

From Ashram to Condo: Transformation of a Religious Ideal

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Construction booms in contemporary Vrindaban, the traditional site of the childhood and youth of Krishna. A previous “building boom” occurred in Vrindaban in the sixteenth century, when Vaishnava groups “rediscovered” the sacred places of Krishna’s life and established devotional centers there. Then, from the 1960s through 1990s, the Hare Krishna movement and its subgroups established their own temples in Vrindaban. Other Hindu gurus also founded ashrams there as part their teaching, preaching, and cultivation of disciples. Both Hare Krishna and other guru traditions addressed the religious needs of middle-class lay Indian disciples by adapting the traditional structure of the ashram. Recent residential developments (and their marketing campaigns), however, present a radically different image of this ashram institution, displaying changed relationships to guru and tradition, raising serious environmental concerns, and problematizing the future prospects of this pilgrimage center.

Geography & History: Construction of the Sacred Pilgrimage Site of Vrindaban

An ongoing building boom in Vrindaban, the Vaishnava pilgrimage center on the Yamuna River, about 160 kilometers south of New Delhi, poses challenging questions about the process of mediating religious tradition to India’s emerging middle class and to her economic elite.¹ Newly constructed temple complexes with upscale accommodations compete with freestanding residential developments to provide access to the heart of the spiritual tradition with sales campaigns that seek to redefine the tradition itself. In so doing, the “condo-ization” of Vrindaban, population 56,600 in 2001, has created a problematical relationship with both the religious and ecological environments of the town. These issues parallel September 2006 articles on India’s water crisis in the *New York Times*,² the first exposés on the Yamuna River at Delhi to mirror David Haberman’s study on that “river of love in an age of pollution,”³ and confrontations over residential developments at Rabindranath Tagore’s university–village of Shantiniketan in Bengal, where “even Tagore’s favorite haunts were given over to real es-

tate sharks.”⁴ A passage from a recent article on Vrindaban highlights the challenge faced:

Historically, holy places have been the refuge of ascetics seeking escape from the material world. It would take days or weeks to arrive at a holy place. Once there, pilgrims confronted austere conditions that quickly separated spiritual dabblers from the truly devout. Today, the opposite holds true as developers encourage tourism and Vrindavan struggles to adjust, for the first time in history, to market economics. Like many other places of pilgrimage in India, this is a town faced with reconciling its cultural and spiritual purposes with its need for a stronger economic infrastructure.⁵

Vrindaban is located in the Braj region, which extends through western Uttar Pradesh from the northern border with Harayana, south almost to Agra, and then west into Rajasthan. This region is the traditional site of Krishna’s birth, childhood, and adolescence, as described in texts like the *Bhagavata Purana*. Since the sixteenth century, these events, called *Krishna-lila* (“Krishna’s play”) have been mapped onto the physical geography of Braj. Today, Braj remains a multidimensional sacred space, in which scriptural tradition, physical sites, and a cultivated aesthetic-religious imagination combine to bring about an enduring transformation in residents and pilgrims alike.⁶

Contemporary Vrindaban is the product of two prior construction periods, one in the sixteenth century and the other in the late twentieth century, notably the decade of the 1960s. In the sixteenth century, at least four efforts to map a sectarian experience of Krishna onto the geography of Braj and Vrindaban took place, giving birth to distinctive lineages (*sampradayas*) in the process.⁷ First, the Bengali mystic Caitanya (1486–1533) visited Vrindaban in 1514. Later he sent six of his followers, now called the Goswamis, to locate the lost sacred places associated with Krishna and to develop the theological, ritual, and devotional framework of Gaudiya Vaishnavism. The Goswamis’ religious vision was embodied not only in text and memory but also in the deity images they worshipped, the temples in Vrindaban which housed those images, and the lineages they established. Second, Vallabhacarya (1479–1530) visited Braj in 1509, and, as a result of his own experiences there, developed a mapping of Braj that centered more on Gokul (one traditional location for Krishna’s childhood, across the Yamuna River from Mathura) and on Srinathji, the image he worshipped at mount Govardhan, site of Krishna’s miraculous holding aloft of the mountain to protect his childhood friends and their cows. It is no surprise, then, that Vallabha’s *sampradaya* focused on the child Krishna and on a path of grace, the *Pushti-marg*. Third, the poet Hit Harivansh came to Vrindaban around 1534, where he established the Radhavallabh *sampradaya* and the temple of the same name, emphasizing the loving play of Radha and

Krishna and the transformation of devotees by identifying their roles as Radha's friends or *sakhis*. Finally, the sixteenth-century musician Swami Haridas, inventor of the *drupad* musical genre and teacher of Akbar's court musician Tansen (1506–89), worshipped an image of Krishna called "Kunjabihari," now known as "Banke Bihari," whose temple is the most popular site from this formative period and the focal point of this *sampradaya*. Other traditions that brought their own understanding of devotion to Braj were the Nimbarka, Srivaishnava, and Ramanandi *sampradayas*.

Each of these Vaishnava traditions entered into a multivalent relationship with pre-existing Shaivite traditions, local goddess cults, and centers of indigenous religious culture. Braj's mountains and rivers, tanks and ponds, plants and trees, snakes, birds, and insects all create a complex religious ecology whose discrete layers have never coalesced into a single religious culture. Instead, as a religious center, Braj is constituted by these multiple maps of religious life, by layer upon layer of discrete traditions, by multiple religious identities of place and transformation, and by the erection of boundaries which both establish sectarian identity and encourage boundary-crossing—even transgressive—behavior. For practitioner and scholar, study of Braj culture and of a pilgrimage center like Vrindaban demands skills in avoiding the shoals while navigating between the river's banks, in negotiating personal and sectarian identity within a multilevel religious environment, and in managing such a complex religious ecology.

Contemporary Vrindaban contains temples, deities, and sectarian lineages that are rooted in the sixteenth century, but it is also heir to a number of transitions that began during the latter half of the twentieth century and which continue to influence the religious culture there. From the 1960s, many representatives of the traditional *sampradayas* were transformed from local gurus into *jagad-gurus*, spiritual teachers with a mission and a message to the world. The missionary outreach of the Bengali Vaishnavas, especially through the sectarian organization of the Gaudiya Math, found successful expression in the preaching in the West of A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami (1896–1977), the founder of ISKCON, the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, popularly known as the Hare Krishna movement. ISKCON began the modern-era construction boom in 1971 by founding the Krishna Balaram Temple in Raman Reti, several kilometers from the traditional center of Vrindaban but surrounded by large tracts of hitherto undeveloped land and with wide streets that would allow tour buses to discharge their passengers for a quick visit. An international guest house, the first foreigner-friendly hotel in Vrindaban, was constructed alongside Krishna Balaram Temple; and the compound came to include several schools, administrative offices, and a *goshala* (shelter for old and ailing cows), all of which raised the visibility of the temple and ultimately secured ISKCON's acceptance in the local community.⁸

After the death of Bhaktivedanta Swami in 1977, the building of the large burial shrine or *samadhi* on the temple grounds encouraged further embellishment of the temple to match it in size and perspective. A visit to Krishna Balaram Temple, the “foreigners’ temple,” became such an essential element of pilgrimage to Vrindaban, especially for those traveling by car or tour bus, that it is now the most visited temple in Vrindaban. Its popularity surpasses all the traditional temples, including Banke Bihari, the previous core of a pilgrim’s visit, which lacks the scale, accessibility, space, and cachet of Krishna Balaram. Thus the geographical center of gravity of Krishna devotion shifted toward the undeveloped land along the *parikrama* (circumambulation) path around Vrindaban; along the Chhatikara Road that leads beyond Raman Reti to National Highway 2 (the Delhi–Agra Expressway); and along the Mathura Marg, which connects Vrindaban with the much larger city of Mathura, fifteen kilometers away.

Since the death of its founder, ISKCON has suffered significant defections and the formation of numerous splinter groups. Some of these groups sought guidance from established teachers in Gaudiya Vaishnavism or from Goswamis associated with the historical temples; others developed their own leadership structure. But the effect of this array of Gaudiya Vaishnava groups has been more than a further proliferation of new temples, ashrams, and institutions. Groups have also taken over dilapidated, perhaps abandoned, temples and ashrams in the traditional center of Vrindaban and have used their own financial resources to refurbish and modernize them. This incursion by other Vaishnava groups—as well as by some groups allied to ISKCON—into the traditional heart of Vrindaban has positioned them in direct competition with temple Goswamis.

However, the temple- and ashram-building boom of the late twentieth century was not confined to ISKCON and its offshoots. Many gurus from other Vaishnava traditions, as well as from many Shaiva and even some Vedanta schools—some with no sectarian link to Vrindaban, found the establishment of a religious center (ashram) at Vrindaban an important support to their mission. Affluent lay disciples wishing to provide a suitable ashram for their guru contributed the construction funds with the tacit understanding that that they would find at the new ashram suitable lodging. In this fashion, the gentrification of the ashram was underway well before 2000. What differs about the latest forms of ashram construction, though, are the scale, the affluence, and the overt marketing ideology.

In traditional terms, an ashram is a place of transformation, representing both a temporal dwelling along the road of life and the physical space wherein one carries out that transformation. Ashram as a time of transformation encompasses the four seasons of *dharma* (socio-religious duty) in the course of a lifetime: *brahmacari*, the “celibate student”; *grihastha*, the married householder; *vanaprastha*, the forest-dwelling retired couple; and

samnyasi, the renunciant who has effectively died before death. Of course, this idealized four-fold form was rarely carried out in practice. The householder stage with its social responsibilities consumed the course of life for the vast majority, while renunciation—often chosen early in life—became the path of only a few.

Four Variables: *Sadhu*, *Guru*, *Sampradaya* & *Sadhana*

As a place of transformation, the ashram is related to four factors or variables: *sadhu*, the one seeking or attaining transformation; *guru*, the teacher and embodiment of transformation; *sampradaya*, the guru lineage or tradition of teaching adopted; and *sadhana*, the form of dedicated practice drawn from the tradition, embodied in the teacher, and expected of the practitioner.

Sadhus are realized or holy persons, actually or in preparation. Some *sadhus* are formally initiated as *samnyasis* (renunciants) within a particular lineage or tradition, while others are closer to being free spirits, freed from all worldly connections, including to a particular tradition or its discipline. This latter case is especially true in Braj, where many of its holy places, notably Radhakund, attract such *babajis* (Vaishnava ascetics) in abundance. All traditional *sadhus* have in common their renunciant status: they have abandoned world, family, social responsibility, and *dharma*. Though there have been notable female saints and gurus, critical differences exist between male and female *sadhus*. About 20 percent of Vrindaban's population consists of widows, many from Bengal, whose renunciant status is less a matter of choice than the expediency or necessity of attaining freedom from oppression in their marital household. These women, conspicuous in their white saris, often congregate in the *bhajan-ashrams*, charitable institutions that provide subsistence income in return for their participation in fixed hours of chanting and other religious practices. Despite often crushing poverty, these women manifest a fiercely independent character that is matched by profound piety and acts of devotion. Contrasting with traditions of *sadhus* and their ashrams, contemporary ashrams are designed for householder devotees rather than for renunciants; they are dedicated to initiating the lay disciples of modern-day gurus into a form of traditional practice.

Gurus welcome lay disciples at their ashrams, providing them direct, incarnate access to tradition by their own persons, by formal initiation, and by the religious activities in the ashram. Disciples, for their part, provide patronage, enhance the status of the guru at the ashram, and provide mission outreach through their social networking. Gurus traditionally lead their disciples on pilgrimages to holy places, engaging in rituals and in the faith-revival preaching of *katha* (sermons on the *Bhagavata Purana*), thereby

cementing guru–disciple relations through powerful religious experience and enhancing their status as gurus with national or international appeal (as true *jagad-gurus*). Disciples establish ashrams for their guru in home cities or pilgrimage sites not only to manifest their personal loyalty but also to ensure regular visits by the guru and a suitable location for their own personal practice. The proliferation of such guru-inspired ashrams at pilgrimage sites like Vrindaban vastly increases the richness and complexity of the religious environment.⁹

The guru is the embodiment of a religious tradition, the *sampradaya*, giving focus to its lineage of initiation, its teaching, and its transformational practice (*sadhana*). The creative relation of individual gurus to a tradition is both complex and flexible. Gurus claim initiated status within the tradition by identifying their own gurus and others who have influenced the development of their teaching: *diksha* and *siksha* gurus. But these same gurus exhibit considerable freedom in interpreting the tradition, directing it to particular Indian and foreign audiences, and establishing their own succession of teachers. The degree of renewal or creative adaptation of traditional teaching and practice may differ according to audiences and settings for a particular guru, and these overlapping and oft-conflicting agendas may coexist within a single ashram. The guru takes on multiple identities to disciples; and the ashram itself serves multiple audiences under an overarching adherence to the *sampradaya* and *sadhana*. As the composition of the disciples has shifted from Indian renunciants to lay followers and even Western seekers, the boundaries of discipleship have become more porous, with greater freedom retained by disciples about their levels of commitment and engagement in transformative practice.

A guru seeks the transformation of disciples by enforcing their practice of prescribed actions, generally those practiced by the guru and recognized in the guru's lineage. Gurus have traditionally challenged their disciples with a difficult regimen, offering them Spartan quarters with few amenities, and confronting them unapologetically with paradoxical behavior calculated to shatter the false self that stands in the way of realization. As lay disciples have become religious consumers, however, many gurus have tailored the *sadhana* to their clients' comfort levels and to their spiritual satisfaction.

Three Ashram Forms

Using the four variables of *sadhu*, guru, *sampradaya*, and *sadhana*, I have identified three basic forms of contemporary ashrams: the “traditional” ashram, the “transitional” ashram, and the “modern” or “condo” ashram. Table 1 indicates the emphases placed on each of these four variables at the three contemporary ashram types.

TABLE 1 Emphases on Three Variables at Four Types of Ashrams

Variable	Traditional Ashram	Transitional Ashram	Modern/Condo Ashram
<i>Sadhu</i>	high	moderate	low
Guru	high	high	low
<i>Sampradaya</i>	high/moderate	high	low
<i>Sadhana</i>	high	high	low

The *traditional* ashram is primarily dedicated to the participation of renunciants or *sadhus*, although lay disciples may be taught there or employed as staff. The authority of the guru is paramount; disciples come to the ashram precisely because they are the guru's disciples. The ashram is clearly identified with the guru's tradition by worship of installed deities, by the teaching given, and by the *sadhana* that is central to its practice: this ashram is *traditional*, its character moderated only by the freedom that *sadhus* have as renunciants. Finally, expectations are high that all dwellers in the ashram, even for a short period, will mirror its serious mission and engage in transformative *sadhana*, with no place for the spiritual tourist or the religious dilettante.

What I characterize as a *transitional* ashram is primarily distinguished by a critical shift of focus toward lay disciples, although respect for the *sadhu* ideal is maintained either in the person of the guru or in the place of honor accorded renunciants. The authority of the guru, the centrality of the tradition, and the high expectations of spiritual practice remain paramount: lay disciples surrender themselves to the guru, embrace the heritage of the *sampradaya*, and come to the ashram primarily to associate themselves with its *sadhana*.

The *modern* or *condo* ashram departs radically from the traditional model. Traditional and transitional ashrams are not being replaced; indeed, new ashrams in these models continue to be established. Instead, a new form of ashram living has been developed to market destination dwellings to India's middle and elite classes. The primary concern of the modern ashram is location, fulfilling the wish of exclusive individuals and families to occupy an abode in a traditionally religious site—but in the style of life to which they have become accustomed. These are institutions unrelated in mission to any guru or tradition, although such ashrams might have facilities to welcome, as guest speakers, notable gurus visiting the nearby sacred places. With no sectarian affiliations that would narrow their market appeal, these ashrams promise only the most generic and inclusive expressions of religion; they require no practice of owner-residents but rather

offer them a comfortable place from which to savor the spiritually charged environment.

Amid the proliferation of ashrams in Vrindaban over the past decade, many extant ashrams serve to illustrate each of these dimensions (italicized ashrams are discussed below):

Traditional: Anandamayi Ma Ashram, Neem Karoli Baba Ashram, Pagal Baba Ashram, Ramakrishna Mission Sevashram, *Raman Reti Radharaman Niwas*, and Sri Caitanya Prema Santhana.

Transitional: *Anand Dham Gaudiya Ashram*, ISKCON International Guest House, Jagadguru Dham, Mayapur Vrindavana Trust, Radha Govinda Temple, Shyama Shyam Dham, and Vatsalya Gram.

Modern/Condo: *Ananda Krishna Van*, Bhakti Dham, Ganpati Krishna Kripa, Nandan Van, *Pushpanjali Baikunth*, Radhika Kunj, and *Sri Krishnalok*.

Were it possible to describe all twenty examples in this article, these cases would illustrate the complex and broad spectrum of religious experience in Vrindaban. For the purpose of this study, however, I will focus on one traditional ashram, the Bengali Vaishnava *Raman Reti Radharaman Niwas*; one transitional ashram associated with Narayana Maharaj, *Anand Dham Gaudiya Ashram*; and three modern ashrams, in different stages of realization: *Ananda Krishna Van*, *Sri Krishnalok*, and *Pushpanjali Baikunth*.

A Traditional Ashram: Raman Reti Radharaman Niwas

Raman Reti Radharaman Niwas is located in Raman Reti, the area of most extensive new construction that, although just off the main street, remarkably remains a spacious oasis of tranquility.¹⁰ At the center of the compound is a temple that incorporates all of the traditional objects of Bengal Vaishnava worship: a large image of Krishna that is surrounded by pictures and images of Caitanya and Nityananda. Although buildings throughout Vrindaban are almost universally painted with the name of Radha, Krishna's lover, the walls of this ashram bear those of "Gauranga" (Caitanya) and "Nitai" (Nityananda), emphasizing the ashram's sectarian affiliation within Bengal Vaishnavism. The *samadhi* (memorial shrine) of the previous guru stands nearby, incorporating the place where he had lived and worked; the current, aged guru's dwelling (*kutir*) is not far away, and it will clearly become his *samadhi*, in turn. *Sadhus* engage in chanting and other worship alongside the temple in a room decorated with the photographs of notable members of the tradition in Bengal.

Although the young ashram manager carries a cell phone, the ashram offers little in creature comforts, lacking air-conditioning, running water, or private toilets. Instead, at the end of clean-swept dirt paths, the line of well-maintained individual rooms reflects the simple asceticism character-

istic of the *sadhu* as religious practitioner. Families that work for the ashram live in small houses at the rear of the compound, but their role is clearly secondary to that of the *sadhus*: while others can visit and work there, this ashram exists for the worship of Krishna and Caitanya. It is populated by *sadhus* who are dedicated to religious practice under the austere direction of gurus past and present, within clear boundaries of tradition. With the exception of the cell phone and electric lights, this ashram would typify ashrams from any decade of the last century.

A Transitional Ashram: Anand Dham Gaudiya Ashram

Along Vrindaban's *parikrama* path, not far from open pastureland and fields but also close to Raman Reti, stands what looks like a suburban gated community of small two-story cottages with attached garages. Anand Dham was constructed in 2003 by A. S. Kela of Aligarh, principal of Anand Group Industries and a disciple of Narayan Maharaj, a guru in another branch of the Bengal Vaishnava *sampradaya* that animated the traditional ashram in Raman Reti.¹¹ The mission of the ashram is to provide support for religious seekers at all stages—*ashramas*—of life, from childhood to old age. True to the core practice of followers of Caitanya, the ashram is dedicated to the chanting of Krishna's Holy Name, a *sadhana* of love (*prema*) that leads to the bliss (*ananda*) of the ashram's name, "The Dwelling of Bliss." Anand Dham seeks to provide permanent residences for senior citizens and opportunities for other sincere practitioners of this *sadhana* to gather with their guru in Vrindaban. The salient roles of guru, *sampradaya*, and *sadhana* are clear; but what is distinctive about this ashram is that, while it explicitly supports the role of *sadhus*, the primary beneficiaries of the ashram are lay disciples, living as householders even on the ashram property. In this way, Anand Dham represents a creative adaptation of the ashram ideal to the lay disciples who make up the vast majority of Narayan Maharaj's followers "so that sincere practitioners of *sadhana* could happily achieve the ultimate goal of their mortal lives in a pure, peaceful and spiritual environment."¹²

Built on a tract of eighteen thousand square meters, the ashram includes a residence for *sadhus*, Sant Kutir, a tribute to renunciants' service to all; a free school for twenty-five "poor but intelligent boys"; and a *goshala* for the traditional care and protection of twenty cows. The ashram has forty-five independent, freehold cottages with attached garages on tracts of one hundred square yards, with 1,425 square feet of living space on two floors. The community is gated, with intercom control and adequate parking for visitors, and provides a library and access to medical care. The prominent temple is dedicated to Krishna as Radha-Syamasunder with other images of "Gaurangadhara" (Caitanya) and "Giriraj" (Krishna bearing Govardhan Hill). Other shrines are dedicated to worship of the *tulsi*

(holy basil) plant and “Gopishvar Mahadeva” (Shiva, who, like everyone, must become a *gopi*—a female cowherd—to worship Krishna in Vrindaban). The full cycle of Gaudiya Vaishnava temple ritual provides disciples opportunities for serving God in a secure and protected environment and for receiving food offerings (*prasadam*). Central to the ashram’s purpose is service to the guru whose presence on the Guru Purnima holiday and other occasions is an additional benefit for residents at Anand Dham.

In addition to the cottages for permanent residents, sixty temporary guest rooms for disciples offer—the Web site promises—a mix of air-cooled, air-conditioned, and normal accommodations, along with security, freedom from noise and air pollution, cemented paths, secure electric supply, and fresh water. Membership time-share options are available for those who wish to use these rather simple guest rooms, but opportunities are limited to family members of permanent residents and those who have observed the religious practice of Anand Dham for some time. These arrangements offer nine nights per year with meals for about \$68 or twenty-five nights in air-conditioned rooms over a five-year period for \$240. The modest costs of guest rooms reflect the ashram’s restriction to practicing disciples as well as subsidy from the endowment and the greater cost of permanent residence.

Residence at Anand Dham is dedicated to a guru, deeply rooted in his tradition, and restricted to disciples engaged in core practice of that tradition. Anand Dham shows its respect for the fourfold ashramic system, incorporating students and *sadhus*; but its focus is almost exclusively on lay disciples of means who want to link their lives and religious practice with minimal compromise. In appearance and mission, it represents something new, a transition attempting to be faithful to the tradition while directing it toward those who represent its future.

Modern/Condo Ashrams

Ananda Krishna Van

All over Vrindaban are signs and posters advertising Ananda Krishna Van as a “prakitik [genuine/authentic, “traditional”] ashram with modern facilities,” although this description understates its aspirations: to be one’s “abode eternal.”¹³ With text in English and Hindi, the brochure recalls:

Vrindavan is a blissful grove, where the queenly Yamuna flows;
He who bathes here and bows, attains the bliss of heaven above;
Vedas, Puranas joyfully praise, and sages, saints do believe,
Yamuna blesses immortality, so witnesses Shri Radhakarani. . . .

Ananda Krishna Van offers “a feeling . . . a devotion . . . a tranquility.” “It is a dream conceived to bring the people closer to the life of Krishna. The whole project is a reflection of Krishna’s life.”

Located in Madhuvan Colony near the *parikrama* path, Ananda Krishna Van consists of three-story condominium apartment blocks in four connected buildings: Yashoda Niwas (for the elderly, named for Krishna's mother), Krishna Niwas, Radha Niwas, and Balram Niwas (named for Krishna's brother). As of August 2006, construction of Yashoda Niwas was complete, and the other three wings were nearing completion. Publicity materials assert that the appearance of Ananda Krishna Van in Vrindaban has redefined its religious landscape:

Bhakti

Lord Vishnu says, "Hey Lakshmi! Listen. The greatness of Vrindavan is so, that I am unable to describe it. . . . Only those who make a special effort to visit Mathura and Vrindavan can feel the vastness of this *ananda*."

The Lord's intense love for Vrindavan has made it the centre for Krishna Bhakti. It is in this ambience of the faithful that Ananda Krishna Van plans to appear . . . to fulfill the desire of Lord Vishnu, and offer the best of services to the Lord's devotees who come to Vrindavan in search of *Moksha* [liberation].

Ecstasy

Ananda Krishna Van evokes the playfulness and loveable attributes of Lord Krishna. Here it seems as if the Lord's frolics with his Friends and Gopis have come alive, in and around the groves.

Waterfalls, lush greenery encircled by lush floral brilliance. At a nook nestles the Nand Gaon ["Nanda's town," Krishna's adolescent town, here the food court], while the breeze sifts through the trunks of Mahavan [ornamental garden] and carries the aromatic pollen of wondrous flowers. Birds chirp. Peacocks dance. Bees hum. Here is where tourists can gain a peaceful and blissful rest, away from the noise and rush of life.

Mahavan: Celestial Green

A central ornamental garden with waterfalls, canals, fountains, ordered lawns, fruit-bearing trees, herbal and spice gardens, gazebos, walkways, an open-air theatre, children's playground, modern toilets and changing rooms, and ultramodern ashrams for the Lord's devotees, makes the Mahavan [*lit.*, great forest] a captivating paradise of divine luxury.

Nand Gaon: A Whiff of the Exotic

In the food court of Ananda Krishna Van, preparation of organic food only without fertilizers, includes a well-equipped cultural centre to hold communions, conferences, cultural programs, vocational classes, beauty aroma therapies, Yoga and meditation sessions, and indoor games for the young and old. Later, facilities such as nature-walks, jogging and walking tracks, horse-riding tracks, riverside games, rock-climbing sites etc. will be added.

With its special services for the elderly, Yashoda Niwas is essentially an assisted-living facility. It offers on-site caretakers and on-call doctors available around the clock, cooked food and provisions provided at the Nand

Gaon food court, and opportunities for religious activities at the Satsang Hall and the non-sectarian Jal Mandir (Water Temple) and for bathing in Sarovar and Pavitra Dhara (a lake and waterfall of Yamuna water).

Tranquility

Close to the Mahavan is a unique repose for weary travelers and tourists. For elderly devotees, the Yashoda Niwas provides single rooms with separate sitting and sleeping areas with 4-bedded large rooms. All rooms have attached toilets. Kitchen is optional. A wide front balcony provides a breathtaking view of the greenery around. Then there are three other blocks, named after Balaram, Krishna and Radha. Each of these complexes provides a glimpse into the mythological ecstasy of Krishna Leela.

The Yashoda Niwas has separate caretaker rooms on each level for round-the-clock caring of the elderly. The other three Balram Niwas, Krishna Niwas and Radha Niwas will have exclusive sun rooms, ramps for the disabled, reading rooms and sitting lounges.

The health and rejuvenation center offers services appropriate to adults (natural therapy clinic, yoga and meditation classes, health club), with special attention to women's needs (gymnasium, beauty and massage parlor, steam room and sauna). Outdoor and hobby activities are directed toward children. Air-conditioned apartments are available in five floor plans, some with full kitchens or pantry-cabinets. General amenities include a business center and "pure, crystal clean water from [the] Yamuna, 24-hour water and power, on-site currency conversion for non-resident Indians, 24-hour room service, advanced 24-hour security system, and adequate parking."

Ananda Krishna Van is directed exclusively at householders. There is no place for *sadhus*, no reference to a guru, a *sampradaya*, or any spiritual practice expected of residents. The level of care for the elderly in Yashoda Niwas, the first phase of construction, is certainly commendable. However, beyond the names of the four construction units, the very generic religious references merely serve to redefine spiritual ideals in terms of marketing strategy: a water temple to no particular deity, bathing in the artificial pond and waterfall (Sarovar and Pavitra Dhara), organic food for *prasadam* in Nand Gaon, and an ornamental garden as one of Braj's twelve forests (Mahavan). The buildings occupy a very intense footprint on the site, leaving little room for the enjoyment of nature and the outdoor activities featured in the brochure. Obtaining "pure, crystal clean water from the Yamuna," whether intended for bathing or drinking, is simply impossible today. This "prakritik ashram" provides modern facilities in a sacred location, while devotion to Krishna has been reinterpreted by the developers of Ananda Krishna Van as a function of marketing.

Sri Krishnalok

Sri Krishnalok (Abode of Sri Krishna) is located on the Delhi–Agra Expressway (National Highway 2) north of the intersection with the Chhatikara Road that leads to Vrindaban, about five kilometers from the Krishna Balaram Temple and seven kilometers from the Banke Bihari Temple, the usual landmark for the historical pilgrimage center.¹⁴ This location makes it accessible for commuting to both Delhi and Agra. While Ananda Krishna Van is a secure compound in a residential colony, Sri Krishnalok is an open, imposing development designed to be visible and accessible from a major highway. In 2006, the residential complex, surrounding a large image of Krishna on interior lawns, was complete, with sites set aside for future construction of a shopping mall and a restaurant/luxury hotel on the 6.5-acre property. Space for constructing a Radha Krishna Mandir (temple) is reserved in the site plan. The residential apartment units come in one-bedroom (710 square feet, including drawing room, dining room, kitchen, toilet, storage, and balcony), two-bedroom (1,120 square feet, adding a second toilet and a second balcony), and three-bedroom (1,495 square feet, adding a third toilet and expanded space in the drawing and dining rooms) models. Advertised sale prices for these units are US\$22,000, \$28,000–\$34,000, and \$40,000–\$44,000, respectively. Three four-story blocks of the larger apartments surround the center of the site, with two parallel blocks of one- and two-bedroom units on the periphery. A separate dormitory houses drivers and servants. The entire complex is described as “Vastu friendly”—that is, following religious and ecological construction norms—and earthquake resistant. Along with the imposing image of Krishna and the proposed temple, the site will offer yoga and nature-cure classes and a room for religious programs. Amenities include security, water, and power; cable and phone service; and maintenance-free living.

The publicity for Sri Krishnalok urges one to “Discover God . . . Discover Yourself” in Vrindaban:

Vrindaban—Gateway to the Lord. One of the holiest Hindu cities, it is the land where Lord Krishna is said to have spent some of the most beautiful moments of his youth. It is the city that is still alive with the tales of Krishna and the music of his flute.

If there is one God whose name is known and recognized throughout the world, it is Sri Krishna. The pious identify him as the savior and protector of those who seek and surrender to Him.

Take refuge in the feet of the same God with love and devotion. Welcome to Sri Krishnalok.

Discover the sanctuary to attain an eternal tranquility. . . .

Understand the secrets of life. Understand your relationship with other beings; with [the] cosmos; with creation and with the Creator. Come to the Land of God. Come home to Sri Krishnalok.

The project fits squarely within the corporate mission of the Capital Group:

After the grand success of “Gayatrilok” [Haridwar] having more than 400 flats, the Capital Group has launched a breakthrough project of [a] residential complex in close proximity of Vrindaban. The complex includes approximately 200 flats built over a sprawling area of 6.5 acres. The unique architectural design of Sri Krishnalok captures the true spirit of the holy city of Vrindaban.

A landmark residential complex built in harmony with acres of peace and security. Attractively landscaped with trees and plants.

Replete with comfy flats are homes for the posh and pocket-wise alike. Sri Krishnalok has a great potential to be a new hub for good life. With the rustic charms and urban convenience, life here is made of dreams.

It fits also within an understanding of Vrindaban:

If that sounds like a dream, it’s time you woke up to the reality of Sri Krishnalok.

Discover the true spirit of love. . . .

Sri Krishnalok “captures the true spirit of the holy city of Vrindaban,” removed yet within proximity to the calls of commercial and secular life. “Vastu-friendly,” it stands distant also from the pressing environmental problems of Vrindaban and the Yamuna River: deforestation, groundwater salination, pollution of rivers and ponds, animal control of cows and monkeys, sewage and garbage disposal, and the “people pollution” that comes from exceeding sustainable load. The large image of Krishna on its central court and the projected Radha-Krishna temple lend a clear Vaishnava tone to the project, a suggestion of Krishna’s “protection of those who seek and surrender to him,” but one that is without sectarian commitment. Krishna is “said to have spent” time here; the city is “alive with the tales of Krishna”; “the pious identify him as the savior.” Sri Krishnalok lays no claim to be an ashram, even though, in its own way, it *does* lay claim to Vrindaban and to the “tales of Krishna.” This project, for “posh and pocket-wise” householders, has no place for *sadhus* or for service to a guru, a tradition, or a requisite practice. But promotional materials suggest that it is possible to come home to Sri Krishnalok and to Vrindaban at the same time.

Pushpanjali Baikunth

Baikunth (*lit.*, “Vishnu’s Heaven,” a generic term for paradise) is an ambitious project of Agra-based Pushpanjali Constructions, a leading developer of residential and commercial real estate, including shopping malls and family entertainment centers, as well as health care and education properties.¹⁵ This development is one of several major (75–125-acre) residential subdivisions by Pushpanjali Constructions currently launched or planned along the National Highway 2–National Capital Region corridor between the Vrindaban–Mathura area and Agra; others include Pushpanjali Meadows, Pushpanjali Upwan, Pushpanjali Farms and Resorts, Pushpanjali Town, and Pushpanjali Orchid. Baikunth has just moved into the “launch” stage with the broad outlines of the first stage walled against squatters and the survey of plots and streets laid out; the first model villa has been built near the sales center. The 110-acre building site is located on open land in the farming community of Burz, a little more than two kilometers south of the Chhatikara Road, one kilometer beyond the completed Keshav Dham development in Keshav Nagar. From the intersection with Chhatikara Road, using the customary measures, the development is 250 meters from the ISKCON temple and nearly two kilometers from Banke Bihari Temple in traditional Vrindaban. The surrounding countryside is currently dedicated to agricultural use; one can observe goats grazing, water buffalo wading in irrigation canals, farm tractors passing, and local herdsmen proudly showing off their cows in the town center of Burz. The surveyed site and the development plans stand in marked contrast to this rural background. The local farmers and herdsmen have seemed oblivious to the looming passage of their entire way of life.

Baikunth is described in sales materials as “The Modern Style of Spiritual Living.” Puneet Agarwal, Director of Pushpanjali Constructions, described Baikunth to the India Times News Network as follows:

Baikunth at Vrindaban can be called your gateway to self-awakening. Spread over 110 acres, in close proximity to National Highway No 2, this project provides you with the perfect settings to achieve totality of thought, of the spirit and finally, of the self. This is because nearby are 4000 temples (including the ISKCON temple). The housing complex has all modern facilities like round the clock security, power back up, underground electrification, market and shopping mall, etc and is set in green surroundings. For spiritual living, the complex also has a Yoga centre, a meditation point and a distress centre. It also has a gaushala [*goshala*], sat sang [assembly] hall, gurukul [a type of Hindu school], naturopathy health centre/spa, jogging park and club with swimming pool. Suites, villas, cottages and apartments, available in the complex, are the epitome of luxury with the best of fittings and are landscaped too. These are also well connected with the ISKCON temple with the help of modern transport sys-

tems. Already, the project is creating a buzz amongst ISKCON devotees in Japan and Europe, with more than 300 already evincing interest in it.¹⁶

Some of the interest by ISKCON devotees may be due not only to the proximity to Krishna-Balaram Temple but also to the freehold ownership model, which contrasts with the two-generational limit at the ISKCON-sponsored Mayapur Vrindavana Trust Ashram.¹⁷ Such residences, modestly priced by Western and Japanese standards, would also allow independent-minded and disaffected ISKCON members to establish their own householder style of devotion in proximity to Vrindaban.

Baikunth is advertised as “your gateway to self awakening”:

Far from the madding crowd is a place rife with tranquility at its height. A place that makes the soul one with the divine. A place that reverberated in the chants of the bygone era of Mahabharata and a quiet yet appealing world of the countryside.

A revelation of sorts, the Baikunth is a reflection of serenity and awakening. Soaked in absolute bliss, the environment here is a symbol of modern day lifestyle amidst the serenity and the divinity of Lord Krishna’s birthplace. Further, the more you acquaint yourself with the proximity including the temples, the more you will get addicted to the spirituality which reflects in the surroundings. The project has thus been designed to bring to you the complete glory of the four seasons. The main motive is to transcend you to a new plane spiritually, every morning.

A Pilgrim’s Progress, in the true sense, Baikunth is all set to get you close to nature and more so, closer to God. Certainly, the 4000 majestic temples (including the ISKCON temple) surrounding the land are going to add to the mysticism here.

Baikunth helps to “reach another world”:

Brought to you by Pushpanjali Constructions Private Limited, Baikunth is the perfect confluence for the mind, the soul and the body—a place where Self-realization and Self-emancipation come naturally to every incumbent, including you. A place surrounded by clinking rivulets, miraculous caverns where the elixir of life flows in more ways than one. What’s more, it continues to provide your physical self the security and the safety you ask for from your earthly abode.

Further, this amazing residency is well-connected with the ISKCON temple with the help of modern transport systems.

And, in this way, Baikunth helps one “attain a new completeness”:

Completely isolated from the world’s cacophony, this place provides you with the perfect setting to achieve the totality of thought, the totality of the spirit, and finally the totality of the self. A yoga centre, a meditation point and a distress centre are all there to soothe the fatigue and bring out the finer things in life. By taking each as close to tranquility as possible so

that the end result is complete emancipation and to take life with a new vigor every time. And thus attain a new fullness.

In addition to the amenities above, Baikunth promises a grand gated entry (prominent in publicity); ample parking; bodies of water with musical fountain; around-the-clock customer care; and fifty-foot statues of Krishna and Shiva, larger still than the image at Sri Krishnalok. Future development envisions an air-conditioned hotel and theatre multiplex. Four villa models are advertised, ranging from 90 square meters to 250 square meters (about 1,075 to 2,475 square feet). The basic two-level design includes two bedrooms, two baths, a combined drawing room and dining area, kitchen, and terrace. The most elaborate tri-level model offers three bedrooms, three and one-half baths, servants' quarters with separate bath and yard, a combined dining and family room, formal drawing room, *puja* (worship) area, two terraces, and extensive lawn space.

Baikunth is only one of several large residential development projects in this area between the Krishna Balaram Temple and the Chhatikara Crossing on National Highway 2. Since my observations in August 2006, a new villa development by Ganpati Shelters, Krishna Kripa ("Krishna's Mercy"), has moved into construction phase on farmland in Keshav Nagar, one kilometer closer to the main Chhatikara Road than Baikunth. This new luxury project, described as a "spiritual ethnic village," offers one-bedroom apartments (1,250 square feet, priced at US\$38,500), two-bedroom villas (1,923 square feet, US\$59,000), and three-bedroom villas (2,312 square feet, US\$71,000).¹⁸

Environmental Impact & Luxury Appeal of the Building Boom in Vrindaban

The environmental footprints of these projects on the semi-arid, irrigated farmland; their demands for water supply, electricity, and sewage and garbage disposal; and the direct impact of increased population density contrast with the brochures' descriptions of paradise—a literal Baikunth—in Vrindaban. Subdivision development will mark the marginalization or elimination of the very farming–herding culture that is celebrated in the stories of Krishna and his cowherd friends, just as deforestation and soil aridity (due to salination and declining water tables) have removed the forests—the *-ban* or *-van*—from Vrindaban and the other forests of the Braj region. Some local residents worry about the construction of houses and villas that wealthy Hindus will occupy only for a few festival weeks each year. However, many purchasers of luxury properties within commuting distance of Agra and Delhi might see them as year-round homes, with a proportionately greater environmental impact and demand for services.

Baikunth offers purchasers “the modern style of spiritual living,” promising a path to new awareness and fullness of life. Although location cements marketing appeal to some Vaishnava practitioners, notably ISKCON members, Baikunth is independent of any guru, *sampradaya*, or *sadhana* tradition. Its luxury appeal contrasts with the world-renouncing *sadhu* image as well as with the ashram discipline enforced by many gurus to push their disciples away from their comfortable life toward religious transformation.

This modern/condo style of participation in the religious ideal and life of Vrindaban starkly contrasts with traditional ashram associations with *sadhu*, guru, *sampradaya*, and *sadhana*. At the same time, these developments do offer the middle and elite classes a mode of participation in the tradition that corresponds to their contemporary lifestyles. While the sales brochures crassly appropriate religious tradition to sell destination condo living, they mirror the “hot buttons” of Indian real-estate sales culture as much as images of environmental beauty, outdoor life, eternal youth, and blatant sex appeal sell “luxury homes and estates” in the *Wall Street Journal* and *New York Times*. Although American ads promise living in a pristine wilderness (surely made less pristine by residential development there), the Indian promotions promise a way to participate in Hindu religious culture—but a culture that stands apart from its traditional foundations. The religious ecology of Vrindaban, its identity as the gateway into Krishna’s eternal play, is thus called into question by challenges to ownership and access to tradition. Who speaks for Vrindaban? Who will answer for its religious life?

The religious meaning of Braj, and of Vrindaban in particular, is mapped onto the natural environment and is inseparable from it. Much of the current real-estate development places new ecological loads on an already fragile and threatened environment. Several local and international groups, notably Friends of Vrindaban and Food for Life–Vrindaban, have been formed to address particular needs in the city: improving the status and professionalism of refuse removal and sewage control, developing a modern plan for refuse transfer stations and landfill disposal of waste, and modeling reforestation in public areas. Private and governmental assistance from Japan has supported improvements in municipal water supply and sewage treatment. The Yamuna Action Plan has begun to address some of the environmental threats to the river itself.

Such private and public efforts, however, are dwarfed by the environmental assault posed by large-scale real estate developments like those described in this article. Many of the developers describe their commitment to Hindu ideals of eco-friendly living (*vastu*) and civic responsibility. Development does bring financial resources that are unavailable in traditional Vrindaban; the self-interest of stakeholders in new communities could enforce a greater level of practical environmental responsibility than governmental regulation. But there is no guarantee that such corporate- or individual-

enlightened self-interest will be forthcoming or that it will be successful against the environmental burden. One long-time resident of Vrindaban spoke sadly: “We have lost Vrindaban.”

The Condo as Ashram: The Challenge of Tradition & Change

Vrindaban has changed before. The sixteenth century brought a totally new and creative—but deeply faithful—mapping of its religious culture and ecological foundation. In Charlotte Vaudeville’s phrase, Braj was “lost” and then was “found.”¹⁹ That process of re-creating Vrindaban involved many Vaishnava traditions that seemed to work at cross-purposes; it required enlisting the support of Mughal rulers whose religious understandings differed radically from those of their Hindu subjects. But sixteenth-century Vrindaban possessed religious and political leaders with the imagination and courage to change, deeply but faithfully. The following universal aphorism applies to Vrindaban: “If you want things to remain the same, things will have to change.” The question is whether love for present-day Vrindaban can summon religious and political leaders to manage that change creatively with both courage and fidelity.

The challenge facing Vrindaban’s traditional and emerging religious leaders, her social and environmental activists, her residents and pilgrims, and her farmers and developers is comparable to that of crossing the monsoon-swollen Yamuna River. The boatman must cast off from land, catch the current while setting his own course, and then bring the boat to the other shore. But because the boat must return to the launching site, the boatman must cross the river with a mind to getting back, knowing how to manage a crossing between two shores. And, for the passengers who share that crossing, one thing is clear: however much a firm fare for the crossing has been bargained in advance, once the boat has cast off and floats in mid-stream, the price will go up.

Notes

¹Numerous and vexing variants in spelling exist for some of the key words used repeatedly in this article, reflecting differing styles of transliteration (*Vrindaban* or *Vrindavan*) and writers’ preferences either for Sanskrit (*Vrindavana* and *Vraja*) or modern Hindi (*Vrindaban* and *Braj*). Except in direct quotations, I have followed the most common transliteration in modern Hindi.

²Somini Sengupta, “In Teeming India, Water Crisis Means Dry Pipes and Foul Sludge,” *New York Times*, September 29, 2006; and Somini Sengupta, “Thirsty Giant: India Drills Deeper, but Wells Are Drying Up,” *New York Times*, September 30, 2006.

³David L. Haberman, *River of Love in an Age of Pollution: The Yamuna River of Northern India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

⁴Jaideep Mazumdar, "Tagore's Ruined Garden: Santiniketan, the Poet-Philosopher's Own Idyllic Campus, Sinks in a Mire of Vices," *Outlook India* (New Delhi), September 25, 2006.

⁵Joshua M. Greene, "Hindu Holy Place Altered by Technology, Development, Pollution," http://www.beliefnet.com/story/167/story_16704_1.html (posted 2004; accessed July 12, 2007).

⁶The transforming process of pilgrimage through Braj has been described by David Haberman in *Journey through the Twelve Forests: An Encounter with Krishna* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

⁷The classic Western description of the multilayered construction of Braj is that of F. S. Growse, *Mathura: A District Memoir* (1882; New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, 1979). The standard for modern scholarship, to which I am indebted for my description, is A. W. Entwistle, *Braj: Centre of Krishna Pilgrimage* (Groningen: Egbert Forsten, 1987). The development of Krishna worship in Braj, the construction of Braj—and Vrindaban—as religious sites, and the central roles of Srinathji and Govardhan are described in a career-long inquiry by Charlotte Vaudeville, now presented in her *Myths, Saints and Legends in Medieval India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996).

⁸These accomplishments in Vrindaban, as well as some attendant missteps, are described by Charles R. Brooks, *The Hare Krishnas in India* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989).

⁹The guru's progress from pilgrim through regular visitor to ashram-builder is reflected in the career of Guru Anandamayi Ma (1927–82). She first visited Vrindaban in 1944 at the ashram of another guru; later, she performed *kathas* in various ashrams during the 1950s while becoming more of an attraction on their premises and influencing their practices; finally, she established her own ashram in the mid-1960s.

¹⁰I observed and photographed Raman Reti Radharaman Niwas in August 2006. I am grateful to the ashram manager for a tour of the grounds.

¹¹Information on Anand Dham was obtained by a tour of the ashram in August 2006 and by consulting the ashram's Web site, <http://www.anandparadise.com>.

¹²See <http://www.anandparadise.com/anand.htm>.

¹³Information on Ananda Krishna Van was drawn from its promotional brochure, from a site visit, and from its Web site, www.anandakrishnavan.com, which replicates the published materials. All quoted passages are from these promotional sources. The complex was designed by Brij (India) Architects and built by Ananda Krishna Infrastructures Ltd. I was unable to obtain any pricing information.

¹⁴Information about Sri Krishnalok was collected from its dedicated Web site, <http://www.srikrishnalok.com>. This development is a project of Capital Hotels and Developers Ltd.

¹⁵Information on Baikunth was obtained from the corporate Web site, accessible from http://www.pushpanjaliconstructions.com/properties/realestate_pre.asp.

¹⁶See <http://realestate.indiatimes.com/articleshow/1438517.cms> (accessed July 19, 2007).

¹⁷Residences at the Mayapur Vrindavana Trust Ashram may be conveyed once by the original owner/purchaser, after which ownership reverts to the Trust. This model supports the ashram trust's endowed purpose of providing retirement living for aging ISKCON members, but it fails to provide accumulation of equity for householders.

¹⁸Information from <http://www.ganpatishelters.com> (accessed March 20, 2007). The site is being redeveloped as <http://www.ganpatibuilders.com>.

¹⁹These terms appear in the title of Charlotte Vaudeville's pioneering historical essay, "Braj, Lost and Found," originally published in the *Indo-Iranian Journal* 18 (1976): 195–213. The essay appears in her *Myths, Saints and Legends*, 47–71.