

Pilgrimage Rituals of Hinduism in Relation to New Vrindaban

Dominique Buccina

Jenna Miller

Ben Lawler

Abstract

The following paper will focus on pilgrimage throughout the Vaishnava community, with a specific emphasis on New Vrindaban. First, scriptural texts will be referenced to emphasize the importance and relevance of pilgrimage to a person following the Eastern religions of Hinduism or Vaishnavism. The passages point to what constitutes a pilgrimage and what the goal of any pilgrim should be. These passages have been used by the Vaishnava movement to enrich everyday modern life. Then, the definition of pilgrimage will be outlined along with what specific practices and beliefs are incorporated into the devotional act of service. Furthermore, the practices and events that New Vrindaban offers as a site of pilgrimage will be highlighted to emphasize its popularity among pilgrims throughout the United States. Welcoming over 40,000 visitors and pilgrims annually, New Vrindaban has been considered the ideal place of worship for the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) devotees in modern-day America. Finally, the paper will conclude by reflecting on the twenty-first century pilgrim in the United States and what it means today to take part in this ritual.

Introduction

When visiting the community of New Vrindaban, one quickly gathers that he or she is not alone. New Vrindaban is an ISKCON community located in Moundsville, West Virginia. Visited by thousands of pilgrims and visitors annually, the community in West Virginia is no stranger to full buses of worshippers eager to invigorate their relationship with the Lord. Pilgrims from around the country are welcomed with morning and evening prayer services, sanctified food, and chanting rituals that allow them to maintain a religious identity while reconnecting to their relationship with the Lord. The leader and the founder of the ISKCON movement, A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, established New Vrindaban in 1968 to create a place of pilgrimage that would welcome all willing to learn and offer worship. Over forty years later, his legacy has transformed into exactly that for all ISKCON devotees in America. Pilgrimage does exist at New Vrindaban.

Scriptural Stories

The foundation of pilgrimage began in ancient Hindu scriptures and has been emphasized through the writings of Prabhupada. According to Gangamantri Dasa, an ISKCON devotee on a pilgrimage to New Vrindaban, the importance of a pilgrimage is to “find the purpose of human life. It is to be educated by the saintly people who reside there and to worship the Lord” (Gangamantri Dasa, personal communication, Oct 23, 2010). The devotees at New Vrindaban base their belief and justification for pilgrimage on writings in the Srimad Bhagavatam, a scriptural text that is considered a Hindu bible for ISKCON devotees. The following passage places more importance on the saintly persons who reside within the place of pilgrimage than the destination point:

One who identifies his self as the inert body composed of mucus, bile and air, who assumes his wife and family are permanently his own, who thinks an earthen image or the land of his birth is worshipable, or who sees a place of pilgrimage as merely the water there, but who never identifies himself with, feels kinship with, worships or even visits those who are wise in spiritual truth — such a person is no better than a cow or an ass. (SB 10.84.13)

From a Vaishnava perspective, a body of water can work to purify the soul, but a saintly being, one who truly holds the Lord within the heart, can purify and educate more than any other form of a spiritual act. The Srimad Bhagavatam again states that is not just the physical aspect of the destination, but the divine presence that constitutes a pilgrimage:

Mere bodies of water are not the real sacred places of pilgrimage, nor are the mere images of earth and stone the true worshipable deities. These purify one only after a long time, but saintly sages purify one immediately upon being seen. (SB 4.84.11)

Many places throughout India are considered “holier” than other sites, depending on difficulty of travel and holy figures believed to be present. However, scriptures point to the belief that a pilgrimage is any place that the Lord is called and worshipped upon in the hearts of a pure devotee. Scripture states that any place could be a pilgrimage site, "devotees like Your good self are verily holy places personified. Because you carry the Personality of Godhead within your heart, you turn all places into places of pilgrimage" (SB 1.13.10). Overall, for an ISKCON devotee, pilgrimage destination sites stress the importance of the saintly persons who reside there more than the physical location.

Practices of Pilgrimage

As outlined in Holy Scriptures, pilgrimages can take on different forms and meaning. Hindu devotees make pilgrimages to sites that have religious significance to them. Every devout follower has different reasons for undertaking a pilgrimage. Some go to seek *darsan*, while

others go to cleanse the soul of sins, among many other blessings. *Darsan* means “to see” in the Hindu religion. Therefore, when a devotee goes to a temple they travel to see the deity and be seen by the deity. *Darsan* takes on different forms as well:

The process of darsan meditation or prayer should begin from lotus feet of the Lord and progress to His smiling face. The meditation should be concentrated upon the lotus feet then the calves, then the thighs and in this way higher and higher. The more the mind becomes fixed on different parts of the limbs, the more the intelligence becomes purified. (SB 2.2.13)

A pilgrim being on sacred grounds also meets the properties of *darsan*. According to the Skanda Purana, pilgrimages, or *tirthas*, that are practiced in the Hindu religion can be broken down into three categories: the *Sthawar*, *Jangam*, *Manas tirthas* (Banas, 2008). The *Sthawar tirtha* can best be described as places in the Indian subcontinent such as rivers, cities, mountains and forests that have religious significance. The greatest *Sthawar tirthas* are usually a combination of different elements, such as meeting with a sage in a sacred temple on a river (Banas, 2008). Rivers have a significant value in the cleansing of sins from the soul. Flowing water, especially the Ganges River in India, is said to flow from the lotus feet of God. In terms of water purification, the holy text states:

My dear Lord, Your lotus feet are the cause of all auspicious things and the destroyer of all the contamination of sin. I therefore beg Your Lordship to bless me by the association of Your devotees, who are completely purified by worshiping Your lotus feet and who are so merciful upon the conditioned souls. I think that Your real benediction will be to allow me to associate with such devotees. (SB 4.24.58)

These places are often associated with manifestations of the Lord in his many forms. *Jangam tirthas* are encounters with sages, seers, and enlightened spiritual teachers. This creates the concept that a pilgrimage can be anywhere where an individual can be closer to the enlightenment of God. This is described in holy text: “My Lord, devotees like your good self are verily holy places personified. Because you carry the Personality of Godhead within your heart,

you turn all places into places of pilgrimage” (SB 1.13.10). In the Hare Krishna sect, *Jangam tirthas* are the most important and revered part of any pilgrimage. Education and spiritual self-realization are the main goals reached through pilgrimage. *Manas tirthas* are different in that they are inner and outward deeds put forth after enlightenment, such as acts of truth, kindness, patience, knowledge and charity. A successful pilgrimage fulfills the three main requirements: *suchi*- pure in heart, *punya*- merit and goodness, and *shubha*- auspiciousness (Patnaik, 2008). These three requirements are complimented by the divinity of the place visited.

Places of Pilgrimage

Pilgrimage sites are designated as holy places for various reasons. Most sites are associated with a certain deity or saint and each site offers its own blessing, such as removing sin from the soul. Jagannatha Dasa, an ISKCON devotee for over ten years, says that places of pilgrimage become prominent places of God through the activities of the residents at the holy site (Jagannatha Dasa, personal communication, Oct. 23, 2010). Today a place where a guru or other holy person resides also constitutes a site for a pilgrimage. Rendering any kind of service to this holy person at the site, devotees say, has subtle effects on one’s consciousness. The Hindu person might not know it at the time, but later can feel they have been changed by visiting a pilgrimage site (Jagannatha Dasa, personal communication, Oct. 23, 2010).

A Hindu can visit any holy site and consider it a pilgrimage – no matter the location or denomination. But the four main denominations do have certain sites they rank as more important. For the Vaishnavas, the top pilgrimage sites are the following: Mathura/Vrindavana, Dvaraka, Badrinatha, Puri, Tirupati, Ayodhya, Nathdwar, Udupi (“The heart of Hinduism,” 2004). The most relevant is the first, Vrindaban, India. It is the most traveled to destination for

Vaishnavas; other pilgrimage sites listed are of importance but lie lower on the rankings of divinity. Vrindaban is the village where Krishna is believed to have lived and is considered to still hold the presence of the Lord. Krishna is a Hindu deity that is revered as the sole creator and Lord for ISKCON devotees. Today, Vrindaban is now a city with approximately five thousand temples for Krishna worship (“The heart of Hinduism,” 2004).

New Vrindaban as a Place of Pilgrimage

New Vrindaban was created by Prabhupada to be a combination of elements of holy sites. His vision for New Vrindaban was a place of pilgrimage for the United States that closely resembled Vrindaban, India. New Vrindaban is the most respected Vaishnava community in the United States and is held in the highest regard. Devotees say that New Vrindaban is in essence an embassy for Vrindaban. They say when one is there it is like being on the very soil of Vrindaban (Jagannatha Dasa, personal communication, Oct. 23, 2010). Madhavananda Dasa, an ISKCON devotee who resides at New Vrindaban, says that it is a place of pilgrimage that addresses all the needs – emotional, physical, and spiritual - of the people who travel there. It offers deity worship, practices such as meditation, chanting and yoga, and welcomes pilgrims with easy accessibility and overall hospitality to encapsulate the best experience possible. New Vrindaban provides housing, food, and educational programs to all visitors. New Vrindaban also celebrates traditional Vaishnava festivals, such as Diwali (Madhavananda Dasa, personal communication, Oct. 27, 2010).

From a Vaishnava perspective, all needs are met when making a pilgrimage to New Vrindaban. Ananda Vidya, a devout follower and scholar of ISKCON, says all *darsans* are met at the New Vrindaban temple, consisting of over three different forms of the Lord Krishna

deities, along with constant services that allow for meditation, chanting, and celebratory worship (Ananda Vidya, personal communication, Oct. 27, 2010). The main *tirtha*, *Sthawar*, is offered at New Vrindaban through the swamis and gurus that reside there, preaching and spreading their love for the lord during the bi-daily services. New Vrindaban houses numerous religious leaders and devotees that provide true pilgrimage experiences for its thousands of pilgrims.

Shankaranand Dasa, a religious leader in New Vrindaban, says that the leaders and devotees also stress the importance of certain practices that take place during a pilgrimage and ensure that all visitors and devotees will have an opportunity to participate (Shankaranand Dasa, personal communication, Oct. 27, 2010).

New Vrindaban and Twenty-First Century Pilgrimage

Prabhupada acknowledged that the world is a changing place and the challenge of taking time to remove oneself from the material world is becoming more difficult. All the while, he taught that the urge to take vacation time is a natural feeling. For the devout follower, there is no better place to get away from the stresses of family and work than a religious place. The importance of pilgrimage is to remember the purpose of human life. Shankaranand Dasa explains the appeal of New Vrindaban as a site of pilgrimage:

Go to a holy site: there you don't have a job, a drive back, or anything like that. You just go there and relax and sing and dance and worshipping-that's it. You get nice food to eat and want to see nice and beautiful things around and of course, relax. New Vrindaban provides this and at the same time they get a little education about the goal of human life. It revives your relationship with God. Pilgrimage is a break from your daily schedule and a chance to remove you from the cycle of sense gratification. (Shankaranand Dasa, personal communication, Oct. 27, 2010)

Although the most prominent destinations of pilgrimage lie within the Indian subcontinent, large numbers of American Hindus make the religious practice relevant within this country. In the 1990s, 1.6 million Hindus were living in the United States. Hindu communities

began assembling temples and other places of worship to enrich and maintain Hinduism in America (David & Gilitz, 2002). Hare Krishna worship was introduced in the United States in 1966. Its first rural community and temple, New Vrindaban, was constructed in 1987.

For the modern-day pilgrims throughout the United States, New Vrindaban is in constant outreach to provide this service and demonstrate the importance of religious diversity and openness in their temple. American Hindu pilgrims travel to New Vrindaban “by car and generally with their families as one way to strengthen the Hindu identity of their children” (David & Gilitz, 2002). Pilgrimage for New Vrindaban is considered a big business and the parties that work to make the business function know that includes transportation, sanitary food and lodging, security and the ritual needs of pilgrims (David & Gilitz, 2002). New Vrindaban welcomes Hindus from around the world all through the year, with summer as its busiest season. Somewhere between 35 and 40 bus tours come to New Vrindaban each year. New Vrindaban has special relations with certain bus companies for easier travel planning. In addition, almost 50,000 independent travelers visit New Vrindaban. New Vrindaban has its own fundraising department that reaches out to other temples and Hindus throughout the country. The department helps set up pilgrimage visits and other exchanges via telephone and email (Madhavananda Dasa, personal communication, Oct. 27, 2010).

Although pilgrimage is considered to be a form of sacrifice and purifying service, the New Vrindaban community focuses on the joy of worship rather than emphasizing the struggle and punishing connotation pilgrimage holds. The common goal of pilgrimage, whether in the Himalayas or West Virginia, is to free the soul of sin and strive toward righteousness to the Lord. For the millions of Hindu Americans, New Vrindaban offers a place of joyful, relaxing worship

to construct and further maintain Hindu identity, an important factor for this religious community (Shankaranand Dasa, personal communication, Oct. 27, 2010).

Analysis and Conclusion

The practice of pilgrimage within the Hindu and Hare Krishna religions is not mandatory but is performed by most Hindus out of devotional service. It is considered an exchange between Krishna and the devotees throughout the Hare Krishna community; their sacrifice of pilgrimage is rewarded by a more promising reincarnation and purification of the soul. Although the practice is predominantly performed throughout India, New Vrindaban also allows Hindus to secure and maintain religious identity. New Vrindaban is considered a main American place for pilgrimage and offers this experience to many Hindus each year, paying service to religious leaders and to Lord Krishna.

The community promotes pilgrimage to serve and worship Lord Krishna and welcomes all religions to create awareness of religious diversity. The ISKCON community in New Vrindaban is the essence of pluralism. Many ISKCON devotees have at one time or another practiced another religion or variant of Hinduism. They understand the differences between religions, and most importantly, find similarities between them. They focus on educating their visitors about their Lord; they believe the Lord resides in everyone and only through education does one truly become in touch with God. They believe that education throughout all generations is essential to continue service to the Lord Krishna. ISKCON devotee Shankarananda Dasa says people, especially those who are young, are becoming more open-minded. The current generation is open to learning about other religions. The community of New Vrindaban provides an opportunity for all people to learn about a religious culture.

Although the culture of the Hare Krishna movement can be considered uncommon in a Westernized country, the practice of pilgrimage is evident throughout other religious dominations such as Christianity, Buddhism, and Islam. For Catholic followers, pilgrimage is considered to be making one's way to holy places as an ascetic practice:

[Pilgrimage] lets the Christian find salvation through the difficulties and dangers of a temporary exile. It is also a means of coming in contact with that which is divine and thereby obtaining grace because of the accumulation of supernatural power in the pilgrimage site. (Sigal, 2005)

For Christians, the frequented places of pilgrimage include St. Peter's Tomb in Rome along with Santiago de Compostela in Spain, but many modern Christians adhere to means of accessibility and affordability; therefore, smaller churches and villages are often visited (David & Gitlitz, 2002). Today, Christian pilgrimage is taken through collective parties more than individual journeys and, more than ever, younger generations of Christians are making the voyage to the sacred sites (Sigal, 2005).

From Western religions to Eastern religions, pilgrimage is integrated into belief systems. China and Japan have welcomed Buddhist followers as pilgrims since it was introduced in the first centuries (Eiki, 2005). The major pilgrimage sites throughout China are all found in the mountainous regions: Mount Wutai, Mount Emei, Mount Putuo, and Mount Jiu Hua (Eiki, 2005). Although pilgrimage faced a decline during the communist regime in China in the 1950's, recent times have restored and revitalized the sites and the Buddhist perspective has also transformed, "as a result of the rapid growth in the living standards of the Chinese people, there seems to be a tendency for famous pilgrimage sites to become targets of tourism," (Eiki, 2005). Pilgrimage is on the rise throughout Japan and China. It serves the same purpose across all eastern and western denominations: to become closer to God and to revitalize religious identity.

Finally, pilgrimage is considered essential and synonymous with the Islamic tradition. It is considered a religious duty that one must make a pilgrimage to Mecca, located in west-central Saudi Arabia. Known as *hajj*, an adult must perform one when he or she is sound of mind, health, and financially able at the time:

The nature and size of this annual ingathering of Muslims from countless ethnic, linguistic, and political backgrounds, combined with the common sacred status that ideally makes princes indistinguishable from paupers, render the *hajj* experience an important expression of social and religious unity in Islamic culture. (Eiki, 2005)

Taught by the Islamic prophet, Muhammad, pilgrimage consists of standing in the presence of a deity of sacred shrine and the entire journey to it. Similar to the other pilgrimage traditions, Islamic pilgrimage is centered on the pilgrim earning spiritual reconciliation from the pilgrimage and becoming closer to their Lord and the entire Muslim community. Last year alone, an estimated 3 million Muslims made the journey for their *hajj* (David & Gitlitz, 2002).

Pilgrimage is a religious practice that varies not only by religion but by personal experience. However, it is a common thread throughout religious belief systems and usually involves a journey to a sacred place, person, or deity. For an ISKCON devotee in New Vrindaban, a pilgrimage experience is revered and respected similarly to a Catholic pilgrimage to Rome or an Islamic journey to Mecca. New Vrindaban offers the accessibility and affordability to make this practice possible for Hindus and ISKCON devotees alike while also providing opportunities for visitors to gain knowledge on an Eastern religion practiced in America. It defines pluralism by welcoming pilgrims, educating its visitors, and activating religious diversity throughout the country, while maintaining strong religious practices and belief systems rooted in its foundation.

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