

The New Vrindaban Project

Global Leadership Center

Ohio University

Introduction

The Global Leadership Center (GLC) at Ohio University is a two-year interdisciplinary certificate program for undergraduate students. GLC students complete a portfolio of research and consulting projects drawn from real-world economic, political, and sociocultural issues of global importance. Working with a variety of partners and clients, the program aims to help students develop a range of analytical and communication skills essential to problem-solving in an increasingly globalized, multicultural world.

Starting in the 2004-05 academic year, GLC students have enhanced their ability to understand different philosophical and religious worldviews through research on a Hare Krishna community, New Vrindaban, located near Moundsville, WV. Since this year marks the fortieth anniversary of New Vrindaban's founding, representatives from the community suggested that GLC students examine community members' visions for the future.

In order to accomplish this task, GLC teams of 3-4 students conducted a series of interviews with a New Vrindaban community member to elicit their vision(s) for the future. With the help of community members, a list of prospective interviewee representatives of community demographics and lengths of residence was identified and each student team was paired with an interviewee from this list. Initial electronic (e-mail) or phone interviews were conducted with each interviewee. Student teams then

conducted a final face-to-face interview during a class field visit to the community in mid-May, 2009. Team vision synopses for each interviewee were developed from these interview transcripts. Interviewees signed a release statement authorizing their visions to be published in the Harvard Pluralism Project database.

Acknowledgements

This year's GLC class was especially fortunate to have as leader-in-residence a former New Vrindaban community member, Balarama Chandra das (Boaz Ramos). Balarama and another long-term community resident, Sankirtan das (Andy Fraenkel), provided invaluable assistance in making connections with community interviewees and in making arrangements for the final field visit. The GLC also thanks all the interviewees and the New Vrindaban community for their hospitality and patience during the course of fieldwork in the community.

Editor's Note

Variations in spelling found in the following student team vision analyses (e.g., Krishna and Krsna; Vrindaban and Vrindavan) mirror variations found in published materials on the movement and the community, as different romanizations of Sanskrit-derived terms are used by movement adherents and those studying the movement.

There will be a balance of what was intended

Jacqlyn Breymaier, John A. Rochford, Wyatt Rogowski

Every morning, the rising of the sun marks dawn's arrival as it begins to appear over New York Harbor. Standing proudly under the beams of the new day, Lady Liberty's copper flames illuminate ever so slightly as a symbol of freedom. Such independence allows all citizens to strengthen their spiritual beliefs however they see fit.

Across town a Hare Krishna devotee, Vrindavanath das, practices his morning rituals and prepares himself spiritually for what the day may bring. Working in New York's financial district, Vrindavanath's career is centered on the current economic crisis. Such an urban setting makes it difficult for one to believe his childhood was spent at New Vrindaban, a Hare Krishna Society in the hills of West Virginia.

As New Vrindaban moves into its 5th decade, Vrindavanath's split life between New Vrindaban and Manhattan allows him to have a modern and realistic view of the relationship between the community and the fluctuating world.

Vrindavanath Das's Biography

Residing in Washington D.C., Vrindavanath's mother found herself in an unhealthy relationship that drained her spiritual and physical self. Seeking renewal she discovered Krishna Consciousness. When Vrindavanath was three years old his mother discovered a Hare Krishna community in West Virginia that focused upon simple living and high thinking. She made the decision to move with her son to a life based on the teachings of Vishnu.

Vrindavanath was enrolled in the community's school and lived at New Vrindaban until the age of 13. As with most adolescence children his urge to rebel led

him towards experimentation with substances outlawed by the community. Because of this substance abuse Vrindavanath was asked to leave and moved back to Washington D.C. with his father. Still young and unable to adapt to the Westernized world Vrindavanath was able to successfully lobby the community to allow him to live with his mother in Asia.

After a brief return to New Vrindaban, Vrindavanath left for college and pursued life in New York City. A successful player in Manhattan's financial arena, he still practices his faith and makes annual trips to the community where his mother still resides.

Vrindavanth Das's Vision of Future Growth

“There will be a balance of what was intended; an alternative to the day-to-day grind. Living simple but thinking spiritual... it is going to the forefront [of the future] and ideas of development and expansion will not. Development is going to fail because it is not based on healthy premises.”

Such a confession is a stark contrast to the city Vrindavanath currently calls home. He believes the fragility of urban life is a result of humanity's deep dependence on unstable factors. He feels that the present economic crisis is a reminder that today's modern lifestyle is unbalanced; those who are purely dependent upon monetary growth now feel empty. Vrindavanath thinks that a sense of emptiness has historically forced people to seek a new spiritual guidance. New Vrindaban possess a combination of Vishnu beliefs and a quaint setting, which allows one to create a worldview not focused upon materialistic aspects.

Vrindavanath's vision is that more people will become attracted to the community and its teachings of self-sustainability. He asserts that sustainability is already taking hold in Western society with concepts ranging from farmer's markets to organic health food stores. As our culture seeks better relations with the environment, Vrindavanath claims New Vrindaban play a unique role in educating people about how to live in mutual respect with the land.

Vrindavanth Das's Vision about Education and Technology

A history of student mistreatment has left the community's school, which once educated over three hundred students, with fewer than fifteen. As New Vrindaban's popularity grows, Vrindavanath feels the community can re-invest in the education of Krishna consciousness.

While information expands, New Vrindaban seeks a healthy balance between the use of technology and the benefits of living sustainable lives. Vrindavanath believes this balance can be achieved if the motive of using technology is to seek Krishna and not for personal use.

Conclusion

As the community enters its fifth decade, the current economic situation and respect for the environment allows New Vrindaban to transcend its troubled past and welcome new growth. For its members, New Vrindaban offers an opportunity to fill the void in many people's lives with the prospect of joining a lifestyle that empowers personal and spiritual development.

New Vrindaban's Fifth Decade: A Spiritual Retreat

Katie Combs, Janelle Huelsman, James C. Wamsley

The Biography of Gadadhara Pandit Das

Gadadhara Pandit das, "Pandit" as he is called, was born Pankaj Srivastava in Kanpur, India, in 1972. As a child, his family traveled to the United States, hoping to benefit from potential career opportunities. Although he was not particularly spiritual throughout his youth, he was raised Hindu. However, this changed in 1998 when Pandit converted to Krishna Consciousness. He said that the philosophy aligned with his personal beliefs and that he found meaning in *The Bhagavad Gita*, the primary text of Krishna Consciousness. He made his first visit to New Vrindaban two years later in 2000. In 2001, Pandit received initiation in the line of disciple succession of the Gaudiya-Brahma Vaisnavas, a monotheistic tradition with roots in ancient India. In the same year, he also began his campus ministry career as a Hindu chaplain at Columbia University in New York City. In 2007, he became the Hindu chaplain of New York University. Pandit did not face scrutiny from his family for converting to Krishna Consciousness. According to Pandit, because his family is Hindu, it helped to alleviate any negative connotations that conversion might have had. His parents have since converted to Krishna Consciousness as well. While Pandit does admit to having questioned his conversion to Krishna Consciousness within his first year as a devotee, he said he feels as though it has been one of the best personal choices he has made in his lifetime. Upon making his first trip to New Vrindaban, Pandit found the community particularly interesting and commended its ability to serve as a spiritual sanctuary. Since first

traveling to New Vrindaban, he has tried to return to the community at least once a year, but said that those plans fluctuate based on his obligations in New York.

Pandit has introduced New Vrindaban to New York University and Columbia University students as part of his services there. Bringing students to a rural community like New Vrindaban allows him to demonstrate the idea of simple living – milking cows and working with the land – something he feels most people today are out of touch with. According to Pandit, Krishna Consciousness emphasizes the significance of simple living as it allows one to be less distracted by worldly issues and brings one closer to God. It also supports having compassion for all living things, which is something that Pandit said is demonstrated to his students through the extensive cow protection program at New Vrindaban.

Pandit is also not oblivious to the controversies New Vrindaban has been faced with. In the 1970s, the community had an association with the “hippie” counterculture. He noted that the subsequent time period in which they were ousted from the International Society for Krishna Consciousness was a result of being “misguided.”

Pandit hopes that as New Vrindaban enters its fifth decade, the community will continue to serve as a spiritual retreat center, as it has in the past. He said that for monks such as himself who live in large cities, New Vrindaban serves as a great escape to remind them of the sense of community and simplistic lifestyle that plays such an important role in the philosophy of Krishna Consciousness.

The Vision of Gadadhara Pandit das for New Vrindaban

Pandit envisions continuing to bring students interested in organic gardening and working with cows with him to New Vrindaban. He hopes that New Vrindaban, in turn,

will expose visitors to spiritual and simple living. Typically, the students Pandit brings attend his cooking workshops, which center on the significance of food in the Krishna Consciousness philosophy. They are usually those who are curious about organic farming and simple living. Experiences with the farming life are generally new to the students who travel from New York City. He said that while he tries to explain the importance of the vegetarian diet and cow protection in Krishna Consciousness during his workshops, students often do not fully understand this until they travel to New Vrindaban, a place where they can experience farming and simple living, practices essential to broadening the minds of his students and that exemplify the aims of the Krishna Consciousness philosophy.

Pandit's vision places emphasis on the learning benefits for his students who travel to New Vrindaban. While most enjoy the rural escape and often express a desire to participate in internship opportunities or prolong their stays at New Vrindaban, none of his students have decided to become permanent residents. However, Pandit said that he is proud of the "transformation" some students undergo after their stay at New Vrindaban. Many of the students leave with more appreciation for life and living things.

As New Vrindaban continues to grow, Pandit said that he sees its success and popularity developing, also. He recognized that the New Vrindaban community is becoming a large attraction for not only many Hindu devotees in the United States, but also non-devotees, thanks to the community's outreach efforts. He hopes the community will continue serving both devotees and non-devotees alike in the decades to come.

Personal Visions and Communal Living:

A Hare Krishna's Design for the Future of New Vrindaban

Nikki Byram, Alex Nickley, Kyle Mitchell

Hari Bhakta Das' Biography

At the age of eighteen after growing up in Southern India, Hari Bhakta das travelled halfway around the world to attend a university in Texas. Shortly after enrolling in college, Hari Bhakta felt disillusioned and sought greater spiritual exploration that eventually led him to discontinue his studies in college. Following this decision he met several Hare Krishna devotees who inspired him to travel to New Vrindavan. From here he began a period that has lasted for nearly two decades where he moved back and forth between New Vrindavan and other pursuits that lay beyond the grounds of this rural ISKCON community.

When Hari Bhakta first set foot inside the community at New Vrindavan, he felt an inexplicable sense that he had returned home. Following his arrival, Hari Bhakta's initial interest in New Vrindavan was largely motivated by an appreciation of the communal aspects and lifestyles rather than an attraction to the Hare Krishna religion. After a year at the community he left to restart his nearly lifelong spiritual journey where he sought to find a set of religious beliefs that fit his life best. This journey brought him all over the country, at times travelling with Native American medicine men and attending various spiritual gatherings. Ultimately, Hari Bhakta decided to travel back to New Vrindavan, however, this time his interest was not merely based on the community, but rather on a desire to pursue the life of a Hare Krishna devotee. After eight years of

living at the community, Hari Bhakta began feeling dissatisfied with the administrators and decided once more to pursue his own path.

By this time Hari Bhakta had also begun a family, and they all travelled together to Columbus, Ohio so that he could finish his studies at Ohio State University. Here, Hari Bhakta majored in psychology and additionally took courses that were focused on comparative religion. Upon graduation he then traveled to Shanghai, China to begin teaching English at a Chinese university to business clients. Following the end of this teaching term in China, he and his family then went across Asia to India where he managed an eco-tourist community. The reason behind both of these travels was a strong desire to get outside of the United States and see something different than the life he had experienced in America for nearly the past decade. While he and his family were living in India his wife became ill, and this led them to return to the United States to obtain optimal medical care. Despite all efforts, his wife eventually passed away leaving Hari Bhakta a single parent with two young children to look after. In November 2008, he again returned to New Vrindavan where he has resided ever since.

Hari Bhakta's Vision

Hari Bhakta is very passionate about what he envisions for the future of the community that he has been involved in for nearly twenty years. There are two main concerns that he would like to see addressed in the future: a lack of job opportunities and a lack of generational continuity. In many ways these two issues are entwined together, as an absence of one fuels problems for the other.

Today in New Vrindavan the current lack of jobs and economic opportunities is a major problem for both the devotees and the community at large. Despite the initial

vision of the community by Srila Prabhupada, the spiritual leader upon whose teachings the community's principles are based, as a self-sustainable and simple living community, the present reality is that it is still necessary to generate some income to be able to pay the bills and to put food on the table. Most of the funding for the community stems from money that pilgrims contribute and from outside donations. This income model is not able to foster further growth and improvements, so it is clear that a change towards greater self-generated funds is needed.

Hari Bhakta sees the solution to this job and economic dilemma relating to the variety of skills, knowledge, and resources that are already within the community. The particular job fields that he sees as an appropriate fit for New Vrindavan are food and farming enterprises as well as holistic medicine practices. Currently there exists limited farming and food production, however as of yet there are not any medical and wellbeing facilities on the grounds of the community. The benefits of these business opportunities would be twofold. They would generate jobs and income for the community, and also increase the profile of New Vrindavan within new population segments.

In the proposed expansion of agricultural pursuits, Hari Bhakta feels that it is crucial to increase the size of gardens and farms in order to generate enough food to feed the community as well as have a surplus to sell on the market. Currently at New Vrindavan there exists a small plot of farmland, but in Hari Bhakta's view this is merely a façade of a farm. The small garden is largely for show because it is too small to be able to contribute much to the food that is consumed by the community. There will likely be some difficulties in this pursuit that could range from agricultural to monetary purposes, such as making the farms competitive with large scale operations that dominate the U.S.

However, currently in the food market there is a shift towards small scale organic farming that Hari Bhakta believes would provide New Vrindavan with a sustainable business niche.

In addition to the general idea of increasing agricultural production, Hari Bhakta specifically envisions an attraction that is called the “Edible Forest.” In this plan he envisions a forest of nut and fruit trees all over the grounds so that everything that is growing can be eaten. He has already started this by planting 50 nut and berry trees and over 100 asparagus plants in memory of his wife.

On the medical and well-being front, Hari Bhakta believes that devotees could use their knowledge of yoga and traditional medicine to start centers for traditional Krishna healing. Because of the growing interest in fitness and herbal medicine in the U.S., he feels that these businesses could be successful. This type of enterprise would not only fulfill the community’s need for economic development, but also enhance and spread Hare Krishna philosophy and practice.

The other main problem that Hari Bhakta sees for the community is the current lack of generational continuity. Many of the families who live at New Vrindavan see their children leave the community once they reach eighteen to attend college and then look for jobs in the outside world. One of the main causes for children leaving is the lack of job opportunities already discussed. Many of the adults who have families at New Vrindavan have worked hard to help build the community and most of them have a desire for their children to stay and continue their legacy of work and spirituality. The majority of the children of the original devotees who arrived at New Vrindavan in the 1970’s have left. Consequently, there are very few young people who grew up at New Vrindavan and

continue to live there. Most of the children who grew up at New Vrindavan have many fond memories, but memories alone are not enough to keep them in the community after they finish their high school education. Hari Bhakta believes that the leadership and the temple members should take some responsibility for creating jobs for the community and retaining the younger generation.

Hari Bhakta asserts that two of the main causes for why the community is not currently pursuing these ideas are due to a lack of funds and resistance from the current leadership. Many within the community still look to the founding vision of Srila Prabhupada who sought a sustainable and simple community where religion was the entire focus. However, as previously stated, people are already living in contrast to this vision in New Vrindavan. He says that these people simply need to admit that they are currently making the transition from Prabhupada's simple living instructions to becoming sustainable within the wider economy. For example, there is already a privately owned jewelry store and a store just two miles away that sells imitation meat products, as well as a thrift store, a hotel, and a restaurant.

The leadership at the temple determines where all its resources are distributed, and sometimes it seems to Hari Bhakta as if the current leadership is rather self-motivated. Many of the leaders also have never had any experience outside of the community, so their ideas and views are often different than someone such as Hari Bhakta's, who has been all over the world and seen many different communities and cultures.

It will certainly be interesting to watch how the future of this community unfolds, and presently it is difficult to predict its path. Although Hari Bhakta has stated a personal

vision for New Vrindavan that conflicts with that of its founder, he firmly believes that the community will remain spiritual. As for Hari Bhakta's own future, he would like to stay in the community to raise his children and help guide the community as best he can.

The First New Vrindaban Family

Amy Busch, Erin Parker, Steve Zeisler

Pulling into the driveway, our devotees' house looked like a typical West Virginia home. They have a quaint, white, ranch style house with carefully tended gardens and the Norwegian flag proudly hanging on the side of the house. However, this family is slightly different than other West Virginians. This family grew up in New Vrindaban in the Hare Krishna movement. The members are Vidya Devi Dasi (the mother and wife), Madhava Gosh das (the father and husband), Manjari¹ (the oldest daughter), and Tulasi² (the youngest son). Their family story is an interesting one, their personal ideas for the future, diverse, but all remain linked with an experienced vision for future families at New Vrindaban.

Vidya Devi Dasi's Vision

Vidya Devi Dasi was raised on a family farm, but at a young age she adamantly remembers her disdain for "eating anything with a face." She became intrigued in the Hare Krishna movement while attending college in Madison, Wisconsin. She eventually moved to New Vrindaban in 1972 in search of an open-minded vegetarian community, only later to embrace the Hare Krishna philosophy. As a young woman in the community, she was coerced by more powerful devotees into an arranged marriage.

¹ Manjari requested not to have her last name used.

² Tulasi requested not to have his last name used.

Vidya had to weigh the benefits of being in the community versus accepting an arranged marriage. After declining several offers, she married Madhava Gosh das. They have been married for thirty-four years and have five children together. They were one of the first arranged marriages at New Vrindaban, a place that did not sustain the traditional family unit.

One vision Vidya has is for the community to become more sustainable. Currently, the community is working to plant 1,000 trees within the next five years. She would like to see more of these initiatives. Another vision is to see more young people at New Vrindaban. “It’s just a bunch of old white men” she exclaimed. She continued by explaining that many of the devotee’s children move away because of the lack of economic opportunity.

Madhava Gosh Das’s Vision

On another farm hundreds of miles away, Madhava Gosh das was born in a small town in North Dakota. He was raised in a Lutheran household and was encouraged to respect the land and animals. While traveling in 1969, his first exposure to the Hare Krishna movement was in Los Angeles, California. A second encounter was with members in Amsterdam in 1970 which allowed him to delve deeper into the philosophy and practices. Upon returning to the U.S. a short time later, he heard about New Vrindaban from devotees in New York City. Because of his fondness for the land, he jumped at the opportunity to live in the community.

His vision for the community is to stay true to its roots and to rely more on the “land and cow.” He feels the American society consumes more than necessary. “I don’t have to drive a new car every year, or have that (new) album that just came out,” said

Madhava. “I would just rather ride my bike, and I have my mantra to chant.” He also acknowledged the future of New Vrindaban lies in the youth and children.

Manjari’s Vision

Their oldest daughter, Manjari, grew up in the early years of the New Vrindaban community. At school age, Manjari was placed in the *gurukula*, the community boarding school at New Vrindaban with other devotee children. Manjari grew up under the original movement’s belief system and her generation is referred to as the *gurukuli* generation. Manjari commented on the *gurukula* by saying, “religion was shoved down their throats.” Manjari, like other devotee children, was not able to see her family on a regular basis, but developed close bonds with many of the other children. She still feels a closer family bond to the girls from the *gurukula* over her parents and siblings. She struggles with feelings of parental abandonment that stem from her childhood in New Vrindaban.

The community experienced changes after the birth of the next three children. The school closed after the community scandals over child abuse allegations in the *gurukula*. The children were swiftly put into public school and the family moved into a home close to New Vrindaban. In public school, Manjari experienced culture shock and had to take a year off to transition into the system. Today, Manjari is an elementary school teacher and lives away from New Vrindaban. She believes the community helped shape her into an open-minded and empathetic person but considers herself an agnostic.

Her vision is for the community to revive itself. She recognizes that the community is aging and more young people need to join and help revive the temple. She expressed the need for economic opportunities in order for youth to stay. She has no plans to move back to New Vrindaban, but continues to visit her parents often.

Tulasi's Vision

Tulasi is the fifth and the youngest in the family and experienced the movement in a different era. His generation is called the *Krishna Youth*. This generation did not experience life in the *gurukula*, and attended the public schools in the surrounding community of Moundsville, West Virginia. Tulasi stated, "My upbringing was normal. I felt...the only way people could tell I was 'different' was because of my name." He grew up closer to his parents. He enjoyed playing sports, and adapted easily into the public school. Recently, he graduated from West Virginia University. He still partakes in aspects of the religious practices and seemed to have an overall positive experience growing up in the community. Tulasi's vision is to one day move back to the community with his friends when they want to settle down.

A Vision for Families at New Vrindaban

As a veteran family in the community, their vision for New Vrindaban families is derived from their personal experiences. As one of the first families, Madhava and Vidya's vision is for the new generation to learn from the community's past mistakes. This vision for families is composed of many facets.

The first is that families become independent. Vidya feels some families are too dependent on the temple and organizations for support rather than using it as a place of worship. She commented that the temple could only provide so much economic assistance, especially in these hard economic times. Currently, Madhava and Vidya envision families becoming more independent, finding an income, and living outside of the community.

Another facet regards arranged marriages. Although arranged marriages are no longer practiced in New Vrindaban, Vidya does not recommend it for the future. If it was still in practice, she could potentially have a hand in the arrangements. However, she does not desire to force this situation upon the other devotees.

A final component is the separation of families and its effects. In the early years, parents were forced to choose between complete devotion to God and the community or independently supporting and raising their children. Madhava and Vidya acknowledge the division of families in the past. The parents recognize their oldest daughter has tribulations stemming from her childhood and being separated from her family.

The family made a point that the youth are vital to the future of the community. Currently, most children move away for college or work. Manjari, like many others in the *gurukuli* generation, will likely not move back to the community. Tulasi on the other hand, and others in the *Krishna Youth* generation, plan on moving back to the community later in life. A challenge to attracting the youth back is the lack of economic opportunity in the community.

The family history can be described as intriguing and insightful. In the end, their story may not be different from other West Virginians. This is because every family faces challenges, but, they are still a family. For this family, their vision provides guidance for future generations at New Vrindaban.

A New Lease on Life: The Future of New Vrindaban

Allison Cooper, Jonathan Miller, Tatum Risch

Sankirtan Das' Biography

Sankirtan das first experienced Krishna Consciousness in college. He and his wife met devotees in New York City and began to adopt some of their practices such as meditation, a vegetarian diet and reading of the Bhagavad-Gita.

Several years after college, Sankirtan and his family moved to Chicago to serve at the Chicago Hare Krishna Temple. In 1976, he and his wife decided to move to New Vrindaban, the Hare Krishna community in West Virginia, so their children could attend the community school.

Over the past 20 years, Sankirtan has generated an income for his family through professional storytelling programs presented to elementary schools and colleges. He travels extensively, offering multicultural and sacred storytelling programs and workshops at various venues. Additionally, he offers coaching to those interested in honing their storytelling, acting and writing skills.

Throughout the 1980's Sankirtan had used his passion for theater and the performing arts by developing a theater company at New Vrindaban. The company performed dramas based on the sacred stories from India such as The Ramayana and Mahabharata. The plays were performed not only for community members but also for thousands of visiting guests. They also traveled to festivals, colleges, and Hindu temples to perform.

Sankirtan served as the Artistic Director of the theater project until the early 1990's. For several years in the mid- 1990's, Sankirtan also served on New Vrindaban's

managerial board. He is also currently involved in the Devotee Care Team, which seeks to serve devotees of the community.

There is a writers' group in the community that Sankirtan is involved in with a few other devotees. The devotees in the group work on individual manuscripts such as movie scripts, memoirs, novels and blogs. Sankirtan is currently working on a manuscript about his father's experiences in World War II Russia. He has previously published a book entitled *The Fish Wouldn't Stop Growing, and other Wisdom Stories from Ancient India*.

The reason Sankirtan has remained at New Vrindaban for 33 years with his family is because of the relationships with the resident devotees. He praises the fact that there are so many unique individuals in the community who serve as resources and outlets for fellowship on both social and spiritual levels.

Sankirtan Das' Vision

While he owns a home there and has no plans to leave, Sankirtan feels that the community needs to make changes to be successful in the future. He believes that in order for New Vrindaban to remain a viable community it needs to focus on attracting and retaining devotees. Currently there are about two hundred residents in the greater New Vrindaban Community, compared to six hundred in years past.

According to Sankirtan, people are not inspired to stay in the community because they feel their various needs are not being addressed. Many consider New Vrindaban just a "stopping point." Sankirtan believes devotee families will remain in the community if schooling is provided for their children, jobs are available, and the

management makes devotee care a priority. This is why a Devotee Care Team program is essential.

Previously, there was a school educating approximately 120 children. This school was a full-fledged, religious, private school that also housed all of the students. It provided an education for students ranging from kindergarten to twelfth grade. About twenty years ago management of the temple decided that the parents could choose to send their kids to public schools or to keep them in the community's private school. The school was eventually discontinued in 1999 due to low attendance.

Sankirtan's wife, Ruci Devi Dasi, taught at the school for twenty years and continues to play an important role in the new home school co-op which several parents established two years ago. Ruci serves as a salaried tutor for the five students involved. Sankirtan would like to see the temple and the greater New Vrindaban community take more of an interest in the educational program and help reestablish a private school, which would be recognized by the State of West Virginia. The children would live at home instead of being boarded. Sankirtan feels that the community cannot flourish without focusing on the school.

Currently at New Vrindaban, temple management often has to juggle conflicting roles as an "employer, landlord, and provider of spiritual inspiration." Over the years Sankirtan has repeatedly seen the results of the sizable responsibility of certain positions. After a year or two, those in such managerial positions experience burnout as their responsibilities become too overwhelming. Often, a lack of manpower forces the work of many people onto just a few individuals.

In an effort to help all devotees in their spiritual and material well being, Sankirtan along with several devotees have stepped forward to create a Devotee Care Team. The Devotee Care Team facilitates study of scripture and also helps resolve various devotees' concerns. They will have an office and regular office hours to provide counseling services when necessary. Also some team members might organize to help devotees who are sick. Currently, the Devotee Care Team is in its developmental stages. Sankirtan feels that for the Devotee Care Team to be successful there needs to be one or two full-time salaried staff members who function independently of management and can help guide their decisions.

Finally, Sankirtan feels New Vrindaban needs to develop new sources of income by attracting a more diverse group of visitors. Now, the community attracts many Hare Krishna and Hindu-American visitors but rarely mainstream Americans. In the past, when public relations and advertising were utilized eighty percent of visitors were mainstream Americans. For more Americans to be attracted again, Sankirtan thinks that offering and promoting retreats could draw in a different and diverse variety of people. These retreats could include workshops on organic farming and self-sufficiency, yoga and meditation programs, arts and crafts workshops, and education about other trades and skills of community members. In his travels, Sankirtan already offers workshops on helping people explore their life's stories, which he feels can also attract people to visit the community.

For New Vrindaban to become a growing community, a school needs to be firmly established; jobs and businesses created; older, longtime members of the community need to be brought on board; the Devotee Care Team needs to function

smoothly; and the management and department heads need to be supported and guided. Because Sankirtan has lived in the community for so long, he has valuable insight into the way the community works and what it needs to be successful. He sees potential in the community with residents having so many interests and skills.

**Social Networks & Mass Media Bring New Significance to
Hindu Community: Reflection of a Devotee on the Future Vision
of New Vrindavan**

Jessica Bores, Jim Brown, Jae Garrison

Nitai Das's Background

New Vrindavan is a stately, picturesque community located in rural West Virginia. In the hills near Moundsville sits a relatively unknown and uncommon spiritual retreat. The community has a fairly long history, and some well known faults which make it even more out of the ordinary, yet, all the more interesting. The community serves a purpose for its devotees and those of the Vishnu, Hindu religion. For Nitai das, New Vrindavan was the community where he found his purpose and has since spent 11 years. Nitai first encountered New Vrindavan in his adolescence when visiting his uncle, a member of the early community. When Nitai was 18 he decided to go on a spiritual quest, which led him out west, and finally back to the community. In his first few years at New Vrindavan, Nitai worked in the kitchen and later in audio-visual work; today he continues working with the audio-visual aspects of New Vrindavan and its events. While he travels to do his work, he sees New Vrindavan as a community with a potential for growth, growth he actively promotes and hopes will help to build the community.

Nitai Das's Vision for the Future

Nitai has mentioned that New Vrindavan was once a place that had a strong sense of community and enthusiasm. This fervent following resulted in the building and development of a large, sustainable community at its height in the mid 1980's. Nitai is very clear to mention that the community has since subsided into a transitional space, where little commitment is made by those living and utilizing the community. In New Vrindavan, there is a segmentation of uses for the community. Part of the community is devotees who live on the premises or nearby and access the resources from the community (i.e. the temple and food) while helping to maintain the community through some aspect of work (i.e. farming, temple). Then there are those who frequent the community seasonally, contributing while they are there. The most transient members of the community are the tourists who visit the temple, the Palace of Gold, and events like the 24-hour Kirtan. The tourists provide a source of income to the community as well as help to build its reputation. Yet, all of these groups together seem to detract from the original vision and impact community resources.

Today, New Vrindavan has a limited visionary scope, and with so many transient people it is hard to maintain a significant community presence. Nitai has, in a sense, found a new way to promote the community and help build it into a new generational phase. When Nitai first moved into the community he worked in the kitchen, but later chose audio-visual work promoting the community. This audio visual work has since made New Vrindavan better known and enhanced the capabilities of the community and its devotees to reach out. As Nitai pointed out, the use of new media (i.e. Facebook and YouTube) has helped make Kirtan music, and the New Vrindavan community, a well

known subject throughout the world. The video clips from New Vrindavan that were put on YouTube have helped to bring together a new group of people with the purpose of chanting Kirtan together. New Vrindavan hosts such events solely to bring people together for the purpose of chanting Kirtan. The 24-hour Kirtan, scheduled for June of 2009, was sold out as of May. The community is expecting nearly 800 people. Given the rural setting and size of the community, New Vrindavan is an ideal space for large gatherings, which Nitai Das has stressed many times in interviews. Mass media has helped to bring people together and bring awareness to what seems to be a dwindling community of a very traditional religion. Mass media, as Nitai mentions, has the ability to transform the everyday spirituality of Hinduism into teaching and educational material, especially through music. YouTube has allowed the Hare Krishna communities across the world to connect and learn from one another. Currently, New Vrindavan fulfills a basic need of space – not much more – for those looking to follow this new trend.

As mentioned, the transient groups detract from the resources of New Vrindavan, making it difficult for the community to grow and develop further. Mass media is presenting opportunities for New Vrindavan to expand and generate new sources of revenue. The demands for self-sustainability and the current costs of maintaining so many people are beyond the community's capacity. Nitai mentions that New Vrindavan is a great venue for hosting "organic Krishna" events and in the future it would need to build more space in order to increase the number of people participating in community events. But Nitai recognizes that in order to develop the community any further, it needs to be done in a business-oriented manner. Upper level management would need to decide on building the community as well as raise actual funds, not donations, for specific

building requirements. In addition, New Vrindavan needs to be redeveloped into a true community. It is nearly impossible that the community will last if it does not have a sustained base of people willing to live, maintain, and support the community. Even Nitai sees his life at New Vrindavan as transitional, which limits the amount of commitment and longevity he can provide for the community.

Given that Hinduism is the oldest religion in the world, it is fascinating that new technology is what will allow it to move into the future. It will take much aligning of past community ideas with new visions and mass media capabilities to truly build a successful community. In addition, the community will need to build a following that embraces this vision, and the potential of mass media, otherwise the community will remain stagnant and possibly fall short of future growth. As of now, New Vrindavan acts as a venue space, but given the mass media capabilities, it has potential to redefine itself in the future. Hopefully, mass media can help to bring more awareness to other aspects of the community beyond the existing major events as a means to build the community for the future.

Simple Living High Thinking:

The Essence of the Hare Krishna Movement

Joanie Burkhardt, Quadia Muhammad, Michael Shvartsman

Ali Krishna Devi Dasi's Biography

Ali Krishna Devi Dasi is a 28-year-old Hare Krishna member who has been involved with the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) movement for the past five years.

Currently, Ali is the executive assistant for Hridayananda das Goswami, a spiritual leader and adjunct professor at the University of Florida where he teaches courses on Indian religions and Sanskrit. This past spring, Ali was appointed as the Director of the Institute for Vaishnava Studies at the ISKCON temple in Gainesville, Florida.

Ali's desire to immerse herself in Krishna Consciousness, while simultaneously participating with others in a sustainable farm project, is what initially prompted her to move to New Vrindaban. At New Vrindaban she was able to cultivate her spiritual consciousness and to develop her relationship with the earth. She describes New Vrindaban as a place where she was able to "refocus her spiritual journey."

One part of Ali's service to the Hare Krishna community is introducing Hare Krishna Consciousness to young people and newcomers. Living in the seclusion of New Vrindaban, Ali Krishna felt her commitment could be better served elsewhere; as a result, after one year, Ali departed from the community. However, two years later, she maintains a spiritual relationship with New Vrindaban and the community members who reside there. The following is an outline of Ali Krishna's three goals that together make up her vision for New Vrindaban's future.

Vision 1: From Communal to Land Trust Model

Founded in 1968, New Vrindaban was originally structured as a communal model. Thus, New Vrindaban does not allow private ownership of land. Members of the community receive assistance through contributions from the temple for basic necessities including housing, clothing, food and medical assistance. New Vrindaban adopted the communal model so that their members could focus on expanding and developing the

community, without having to seek outside employment. Furthermore, communal models incorporate a controlled living environment designed to structure a common social life for everyone.

Similar to the communal model, the land trust model also shares the benefits of common social life, but differs in that the central plot of land becomes incorporated; meaning that the land is jointly owned among several community members. In fact, Ali expressed a strong preference for the adoption of the land trust model for New Vrindaban.

Through the land trust model, membership is given to those who pay annual dues to the community. Collectively, the members then vote on how the land should be utilized. If a member decides to build a house on the land, they cannot buy a piece of the land trust; rather, they are allowed to lease a parcel of the land. If the member decides to leave the community, they are allowed to sell their house but not the land. In turn, the new home owners will begin to pay the lease for the land upon which their house sits.

Ali believes that New Vrindaban would benefit from the land trust because it allows for members to sustain the community. During an interview, Ali stated, “Because a communal model does not appear to be sustainable, I would like to see the land trust model embraced at New Vrindaban. To me this seems to be a more healthy, mature, and sustainable land use model.”

Vision 2: Education and Outreach

The Vedic tradition emphasizes that human life is for the pursuit of “understanding the Lord.” As a result, education and outreach play a significant role in the sustainability of the New Vrindaban community and the Hare Krishna movement. Ali

Krishna outlined key components that should be included as part of the educational experience at New Vrindaban for visitors, pilgrims, and Hare Krishna devotees alike.

The first includes the opportunity for guests of New Vrindaban to visit the temple and learn the significance of various altars and deities, as well as participate in chanting “Hare Krishna,” one method of attaining one’s Krishna Consciousness. Additionally, Ali Krishna believes guests could benefit by interacting with New Vrindaban residents in order to see first-hand the enlightenment one is able to experience while living in a spiritual community. In her opinion, a visit to New Vrindaban is an ideal location for one to “awaken Krishna Consciousness,” and to learn the teachings of the movement’s founder, Srila Prabhupada.

Moreover, Ali Krishna sees a great opportunity for New Vrindaban to impart the teachings of “simple living high thinking” to visiting Hare Krishna members who live in metropolitan areas. Because Hare Krishna “urbanites” are more often influenced by outside culture, it can be difficult for these members to cultivate and maintain their spiritual consciousness. Thus, by visiting New Vrindaban, “urbanites” can obtain knowledge regarding the “simple living high thinking” philosophy which they can implement upon their return home.

According to Ali, this spiritual attainment can be fulfilled through the practice of “simple living high thinking” which she defines as honoring Krishna in all one does, offering one’s activities for the pleasure and approval of Krishna, accepting *only* that which is necessary for one’s personal or family maintenance, and being a good steward of the land. Through the process of living simply, one will be able, if properly directed, to arrive at the point of “high thinking,” or spiritual apex, a tenet of Srila Prabhupada’s

Bhagavad Gita teachings. Ali Krishna believes that this educational experience, coupled with the physical beauty of New Vrindaban, is an ideal setting to purport this philosophy. For Ali, the community ambience at New Vrindaban has the potential to inspire interest in the Hare Krishna movement for newcomers and maintain interest for current devotees.

Vision 3: Leadership

A leader should lead by example. According to Ali, a leader at New Vrindaban should foremost, exude Hare Krishna qualities which include showing devotion to Lord Krishna, sharing the vision of ISKCON and Srila Prabhupada, demonstrating a purely spiritual life, and engaging people well. The aforementioned should be exhibited by all devotees; however, it is of utmost importance that the leader of New Vrindaban possess these qualities as he/she will set the standard for community members.

Generally, leaders within ISKCON are defined as those devotees who exhibit strong leadership skills, or who have leadership experience and are following the four regulative principles (no meat-eating, no intoxication, no gambling, no illicit sex). Role models should also chant a minimum of 16 rounds of the Hare Krishna maha mantra daily, and be well-versed and knowledgeable in the bhakti sastris (i.e. Vedic literatures including the *Bhagavad Gita*, *Srimad Bhagavatam*, *Sri Isopanisad*, etc.).

When asked whether she would like to be a leader for New Vrindaban, Ali declined, explaining that the leader should be someone with more extensive experience who conveys respect within the ISKCON movement. Ali explains, “I think the ideal leader would be someone from within the community with extensive leadership experience who sees the importance of developing, simultaneously, both the agricultural and educational component of New Vrindaban.” Ali acknowledges that New Vrindaban

requires a leader who can convey the significance of New Vrindaban as a “simple living high thinking” community.

Color It Green and Open the Door

Ashley Gregory, Colleen Koehler and Alison Ungar

Tapahpunja’s Biography

Sitting at a worn wooden table at the Small Farm Training Center’s intern house with bird songs and a warm breeze drifting through the open windows, Terry Sheldon shared the following story, “When I was a little boy I had a leg injury— a simple broken leg... Unfortunately, the doctors... had set the cast too tight, and it cut off all the blood below the knee for about three days. Gangrene set in and two toes fell off— my foot was permanently damaged.”

Throughout his youth, Sheldon wondered, “If there is a god, why would he do this to me?” The son of two Wobblies who detested organized religion, Sheldon cited his leg injury in addition to more scientific arguments such as the theory of evolution as proof that god did not exist. “I was really good at convincing my Catholic friends that there was no god,” he admits with a chuckle, later adding, “I had no idea what I was saying, I was just parroting.”

Growing up in Detroit, Michigan during the 1960s, Sheldon explained that he was presented with three options, “One was work in a factory, two was go to Vietnam and get killed, and three was become a hippie.” Like everyone else who chose the latter option, he cashed in his pop bottles and headed for California, eventually landing in Berkeley where he lived on the streets.

It was in this setting that Sheldon first came into contact with the Hare Krishna community, “Everybody had hair down to their waist and then here are these guys with completely shaved heads.” Their hair, or lack thereof, was not the only difference he noted between the Hare Krishnas and other members of the counterculture. While most assumed they had just dropped too much acid, Sheldon recognized, and envied, the Hare Krishna’s genuine happiness. Although his interest had been peaked, Sheldon, who at the time felt that change necessitated violence, saw the Hare Krishnas as cop-outs— “I was like, don’t they know there’s a revolution out there?”

Pondering the source of the Hare Krishna’s happiness prompted Sheldon both to question what the *real* revolution was and re-evaluate the lifestyle and beliefs he had adopted. “What I saw happening when I was a little bit honest with myself was that I was becoming like the very animal that I was trying to get rid of.” It was at this point that Sheldon decided to take a step away from the counterculture scene.

He moved back to rural Michigan where he began to work the land as his family had done while he was growing up. With as much hash as he could smoke in his pocket and a “hippie girlfriend” on his arm, Sheldon was happy. That is until a Hare Krishna from the Detroit temple arrived at his property asking if he could stay there for a while. Sheldon agreed, and the arrangement worked well until one day the devotee asked, “You really think you got it together?” Sheldon was shocked but enjoyed the boldness of the question and subsequent explanation, “You’re thinking that the goal of life is just to make all of these arrangements so that your body is comfortable and you are well received... but you’re missing the whole point.” It only took one trip to the temple in Detroit for Sheldon to conclude that this is where the true revolution was being played out.

By the time he heard about New Vrindavan Sheldon was an active member of Detroit's Hare Krishna community. Intrigued by the idea of living on a commune in rural West Virginia, Sheldon and a friend packed up their Volkswagen bus and drove there to check it out.

Thirty-five years later Sheldon, now known as Tapahpunja, still resides at New Vrindavan where he continues to practice Krishna Consciousness and promote a sustainable lifestyle. He does this not only by working the land to feed the community, but by sharing his skills and knowledge with others through the Small Farm Training Center, a non-governmental organization he established in 2000.

Although the leg injury he suffered so many years ago refuses to be forgotten as he limps about the garden pointing out mint here, carrots there, Tapahpunja has long stopped seeing it as proof that god does not exist. "It wasn't until I came into contact with the philosophy of Krishna Consciousness that it kinda clicked, that I apparently had done things in a previous life injurious to other people," and the leg injury was punishment for those actions.

Tapahpunja's Vision

In contrast to the tranquility it radiates, New Vrindavan has a turbulent past. Established by a handful of devotees belonging to the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) in 1968, progress was incredibly rapid. By 1984 the community boasted a population of 600 plus. During the late 1980s and early 1990s a series of scandals involving Kirtanananda Swami, the community's leader, both tarnished New Vrindavan's reputation resulting in its excommunication from ISKCON and became a serious financial burden. By the time Kirtananda was convicted in 1995 the

community's population had dropped down to 225. New Vrindavan's future seemed to brighten when ties with ISKCON were rekindled in 1997, but the community has never quite made a full recovery.

Nevertheless, Tapahpunja has high hopes for New Vrindavan as it prepares to enter its fifth decade, "As the world's social and environmental deterioration accelerates places like the New Vrindavan community [which] have a world view that combines spirituality and sustainability— those kind of places will become more prominent." He also believes that "the future is a lot more rural than it is urban," making New Vrindavan a particularly attractive destination.

Despite these predictions, Tapahpunja does not expect New Vrindavan's population to experience any significant growth, pointing to the limited availability of water and land as well as the perpetual challenge for devotees to make economic sense of joining the community as constraining factors. He also stressed, however, that while these factors are very real, "Krishna can feed innumerable... people on the head of a pin," so, if Krishna wishes such, the community *will* be expanded regardless of physical or material obstacles.

Another reason Tapahpunja does not anticipate an increase in the community's population can be attributed to the Krishna teaching that says "you should not have any more people than can walk to the temple." This, combined with an expected rise in popularity, leads Tapahpunja to believe that New Vrindavan will decentralize, developing new hubs of worship and production, "there may be 10 or 20 of those around the community... that's kind of my vision."

In accordance with founder A.C.Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada’s mandate, Tapahpunja expects that New Vrindavan will continue to see more devotees joining in worship and taking in the Golden Palace’s majesty— not as permanent residents, but pilgrims. “You will see it growing as a place of pilgrimage, because the original mandate for the community is that it should be a place that attracts people to hear and chant about Krishna and to make personal spiritual growth.”

While Tapahpunja clearly acknowledges that non-manipulative factors will play a large role in shaping New Vrindavan’s future, he plans to play an active role as well. He then developed a Small Farm Training Center, which is a non-profit organization that strives “to teach the art of growing healthier food with the use of simple technology.” He does not plan on stopping there though. He stated, “The other contribution I hope to make is to establish a Vedic academy of rural arts, which would educate participants on the philosophy to live sustainably and receiving technical skills necessary to do so.”

These initiatives are important for two reasons. According to Tapahpunja, true sustainability cannot be attained unless efforts are rooted in spirituality, a realization he believes the environmental movement must embrace before expecting to make progress. Additionally, by “Krishnaiz[ing] what seem to be simple secular agrarian issues” Tapahpunja hopes to make the Hare Krishna philosophy more accessible, in part by illustrating to those of other religious traditions that they have common values.

Interestingly, while the “real” world has been suffering from a recession in recent years, Tapahpunja sees this as a potential benefit for the cause of Krishna consciousness, “in one sense it’s good... an awakening we shouldn’t feel insecure about... we should feel kind of glad it’s being exposed for what it is.” He hopes that current economic

conditions, which he refers to as a “karmic reaction to greed,” will catalyze a mass realization that real wealth is biological. “The real engine and the flywheel of the economy is agriculture... the other stuff is just cheating.”

Having lived through all of New Vrindavan’s trials and triumphs, Tapahpunja’s vision for the community’s future has a certain commitment behind it. While he acknowledges that non-manipulative factors like land limitations and conditions of the wider environment will play a large role in shaping New Vrindavan’s future, he plans to play a substantial steering role as well. In establishing the Small Farm Training Center Tapahpunja has illustrated his commitment to go beyond speculation, actively breathing life into his vision for New Vrindavan’s future—one of increased accessibility and true sustainability—as it prepares to enter its fifth decade.