

## **Emerging Leadership at New Vrindaban: A Case Study of Radha Sundari Dasi and Ananda Tirtha Das**

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### **Background**

New Vrindaban is a Hare Krishna community located in Moundsville, West Virginia. The Hare Krishna or ISKCON (International Society for Krishna Consciousness) movement was established in 1966. Its founder, Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, came from India to the United States in order to spread Krishna consciousness. One of his goals was to establish a community within the country that would replicate Vrindaban, India, a holy site for devotees of Krishna. New Vrindaban was established in 1968 for just that purpose. Members of the community farmed their land so that they could support themselves and began to raise money to erect a temple in honor of Prabhupada. Construction began on the temple in 1973 and today it is a popular site of pilgrimage for devotees of Krishna. The community experienced both high and low points during the next thirty years, but today community members are working to ensure that the ideals that New Vrindaban was founded on are attained and that the goals of the community are achieved ("History").

### **Research Methods**

Four students from the Global Leadership Center at Ohio University conducted this case study. Several different sources were utilized to gain information to complete this case study. First, the New Vrindaban community was visited and ceremonies and practices were observed first hand. Second, approximately 20 members of the community were interviewed about many different aspects of their lives, including leadership roles and spirituality. Next, secondary research was conducted through books and Internet sources about the history of the community and of other similar communities and organizations. Also, leaders from different religions and different religious communities were interviewed to understand how religious communities function and the roles of leaders in the communities. Lastly, interviews were conducted with the current temple co-presidents of New Vrindaban with emphasis on spiritual and managerial leadership. The information from the temple co-presidents greatly influenced the structure and the topics of this case study.

### **Introduction**

This case study aims to discuss and analyze the emerging leadership of New Vrindaban's new temple co-presidents, Radha Sundari Dasi and Ananda Tirtha Das. It will discuss the leadership structure of the community, explain the background of the new temple co-presidents, and most importantly, it will discuss not only the goals and challenges of the leaders, but the goals and challenges of the whole community.

## **Current Temple President's Background**

### *Radha Sundari Dasi*

Radha was born in 1978, her family moved to Ohio from England in 1980 when she was two years old. When they came to Ohio they joined the New Vrindaban community. Both of her parents had jobs outside the community and she attended school outside the community as well. Growing up, Radha had a close relationship with many of the devotees. After leaving New Vrindaban to go to Northwestern University in Chicago, Radha continued to be involved in local Hare Krishna temples. After college Radha traveled around the world visiting with local devotees. She then got married to Ananda Tirtha Das in May of 2005. Radha came back into contact with New Vrindaban when she and her husband were asked to come and help organize a festival. In August of 2006, a few weeks after the festival, she and her husband were asked to take on the roles of temple co-presidents (Sundari Dasi, Radha. Telephone interview).

### *Ananda Tirtha Das*

Ananda was born in 1974 in Australia where he attended public school for 6 years. He then studied at one of the Hare Krishna temple schools for another 2 years. In 1988 he moved to India to have a more spiritually oriented education. He spent 12 years there before moving to the United States. Ananda's first visit to New Vrindaban was in April of 2006. He had heard of the community and was impressed during his first visit and felt honored to be there. When Ananda was asked to be a temple co-president he was unsure if he was ready to have a high administrator position (Tirtha Das, Ananda).

## **Daily Roles and Responsibilities**

The everyday schedule of the temple co-presidents is divided up between spiritual and business time.

### *Morning*

Between 4:00 AM and 9:00 AM they worship and do spiritual tasks along with the other devotees in the temple. Between these hours Ananda is making sure everything is running correctly for the morning services by making sure things are set up and that the breakfast is being prepared.

### *Afternoon*

The early afternoon is spent mostly in meetings with devotees. In these meetings they discuss projects, provide counsel to devotees, work on schedules, and answer phones. The late afternoons are times for planning, working on projects, administrative work, and following up on tasks.

### *Evening*

During the early evening hours the focus is back on the spiritual aspects of the community, including preparing for dinner and worshiping in the temple. The late evening is spent answering correspondences and working in their home ("GLC follow up questions").

## **Leadership Duties**

The duties of the temple co-presidents are divided up based on their different leadership styles. Radha takes on a more administrative role; for example, if there is an upcoming festival Radha is responsible for delegating the

different tasks that need to be done and also she is in charge of making any purchases that are needed (Sundari Dasi, Radha. Telephone interview). Ananda is involved more with the devotees and going out and doing work. When there are festivals, Ananda makes sure everything is running correctly (Tirtha Das, Ananda).

### **Personal Leadership Challenges**

Since the temple co-presidents had very different upbringings, the personal challenges that they face by running the temple are also very different.

#### *Radha's Challenges*

Radha grew up in New Vrindaban and many of the older devotees used to be her gurus. Even now, many of them remember her as she was when she was a child and this can be hard for the new temple president to exhibit a leadership role. Sometimes it can be challenging for her to lead the very people who she used to learn from, especially when they do not always agree with what she says (Sundari Dasi, Radha. Telephone interview).

#### *Ananda's Challenges*

One of his greatest challenges is the idea that he never wanted to have a specific title like temple president. Ananda has said that it is more natural for him to be a part of a team or working on his own than to be a leader. He never imagined that he would be holding a position like the one he has now at New Vrindaban (Tirtha Das, Ananda).

### **Challenges for Temple Co-Presidents**

The position of co-temple president has some unique challenges in itself. They must find a balance not only in their systematic managerial skills, but also between their spiritual roles in the community. They have to find a way to separate their spiritual life from their business roles. Radha says a way of dealing with the problems that devotees bring up during spiritual time is to politely request that the problem wait until after morning prayers are done, unless of course the issue is a major one. It can also be somewhat more challenging for the young couple because their places of work, living, and religion occur within the same community and it can be hard to take time out for themselves. Sometimes this can be too overwhelming for just one person to run such a large temple. In order to stop this from happening, the responsibilities of running the temple have been divided among several people. Instead of only one temple president, Radha and Ananda work together as a team. They also work closely with the Director of Administration who has vice-presidential like duties as well as with the treasurer of temple. They also work with the temple board to further divide the responsibilities as well as allow for a system of checks and balances (Sundari Dasi, Radha. Telephone interview).

### **Temple Challenges**

Radha and Ananda are relatively new to the job and sometimes it can be hard for devotees to adjust to their different leadership styles, as opposed to past leadership styles. Many of the residents have been at the temple for longer than

the new presidents have even been alive. Since New Vrindaban is in an isolated place, the residents are used to it being run a certain way because it is not as easy for outside influences and new ideas to come into the community. However, Radha and Ananda have the ability to break through these challenges since the community has known Radha since she was a child and devotees feel comfortable around them. Since they are young and were therefore not involved in some of the community's issues in the past, they are neutral to many of the problems that have caused negative feelings in residents towards past leaders (Sundari Dasi, Radha. Telephone interview).

### **Goals for the Future**

Although running a temple is not an easy job, the presidents have lofty goals for the future of the temple. Radha believes that New Vrindaban is becoming the North American place of pilgrimage and she would like to create more programs that help devotees to focus on their spiritual growth. She would like to increase Krishna consciousness by serving the greater community (Sundari Dasi, Radha. Telephone interview). Ananda adds that one of their goals is to make sure that the needs of the devotees (both residents and visitors) are all met. This includes not only their physical needs but their spiritual ones as well. They want their residents to be happy and to feel at home while they are living at New Vrindaban so that they can stay and serve in the community for as long as they would like (Tirtha Das, Ananda).

### **Conclusion**

When Srila Prabhupada outlined the seven main goals of The New Vrindaban community, one goal was "To erect for the members and society at large a holy place of transcendental pastimes dedicated to the personality of Krishna ("Mission"). Ananda and Radha's goal for the community is the same. They are working to make New Vrindaban a holy site for devotees and make sure that the residents' needs are met as well. Radha's lifelong involvement in the community gives her a great knowledge of New Vrindaban's strengths and weaknesses and how to utilize them. Ananda's diverse life experience has exposed him to devotees all over the world, which will help him to establish New Vrindaban as an international site of pilgrimage. Only time will tell if their diverse backgrounds will complement each other and therefore benefit the New Vrindaban community.

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