

Agriculture and Organic Farming as a Path of Worship at New Vrindaban
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“I am not the doer, not the maker, but the servant; a servant to Krishna to use his seed, earth, sun, and water to assist in the growth of his plant.”

- Balabhadra, Local Devotee and Organic Farmer

Introduction

New Vrindaban is a community located in Moundsville, West Virginia where members of the International Society of Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) devote their lives to worship Lord Krishna, a Hindu god. Within this Hare Krishna community, agriculture is a means of spiritual practice. Tending to their land and cattle is an activity that brings the devotees closer to Krishna (Balabhadra, personal interview). The New Vrindaban ideals of agriculture can be categorized into the following: a general outlook on farming, the importance of the cow, crop cultivation, and the vision for the future.

Research Methodology

Prior to exploring the Hare Krishna community, research of the Hindu and Hare Krishna religions was performed. Tapahpunja, agricultural activist and devotee, and Balabhadra, community member and organic farmer, were interviewed during a visit to New Vrindaban. Various websites concerning organic farming were also referenced.

Insight of the importance of food in the community and an understanding of the religious practices and concepts were gained by attending vegan cooking classes hosted by Hare Krishnas as well as consulting the Bhagavad-Gita, a prominent Hindu scripture.

General Outlook on Farming

Most farmers look at farming as an occupation, a source of income. However, the farmers at New Vrindaban view it as a path of worship. They are taking the gifts that Krishna gives them and acting as stewards to the earth. Balabhadra does not attend temple regularly, but he worships Krishna everyday by planting seeds, tilling the soil, and harvesting plants (Balabhadra, personal interview).

Balabhadra does not believe himself to be “the doer, not the maker, but the servant; a servant to Krishna to use his seed, earth, sun, and water to assist in the growth of his plant.” Devotees also believe that Krishna is the only one who has the ability to produce sun, water and other essentials for the plants to survive (Balabhadra, personal interview).

Importance of the Cow

Physical

As explained by Tapahpunja and Balabhadra, the cow is a central figure in agricultural and religious practices at New Vrindaban. The non-profit educational organization known as the International Society for Cow Protection (ISCOWP) is led by Balabhadra and his wife, Chayadevi. ISCOWP strives to “present alternatives to agricultural

practices that support and depend upon the meat industry and industrialized, petroleum powered machinery” (Dove, ISCOWP).

The physical uses of the cow are varied. A cow’s urine is used as an antiseptic and its manure is an excellent fertilizer for the growth of organic produce. As Tapahpunja explained to us, there is also use for the cows to clear the gardens when they are overgrown with weeds. As cattle graze, their hooves till the soil and thus the energy that would otherwise be used to plow is conserved (Tapahpunja, personal interview). These uses exemplify just a few of the valuable alternatives to the slaughtering of these animals.

Spiritual

In addition to and deriving in part from these physical uses of the cow, there is great spiritual significance for the Hare Krishna community in the protection of this animal. Balabhadra and Tapahpunja each demonstrated how a cow is seen as a symbolic mother figure to the followers of the Hare Krishna faith. The cow and all of its varied uses gives energy to the gardens which give food to the community, and thus, life to the people (Balabhadra, personal interview).

It is Balabhadra’s belief that society must protect the lives of cattle in order to protect our own way of life. According to His Divine Grace A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, “without cow protection ...no human civilization can prosper at any length” (Dove, ISCOWP). Thus, in order to sustain a healthy consciousness, one must refrain from slaughtering and consuming cows.

Crop Cultivation

Physical

The crops that farmers at New Vrindaban choose to plant reflect what they believe spiritually. They believe that every food is “classified as goodness, passion, or ignorance” and based on these three categories they determine what to plant. Onions and garlic are classified as foods of ignorance and don’t have a place in the gardens at New Vrindaban (Tapahpunja, personal interview).

The way that the food is grown is believed to affect the ability to worship. In New Vrindaban it is necessary to have a clear consciousness to properly worship. “If you don’t have healthy food, you don’t have healthy consciousness.” This is why it is so important to the farmers to have organic crops (Tapahpunja, personal interview).

Spiritual

Crops take on a spiritual meaning to the farmers at New Vrindaban. Balabhadra looks at his crops as his children. When he is farming he thinks about the purpose of his food, which is to act as a spiritual offering to Krishna which is called prasādam. To him, crops are not for profit; rather they are devices to better worship Krishna.

Balabhadra compared his crops to devotees when he said “Consider planting a single seed as a devotee. They germinate (take birth), produce food (produce children) and are

then served (service to god), parallel to the Hare Krishna way of life.” His view is that all crops are grown to serve God.

Vision for Future

Currently the New Vrindaban temple feeds up to 100,000 people annually and depends heavily on commercial food production (Tapahpunja, personal interview). However, the Bhagavad-Gita states, “we have to depend on the production of the field and not on the production of the factories (180).” To work to achieve this religious ideal, New Vrindaban currently has 6.5 acres of land that is enclosed by an eight foot fence containing seven gates (Tapahpunja, personal interview).

Tapahpunja’s vision is for seven families to co-exist, living at each of the seven entrances of the farm. His hopes are that this will help to bring back small scale family farming. The more families participating in the spiritual act of farming, the less the New Vrindaban community will need to depend on buying food commercially (Tapahpunja, personal interview). However, this is an ideal. Currently there are not families that share a desire to devote their lives to agriculture at New Vrindaban.

In his efforts to expand the farming community at New Vrindaban, Tapahpunja has created The Sustainable Agricultural Network for Training and Environmental Education (S.A.N.T.E.E) to try to reach people with the message of how small scale farming and gardening practices can enhance the quality of life. Moreover, S.A.N.T.E.E. teaches food literacy. According to the website, “S.A.N.T.E.E provides public access to training, tools, land and educational materials.” With these elements in place, New Vrindaban hopes to become sustainable in the future (Sheldon, 7 Gates).

Conclusion

To the devotee-farmers of New Vrindaban, agriculture is a means of spiritual practice which brings them closer to their Lord, Krishna. The general outlook on farming, the importance of the cow, crop cultivation, and the vision for the future, are all ways in which agriculture plays a spiritual practice at New Vrindaban.

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