how environmentally aware pilgrimage is an essential aspect of Krishna pilgrimage and hence flows of faith. Based on extensive fieldwork carried out by Shinde (2008), environmental awareness does not appear to be a major priority for pilgrims to Vrindavan; this seems especially so for ‘weekend pilgrims’ from Delhi.

Shinde (2008, 2007) attempts to account for the reasons why this beliefs or knowledge beyond borders has not been synthesized or accepted by the masses of pilgrims that converge on the town every year. He claims that a large majority of pilgrims fall into the category of ‘sacred sightseers’ (Shinde 2007, p. 193). The dramatic increase in (pilgrimage) tour operators and food venues in the vicinity of Vrindavan’s most popular temples suggests that there has been a great shift from traditional pilgrimage to ‘consumer pilgrimage, where visitors demand good accommodation and contemporary food’ (Shinde 2007, p. 193). Traditional Vrindavan pilgrimage, which is intimately connected to the land and myth of Braj and Krishna, has, like other pilgrimage locations in India, become dwarfed by the increased character of tourism. Such a shift has also been seen in pilgrimages in other Third World locations (Gladstone 2005) and through the process of religious commodification (Kitiarsa 2008).

My own suggestions for this shift away from ecologically aware pilgrimage are based on observing over a decade of vast ecological changes in Vrindavan, which are commonly associated with tourism-based changes. Pilgrims and the ‘pilgrimage industry’ have begun to commodify the pilgrimage process and experience. Pilgrims tend not to undertake the long *tirtha-yatras* (journeying to holy places) common in the past. Vrindavan pilgrimage has been made easily accessible to the uninitiated through the increase in the speed of travel to Vrindavan from Delhi, the increase in creature comforts available in Vrindavan guest houses, and the more fluid facilitation of popular and easily approachable pilgrimage ends such as *darshan* (sacred vision of the deity) and access to the company of modern spiritual leaders and scriptural orators. Through this modernization, the traditional process of what appears as ‘ecologically aware’ pilgrimage, connected to the land and appreciating and meditating on the legends associated with it (Haberman 1994; Kinsley 1998), has been lost.

While not necessarily detrimental, the environmental effects of this pilgrimage shift have been great (Shinde 2008). Pilgrimage in Vrindavan has brought about

such large changes in the town's landscape that it is now difficult to perceive the town in terms of its past; the forest groves described as Krishna's playground now appear as a romantic reminder of what exists only in scriptures and perhaps in the minds of some older and earnest pilgrims and spiritual practitioners. The seven levels of human ecology model help to explain how the attraction of traditional processes of pilgrimage may have declined due to their disconnection from nature and limited awareness of the sensitive cultural and religious heritage of Vrindavan.

Conclusion

For devotees of Radha-Krishna, the supposed earthly paradise of Vrindavan is identical with Krishna's heavenly abode, *Goloka Vrindavan*. Krishna scriptural mandates pose Krishna as the 'ultimate environmentalist' (Shinde 2008, p. 231), the upholder of *dharma* (cosmic and religious order) and the banisher of ecological wrongdoing. Although pilgrimage to Braj and Vrindavan has been promoted by national and international religious groups, and despite the establishment of national and international environmental initiatives, e.g. WWF-India, Friends of Vrindavan, Vrindavan is a clear example of the erosion of relationships between transcendent beliefs and their earthly manifestation.

From the 1970s onwards, Vrindavan has opened its doors to millions of pilgrims who have traversed its holy paths and visited its sacred sites. The popularization of the Krishna faith has succeeded in crossing strong and distinct social, cultural and geographical borders, but the proselytizing and worldwide expansion of the movement, e.g. ISKCON, have not conveyed ecologically aware or sustainable religious practice, especially in the realm of pilgrimage. Pilgrimage expansion and the transportation of Krishna beliefs beyond the confines of Vrindavan have precipitated the breakdown of temple traditions, the increasingly dilapidated state of the town and the expanding divide between the 'aware pilgrim' and the 'consumerist religious tourist' (Kitiarsa 2008). The consequent commodification of beliefs, the dilution of religious and their related ecological values, and the commodification of the inherent divinity with the location and myth of the Braj landscape have resulted in the schism between religion and ecology in Vrindavan. Modern pilgrimage in Vrindavan has not honoured the standards of awareness elucidated and even imposed by medieval canonical texts. And although the ecological import of pilgrimage to Braj and its surrounds is an inherent and fundamental component of a holistic recognition of Krishna and Krishna's terrestrial abode, religious sects have not emphasized this significance, leading certain Vrindavan environmentalists to call for serious environmental management of the town.

Vrindavan is both a concept and a physical place; it is a relationship people travel to, in many forms and through many processes. The pilgrim, whether Indian or foreign, has a great responsibility to create and manage this conceptualized yet potentially real Vrindavan. The Vrindavan environmental concept and the seven levels of human ecology incorporate a vision that has evolved out of years of Braj

and Vrindavan pilgrimage and discussions with interested pilgrims – a pilgrimage of ideas. The physical environment, although endowed with divinity by dint of those who have walked the sacred paths and performed pastimes there in seclusion, makes sense in the modern context through an expanded field of pilgrimage. This concept of *environmental pilgrimage* suggests a reinvention of ways of seeing pilgrimage, travel for religious purposes, the building of relationships and spiritual practices that reflect the past while building a vision to the future.

Endnotes

1. See 'Prabhupadanuga News' <http://www.prabhupadanugas.eu/?p=11721>. Accessed 18 October 2010.
2. See, for example, the Vrindavan Alliance Acting for Community and Heritage (VAACH) website, <http://www.vina.cc/stories/DHAM/2004/2/vaach.html> and the Friends of Vrindavan (FoV) website, <http://www.fov.org.uk/>.

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