

4 Human Sanctuaries Can Be Created Everywhere: Pilgrimage, Tourism, and Conservation in Vrindavan, India

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Introduction

The pilgrimage town of Vrindavan is located 150km south of Delhi, the national capital of India. A town of approximately 65,000 people, Vrindavan has more than 5500 temples dedicated to Krishna, the tenth incarnation of Vishnu, one of the trinity gods in the Hindu pantheon. The history of the town dates to the early 1500s when leading Vaishnava gurus who were followers of Vishnu and of the Bhakti (devotional worship) movement arrived on the banks of the Yamuna River in search of places related to Krishna's legends. The gurus discovered Vrindavan as a place with geographical features such as rivers, hills, lakes, and forests that characterized the setting of the pastimes of Krishna. They encouraged their disciples to visit these features and articulated the routes, itinerary, and format of pilgrimage in this landscape (Entwistle, 1987). Since then, Vrindavan has continuously evolved as a place of pilgrimage. Its expansion from a small rural settlement comprising of forest groves and meadows that attracted pilgrims to Vrindavan in the past into a place of extraordinary religious heritage of temples, havelis, pilgrim lodges, ashrams,

and other religious infrastructure necessary for pilgrims is well-documented (Entwistle, 1987; Shinde, 2008).

Contemporary influences of pilgrimage, tourism and expanded development, however, have overwhelmed the town. In 2017, 13.78 million people visited Vrindavan (Tourism, 2018), almost double what was reported a decade before (Shinde, 2008). Most of the natural landscape has given way to housing and infrastructure developments. At the same time, the ancient temples in the older parts of the town have become increasingly dilapidated, the streets clogged with human and vehicle traffic, the general ambience of the town has been disturbed, and the environmental conditions have become very poor (Haberman, 2006; Shinde, 2008). Vrindavan has begun to take on complications reminiscent of urban environmental problems, and many authors have repeatedly noted how Vrindavan pilgrims have been disappointed that they are unable to view the imagined landscape depicted in religious scriptures (e.g. Haberman, 1994; Sullivan, 1998). And yet, 'the unchanging image of the place as Krishna's land and its transcendent qualities prevail over the physicality

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of environmental problems' (Shinde, 2011, p. 460). (Haberman, 1994) p. 48) notes that 'regardless of what has actually survived in this age of deforestation, [this urban landscape] is conceived of as a forest'. This imagination has continued to inspire environmental conservation efforts in Vrindavan. For instance, religious institutions and social movements in Vrindavan have focused on reforestation through the Vrindavan Conservation Project funded by World Wide Fund for Nature – India. In addition, this project, along with other non-governmental organizations (NGOs) such as Friends of Vrindavan, has focused on creating awareness of environmental issues which were first noted by religious gurus and devotees.

Moving beyond the ongoing discussions and lament about the degradation of the physical environment of the town, this chapter takes a philosophical perspective and focuses on the imagination of Vrindavan as a sacred place that inspires a distinct eco-spirituality. The imagination of the idyllic setting of mythical Vrindavan, as articulated by the Vaishnava poet-saints in their devotional literature provides deep insights into the relationships between humans, nature, and the divine. In creating the religious framework of theology and practice for Vaishnava devotees, the poet-saints eulogized Vrindavan as a forest of Krishna's pastimes and the terrestrial playground of the divine couple, Krishna, and his eternal consort, Radha. Just as the Hindu god Shiva is 'the destroyer' and the Hindu god Brahma is 'the creator', Krishna is seen as 'the enjoyer'. Vrindavan and its forest groves were created to serve as an earthly home for the divine couple to enjoy. And in the same way that Krishna and Radha took on human form to experience the bliss and the sanctuary of the gardens of Vrindavan, there is also the possibility for humans to access the same type of blissful experiences in this sanctuary.

The idea of Vrindavan as a sanctuary that nestles religion-spirituality-ecology connections is at the centre of this chapter. It argues that a true pilgrim/devotee of Krishna visiting Vrindavan and worshipping this sacred landscape can internalize these connections through meditative practices and spiritual alignment, evolving this landscape into a human sanctuary. The idea of Vrindavan as the 'human sanctuary' was coined by local Vrindavan ecologist Shri Sevak Sharan (Sevakji)

who has been working towards environmental conservation in Vrindavan since the late 1970s. He elaborates on this through his Vrindavan Ecological Concept (VEC), which in turn is based on imaginations of Vrindavan in devotional literature. He argues for practical, spiritual-based action and contemplative practice (*sādhanā* and *chintan*) to realize this concept. As a westerner seeking the melding and meaning of religion and ecology I eventually took Sevakji to be my teacher. As his student over the last 20 years, I have imbibed some of the VEC concepts in my becoming a pilgrim of religion and ecology which I reflect on in this chapter. This reflection is part of my ethical responsibility towards my guru who desired that I 'become a real environmentalist for Vrindavan' and through my *sādhanā* (i.e. spiritual and meditative practice) that I share the eco-spiritual understandings from a sacred place like Vrindavan to a wider world. My view is that sanctuary exists both in the physical and metaphysical sense. Based on the eco-harmony found in and principles learned from Vrindavan, humans around the world should be able to create human sanctuaries anywhere.

In this chapter, I first refer to the Vaishnava devotional literature which provides some commentary on the environment of the divine place dedicated to Krishna and creates a certain imaginary of Vrindavan. A major focus is on a philosophical poetic work called *Hit Chaurāsī Pad (Eighty-four Stanzas)* written by Hari Vansh Goswami, a poet-saint from the 16th century. In this work, one can find the ecological, theoretical, and scriptural explorations of Vrindavan as a sanctuary place as well as a metaphysical concept. Then I turn my attention to Sevakji's articulation of the VEC through an eco-spirituality approach, which to me is an excellent vantage point to examine deeper issues beyond pollution control, disease, waste amelioration, and environmental management. While doing so, I explain the ways in which the human-nature-divine relationship is framed through Vaishnava religious practice in the worship of Krishna and Vrindavan. Following these explanations, I dwell deeply on how the teacher-student (*guru-shishya*) relationship that developed in the ashram of Sevakji has helped me to understand the deep ecology of Vrindavan and internalise the concept of human sanctuary by focusing on the ideal Vrindavan of the mind, spirit, and

devotion. Finally, I return to the interpretation of this philosophy for environmental conservation in physical Vrindavan, and conclude the chapter by considering how ecological thinking and environmental action have become integral to how the VEC, Sevakji's philosophy, and the human sanctuary idea can potentially be manifested and extrapolated through the actions and behaviour of religious communities, devotees, and pilgrims in the city of Vrindavan.

The Environmentalism in Vaishnava Devotional Literature

The 16th-century poet-saints through their scriptures created an image of Vrindavan as a place of divinity. A seminal work in this regard is the *Hit Chaurāsī Pad* of a poet-saint Hari Vansh Goswami (1502–1552). Like many saints of the time who were inspired by Vaishnava devotional worship, which encouraged visiting the newly discovered land of Krishna's pastimes, Hari Vansh Goswami was also attracted to the divine forest groves of Vrindavan. As a devotee of Krishna, he realised the potential fruits of human life and scribed detailed synopses of his realizations of the pilgrimage landscape that Vrindavan was. Later, he founded a new tradition of worship in Vrindavan through his Radha Vallabh temple (see Snell, 1984, 1991 for more details of Hari Vansh's life). The major position taken by Hari Vansh Goswami in his poetry is that Vrindavan is the terrestrial stage where the male Krishna and the female Radha, in their human forms, represent two equal and opposite forces of life energy, consciousness, or *brahma* (spirit). The environmental imagery of verdant forest groves of Vrindavan provides the setting for the celestial pastimes of the divine couple Radha and Krishna. Krishna and Radha are worshipped for sporting amusement and aesthetic experiments into the science of *ras* (pleasure). A few verses from *Hit Chaurāsī Pad* translate as:

'Come, wise Radhika! For your sake Shyam has arranged a round dance, a store of joy, on the bank of the Yamuna

'In that most pleasing place near the vamshivata a soft breeze blows from the [sandal-clad] Malaya mountain, yielding all joys

'the forest is strongly fragrant with half-blown jasmine, and there is bright moonlight in the full-moon autumn night

'lady! Experience this ocean of delight, rejoice with your arms joined around his neck. For Shyama's sport in the fresh bower is worthy of the world's praise!'

While the physical forms of these deities are engaged in the act of pure enjoyment and for the achievement of bliss, they also represent a cosmic drama, where Krishna and Radha make each other complete. Without one, the other is incomplete. Similar duality exists between deity and devotee, which duality creates the divine experience within the human-nature relationship. By being aware of this duality, humans can understand the relationship between life and nature. For example, in one of the forests, one tree has white and dark branches intertwining with each other; leading devotees believe that this represents the embrace of Krishna and Radha (Shinde, 2008).

Vaishnava poet-saints not only portrayed the divinity of landscape called Vrindavan but also commented on its transformations into a physical place of worship. For instance, another poet-saint of the 17th century, Hariram Vyas, criticized the construction of temples in forested areas:

The Kaliyuga has really arrived ...

Why have you left me alive to see this day when trees are being cut [in Vrindavan] and the sacred land is being dug for making way for temples [in Mathura]?

(Translated from Hindi) (Shinde, 2008).

Another poet-saint, Biharindas lamented:

These people are stupid – leaving the importance of Braj-raj (soil of Braj), they are making temples of stones – they are doing all wrong things.

Due to their greed they are not able to gain their guru's best wishes and therefore they have become sick with greed,

Ministers have become bad advisors; they have cut the bowers and brought in stone thereby making the kunj [forest grove] non-productive.

They have cut the trees and loaded logs on bullock carts and the axe is seen. More so by driving the bullock carts in the tender soil of Braj, they have made it like fine flour.

(Translated from Hindi) (Shinde, 2008).



Fig. 4.1. Sevakji with the author, Vrindavan, December 2003 (Photo courtesy of the author).

Sevak Sharan as an Eco-guru and the VEC

Much of the existent devotional literature, particularly that of Hari Vansh, demonstrates the importance of the lived, natural experience, the relationship between nature and culture, and how poetry, art, and the ancient perspective and role of the natural and religious ritual depict the dialectical interplay of the human being with nature. It is the lineage of Hari Vansh Goswami and the Radha-Vallabh Sampradaya (temple tradition) that he founded with which Sevakji is associated (Nash, 2015). Following on the philosophical tenets of his ancestral gurus, Sevakji reinterpreted the environmental situation in Vrindavan and formulated the VEC, which I describe below.

My association with Sevakji began in the late 1990s in Vrindavan during a brief stint as a student environmentalist and aspiring

devotee (see Nash, 1998). I also made six visits to Vrindavan between 2003 (see Fig. 4.1) and 2008, during which time I worked intently with Sevakji to synthesize several disparate strands of spiritual practice (*sādhana*) and the VEC.

Sevakji grew up in Vrindavan, and having been steeped in the knowledge and experience of his parents' generation of stringent and orthodox temple worship and spiritual practice, he had deep questions regarding the relevance of scripture, practice, and devotion to the practical aspects of environmental conservation. He was familiar with the ecological vision as found in Hindu religion which considered nature and the environment as divine and sacred (Chapple and Tucker, 2000; Dwivedi, 2000). Having read devotional scriptures dedicated to Krishna and Vrindavan, he became aware that the worship of Krishna and Radha was filled with ideas about conserving the environment. And yet he daily witnessed the degradation of the natural environment. Sevakji was trying to find answers as to why this place – historically a highly charged place of pilgrimage and ritual – had become so neglected ecologically, culturally, and religiously. This damage had occurred despite there being ample money, dedication, and local and international interest to remediate the squalid environmental state of the town. This outcome initially led to the instigation of several cultural and ecological conservation programmes, including preserving the sacred bathing *ghats* by the Yamuna River in the early 1980s, education programmes aimed at encouraging reforestation, and ultimately the founding of the World Wide Fund for Nature – India's Vrindavan Conservation Project (Nash, 1998; see also Kumar, 2010, Kumar, 2019; Sharma, 2010; Kumar and Jacobsen, 2017).

In parallel with the outward movement of establishing the environmental and social movement of Vrindavan conservation, Sevakji set up what was to become the prototype for his vision on the then remote pilgrimage path that surrounded the town. He established a nursery in 1980 on land he inherited from his family. Slowly, this single-acre hermitage where Sevakji still lives became the training ground for disseminating knowledge and experience about the principles of nature and spirituality that have evolved from years of practice and ecological work in Vrindavan. Integrating philosophical

tenets from scriptures into his practical work, Sevakji proposed the VEC model that would help in addressing some of the environmental issues in Vrindavan.

VEC: Seven Principles of Human Ecology and Spirituality

The VEC comprises of seven principles of human ecology that Sevakji derived from his study and rootedness in Vrindavan. The first principle is spirituality – the realization that humans exist in a world brought about by something greater than themselves. The world and everything in it are divine. The second principle is that nature is the outer manifestation of this spiritual inner truth. All creatures learn from nature, and human beings need to realize that they give and take from nature. The third principle is that human-nature interactions are what create human culture. These cultures in turn create tangible and intangible heritage – the fourth principle, through which specific cultural expressions are maintained over time and are deeply embedded in people's dealings with the environment through music, art, architecture, food, and lifestyle. Pilgrimage and experiencing sacred places, the fifth principle, are methods through which one can understand differences and similarities between cultures across time and environment. These mobilities help people realize that human beings ultimately share the same strivings, problems, needs, desires, and will to find peace in life. From this realization comes concerns over human welfare, the sixth principle, and associated social and environmental ideas, programmes, and activities. When individual humans are in harmony with themselves, they can experience similar feelings with their close social group, greater society, and nature. They will then also understand how these positive emotions and interactions can be commonly shared universally all over the world. All such interactions expand to the ecology of the world – the seventh and overarching principle. Thus, if we follow the seven principles in succession, this world represents an extension of human ecology which begins with a spiritual understanding of oneself. In this way, Vrindavan is a microcosmic representation of the world.

Underpinning these seven principles of human ecology is the notion of consciousness. The VEC can be realized through developing five types of consciousness that follow on from Hari Vansh Goswami ecological-cum-scriptural injunctions and are evident from the life and pastimes of Radha and Krishna. The first consciousness is Krishna Consciousness. Many religious gurus interpret Krishna legends as socially and ecologically focused pastimes and thus portray him as an ecologist and as an upholder of dharma. For instance, Shinde, 2011, p. 458) notes how a Vaishnava guru in Vrindavan highlighted the need to contextualize environmental problems within Krishna worship by suggesting that 'the presence of the serpent, Kaliya, was like pollution in the Yamuna River. By killing Kaliya, Krishna actually destroyed the pollutant in Yamuna and not merely the physical form of Kaliya'. The second consciousness is Radha Consciousness, where one can learn practically through the possibility of grouping with others intimately. Radha and Krishna demonstrated and manifested divine love as known from several legends where they engaged in circles of dance on the banks of the Yamuna River (Entwistle, 1987). In the third consciousness, Yugal (conjugal) Consciousness, people perceive an awareness of the relationship of divine opposites regarding nature, love, relationships, everything in the cosmos. This awareness is enabled through the fourth consciousness, Vraj (or Braj) Consciousness – Krishna's interaction with the people and environment of Vraj, the geographical location where Krishna manifested his childhood and adolescent pastimes. This interaction demonstrates the possibility of how to interact with the generally unbalanced outer society while maintaining one's inner balance through practical ecological and socially balanced behaviours (Entwistle, 1987). Finally, Nature-Vrindavan Consciousness expresses ways of living in harmony with nature. Specifically, the beautiful environment of Vrindavan is the place in which Radha and Krishna undertook their divine activities and affairs.

According to Sevakji, in Vrindavan one can find an integral and pervasive connection between humans and the divine, and hence Vrindavan has the potential to represent in a microcosm the prospect that the entire world could in principle become a human sanctuary.

Following this premise, I conceive of 'human sanctuary' as a place-state where humans can live in a vibrant, non-static, and peaceful consonance with themselves as individuals and in an intimate and loving partnership with the greater human society and with nature. During my stay at Sevakji's ashram in Vrindavan, I was able to live and experience these eco-spiritual lessons more closely, as I illustrate below.

Nature Is-as Teacher: Living and Imbibing Eco-spiritual Lessons From an Eco-guru

I have visited Vrindavan many times in the last 20 years and stayed at Sevakji's ashram, affectionately known as Latā Bhavan or the Abode of Fauna on the *Parikramā Mārg* in Vrindavan (Fig. 4.1). Over this time, I engaged in developing the *guru-shishya* (teacher—student) union in both my working life as an academic and in my perpetual striving for fulfilling the path that Sevakji had shown me. I could see that Sevakji was not merely an ecologist who possessed some clear ideas about how the Vrindavan environment could be remediated. Rather, he had synthesized a theory of the relationship between the human, nature, society, and the Divine which had yet to be written or compiled in any significant way. During my experiences with Sevakji, what I discovered and was taught was a vast amount of philosophical, empirically scientific, as well as personal *sādhana*-based research that was waiting to be written, put into practice, and shared with the world, particularly about the VEC as a philosophy building on the human sanctuary idea.

What became apparent to me was that the more I looked at the links between the elements in Sevakji's system of thought, the more difficult it became to synthesize his system. The more intense our *guru-shishya* relationship became, the more the realizations grew about how this personal Vrindavan environmental awareness creation, *prakriti-chintan* (meditation on nature), *prāṇa-sādhana* (meditation on life energy), *kāla-sādhana* (meditation on time and its movement), and spiritual schooling interaction were achievable for a seeker. A tangible opportunity to articulate this thinking came when Sevakji urged me

to write and publish a synthesis of the research he had conducted in developing VEC. Initially he asked me to compile a small booklet that introduced some elements of the VEC so he could use it as a simple teaching tool for the many visitors and devotees who came to visit him in his ashram. He believed that this booklet would satisfy the intellectual side of any seeker.

Sevakji continually shared with me that his thought processes encompassed four major philosophies or, as he called them, *driṣhti*, or visions. The first was the ancient or Vedic vision of India that most Indians would have known from scriptures of Vedas that talk at length about interactions between humans, deities, and nature. The second was the Rādhā-Krishna vision, which is essentially embedded in the worship of Krishna and Vrindavan and what I have come to term 'the self-vision'. The third was the Gandhian vision, attributed to the simple living advocated by Mahatma Gandhi, and what I term the local or sustainable vision. The fourth was the modern scientific vision that is embraced by contemporary ecologists and environmentalists, which, according to Sevakji, are like modern-day yogis (spiritual practitioners) who keep close and continue the cycle from the modern scientific vision back to the ancient Vedic and natural vision. While such thinking is inspired by immersion into the physical and cultural setting of Vrindavan, these concepts are universal and could be taken by pilgrims and seekers back to the places from which they came. That is, Sevakji believed that these principles, when written in booklet form, would provide lessons from Vrindavan that could be extrapolated and practiced elsewhere.

Another milestone in my learning from Sevakji came in 2004 when he said something to me that changed the direction of our relationship and allowed the next step in my practice to proceed: 'You should become serious about *sādhana*.' I had apparently become a little careless in my awareness practice, and with this statement realized I had not been appreciating the gravity of the *sādhana* process in which I had been engaging and the gravitas expected by Sevakji with which to apply myself. I was resident in the *gurukula* (the house of guru/teacher). Because of my exposure to Gauḍīya Vaishnava ideas, Bengali Krishna worship associated with the medieval saint Chaitanya, and

its relationship to *guru-tattva*, or the truth or essence of the teachings of the teacher, I began to appreciate the rareness of having the privilege to 'live in' with such a teacher and to be carefully watched and trained by this guru. The instruction I was receiving was not only based on being exposed continually to his intellectual teachings – the focus was intently on the significance of *nature* as our principal teacher.

In certain takes on Krishna philosophy, there is the book *bhāgavat* and the person *bhāgavat* (*bhāgavat* meaning devotee, worshipper or follower of Bhagavanta or God). The book *bhāgavat* is believed to be a scriptural manifestation of the Divine and its reading prepares the reader to have experiences with the Divine, while the person *bhāgavat* refers to holy people who can lead a person to the Divine through their teaching, spiritual guidance, and counsel. Through both book *bhāgavat* and person *bhāgavat* people can arrive at the mystical *bhāgavat*, or the Divine. The goal or intent encouraged by many seers is to listen to and think about the *bhāgavat* and Krishna's life and teachings 24/7 from the lips of a genuine guru, a person *bhāgavat*, or a devotee who has realized that Krishna is present in Vrindavan. It is believed that guru is the physical form of God and the subtlest form of guru is God.

For me, both Sevakji and his ashram in Vrindavan were a guru. Sevakji's ashram had itself become a micro *dhām*, holy place, and a *tirtha-sthān* or a confirmed place of pilgrimage, because of the individuals, yogis, and sages who resided there over the past century or more and added layers of divine practices and interactions between humans and nature in creating the sacredness of the place. I believe that the *dhām* (place), *prakṛiti* (nature), and environs that Sevakji had set up in his ashram provide a small-scale case study-cum-template of larger scale human—human, human—nature, and human—divine interactions that one can find within the greater cosmos. I learned that through self-introspection and *chintan* or contemplative meditation, which creates awareness of one's self and own life energy or *prāna*, one could see, experience, and learn from a guru in nature and become cognizant of one's self in world. In this system of thought, nature is the curtain of the Divine and an inherent and intrinsic guru in the cosmos and the

biosphere. Vrindavan as a place of learning is guru. The human sanctuary is not only scriptural. Interactions between two human beings represented as teacher—student interaction can help people understand and live individual and personal human—nature interactions in a more balanced way. Thus, people are to live in harmony with nature and others and come to this self-realization in order to experience the Divine. Because Vrindavan is the model of human—human and human—nature interactions, extending the ways in which the people/government in Vrindavan live their lives and applying them to other contexts the world can eventually become Vrindavan and experience the Divine. This is core to the thesis that human sanctuaries can be created everywhere.

As an aspiring *sādhak* or devotee, I wondered: what did this realization mean to me, and how could I put this into practice? How can one listen to book *bhāgavat* (sacred scriptures) 24/7? Does a person always have to be around the person *bhāgavat* (saint)? What is the relationship between *vāṇī* (the message of the teacher) and *vapu* (the form of the teacher) of the person *bhāgavat*? And where can one find a guru in this material world anyway? It became clear to me that nature is guru, the original guru whereas the place is a guru when one is in that place such as Vrindavan. So, if we listen to nature speaking, which we *can* do 24/7, then we *are* hearing the Divine all the time. One does not actually need to have a human guru, nor do I believe one needs a guru connected to any manifestation of the Krishna religion. Nature is teacher; Radha and Krishna are both in the world and accessible, as well as being distant, transcendent, and unattainable; and people can live a life in bliss with ourselves, our partner and intimate contacts, nature, and society. That is, we can simultaneously live in all types of consciousness: Krishna (self) consciousness, Rādhā (partner-other-intimate) consciousness, Vrindavan (nature) consciousness, and Vraj (societal) consciousness.

Because of this change of focus from the human to the natural, a guru could be experienced anytime and anywhere. For the several years I spent in the ashram of my teacher, guru, friend, and co-researcher, Sevakji was my form – *vapu* – and his message – *vāṇī* – to me was simple: be a real environmentalist for Vrindavan. While

he did not tell me how to be or become such a devotee – that is part of my own lifework – what is clear over an almost 20-year connection to Vrindavan is that both the physical place called Vrindavan and the ‘spiritual Vrindavan’ are important. Or, as I have written elsewhere in opposition to flippant positions about the role of the environment in Vrindavan, ‘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’ (Nash, 2012, p. 109). Vrindavan is Rādhā and Krishna’s *Rāsa-līlā* or cosmic playground. It is meant to be a terrestrial representation of something divine. However, it is still important to remember that in its physical and material form, it is a polluted and consumptive religious dreamland that is rapidly urbanizing.

As a writer, one element of my ‘being a real environmentalist for Vrindavan’ means committing to paper such topics. This chronicling is essential to document specifically not only the history of my interaction with Sevakji and the Vrindavan environmental movement, with which I am still involved, but also how personal takes on knowledge transfer and *sāadhanā* practice can be expressed more generally. Despite modern technological advancements and their application in devotional circles like mass television preaching, I contend that the role of guru as teacher and the importance of their physical presence when imparting to disciples the possibility of attaining developed self-knowledge has not fundamentally changed. Because the Krishna sect’s intricate system of knowledge – *Veda* – is traditionally represented in religious institutions and systematised patterns of belief, the role of the physical guru in the dissemination of knowledge becomes vital. Gurus habitually live in remote and simple ashrams where seekers come to visit and seek out knowledge and enlightenment. It is in these ashrams and the philosophies presented by gurus where a clearer appreciation of the relation between religion-philosophy-scripture and nature can be arrived at. I claim this is what Krishna came to teach as guru, namely that the whole cultural and natural world, when seen with a divine perspective, is Vrindavan. That Vrindavan is a human sanctuary and that Vrindavan is and can be anywhere.

Exiting the Sanctuary, Re-entering the World

From its rural beginnings, Vrindavan has evolved into a popular Hindu pilgrimage town and its environmental history is well-documented (e.g. Entwistle, 1987; Shinde, 2008; Kumar, 2019). In the last four decades in particular, the town has suffered intense environmental degradation due to a phenomenal increase in numbers of pilgrims. The practical groundwork and governmental lobbying of, for example, the World Wide Fund for Nature – India has not been able to produce the intended results such as reforestation and broader societal awareness of environmental issues. Although small-scale projects and initiatives like Friends of Vrindavan have brought about temporary outcomes at the micro-level (such as cleaner streets), larger governmental projects, such as the many proposals to remediate the Yamuna River, have not lived up to their requisite potential on a macro-level.

Considering the increasing religious tourism and its impacts, it is not clear whether there could be positive social and ecological change to the sacred landscape of Vrindavan. How would worship of Krishna as propagated by different Krishna sects and denominations lead the interactions of devotees with the sacred environment? I have elsewhere argued that ‘according to scriptures from all of the prevalent temple traditions, Vrindavan should render the epitome of environmental awareness and thus divine awareness real’ (Nash, 2015, p. 60). However, this awareness is not currently visible in this temple town. What is the role of the media and the internet in mustering support and doctrinal change in terms of religiosity and environmental change? These are large and perplexing questions, the answers to which do not only belong in the written or even thought and emotional realm, but in the realm of focused action.

However, this chapter has moved beyond the physical and material world of Vrindavan and presented a clear hypothetical statement on the idea of human sanctuary. This idea is rooted in religious thought and *chintan*, or contemplative practice, as well as on documenting relevant social and theological history and practice associated with the VEC and Vrindavan environmentalism. In principle, the conceptualization

of human sanctuary within the framework of the VEC is inspired by the human—nature—divine—relationships that can be experienced in a sacred place like Vrindavan. Vrindavan is both a real place and a concept. The town's physical environment and devotional culture is important in developing 'a correct vision to make the Vrindavan = Nature + Divinity scenario a reality' (Nash, 2015, p. 60). I argue that by synthesizing a nature-focused, *dham-sadhana*-centric process a pilgrim and a seeker can achieve a divine vision and when such a person 'looks to nature with divine vision, that place becomes Vrindavan. And that place, which becomes Vrindavan, the place where there is consonance in the Humanity—Nature—Divinity trinity, becomes a *Human Sanctuary*, a place of sanctity, solace, and the sacred' (Nash, 2015, pp. 60–61). It is the how, where, why, and when which seem to be the major challenges of the next stage of Vrindavan conservation.

Using the template of Vrindavan, I have put forward ways where practical and personal

lessons learned (e.g. personal spiritual practice in line with ecological ideals) are generalizable and can be applied beyond this northern India example and to religion and tourism locations elsewhere. Similar stories of devotion exist in other sacred landscapes such as in Bodhgaya, India, as applied to Buddhism (e.g. Geary, 2008), and to other gods such as Shiva in Varanasi, India (e.g. Singh, 1997). The appreciation of *nature as teacher* and *nature as a curtain of the Divine* is essential for understanding Sevakji's teachings. Vrindavan is not merely a poetic metaphor or a metaphysical reality to be experienced in some transcendental realm beyond this mortal, material existence; it is an actual physical historical place, where Radha and Krishna, after carrying out their pastimes more than 5,000 years ago, still live them out through their devotees. By addressing the human sanctuary idea, it is hoped this most venerated and holy place will move towards a sober preservation of its ecological and religious integrity.

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