

A Collection of Research on the Practices of the Hindu Community of New Vrindaban

The Global Leadership Center, Ohio University

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Karma and Reincarnation

Jackie Bavaro, Miaomiao Shao, Kial Smith

Ohio University

## **Introduction**

His Divine Grace A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, founder of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness and original leader of the Hare Krishna movement, first arrived in America in the midst of the cultural turmoil of the sixties. Swami Prabhupada's objective was to deliver a new consciousness and raise awareness of the Hare Krishna movement, which attracted the counterculture of the western world increasingly hungry for eastern philosophy. After opening a house first in New York and then in San Francisco, Prabhupada opened the community in Marshall County, West Virginia, known as New Vrindaban (Cerrone, 2009). Traditionally, *Krsna-bhakti*, love of Krishna, had been known only in India, however, in the late 1960s the teachings and practices of the Hare Krishna faith sparked a new religious movement in the United States.

The beliefs in karma and reincarnation are an integral part of the Hare Krishna movement in New Vrindaban. This can be seen in the daily practices of each of the devotees' lifestyles, which are intended to demonstrate their commitment, sacrifice, and love for Lord Krishna and Krishna consciousness. In this paper we will explore the beliefs of karma and reincarnation in the New Vrindaban community as well as explain how the basic principles of karma and reincarnation influence the lives of each of the devotees.

## **Karma and Reincarnation**

In the New Vrindaban community, the belief in reincarnation influences the decisions of each devotee and his or her every action. Reincarnation is the belief that when a person dies, his or her soul is "transmigrated," or moved, from one physical body to another. The soul is defined as "a non-material, eternal spiritual entity present within any living being" (Dasa, 2010). The belief of karma is how a person acts during their lifetime. This directly affects what one is

reincarnated as in his or her next life. In order to achieve good karma, one must fulfill his or her dharma. Dharma is the relationship between an object or person and its role in the material world. It is the eternal truth, which holds all existence in proper relationships. For example, “the dharma of fire is to burn, of water is to quench, of a mother to care for her child, and so on. Thus the innate and essential nature of a thing is its dharma” (Baba, n.d). Fulfilling one’s dharma and performing one’s required role in the material world, helps to obtain good karma and continue on the spiritual journey to one day live with Krishna.

The *Bhagavad-Gita* text is one of several foundations of the Hare Krishna movement in New Vrindaban and across the world (Olivelle, 2010). In the *Bhagavad-Gita* Krishna says, “Never was there a time when I did not exist, nor you, nor all these kings, nor in the future will any of us cease to be” (Bhagavad-Gita 2.12). The soul is an eternal driving force within each of us that has always existed, even before our bodies. Jagannatha Dasa, a devotee at the Columbus [Ohio] Krishna House, explained the relationship between the body and soul as being comparable to a car and its driver. The car represents the body and the soul is the driver. Though the driver is inside controlling the car, the two are separate entities. As time goes on, the car gets old and worn until it is no longer usable and the driver moves on to a new vehicle. The soul, like the driver, is a separate entity within our bodies that controls the physical being until that body grows old and worn and can no longer sustain life. The body then dies and the soul recycles into a new one.

When the soul moves to a new body, it does not remember the previous life, but keeps the karma that it has earned. One belief concerns why the soul would forget its memories of its previous life upon reincarnating. One cannot remember details about events that happened weeks ago let alone years ago in a previous life. However, one does carry impressions of lessons

learned, which is known as *samskara*. *Samskara* builds our intuition, or “the thread that keeps us, often times unconsciously, progressing on the path to enlightenment. It [intuition] keeps us on track, which helps us become aware of the lessons we have learned from one body to another” (Madhavananda Das, personal communication, November 13th, 2010). “The purpose of *samskara* is to create a deep, lasting impression in the mind of the person for whom it is performed. The impression will channel the stream of the person’s thoughts and emotions in a way conducive to spiritual advancement” (Dasi, n.d.). Additionally, Jagannatha compared this lack of memory to Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. When events occur during our lifetime, they change who we are and our perspective on situations, sometimes negatively. If one suffered a traumatic death and it carried that memory into the next life, he or she would be born traumatized and with a jaded perspective of the world. Instead, the soul starts new with a fresh perspective and another chance to obtain the ultimate goal, enlightenment. Enlightenment is the understanding that the self and the body are separate entities. It is the knowledge necessary for union with God. Throughout the continuous cycle of birth and death, reaching enlightenment is a path unique to each individual (Prabhupada, 1972).

According to the *Bhagavad-Gita: A New Verse Translation*, the principle of karma, Yoga, is that all action is the result of desire, and that we need not abstain from action, but we must not let it stain us. “It is one’s attitude towards what he does that is important, not success or failure of the work” (Stanford, 1970). A soul’s karma determines one’s reincarnation in his or her next life. If, when given the chance to inhabit a human form, one is a menace to society or lives in selfish desire, he or she will not reach enlightenment. At the end of that body’s usable life, the soul will return as a being in a lower part of the hierarchy. The progression of this hierarchy begins with water dwelling creatures as the lowest form, followed by insects, monkeys,

cows, humans, and finally demigods (Ananda Vidya, personal communication, September 29, 2010).

For any being under the level of a human in the hierarchy, karma is not accumulated because that being has no free will. Without free will, the being is driven only by basic instincts: Sleeping, eating, breeding etc. The animal does not know better than to kill another animal, nor does it know devotion, and for this reason it evolves through the hierarchy until it inhabits the human form where it is to consciously reach for enlightenment (Dasa, 2009). The cycle continues until that goal is reached and the soul can escape the ties of material form to join the spiritual world. To obtain this goal, the devotees of New Vrindaban take several daily steps according to the teachings of Krishna. They attempt to free themselves of karma by performing tasks according to their temple duties, living righteously in consideration of others, constantly seeking knowledge of the divine truth, and respecting all living organisms by eating only plant-based foods from a non-violent source.

### **Vegetarianism and the Universal Laws of Karma and Reincarnation**

One way the beliefs in karma and reincarnation are practiced throughout the Hare Krishna community in New Vrindaban is by following a vegetarian lifestyle that offers foods from a non-violent source in a mood of devotion to Krishna. Due to this, the Hare Krishna devotees have been the forerunners of the modern vegetarian movement in the west since the 1970s. Moreover, the Hare Krishna movement is sometimes referred to as the “kitchen religion” because of its emphasis on cooking and distributing vegetarian food (Sullivan, 1996). The vegetarianism of their devotion is based on several passages in the *Bhagavad-Gita*, which instructs faithful followers to eat only foods from a nonviolent source and to cook food in a

mood of devotion to God (Krishna). Thus, the Hare Krishnas believe that food is a direct way of uplifting one's consciousness, while respecting all living entities.

His Divine Grace A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada explains much about the philosophy of Krishna consciousness in relation to vegetarianism, the nature of God and the logic of reincarnation throughout the *Bhagavad Gita*. Prabhupada sternly warns about the karmic danger of animal slaughter in his *Bhagavad-Gita* commentary stating that, “every living creature is the son of the Supreme Lord, and He does not tolerate even an ant being killed. One has to pay for it” (Rosen, 2004). It is further stated, “all those who are connected to the killing of an animal are liable - the person who gives permission for the killing, the person who kills, the person who helps, the person who purchases the meat, the person who cooks the flesh, and the person who eats it” (Smith, 2004). According to the laws of karma and reincarnation, “if an animal is killed before its allotted time in that particularly body, then it has to take birth again in the same type of body in order to be promoted upwards to the next species” (Rosen, 2004). Thus its evolution upwards through the different species of life is interrupted and slowed down. Therefore, the killing of animals to satisfy the demands of the palate is an act of both material and spiritual violence (Rosen, 2004).

The book *Holy Cow: The Krishna Contribution to Vegetarianism and Animal Rights*, explores the spiritual dimensions of vegetarianism, with a special focus on the Hare Krishna diet. This book explains that before eating any type of food, the devotees of Krishna perform a ceremony where they offer their food to God. This religious performance sanctifies the food and frees the persons eating it from the karma involved in the collection and preparation of the ingredients.



This is confirmed in the *Bhagavad-Gita*, where Lord Krishna explains that not only should man eat a vegetarian diet, “but he should also offer these eatables to Him. If we follow this process of sacrifice, the Supreme Lord, Krishna, protects us from any karmic reactions resulting from the killing of plants. Otherwise, according to the law of karma, we are personally responsible” (Smith, 2004). The *Bhagavad-Gita* states, “The devotees of the Lord are released from all sins because they eat food that is offered first for sacrifice. Others, who prepare food for personal sense enjoyment, verily eat only sin” (Smith, 2004). Moreover, when someone adopts a vegetarian diet, it is much easier for him to remain peaceful, happy, productive, and concerned for the welfare of others.

### **Lifestyle at New Vrindaban**

The devotees of the Hare Krishna community in New Vrindaban practice the beliefs of karma and reincarnation throughout their daily lives not only by eating vegetarian foods from a nonviolent source but also with the guidance of a Guru and the chanting of the Hare Krishna mantra. For example, in the *Bhagavad-Gita*, Sri Krishna says, “Engage your mind always in thinking of Me, become My devotee, offer obeisances, and worship Me. Being completely absorbed in Me, surely you will come to Me.” The ultimate end goal for each devotee of the Hare Krishna faith is to live in pure consciousness with Krishna and serve him eternally. However, in order to transcend out of the material world and into the spiritual world, a devotee must seek spiritual guidance from a Guru.

“On hearing the word guru, we tend to envision a caricature like image: a bizarre-looking old fellow with a long, stringy beard and flowing robes, meditating on distant, esoteric truths. Or we think of a cosmic con man cashing in on young seekers’ spiritual gullibility. But what really is a guru? What does he know that we don’t? How does he enlighten us?” (Prabhupada, 1973). In

all Hare Krishna communities including New Vrindaban, the guru is a disciple of Krishna and a spiritual master who presents the words and lessons of Krishna to each devotee (Klostermaier, 2007). A devotee advances in spiritual life by regular chanting and following the instructions given by his or her Guru in order to achieve love of Krishna. According to Hari Nam, a devotee at New Vrindaban, the Guru does not always live in the same community; most Gurus are in the renounced order. They might have a base in a particular city, but most of the time they travel from place to place spreading spiritual knowledge. The Guru does not misinterpret the words of Krishna, but transmits them exactly as they were spoken. The Guru's business is to see that no human being suffers in this material world and no more birth, no more death, no more old age, no more disease continues. Thus the Guru takes on a very great responsibility because he must guide his disciples and enable them to become an eligible candidate for the perfect position--immortality.

Krishna says that "He delivers one from all sinful reactions after surrendering unto Him" (Bhagavad-Gita, 18. 66). At the time of initiation, a Guru accepts all karma from his devotees. As a result, a devotee is relieved of his previous karma, with the understanding that from this point on to proceed with caution. When the Guru accepts a particular person as his or her disciple, the Guru takes responsibility for that person and his or her spiritual progress. Every devotee will suffer from his or her karmic reactions and the Guru also suffers reactions due to the inappropriate behavior of his disciples.

According to *Vedanta-sutra*, the scripture text that systematically sets forth the philosophy in a logical order, a reporter once asked Srila Prabhupada about the purpose of life. His quick reply: "The purpose of life is to enjoy" (Vedanta-sutra 1.1.12, quoted in Srimad-Bhagavatam 9.24.58, Purport). To achieve this unlimited and imperishable happiness, devotees

at New Vrindaban chant Hare Krishna everyday. They believe that they can achieve pure consciousness from chanting and hearing what sages of ancient India have for millennia called, “The Great Chant for Deliverance,” or the Hare Krishna maha-mantra. This simple sixteen-word mantra is comprised of sound vibrations powerful enough to awaken the natural happiness within everyone:

“Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna, Krishna Krishna, Hare Hare.

Hare Rama, Hare Rama, Rama Rama, Hare Hare”

According to devotees at New Vrindaban, they have learned how to chant the Hare Krishna mantra and experience this true, spiritual happiness. It is the most popular mantra in India, the homeland of meditation (Klostermaier, 2007), and differs from other systems in two ways. First, the complete mantra is chanted, and second, the mantra is chanted aloud. The Hare Krishna Chanting was introduced by the original leader of the Hare Krishna movement, His Divine Grace A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada. Prabhupada said that there was “nothing higher” than the happiness experienced from chanting Hare Krishna. He believed that chanting frees devotees from all karma. Devotees at New Vrindaban explained that they try to avoid all karma: good or bad. They believe that having any types of karma binds them to take another birth in the material world, which disrupts their journey to ultimately obtain pure consciousness and serve Krishna since having karma means an inevitable life cycle.

The law of karma means that for every material action performed, nature forces an equivalent reaction upon the performer. The *Bhagavad-Gita* states, “Whatever you do, whatever you eat, whatever you offer in sacrifice, whatever you give, whatever you practice as austerity, O Arjuna, do it as an offering unto Me” (Bhagavad-Gita, 9. 27). According to Tapa Punja, a Krishna devotee at New Vrindaban, followers of Hare Krishna believe that material activities can

be compared to seeds. Initially they are performed, or planted, and over the course of time they gradually fructify, releasing their resultant reactions. According to Swami Prabhupada, “enmeshed in this web of actions and reactions, we are forced to accept one material body after another to experience our karmic destiny.” Devotees at New Vrindaban explain that in addition to accepting karmic destiny, they also believe freedom from karma is possible by sincere chanting of Krishna’s transcendental names. Since Krishna’s names are filled with transcendental energy, when the living being associates with the divine sound vibration, he is freed from the endless cycle of karma. In Swami Prabhupada’s commentary on *Srimad-Bhagavatam*, he stresses, “The holy name is so spiritually potent that by chanting the holy name one can be freed from the reactions of all sinful activity.”

### **Conclusion**

The beliefs in karma and reincarnation in the Hare Krishna faith are demonstrated in the daily practices throughout the community at New Vrindaban. Each devotee is committed to living his or her life dedicated to becoming free of karma in order to avoid another birth and ultimately leave the material world to serve God (Krishna). Not only bad karma, but even good karma is condemned as it may bring forth another birth and make the soul accept the continual cycle of birth and death. That is why daily routines such as chanting, eating vegetarian food, worshiping deities, and reading sacred texts are various ways in which the devotees become closer to becoming karma free and achieving pure consciousness. Karma and reincarnation are key concepts to analyze when exploring the Hare Krishna faith and understanding the end goal of one day living in peace with Krishna, the supreme God.

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Marriage, Sexual Relations and Child Rearing Practices at New Vrindaban and the Relation to

America's Religious Landscape

Erica Fletcher, Natalie Mercuri, Monique Pelletier

Ohio University

## **Introduction**

This is a preliminary paper that is part of a greater research project through the Harvard Pluralism Project and the Global Leadership Center of Ohio University. In the first draft our team outlined our primary findings in order to gain a greater grasp of marriage, sexual relations and child rearing from the theological standpoint of *Sanatan Dharma* (the Sanskrit term for Hinduism, meaning “the eternal law,” as used by its adherents). As we progressed in our research our findings grew to encompass specific practices of the Hare Krishna religion and the customs practiced at New Vrindaban, a Hare Krishna temple and community in West Virginia. The end goal of this research is to understand the theological foundation for specific marriage, sexual and child rearing practices at New Vrindaban through scriptural research, interviews and empirical study. The conclusion of this research essay will reveal how the Hare Krishna community in New Vrindaban has evolved since its inception, as well as the devotees’ adaptation to living and worshiping in the greater American society.

## **Marriage**

Within the *Sanatan Dharma*/Hare Krishna belief, marriage is known as *vivaha*, a sacred union between two people of the opposite sex that is not limited to this life alone. The marriage between two people is a marriage of the souls with the common goal of assisting one another to mutual salvation also known as *Moksha*. Marriage is not only a rite of passage but an obligation as specified by the *Sanatan Dharma*/Hare Krishna principle of the *asramas* (Jarayam, 2010). Currently, devotees living at New Vrindaban are working to reestablish the order of the *Varnasramas* within their community. This practice is a division of the social (*varna*) and spiritual (*asramas*) classes. There are four stages to the *asramas*, the second spiritual stage being *Grhastha* or the married householder (Cush, Robinson, York, 2008, p. 121).

The *Laws of Manu*, *Manusmṛiti*, is an ancient text given as a religious discourse by Manu, the progenitor of mankind, as transcribed by a group of seers also known as *Rishis*. These laws were passed on to Manu from the god Brahma and were to be written as a book of regulations for living a proper life (Cush, Robinson, York, 2008, p. 491). Besides the *Manusmṛiti*, the four *Vedas* as well as the *Srimad Bhagavatam* provide the devotees with the proper steps to go about courting, proposing marriage and performing the marriage ritual. It also includes the proper ways to live a fulfilling and meaningful life as a devotee. In an interview with Shankaranand Das, an ISKCON (International Society of Krishna Consciousness) council member and a member of the New Vrindaban community, what most guides the devotee's way of living is the three modes of goodness, passion and ignorance. The three aforementioned modes each contain 6 of the 18 *Puranas* as established in the Vedic scriptures. Each mode provides instructions on how to live one's life. These modes will be further discussed in the section about sexual relations (S. Das, personal communication, October 27, 2010).

### **Courting**

Unless a man chooses to renounce his life and live as a *Sannyasi*, or hermit, he is required to marry. Although the women who follow the *Sanatan Dharma* religion are required to take the same steps as men, in order to obtain *Moksha*, they are all expected to marry and it is only in very rare instances that a woman would take up the life of a *Sannyasi*. Within the New Vrindaban community their way of living does not differ too significantly from traditional American way of life. Dating usually takes place before a couple commits to marriage and having children. However, the proper steps must be taken before the courting can take place. To begin dating there is a web of permission that a man must obtain before he asks the woman on a date. If the woman is living in the temple the man must first ask the temple president, then the



closest male (either father or eldest brother, if the father is unavailable) and finally the mother for permission to date her daughter and if permission is granted from all three of those people then the couple can begin courting. This is not only a sign of respect but also creates awareness for the community. It is taboo for a couple to date without obtaining permission and if the couple is seen holding extended conversations or engaging in any type of relations they will no longer be able to participate in any of the rituals or services of the community/temple (S. Das, personal communication, October 27, 2010).

### **Courting Rituals**

As with the *Sanatan Dharma* tradition, Krishna Consciousness requires that once a woman marries she is expected to leave her parents and begin a new life in her husband's home (Jarayam, 2010). This is not typically the case at New Vrindaban because there are not very many extended families. Normally, once a couple marries at New Vrindaban they find their own home on or near the temple grounds (S. Das, personal communication, October 27, 2010). One requirement that Krishna's devotees must follow before going through with their marriage is the rite of *Siddhanta*, or Vedic astrology. This practice is fundamental to the success of any relationship. Shankaranand Das emphasized the importance of being astrologically compatible with one's partner for the growth and development of a relationship to take place. If a couple is not compatible it is likely that a *Purohit*, or a devotee entitled to perform a marriage ceremony, may or may not marry the couple. The purpose of marriage is to fulfill the needs of the soul in order to elevate one's consciousness. Within the Hare Krishna community those who decide to marry outside of normal traditions or take part in any action that is deemed inappropriate for devotees are said to be engaging in *Preya*. *Preya* is the practice of letting one's impulses guide his or her decision-making. While these deviant actions may or may not bring one any physical

harm it can be detrimental to spiritual growth and may hinder one from obtaining *Moksha* (S. Das, personal communication, October 27, 2010).

### **Types of Marriage**

Traditionally the most common type of *Sanatan Dharma*/Krishna marriage is arranged with the consent of the bride and groom as well as the blessing of the elders. According to Shankaranand Das, within the Krishna community there are several factors that must prevail in order for a marriage to be a beneficial union. Besides their astrological compatibility a couple must match financially and culturally (S. Das, personal communication, October 27, 2010).

When an arranged marriage takes place there are several other factors that go into choosing an appropriate mate including: caste, natal charts, family lineage, financial status of the groom, appearance, character and willingness (Jarayam, 2010). ISKON emphasizes that Krishna's devotees must follow the law of their state. Therefore, in order for a couple to be married at New Vrindaban, they must first be married by the state in a civil union and then they can go forward with the religious wedding ceremony. A common misconception that follows New Vrindaban's turbulent past is that a man is allowed to marry more than one woman; while it is accepted by ISKON, it is illegal in West Virginia (state where New Vrindaban is located), making it improper for devotees at New Vrindaban (S. Das, personal communication, October 27, 2010).

### ***Sanatan Dharma*/Hare Krishna Marriages**

The eight types of marriage recognized in the Krishna community as outlined in the *Manusmṛti* are as follows: *Brahma*, *Daiva*, *Arsa*, *Prajapatya*, *Asura*, *Gandharva*, *Rakshasa* and *Pishacha* (Cush, Robinson, York, 2008, p. 971). Within the New Vrindaban community, there are only two types of marriage that have taken place and they are the *Brahma* marriage and

*Daiva* marriage. Stephanie Jamison the author of *Sacrificed Wife/Sacrificer's Wife: Women, Ritual and Hospitality in Ancient India* notes, "What distinguishes these types from each other are the occasion and circumstances under which the bride comes into the groom's possession" (as cited in Cush, Robinson, & York, 2008, p. 210-211). *Brahma* marriage is the most recognized marriage within *Sanatan Dharma*/Hare Krishna in which the father honors his daughter by giving her away to a man of Vedic learning and high moral standing. The *Daiva* rite is the gift of an ornamented daughter, who decided along with the groom they wanted to be married, to a priest who officiates a proper ceremony. *Arsa* marriage is recognized as a legal practice in India today where the bride is given as a gift to a bridegroom in exchange for a bull and a cow. The *Prajapatya* marriage is when the bride's father gives her to a man with the stated and understood expectation that they will live together to fulfill their religious duties. These four marriage rites are recognized as legal practice by ISKCON as well as in most countries, while the later three are considered to be illegal means of marriage although some religious texts state otherwise.

The *Asura* rite is historically the most practiced *Sanatan Dharma* marriage rite and is the same as the dowry system wherein the groom gives the bride's family as much as he can afford then the bride is given away to the groom. The *Gandharva* rite is a marriage that arises from lust in which the couple will marry in order to consummate their relationship so that they may engage in sexual intercourse. *Rakshasa* marriage is the forced abduction "of a maiden, weeping and wailing, from her house, after smashing and cleaving and breaking (her relatives and household)" (Cush, Robinson, York, 2008, p. 211). Finally, *Pishacha* marriage, as stated in *Manusmrti* 3:34, is defined as, "When a man by stealth seduces a girl who is sleeping,

intoxicated or disordered in intellect”; or basically raping the woman after which he is required to marry her (Buhler, 1886).

### **Homosexuality**

While New Vrindaban openly welcomes people of all race, religion and sexual orientation it is not seen as an acceptable behavior to engage in any homosexual relations. In an interview with Madhupati Das, a devotee and member of the New Vrindaban community since its inception, he referenced the idea that what one does in the privacy of his or her own home is their personal behavior and there are no “gay police” to monitor their actions. According to the teachings of Srila Prabhupada, the leader of the Hare Krishna movement in America, a man is the protector of his family, community and self. When a man or woman engages in homosexuality s/he cannot engage in rightful sexual and relational behavior, thus s/he cannot fulfill her/his spiritual duties and will be unable to reach *Moksha* (M. Das, personal communication, October 27, 2010).

### **Divorce**

In relation to remarriage and divorce the regulations about the appropriate means for leaving one’s spouse are also outlined in the *Manusmṛti*. Contrary to the teachings in the *Manusmṛti*, the *Vedas* emphasize that if one follows the correct procedures suitable for marriage, such as the astrological compatibility, then there will be no conflict that the couple cannot resolve. At New Vrindaban, specifically, marriage is a rite in which all the community comes to participate and reaffirm the union. When a couple decides to divorce it is seen as disrespect not only to the community but to the gods as well who were called upon to bless the wedding (M. Das, personal communication, October 27, 2010).

## Sexual Relations

While marriage is a sacred union of a man and a woman it is also a means for elevating one's consciousness in order to fulfill one's spiritual needs. Sexual relations are not permitted unless a couple is married. In terms of when it is appropriate to have sex within a married relationship, according to the *Maunsmrti*, sex is not allowed, "during 16 days and nights in each month including four days that differ from the rest as censured by the virtuous, and called the natural season of women" (Manusmrti 3:46). In translation, sex is not allowed: during a woman's menstruation cycle, on *Ekadashi* which is the 11<sup>th</sup> of every moon cycle from the waxing and waning period of the moon, on any auspicious day otherwise known as a day of fasting or the 13<sup>th</sup> day of every moon cycle (although not as strictly enforced) (S. Das, personal communication, October 27, 2010).

### ***Kama Shastra Versus Bhagavad Gita***

*Sanatan Dharma* differs from other religions in its understanding and manner on the subject of sex. Sex can be either a way to liberation and happiness or a great obstacle and cause of suffering, depending on how it is viewed. Either way, one has to ultimately overcome their desire and *Moksha*. If one chooses to indulge in sex they may find ways gratify their desires in the *Kama Shastra* (commonly known as the *Kama Sutra*). However, if one chooses to abstain from sex they can use the *Bhagavad Gita* as a means for support. The *Bhagavad Gita* 4:26 states

Sex life. [Is a] general tendency of human society, but a regulated householder does not indulge in unrestricted sex life. This restricted, unattached sex life is also a kind of *yajna* (sacrifice) because the restricted householder sacrifices his general tendency toward gratification for higher transcendental life. (Prabhupada, 1977)

*Sanatan Dharma*/Hare Krishna, consider sex a desire and desires cause human suffering, and according to the *Bhagavad Gita*, desire leads to misconception and bondage to the cycle of births and deaths. The way out of suffering is to become separated from the senses through practices like yoga and meditative actions that are considered sacrificial offerings to god. Sex is considered materialistic and engaging in forbidden sex leads to an afterlife of very undesirable things. According to a passage from the *Srimad-Bhagavatam*,

Materialistic life is based on sex life. The existence of all the materialistic people, who are undergoing severe tribulation in the struggle for existence, is based on sex. When sex life is indulged in for sense gratification illegally and illicitly, both the man and the woman await severe punishment in this world or after death. In this world also they are punished by virulent diseases like syphilis and gonorrhoea that will follow them into their next life. (Prabhupada, 1977)

However there exists a contradictory text written by ancient Indian sages called the *Kama Shastra*, which is based on the *Vedas*. This book is one of the three ancient Indian texts concerning the aims of life. *Sanatans* believe that *kama*, sensual pleasure, is one of the four *purusharthas*, aims of life. The *Kama Shastra* considers sex to be a positive aspect of life that can be enjoyed as one of the duties of married life, particularly in the desire to have children. According to the book *The Kama Sutra of Vatsyayana*,

*Kama* is the enjoyment of appropriate objects by the five senses of hearing, feeling, seeing, tasting and smelling, assisted by the mind together with the soul. The ingredient in this is a peculiar contact between the organ of sense and its object, and the consciousness of pleasure, which arises from that contact, is called *Kama*... *Kama* is to be learnt from the *Kama Sutra* (aphorisms on love) and from the practice of citizens. (Burton, 2009)

Self-control is an important aspect of this, so sexual intercourse has to take place between married couples only. The book is meant to be a guide towards deeper intimacy between a man

and a woman as well as within the mind, body and soul; in this sense procreation is the highest goal of engaging in any sexual act.

### **Purpose of Sex**

In a personal interview with Shankaranand Das, he stated that there is a need for the conditioned mind, saying that we all have polluted minds and polluted intelligence, but it is a need of the body, like eating, sleeping and defense. When trying to understand the purpose of human life, which is reviving the relationship with God, people have forgotten that they can neglect the need of sex. According to the *Bhagavad Gita*, sex is meant for elevating one's consciousness in service to god. In this light the purpose of sex is for the procreation of children, which leads to raising them as good devotees of God. This is called a responsible sex life as stated previously in the section on marriage (S. Das, personal communication, October 27, 2010).

### **Three Modes**

According to Shankaranand Das those living at New Vrindaban apply specifically to the mode of passion. The mode of passion is characterized by the attraction between a man and a woman. According to the *Vedic* scriptures it is stated that sex indulgence is meant for bodily enjoyment and different instructions on how to improve it are part of *Kama Shatra*. The types of food people eat and different exercising techniques are things people can do to enhance sexual pleasure. These kinds of instructions will be attractive to those who are deeply rooted in the mode of passion.

Women have attraction for men, and men have attraction for women. When the mode of passion is increased, one develops the longing for material enjoyment. S/he wants to enjoy sense

gratification. For sense gratification, a woman/man in the mode of passion strives for honor within their society and s/he works to have a happy family, with nice children, a spouse and a home. Shankaranand Das also says, as stated in a verse of the *Bhagavad Gita*, “that one becomes associated with the fruits of his activities and thus becomes bound by such activities” (S. Das, personal communication, October 27, 2010). In relation to New Vrindaban, their community is slightly bound to the material world thus the mode of passion.

### **Child Rearing**

From a responsible sex life comes children and the need to raise and educate them in the proper *Sanatan Dharma*/Hare Krishna way of living. In order to understand how children are raised in the *Sanatan Dharma*/Hare Krishna religion it is important to understand how they were educated in ancient India. Being a *Sanatan* is not just a practice but also a way of life and it requires much dedication and time. Even though education in modern *Sanatan Dharma* may not be as strict as it was in ancient times, it is still vital to know the old ways of learning. Knowing the ancient and modern ways of *Sanatan Dharma* education can shed light on how Hare Krishna educational practices evolved.

According to the *Vedas*, "The tendencies developed in previous lives, rather than the training in the present one, determine whether or not our intellect will turn out good and our moral propensities strong" (Vyas, 1967). In ancient India, those who followed *Sanatan Dharma* raised their children under care of a guru. A student was required to reside with her/his guru and develop his proficiency under the guru's personal supervision. One's emotional and intellectual personality was shaped by a guru, who was specially equipped for the onerous task and whose



main duty in life was to teach and train (Vyas, 1967). Nowadays, the parent has a much larger role in the education of their children.

### **Ancient *Sanatan Dharma* Education**

According to *India in the Ramayana age*, "The first stage of life, the *brahmacharya*, [who taught the sacred texts], was specially set apart for learning and education. During this period, the Aryan student was taught the habits of simple life. Whatever the social position or status of the students' families, they had to submit to the same stern and disciplined mode of life in the preceptor's [guru's] home" (Vyas, 1967). The repetition of their daily life was seen as very useful for the student. In ancient India a child's daily routine consisted of waking before sunrise, bathing, reciting morning prayers, fire-worship and salutation to the guru. These actions went a long way towards the formation of good habits and the mastery of their education (Vyas, 1967). In ancient India the education that a student received was vast; it did not just involve the proper way of living as *Sanatan* but included study in subjects such as literature, grammar, phonetics, etymology, astronomy and medical science. As stated in *India in the Ramayana age*, "Moral education was by no means neglected. Good character meaning firm adherence to truth and duty, cleanliness of body and mind and perfect control over the senses constituted the distinguished features of a man and true education" (Vyas, 1967).

### **Modern *Sanatan Dharma*/Hare Krishna Education**

Modern *Sanatan Dharma* education is not quite as rigorous as it was in ancient India. While *Sanatan Dharma*/Hare Krishna devotees learned from their ancestral ways, they have incorporated current ways of living into their child rearing practices. When raising children, the parents are now the principle teacher in their life. *Hinduism Today Magazine* states, "Parents are

indeed the first guru. They teach in many ways, such as by example, explanation, and giving advice and direction” (Hinduism Today Magazine, 2007). A devotee parent needs to establish a shrine in the home, and worship at this shrine every morning. They also should worship as a family once a week at the temple. The parents need to teach their children about the soul and how to obtain *Moksha*. Today’s devotees follow a strict vegetarian diet, do not participate in gambling, do not consume any drug-like substances such as alcohol or caffeine and do not engage in sexual activity before marriage. These fundamental ways of living must then be passed their children.

### **Three Modes**

In regards to the three modes, as defined in the sexual relations section of this research paper, the *Puranas* state:

In the mode of goodness, children are perceived as the very means of attaining liberation. [If a child in a family becomes a devotee of Krishna - many generations of that family are liberated]. Also, children are considered a very sacred responsibility. In the mode of passion, there is intense attachment to children on account of identifying them as born of one's own body, [or semen]. There is sense of possessiveness and thus children are cared for and brought up in a manner that will boost one's pride and glorify the name of family. In the mode of ignorance, the children are considered the undesirable byproduct of sex indulgence, unwanted progeny, and thus are considered a burden to family and society. Thus abortions, killing children, abusing children or neglecting children and their proper upbringing is result of mode of ignorance. (S. Das, personal communication, October 27, 2010)

### **New Vrindaban Educational Practices**

At New Vrindaban, they raise their children similar those who practice *Sanatan Dharma*. Devotees want their children to follow traditional Krishna ways of living as was discussed earlier. In regards to schooling, New Vrindaban is working toward building its own school

within the community. Currently the community teaches elementary-aged children but hope to have a high school and higher education learning facility on temple grounds in the near future (S. Das, personal communication, October 27, 2010). Madhupati Das' daughter, Sita, goes to public school not far from the temple and discussed how she does not like being away from her family for the whole day. Sita feels as though she is becoming detached from her community. She is gone away at school all day and comes home to complete several hours of homework. All of their other children are homeschooled and seem to enjoy it. Even though Sita goes to public school and is learning about modern societal ways her parents are not worried because they know she will always be drawn to the Hare Krishna lifestyle. (S. Das, personal communication, October 27, 2010).

Shankaranand Das discussed how the children in New Vrindaban are not forced to do anything like the daily prayers, rather they learn by example. He said his own son wants to get up for the early morning prayer because he sees his parents doing it and wants to follow in his father's footsteps. Shankaranand Das says the children are inspired to do these things and want to be part of the religion. In regards to schooling he said he would like for his children to be friends with children in the community because he worries they may taint his way of thinking. He doesn't want them to have any negative outside influences, but he knows he cannot stop them from having friends outside the community (M. Das, personal communication, October 27, 2010).

### **Conclusion**

After spending a weekend at New Vrindaban we were able to experience, first-hand, how this community influences the local as well as national *Sanatan Dharma*/Hare Krishna populace.

Although they experienced a turbulent past New Vrindaban has been able to mold their way of living so that it would conform to modern society without having a large impact on their fundamental beliefs. While marriage and sexual practices of the Hare Krishna followers has not deviated too much from the ancient ways, New Vrindaban has made substantial strides in terms of modernization. Not only has their community had a great impact on the surrounding neighborhoods in terms of high moral values and sustainable living but they have changed internally so as to be more accepting of non-devotees' ways of living. At New Vrindaban it seems that the parents would like to raise and teach their own children within the community but know that there will always be outside influences that cannot be controlled. They accept the outside influences having an impact on their children and way of living but hope their devotees make the best decisions out of all the information they obtain and stay true to their Hare Krishna roots (S. Das, personal communication, October 27, 2010).

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Vegetarianism at New Vrindaban

Alison Davis, Roman Suer, Jackie Wurzelbacher

Ohio University

## **Introduction**

The devotees that practice the Hare Krishna tradition in the New Vrindaban community follow a vegetarian diet. This excludes all animal meat and also eggs from their food supply. They do, however, consume dairy products regularly. The reasoning behind the devotees' choice to be vegetarian comes from the main texts of the Hare Krishna religion including the Vedic texts, the Bhagavad-gita, and also from their guru Srila Prabhupada. However, most devotees would consider their diet to be "Krishnatarian," meaning that they simply eat what Krishna has asked to be offered. They have this lacto-vegetarian diet in order to eat only for Krishna. Beyond these recommendations, each devotee seems to have developed personal reasons to follow vegetarianism. When asked for his reason for being vegetarian, New Vrindaban devotee

[Tulasiananda Ognibene](#) says,

The text recommends us to be a vegetarian, but yes there are personal reasons for not eating meat. Because I was born here in New Vrindaban, I grew up with animals and have loving friendships with them. I remember one time I took a nap on a cow for like 2 or 3 hours. The cow stayed there and did not move at all because I was asleep. I finally woke up and the cow was looking at me with this loving look of a mother. I just have lots of love for all living beings. (Ognibene)

Through the words and actions of the devotees it is clear that animals provide a special relationship for them and that the animals are not viewed as a food source. The texts that the devotees follow confirm and reiterate these beliefs.

## **Vegetarianism in the Vedas**

The Vedic texts are the oldest and most sacred literature to Hinduism, and are widely regarded as the oldest religion in the world. The Vedas is a collection of poems and scriptures that reveal the path to holiness. One of the most important decisions a follower of Hinduism can make to achieve holiness is to follow a strict vegetarian diet, abstaining from killing any living

creature capable of feeling pain. According to the Vedas, “Only the animal killer cannot relish the message of the Absolute Truth” (Varjavandtst).

The Vedic texts state that man’s tendency to treat other humans with respect but view other animals as inferior does not condone a balanced philosophy and fails to portray spiritual unawareness. The Vedas state, “He who injures innoxious beings from a wish to give himself pleasure never finds happiness, neither living nor dead” (Knapp).

A passage from the Yajur Veda states that killing animals for meat consumption represents ignorance of the fact that our bodies belong to Krishna and thus cannot be used to kill other creatures that embody Him. It reads, “You must not use your God-given body for killing God's creatures, whether they are human, animal or whatever” (“Vegetarianism”).

The Mahabharata is another Vedic text that stresses a vegetarian diet. Many of its passages support vegetarianism including the passage that states, “The sins generated by violence curtail the life of the perpetrator. Therefore, even those who are anxious for their own welfare should abstain from meat-eating.” This means that one who kills animals is also likely to view humans with this violent mindset and would be prone to killing humans along with other living creatures (Knapp). The following passage states the levels of involvement in the process of meat consumption that are considered sinful in the Mahabharata: “The one who brings an animal to be killed, the one who buys an animal to be killed, the one who sells, buys, cooks and eats the meat are all sinners.” The text also reads that a human who uses the flesh of another living being to sustain himself will suffer in the next body that his soul adopts upon reincarnation. It says, “He who desires to augment his own flesh by eating the flesh of other creatures, lives in misery in whatever species he may take his [next] birth” (“Hindu Scriptures”).



### **Vegetarianism in the Bhagavad-gita**

The devotees at New Vrindaban follow the words of the Bhagavad-gita closely and use its words—Krishna’s words to Arjuna—to guide their actions. Therefore, when Krishna states the types of food that He would want to be offered, the devotees cook this food to eat and to offer to Krishna. In the Bhagavad-gita, Krishna states, “If one offers Me with love and devotion a leaf, a flower, fruit or water, I will accept it.” (Bhagavad-gita, 9.26) Devotees note that Krishna does not mention any type of animal or meat. Everything that the devotees eat should be offered to God according to the Bhagavad-gita, “...all that you do, all that you eat, all that you offer and give away, as well as all austerities that you may perform, should be done as an offering unto Me.” (Bhagavad-gita, 9.27) Therefore, they eat what Krishna would eat and consequently eat no meat because Krishna eats no meat (Turner). Also, the Gita explains that offering food to Krishna releases devotees of many sins. Therefore, if a person were to eat something other than what Krishna would want to be offered, he or she would be sinning. Krishna says, “The devotees of the Lord are released from all kinds of sins because they eat the food which is offered first for sacrifice. Others, who prepare food for personal sense enjoyment, verily eat only sin.” (Bhagavad-gita, 3.14)

An issue that is often raised when discussing vegetarianism and the equality of living beings described in the Bhagavad-gita is that plants are also living beings and killing them for food would be an act of violence. This passage from 3.14 in the Gita shows that although eating plants is an act of violence, the sin of killing the plants is absolved because the food is offered to Krishna and it is food that Krishna has asked to be offered.

The Bhagavad-gita also describes the laws of karma, meaning that an act of evil will produce bad karma for that soul. This is tied to the idea of reincarnation from the Gita meaning

that the soul will move to different living bodies and go through many birth cycles in different physical bodies. It states, “As a person puts on new garments, giving up old ones, similarly, the soul accepts new material bodies, giving up the old and useless ones” (Bhagavad-gita, 2.22)

Since the soul changes bodies, all living things are to be perceived with equal rights. When stating the qualities of someone who is “godly,” Krishna includes the characteristic of having “compassion for all living entities” (Bhagavad-gita, 16.3). Therefore, killing an animal would disobey the laws of karma and would be unjust to that living being (“Karma”). Also, the Gita describes the consequences in reincarnation for dying with an animalistic mentality or in the “mode of ignorance” or the “mode of passion.” The verse states, “When one dies in the mode of passion, he takes birth among those engaged in fruitive activities; and when one dies in the mode of ignorance, he takes birth in the animal kingdom.” (Bhagavad-Gita, 14.15) This implies that one who kills an animal will be reincarnated as an animal so as to understand the equality of all beings because of the possibility that they in turn will be treated poorly by humans.

### **Vegetarianism from Srila Prabhupada**

Srila Prabhupada is considered to be the “spiritual master” for the Krishna devotees of the western world, and the importance of the “spiritual master” or “guru” is explained in the Bhagavad-gita when Krishna describes some important qualities to obtaining “Absolute Truth.” The verse states, “Humility; pridelessness; nonviolence; tolerance; simplicity; *approaching a bona fide spiritual master...*” (Bhagavad-gita, 13.12). Prabhupada’s position as a “bona fide spiritual master” is the justification for the importance of his teachings in New Vrindaban. Prabhupada was a major advocate for vegetarianism while he was alive, and the devotees use his dedication to this cause to justify their vegetarianism as well. He was able to convert many meat

eaters to vegetarianism through his descriptions of the meat industry's unsustainable nature, cruelty, and unhealthy effects. (Srila Prabhupada's ISKCON Bangalore”).

Prabhupada clearly stated his thoughts about the killings of animals many times. He once said, *“Every living creature is the son of the Supreme Lord, and He does not tolerate even an ant's being killed. One has to pay for it”* (“Karma”). Prabhupada has also connected the ruthless killing of animals that is carried out in factory farms to the killing of men in war. He asserts that when one kills animals so unrestrictedly, they must also be slaughtered in large wars because of such insensitivity to the killing of fellow living beings (“Karma”).

There are many other problems that arise with the killing of animals about which Prabhupada considered. He insisted that plant-based foods are more sustainable to grow than meat. According to his teachings, it is the will of the Godhead to produce the types of foods more easily that He wants us to eat, and that is why there are enough plant-based foods to easily end world hunger. Prabhupada also addressed the issue of the act of violence committed by vegetarians when they eat plants since plants are also living things. Although it is an act of violence, he says, “For a human being that violence should be committed only as much as necessary” (“A Higher Taste”). The reasoning behind the vegetarian ideals at New Vrindaban is made clear through Prabhupada's words and teachings.

### **Conclusion**

The devotees at New Vrindaban follow a long tradition of vegetarianism that started in the Vedic texts and reached throughout the religion. Through the Bhagavad-gita and Srila Prabhupada's teachings, the devotees are able to justify their reasons for their vegetarian diet. These important sources have guided the devotees to develop personal decisions about their diets and actions as well.

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Gender Roles in the New Vrindaban Community

Nina Bressau, Nicole Bersani and Guru Amrit Khalsa

Ohio University

## Introduction

The Global Leadership Center visited the New Vrindaban community in Moundsville, West Virginia September 2010 to observe and document the Hare Krishna lifestyle and to elucidate the theological and scriptural basis for the practices we encountered. New Vrindaban was established in 1968 under the auspices of Prabhupada, a swami born in Calcutta, India who spread the Hare Krishna movement to America. In addition to observing the community, we conducted research on Hinduism and the Hare Krishna movement, and interviewed religious scholars and devotees at New Vrindaban and other Hindu temples.

While men and women perform many tasks together and engage in the same devotional practices, distinct roles for men and women exist at the New Vrindaban community. Women are primarily responsible for childcare, while men are in charge of administering the worship services and representing the community to the outside world. Also, men and women stand on separate sides of the room during worship. In addition, devotees practice ecstatic worship of the deities Krishna and Radha, a pair of lovers representing metaphor for devotees' relationship with God.

This report will examine the scriptural and theological underpinnings of gender roles in the New Vrindaban community. Specifically, it will address the implications of male Krishna as the figurehead of God, Krishna's relationship with Radha, gender roles in daily life and worship, leadership distribution among men and women and the impact of the Western concept of feminism on traditional Hindu gender roles.

## **Feminism: New Vrindaban Community in the U.S. Versus ‘Traditional’ Hinduism in India**

Bhakti devotion is a movement that Chaitanya (an ardent devotee of Krishna and a famous poet) launched in the 17th century that spread throughout Northern and Eastern India. Harinam Dasi, a New Vrindaban devotee, said devotees consider Chaitanya a messianic figure, a direct incarnation of Krishna that comes in the age of Kali (the present age) to deliver the fallen souls through worship and chanting of the Lord’s name. Many scholars consider this movement a decidedly anti-caste movement, as it eliminated the role of the high-caste Brahmin priest as intermediary, making direct worship available to the lower castes and women for the first time (Sharma, 2010). Arthur Basham, author of *The Origins and Development of Classical Hinduism*, writes, “Salvation by means of devotion was now open to all humans regardless of birth, gender, or station in life. The movement grew rapidly, giving, for the first time, women and the lower social orders equal access to salvation” (1989). Prabupadha’s Hare Krishna movement brought Chaitanya’s teachings to the West in the 20th century, and the New Vrindaban community is an outgrowth of this original movement of bhakti devotionism (Sharma, 2010). Heidi Pauwels, professor of Asian Languages and Literature at the University of Washington, writes “[Bhakti Devotionalism] allows women to engage in acts of worship that are functionally equivalent to those of men” (2008). She continues by stating that the privileging of love over ritual “undermines *dharma*,” allowing women to break out of traditional roles that might limit their spiritual experience. The Hindu concept of *Dharma* is defined as the necessity and spiritual requirement of fulfilling one’s duty in society, and was often used as a justification for pigeonholing women into subservient roles by stating these roles constituted their duty. In fact, many stories of female bhakti saints often include the rejection of the traditional role of the woman as a devoted wife in favor of devotion to God (2008).

New Vrindaban devotee Malati, one of the 32 Governing Body Commissioners that oversee the spiritual and philosophical endeavors of the International Society of Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), said that the New Vrindaban community is based on a fusion of traditional Hindu beliefs regarding gender and Western concepts of feminism. She explained, “we try to keep some of the traditions, and believe that men and women have special roles, which is why God created men and women. Each has different gifts and inclinations that may cause them to be more suited to certain tasks” (2010). She said that the community has basic tenets prohibiting illicit sex on the part of men and women, mirroring the importance of modesty and purity in the broader Hindu faith. Malati also pointed out that the New Vrindaban community is not technically “Hindu” but rather a Vaishnava community, exempting it from practicing various Orthodox Hindu practices and beliefs that may limit women’s participation in the community (2010). New Vrindaban devotee Shankaranand Dasi mirrored this view: “Certain Hindu practices, especially those concerning women, tend to be diluted in ISKCON” (2010).

Ananda Vidya, another New Vrindaban devotee, described gender roles in the community from his point of view, “We believe there are certain actions that help women advance to the next birth in the cycle of reincarnation, including faithfulness to one’s husband, chastity, hospitality toward visitors, and other duties of the wife in marriage. General thinking in ISKCON is that man and wife are meant to work as a team, both serving Krishna” (2010). This idea of man and wife serving the Lord, as opposed to the wife simply serving her husband, is perhaps the most important difference between the more Orthodox Hindu paths and New Vrindaban’s conception of gender roles.

New Vrindaban devotee Harinam summed up the East meets West effects on the position of women in the movement as follows: “We adjust our practices according to the time, place and



circumstances we find ourselves in. More and more women are speaking out in the community and in classes. Even Hindus in India are adopting more practices many would consider ‘feminist’ as the country competes with the West” (2010).

### **Implications of Male Krishna as the Figurehead of God**

Advocacy of devotion to Krishna for men and women is also found in one of the New Vrindaban community’s most central texts, the *Bhagavad-Gita*. After Arjuna asks Lord Krishna whether it is preferable to worship Him in the form of Krishna or a formless version of God, Krishna replies “Men intent on me renounce all actions to me and worship me, meditating with singular discipline” (Miller, 1986).

For practitioners of Krishna consciousness, Krishna is seen as the Supreme and His name translates to “all-attractive” (harekrishna.com). Therefore, men and women of all ages can worship and connect to Krishna at all times. In the *Bhagavad-Gita*, Krishna is described as male and is always referred to as “He.” In the same way, Prabhupada refers to the Lord as “His” in the *Sri Isopanisad* (1969). Prabhupada is the founder of the Hare Krishna movement in the United States, and left a lasting legacy on the New Vrindaban community. Although the book *The Life of Hinduism* persistently uses “He” when talking about the Ultimate Reality, it states, “He is neither masculine nor feminine” (Hawley & Narayanan, 2006). According to Sudha Ganesan, a female devotee at the Bharatiya Temple in Powell, Ohio, Radha is Krishna’s female counterpart, and together they make up the full manifestation of God. She also said Lord Vishnu is sometimes depicted as half-male, half-female. In the book *The Life of Hinduism*, Hawley and Narayanan argue that gender in worship does not matter. “In all men or women is He alone. The Self in everybody is genderless” (Hawley & Narayanan, 2006).

On the other hand, E.B. Rochford, author of *Hare Krishna in America*, argues the whole experience of surrendering to Krishna is different for men and women. “While the division is not always exact because some devotee women (such as Devi) hold positions critical to the functioning of the movement’s communities, women’s overall role obligations are nevertheless largely confined to the household” (Rochford, 1985).

### **Krishna’s Relationship with Radha**

The New Vrindaban community worships Krishna and his lover Radha as a pair, in addition to their worship of Krishna alone. Harinam said Radha is the “external manifestation of Krishna’s internal potency.” She also said Radha is thought of as a Universal Mother, whose mercy allows devotees to directly approach Krishna. Radha and Krishna are displayed in the form of large and elaborate statue deities at the edge of the community’s lake. Devotees also study and celebrate the love between the two as a metaphor for a devotee’s relationship with God. Shankaranad Dasi said, “The metaphor is based on the idea that the relationship between a man and his mistress is even more sweet and intimate than a relationship between man and wife. However, in our world extramarital affairs are both polluting and distracting. Chapter 15 of the *Bhagavad-Gita* describes the world as a subverted reflection of God’s abode, like a tree with the roots going up and the branches going down, as one views the objects in a lake. This means that what is most abominable in our world is actually good in God’s world. “Radha and Krishna’s affair thus represents the topmost form of worship” (2010).

This metaphor has historical roots in Vaishnava texts such as the Visnu Purana and the Harivamsa. These texts describe Krishna’s youth spent as a cowherd in Vrindaban, India (located between Delhi and Agra). According to the myth, Krishna charmed all of the milkmaids (*gopis*) in the village with his beauty and his flute. All of the *gopis* immediately fell in love, and

abandoned their husbands each night to go to the forest to dance with Krishna, a phenomenon dubbed the *Rasa-Lila*. According to the legend, each *gopi* believed that Krishna was “dancing” only with her.

The idea of *Rasa-Lila* eventually transformed into a central object of worship for many devotional sects, including the ISKCON movement (Basham, 1989). Radha was Krishna’s favorite *gopi* and is now considered a goddess in her own right by many. She is worshipped by millions of Hindus worldwide for her staunch devotion to Krishna (Pauwels, 2008). The *Rasa-Lila*’s depiction of Krishna’s passionate love for the *gopis*, and their love and constant longing for Him is meant to show that the human emotion of love can be transformed into a form of devotion to God, a hallmark of which is the constant longing for His presence (Basham, 1989).

Pauwels argues that Radha is primarily a sensual figure, and that many interpretations of the legend describe her relationship with Krishna as a clandestine affair conducted without the knowledge of her husband. In this way, Radha and the *gopis* seem to represent figures that act counter to India’s social norm of displaying absolute devotion to one’s husband. Many devotional poems also interpret their relationship as highly, and perhaps surprisingly, erotic: “My body hungers for his as mirror image hungers for twin of flesh . . . How many honeyed nights I have spent with him in love’s bliss, yet my desire never abates” (Dimock, 1981). Also, Krishna takes other women as lovers in addition to Radha: “Radha’s relationship with Krishna is famously fraught with the issue of his unfaithfulness and her jealousy of his other loves and wives” (Pauwels, 2008).

This relationship may be seen as obliterating community norms in Indian society in a deliberate and self-conscious fashion, forcing devotees to place God above all else in their lives.

Pauwels argues: “The very fact that Krishna is not their husband and hence they have to risk their social security for their love is seen as proof of the strength of that love” (2008). Devotional poetry describes Radha’s fear regarding her decision to be with Krishna, “At the first note of his flute down came the lion gate of reverence for elders, down came the door of *dharma*, my guarded treasure of modesty was lost, I was thrust to the ground as if by a thunderbolt . . . No more honor, my family lost to me, my home at Vraja lost to me” (Dimock, 1981). However, it is important to note that Radha never truly doubts her decision, and in fact seems to feel that Krishna is the only element of her life with meaning: “O my friend, my sorrow is unending. It is the rainy season, my house is empty, the sky is filled with seething clouds, the earth sodden with rain, and my love [Krishna] far away” (Dimock, 1981). These poems represent subjective, though still illuminating, interpretations of the relationship between Hindu beliefs and traditional Indian society.

### **Men and Women in Marriage, Working and Community Life**

In traditional Hinduism, a woman’s role was to produce many sons, complete household chores and have very little education. In addition, Meena Khandelwal writes: “The *Dharmashastras* clearly state that the proper role of women (*stridharma*) is to be under the protection and control of men throughout their lives” (37). The *Dharmashastras* literature – stemming from the Hindu concept of *Dharma* (duty) – provides Hinduism with rules for behavior, including explicit details of the ‘ideal life’ for Hindus to follow. According to Leslie Orr, author of *Women’s Lives, Women’s Rituals in the Hindu tradition*, traditional Hindu communities may completely exclude women from religious activities and roles, and instead have men as the central religious performers (110). However, some elite women were not subjected to the strict marital lifestyle and exclusion from religious practice that lower caste

women endured. Some were born into regional traditions of “matrilineality” and cross-cousin marriage (*vivāha*), while others were bhakti saints who gave their love to God (Young, 2008a).

Thus, some status differences in gender roles were practiced in ancient Hinduism.

According to Leslie Orr, gender roles might be separated in Hinduism, but they should not be looked at as black and white rules. Rather, they should be viewed as “different colorings and shadings” (122). The roles of men and women may be divided in some areas; however, many of their religious goals and attitudes are similar. K. Young, author of the *Encyclopedia of Hinduism*, mentions an extension of Orr’s idea, in that the context and background information should be known when studying the roles of Hindu women versus men:

Perhaps the most daunting problem – a common problem for anyone who wants to understand women’s history – is that we must rely mainly on pre-modern works written by elite men, although we can read between the lines and supplement these, for some periods, with inscriptional and art-historical information. (2008b)

Clearly, there is a danger in relying on ancient scriptural text to understand contemporary gender role practices. However, they do provide some context and a common thread when considering the place of women in different Hindu communities.

Ananda Vidya das, a devotee in the New Virdaban community, said, “The roles [of women and men] are not so specific. We’re all servants of the Lord, and since Krishna is in the center, all other roles are second.” In the *Śrī Īsopaniad*, written by A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupāda, leader of the Krishna movement in the U.S., the most important goal is to know Krishna, which is advocated in the *Vedas*. Ananda Vidya also mentioned that married men and women work as a team; the money they make is for Krishna and the food is first offered to him as well. Shankarand Dasi said that administrative roles in the community are always given to the

most capable devotee, man or woman. He also said that he has observed that women tend to be happier caring for children and taking care of the household activities, while men's egoistic nature causes them to desire a more dominant role in the community's administration.

Meena Khandelwal, Hindu scholar and author of *Women in Ochre Robes*, also expresses this idea that the life stages (*ashramas*) are most commonly associated with the life of a "high-caste male," excluding women from all roles except as a "married householder" (Khandelwal, 37). However, during the late-nineteen and early-twentieth centuries Hindu women were seen to broaden their roles in society. Women in modern Hindu communities have found leadership in organizations, higher education, monastic training and ritual participation (Khandelwal, 38-39).

The food at New Vrindaban was prepared by both sexes and everyone was able to take part in all worship ceremonies. While worshipping, the men and women move to separate sides of the temple at New Vrindaban. Shankaranand Dasi said that this is because "it doesn't look good in the temple if men and women are holding hands and dancing together. It begins to look more like a nightclub than a worship service." In addition, men and women both chant, offer temple food and perform *puja* for the deities (2010). However, women on their menstrual cycle may not cook in the temple kitchen and are discouraged from certain worship practices at this time because their bodies require rest due to emotional and physical weakness. According to Elizabeth Collins, Classics and World Religions professor at Ohio University, female Hindus are not supposed to go to temples during menstruation because it is also seen as pollution.

According to Sudha Ganesan, a worshiper at the Bharatiya Hindu Temple, socialization of Hinduism over the years has caused the religion to adapt, especially in Western societies. For example, women are only allowed to come to the temple on certain days or times of the month in

some Hindu communities and especially in India. However, temples have adapted new rules that either alter traditional ones or change the rules completely. The Bharatiya Hindu Temple does not have any women priests or a large number of women gurus, but both men and women members share the rest of the grunt work, including teaching, cleaning, cooking and maintaining the temple (Ganesan, 2010). Everyone besides the priest has a job outside of the community as well.

### **Leadership Distribution among Men and Women**

In ancient Hinduism, leadership distribution based on gender roles was more distinct than it is today. It was not common for women to take up important or high profile positions, and they usually stayed in the household. According to Basham, “the husband in principle controlled his wife’s every movement” (1989). Collins said in classical Hinduism women were below men and needed to worship their husband as a Lord (2010). Regarding the caste system, women were seen as lower than men, even if they were born in the same caste. “The woman’s status in ancient India was always inferior to that of the man, her punishment for wrongdoing being, according to the law books, equivalent to that given a *sudra*” (Bashman, 1989). *Sudra* is the name given to the worker class of the Hindu hierarchy and is sometimes used to refer to the untouchables. Prabhupada expressed a controversial sentiment in the *Sri-Isopanisad*: “[God] then thought of the less intelligent class of men... He considered the woman class and *sudra* class and *dvija-bandhu* (those not properly qualified)” (1969). When the *Bhagavad-Gita* talks about those of lower birth, it refers to women, workers and merchants (Miller, 1986).

The roles of Hindu men and women have changed with time in both India and Western society. “Women in India currently enjoy a greater amount of freedom and opportunity than

they had in the past, owing to the reform movements of the past century” (Basham, 1989). Sudha Ganesan, a Hindu devotee interviewed at the Bharatiya Temple, said work and power are equally distributed among men and women (2010). Elizabeth Collins agreed Hinduism is about equality nowadays and said the New Vrindaban community is more about the devotion to God.

According to Ganesan, although Hindu priests in America are always male, she added female priests do exist in India. She said that many women at the Bharatiya Temple are *gurus* and teach their knowledge in educational sessions. Hindu gurus are “beings who straddle between the human and the divine, or obliterate it altogether” (Hawley, & Narayanan, 2006). Women who are gurus not only hold the power to connect to God, but also obtain “a sense of trust and well-being that is essential for personal and spiritual health” (Hawley, & Narayanan, 2006).

All *swamis* (religious teachers) at the New Vrindaban community are male. In the community’s history, there have been different types of women *gurus*, but never a *swami*. To Ananda Vidya, the *swami*’s role is generally meant for men because after the men have aged and possibly married, they eventually travel to the forest to fulfill their last stage of life. This adventure is not recommended for elder women because it is generally not safe and their sons usually protect and take care of them when they are older. Harinam said women do not tend to choose the path as a *swami*, because they always require male protection, from first their father, then their husband, and finally their son(s). This rules out the acetic life of a *Sannyasi* for women in the New Vrindaban community, where they would be unprotected and at risk of exploitation (2010). Although the beliefs and lifestyles of Hare Krishna devotees may differ from those of other Hindu sects, leadership distribution between the sexes seems to be similar. “There are no exclusively female vocations in the movement. Both men and women cook, clean and raise



children. And rather than remain homebound, [devoted] women are strongly encouraged to be assertive as missionaries and preachers” (Knott, 1995).

Harinam, a devotee at the New Vrindaban community, said gender roles have changed over time and nowadays men and women work together to progress. Kim Knott, author of *The Debate About Women in the Hare Krishna Movement*, tackled the ‘women issue’ in ISKCON: “Technically at least, there is no reason why women should not have the highest religious authority in the movement, as *guru* - although, as yet, none have achieved this - or the highest managerial responsibility, as temple president” (Knott, 1995).

### **Conclusion**

The New Vrindaban community has been influenced by its Western environment, as well as by Chaitanya’s movement of bhakti devotiona in the 17th century: Both factors acted as equalizing forces in terms of gender roles and elevated the position of women from their husband’s servant encountered in ancient Hinduism to equal partners in marriage as servants of Krishna. Krishna is an attractive figure, to which both men and women of all ages can easily connect in their devotional practices. Even though he is described as a male figure in ancient scriptures, one can worship him and his female counterpart Radha as a pair. Devotees worship the relationship between Krishna and Radha as a metaphor for their relationship with God. In doing so, devotees aim for a relationship with God containing all of the sweetness and longing found in relationships between lovers engaged in passionate affairs.

Though ancient Hindu texts emphasize distinct and rigid gender roles for men and women, modern Hinduism has adapted new or less strict rules, especially in Western communities such as New Vrindaban. Overall, it strives for equality in worship and community

life. Basic worship practices are virtually identical for men and women, and whether married or single at New Vrindaban, all are servants of Krishna. Even though men hold the majority of leadership roles at the New Vrindaban community, women show confidence and share their knowledge in sessions. Although there are no female *swamis* in the New Vrindaban community, well-known female swamis have served in and influenced the ISKCON movement. Women have the opportunity to act as *gurus*, or teachers, in the New Vrindaban community as well as Hindu temples in America. Our observations at the New Vrindaban community and our research of the Hare Krishna lifestyle show gender roles have evolved to have more equal responsibilities and to hold similar positions.

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Deity Worship and Worship Practices at New Vrindaban

Laura Bevington, Tylah Deal, Andrea Harless

Ohio University

## Introduction

Deity worship exists at New Vrindaban, a Hare Krishna community in West Virginia. It is one of the largest and most revered Hare Krishna communities in the United States. Over the years, it has become a popular pilgrimage site for religious followers from around the world. A deity in the Krishna movement is a reincarnation of Krishna that reflects a portion of his personalities. Deity worship is defined as the worship of Krishna and all his personalities in different forms such as statues. The scriptural justification for deity worship is that there are specifically outlined rules that devotees, persons that have devoted their lifestyles to the following of Krishna, follow that make the practice of worshiping deities legitimate. This is what sets deity worship apart from idol worship where one simply worships a tangible item without any definite reason that it encompasses their God according to Madhadananda, a New Vrindaban devotee. There are many different deities in the Sri Sri Radha Vrindabanchandra temple in New Vrindaban along with many worship practices that the devotees perform. These observations led us to question what each deity represented and why the devotees participated in these different worship practices. The Hare Krishna Movement is often classified as a branch of Hinduism. However, according to the Hare Krishna devotees Hinduism is not even a religion. The word Hindu is simply what the people of India were called by the inhabitants of the people across the Sindu River because they could not properly pronounce "Sindu." The alleged idea of Hinduism is that they have a polytheistic (belief in many gods) theology as opposed to the monotheistic (belief in one god) theology of the Hare Krishna tradition. In comparison to Christianity, a monotheistic religion, Hare Krishnas worship their Supreme, Krishna, as the Christians worships God. The deities in the Hare Krishna movement serve a similar purpose as Jesus Christ does in Christianity. This research paper will begin with an explanation of the

structure of the deities including a description of each god mentioned, followed by a thorough discussion of Krishna worship practices.

### **Hare Krishna Deity Hierarchal Structure at New Vrindaban**

The Hare Krishna Movement holds the belief that there is one God, Krishna. Krishna is the Supreme. The other deities who are acknowledged and highly revered are mere images of him. They are incarnations of Krishna that have returned to Earth to re-instill faith into the people. The incarnations serve a similar role as Jesus Christ serves to the Christian religion. Krishna has been reincarnated numerous times in order to reach out to the people during different time periods, each time with a different approach. The most memorable and impactful deities are the ones who are usually present in the Hare Krishna temples across the world. In addition to there being many different deities, there is also a classification system to help explain and categorize the deities. The deity hierarchal structure for the Hare Krishna movement goes as follows from top to bottom: Krishna, Vishnu-tattva, Shaskti-tattva and Jiva Tattva. Krishna is the supreme God (Madhanada, Personal Communication, October 27, 2010).

The aforementioned hierarchy is literally different categories of personalities of Krishna. Throughout time, Krishna comes to earth as reincarnations and each reincarnation possesses a different number of Krishna-like qualities that ultimately divides the deities into the different personality categories. The more qualities the reincarnations have the closer they are to Krishna. The first group of personalities is Vishnu-tattva, the primary expansion of God (Vishnu-tattva, 2010 ). The next group of personalities is Sakshi-tattva one that represents self. This category is a female version of Vishnu-tattva and represents the female deities, according to the devotees at New Vrindaban. Another devotee added that Sakshi-tattva is missing qualities that would make

her the supreme God. The Jiva Tattva is the final category which encompasses humans, animals, insects, plants and other living inanimate objects because they have flaws, desires and passions that do not accord to the teachings of Krishna. Other qualities of the Jiva Tattva include: Fears, growth, decay and the need to self defend (jainworld.com, 2010). The deities Krishna, Rudra and Jagannatha seen on the front altar in the Sri Sri Radha Vrindabanchandra temple in New Vrindaban all fall into the Vishnu-tattva category.

### **Krishna**

According Madhavananda, a New Vrindaban devotee, in order to be the “Supreme” one must have 84 empowering qualities and the only one that has all of these is Krishna. The figures that are worshiped throughout the Hare Krishna movement around the world differ depending on the selection of people that are following. The Krishna movement views Krishna as the supreme God. However, this is just one variation in other movements the followers may see a different god as Supreme. The Bhagavad Gita has several sections that have depicted Rama as the supreme God. There is also the association of Vishnu that claims him to be the God who enters or “pervades the universe” (Rodrigues, 2003). Krishna is considered an incarnation of Vishnu he is one from a series of eight incarnations. Hare Krishnas at New Vrindaban choose Krishna to be the supreme God because he is the one that rose above the other incarnations to obtain this position (Matchett, 2001). According to the devotees at New Vrindaban, the supreme God has qualities that empower him to the greatest possible standard.

Krishna, considered the avatar of all gods, is the central figure that is worshipped within the Bhagavad Gita (Pettinger, 2008). He is thought to be the “creator-redeemer God who creates a real world of souls and matters” (Gier). Krishna comes to earth to carry out his divine

mission (Nevatia, 2007). As announced in the opening section of the Bhagavad Gita, “Whenever, O descendant of Bharata, righteousness declines and unrighteousness prevails, I manifest Myself. For the protection of the righteous and the destruction of the wicked, and for the establishment of religion, I come into being from age to age.” This excerpt expresses the “divinity” of Krishna and also promises reincarnations of God in human forms (Pettinger, 2008). New Vrindaban views this passage as important because it directly states that Krishna is the Supreme that builds the foundation for the Hare Krishna movement.

### **Vishnu**

Vishnu is a personality of Krishna. He is the supreme and absolute truth and server of “God the original” (Charnell, 2010). Vishnu has 83 of Krishna’s 84 qualities; the only one he is missing is the quality of being Supreme. Vishnu, also known as the preserver, is “the cohesive force which holds life and matter together” (Gupta, 1974). He is representative of the Vishnu-tattva category of the Hare Krishna hierarchy. His presence is symbolic of the continuity of life. Vishnu is depicted in three different attitudes: Sleeping, sitting and standing with four arms extended. The Hare Krishna community in New Vrindaban has chosen to depict Vishnu as the latter, as have most other Hare Krishna temples. The four arms of Vishnu are representative of all life forms. A discus is held in the upper right hand, which is symbolic of the mind. In the upper left hand lies the lotus and bow. The lotus marks the moving of the universe and the bow signifies the power of illusion (Gupta, 1974). In the lower right hand, the conch is held. This shell represents the five elements which themselves are an expression of creativity (Gupta, 1974). The mace is held in the lower left hand representing individual existence (Gupta, 1974).



## **Shiva**

Shiva is highly respected by the New Vrindaban population because of how she came to Earth. Though she does not directly appear in the temple at New Vrindaban, she is still worshiped by temple goers for this reason. Shiva is also a personality of Krishna but because she has a lesser amount of Krishna like qualities she is most similar to Vishnu. Shiva, commonly known as the destroyer, is a deity in the Shiva-tattva sector of the Hare Krishna deity hierarchy. There would be no continual need for a creator if there wasn't a destroyer, which is why Shiva and Vishnu complement one another. As the destroyer, she is responsible for both positive and negative change. She symbolizes negative change through death and destruction, and positive change by destroying the ego and bad habits (Bhatnagar, 2010). Destruction allows for rebuilding in which Shiva creates pathways for new creation and illusions. Although the word destruction itself has a negative and chaotic connotation, The Preserver is directly associated with the inward path of the ascetic yogi, where one meditates so deeply that the mind actually stops and all connections to worldly things become nonexistent, the epitome of peace. Just as Vishnu is depicted in a multitude of ways so is Shiva, but her main attributes remain constant. She is depicted as either sitting on an actual tiger or tiger skin, which is representative of the mind. The presence of the snake represents her power and how it surpasses both poison and death.

## **Brahma**

As Shiva destructs, rebuilding is vital, and Brahma is the deity responsible for creation. Brahma belongs to the Jiva-tattva sector of the Krishna hierarchy. He has been given the power to create "beautiful material manifestation" by the Lord (Prabhupada, 1987). Although he is recognized as being the creator, he is no longer worshiped. According to legend, he was cursed

by Shiva after not being truthful about his advancement in a contest with Vishnu (Nagar, 1992). Despite the lack of worship, Brahma continues to be well revered. All beings, including deities, receive their power from he who is truly formless. He who creates, maintains, and destroys the world: Krishna (Prabhupada, 1987). Like Shiva, Brahma does not appear in the temple at New Vrindaban. However, because he is a reincarnation of Krishna the population of New Vrindaban respects his role as the creator.

### **Reincarnation and Deity Clarity**

The information above may seem to convey the belief that the Hare Krishna movement calls for the worship of many gods deeming them polytheistic, but this is false. All beings and deities receive their power from Krishna. Krishna is the Supreme, the Almighty, the one and only God. The other deities are simply images of his different personalities. They are all reincarnations of Krishna. A reincarnation is “the appearance of the same God, transcendental in time, space and culture in a form which lends meaning to contemporary thought and life” (Gupta, 1974). It is essentially a way to experience the Lord here and now, allowing one to experience all of his many dimensions separately with each deity, then collectively as Krishna.

### **Worship Practices**

Knowing the hierarchical structure of the deities is essential because one must know who the gods are in order to worship them. Worship is reverent honor and homage paid to a god or sacred personage. All religions have different forms of worship practices. Members of the Hare Krishna movement have practices that are specific to their beliefs. While much of the worship practices stay the same, depending on what service the deity highlights the mantra may change. At New Vrindaban, a typical temple service consists of honoring Krishna, Rudra and Jagannatha. However, a temple service at another Krishna temple may focus on different deities. The

number of deities a temple has depends on the amount of devotees and regular attending temple members that are able to properly care for the deities.

## **Chanting**

The central religious ritual of the Krishna practice is chanting. Each day devotees and members of the movement chant, “Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna, Krishna Krishna, Hare Hare, Hare Rama, Hare Rama, Rama Rama, Hare Hare.” This is known as the Maha Mantra. According to the New Vrindaban Morning Program, it is “The great mantra of deliverance for the age of Kali (the goddess that represents eternal energy), composed of all three auspicious names of God (Hare, Krsna, Rama)” (New Vrindaban Morning Program). Chanting, singing or meditating upon this is thought to bring a higher state of consciousness and is the most effective means of self-purification. This ritual is so important to the devotees that they are expected to chant the mantra for 16 rounds of a rosary of 108 beads (1,728 times) daily. In chapter nine text 14 of the Bhagavad Gita it states, “Always chanting My glories, endeavoring with great determination, bowing down before Me, these great souls perpetually worship Me with devotion” (Prahupada, 1972). These were characteristics of a mahatma which, according to the Merriam Webster dictionary, is “a person to be revered for high-mindedness, wisdom and selflessness” (Merriam-Webster 2010). A mahatma is equal to that of a Christian saint. According to the devotees, *maha* means great and *hatma* means soul. This person embodies an advanced spiritual being. There are specific characteristics of a “great soul” within the Bhagavad Gita. Devotees believe that the act of chanting will bring them daily self-purification which in turn will bring them closer to the status of mahatmas. Another reason that chanting is so important to devotees is because it brings them closer to Krishna and allows them to be surrounded in his love. In chapter 20 text 14 of the Sri Caitanya Caritamrta, written by

Prabhupada, it states, “The result of chanting is one that awakens his love for Krishna and tastes transcendental bliss. Ultimately, one attains the association of Krishna and engages His devotional service, as if immersing himself into a great ocean of love” (Prabhupada, 1972).

The Hare Krishnas are in love with Krishna. By chanting, they are brought closer to him. They usually will chant quietly because this is a personal meditation practice for them. However, they also will sing it loudly with others so that everyone can be surrounded by Krishna’s love. The New Vrindaban Morning Program states, “We chant the Hare Krsna mantra either softly to ourselves or musically in groups, and the transcendental vibration of the mantra gives all-auspicious spiritual benefit to those who chant and hear it” (New Vrindaban Morning Program).

Transcendental experiences, ones that bring someone beyond an ordinary experience, happen when someone is chanting or hearing the Maha Mantra. According to the devotees, a transcendental experience is one that enables someone to go beyond their self and do what is right. They explained the experience by saying that you are no longer performing your earthly duties in a materialistic way. When you are having a transcendental experience, you are concentrating on the Supreme and going beyond your physical boundaries. You are no longer materially motivated as one usually is on a daily basis. These experiences are necessary for developing complete psychological and spiritual fulfillment that is already in everyone (Bhaktivedanta Book Trust International, 2010). In Prabhupada’s commentary on the Bhagavad Gita, he states, “...we have practical experience that any person who is chanting the holy name of Krishna in course of time feels some transcendental pleasure and very quickly becomes purified of all material contamination” (AsItIs.com, 1972).

The overall practice of chanting is the most important ritual in a devotee's life. This is something that they devote themselves to doing. However, the combination of the transcendental experience and being surrounded by Krishna's love for them is something they love doing, sometimes even more than the expected 1,728 times each day.

## **Obeisance**

Another worship ritual that devotee's partake in is obeisances. This is when a devotee lays his or her entire body on the floor to acknowledge another's superiority. For devotees, obeisance translates to *namaste* or *namah*. Prabhupada wrote that "na" means "negation" and "ma" means "false ego." Therefore, offering obeisances chases away pride. The practice of an obeisance involves calling out a deity's name and then lying face down on the floor with your arms stretched out in front of you while offering a prayer to Prabhupada (Dasa, 2006). During an obeisance, one is giving their whole self to Krishna and honoring him, the deities and Prabhupada, who are superior to an average person. This is an act of humbling oneself. In chapter 11 text 37 of the Bhagavad Gita, it states, "O great one, even greater than Brahma, You are the original creator. Why then should they not offer their respectful obeisances unto You?" (Prahupada, 1972). The commentary on this states that by offering obeisances, Arjuna, a Hindu hero, indicates that Krishna is able to be worshipped by everyone. Arjuna enters Krishna's story when Krishna persuades him to go to war. During this discussion they shed light on courage, a warrior's duty, the nature of human life and the soul. He is addressing him as mahatma, which makes him generous and unlimited. Arjuna also says that Krishna is *anata*, which means there is nothing uncovered by the influence of him as the Supreme Lord. Finally, he states that he is *devesa*, meaning the controller of all the deities (Prahupada, 1972). This statement from Arjuna greatly affects the way that people begin to see Krishna, because he is a very influential hero in

the Hindu religion. It is then recognized that Krishna is an extraordinary person, who should be treated as one through obeisances.

### **Conclusion**

In reflection, the Hare Krishna Movement is a branch of Hinduism, with different variations and interpretations of the traditional Hindu beliefs and practices. It is a monotheistic religion that uses the existence of numerous deities as mere reflections of the different personalities of The Almighty, also known as Krishna. Within this sector of Hinduism, there are special worship practices. These worship practices are done each and every day and are meant to humble a follower and keep Krishna in their hearts. This research will shed light on the different reincarnations of Krishna and why the Hare Krishna devotees worship them the way they do. Through this research, one will better understand these practices that take place at New Vrindaban, and can see the deep sense of love their temple goers have for Krishna.

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Prasadam in the Context of New Vrindaban

Heather Farr, Jenna Garchar, Michael Lupsa

Ohio University



## Introduction

A basic necessity of life, food is one of the only constants found across all groups, societies and cultures. Religious groups take the role of food beyond fulfilling physical and emotional needs by including it into daily religious practices and rituals. For residents of New Vrindaban and followers of the Hare Krishna movement, the act of preparing and eating food is as much a religious act as it is a primal one. Through interviews and the dissection of holy texts in Vaishnavism, the goal of this paper is to better understand and analyze the practice of cooking, offering and receiving prasadam in the New Vrindaban community as well as its important role in a pluralist American society.

Vaishnavism is a branch of Hinduism in which the Lord Vishnu, or one of his incarnations, such as Krishna or Rama, is worshipped as the supreme God. Residents of New Vrindaban, a Vaishnavism community in West Virginia that was founded in 1968, strictly eat what the Vedas call *prasadam*, or “the Mercy of God.” Krishna insists that all food should first be offered to him in sacrifice; the food that remains after the offering is prasadam, or God’s holy leftovers. According to His Divine Grace AC Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, Founder-Acārya<sup>1</sup> of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, “the human being is meant for self-realization, and for that purpose he is not to eat anything that is not first offered to the Lord” (ISKCON-Bangalore, n.d.). Followers of Vaishnavism first offer food made for human consumption to God so that He can bless it. This symbolic gesture is called *naivedya*. Krishna does not actually eat and digest the food given, but it is “touched by his halo” so that the leftover food “is accessible to all devotees” (Moreno, 1992).

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<sup>1</sup> The word Acārya refers to someone who knows or teaches the rules of right conduct. The title ācārya is primarily applied to a Hindu teacher who invests the student with the sacrificial thread and instructs him in the Vedas and the religious law.

According to Anandavidya, an 11 year resident of New Vrindaban, the act of first offering the food to Krishna reminds devotees that Krishna is the enjoyer and they are the servants; servants may eat the same thing as Krishna, but only after it has first been offered to him (Anandavidya, personal communication, September 29, 2010). According to Shankarananda, a six year resident of New Vrindaban, by eating sanctified food, one purifies oneself, and only by purifying one's existence can he or she better understand God and subject matters pertaining to God (Shankarananda, personal communication, October 27, 2010).

During a study trip to New Vrindaban, students of Ohio University's Global Leadership Center had the opportunity to witness several stages of the Vaishna practice of cooking, offering and eating prasadam. Several students helped prepare the food in the kitchen, where they were asked to remove their shoes and the Maha Mantra played quietly in the background. Students took note of the many standards by which the devotees cooked. For example, cleanliness was a very important aspect of preparing prasadam and it was equally as important that the food being prepared was fresh. After the food was prepared and offered, all were invited to eat; at the end of the food distribution line, a smaller vessel held *mahaprasad*, or food that was directly offered to Krishna on the altar. Even though they were not devotees, all present were invited to share in the practice of receiving prasadam.

### **Common Standards**

Standards involved with cooking, offering and eating prasadam exist, but the extent to which a devotee follows the standards depends on each devotee's circumstances. Additionally, basic rules should be followed in a temple, such as in New Vrindaban, or wherever there is a form or picture of the Lord, but the differences lie in how extensively these standard procedures are performed. An idea held across the Hare Krishna movement is that food is not for enjoying or

for taste; followers of the movement do not “live to eat, they eat to live,” or they only eat because they must do so to stay alive (Kamagiri, personal communication, October 17, 2010). According to Kamagiri, a devotee cook at the Krishna House in Columbus, Ohio, devoted cooks must cook without tasting the food, because it must first be offered to Krishna, and they must not lust over the food that they are cooking. When devotees cook, cleanliness is also important because “Krishna likes everything first class” (Kamagiri, personal communication, October 17, 2010). Before preparing food, one is expected to have a clean mind and body. Most cooks will shower and put on clean clothes before cooking. Additionally, cooks are expected to never touch themselves while cooking, and if they touch anything other than the food, they must wash their hands.

Promptness is also an important aspect of cooking, especially in regards to cooking in a temple. In a temple such as the one in New Vrindaban, Krishna eats at a certain time every day and a certain number of times a day. Therefore, cooks must plan accordingly and have the meal finished before the time that the food is supposed to be offered. Additionally, a minimum number of “preparations” are expected at every meal. For example, Kamagiri might make a meal that contains a vegetable, a soup, rice, a savory, a pastry, a fruit or chutney, bread, salad and a drink. However, the standard is a minimum, so cooks can always make more preparations. Cooks are expected to prepare quality meals, as if “an important house guest is coming to eat” (Kamagiri, personal communication, October 17, 2010). For this reason, cooks, like Kamagiri, make foods that are “Krishna’s favorites,” and prepare the food elaborately for Krishna rather than for him or herself.

The practice of cooking food, offering *naivedya* and eating prasadam also serves as a means of meditation and is taken as seriously as prayer in the New Vrindaban Community.

Everything one does is to remind him or her of Lord Krishna and help him or her appreciate all that the Lord has given. Cooking is an accepted form of meditation because devotees keep Krishna in mind while they cook and because it is a way of serving Krishna. Devotees are expected to have a certain consciousness connected to their service. Followers believe that whatever it is one does in life, such as cook, he or she should “put everything into it” and do so willingly as an act of duty (Kamagiri, personal communication, October 17, 2010). This idea is expanded upon in the *Bhagavad Gita*, which says that for men who only find contentment in the self and who satisfy only the self, “there is found (in effect) no action to perform.” This reading continues by saying that—without being attached to an activity—one should act as a matter of duty to “attain the highest” (*Bhagavad Gita* 3: 17-19). Devotees consider the act of giving food to Krishna as a love offering and, therefore, are expected to give their best (Kamagiri, personal communication, October 17, 2010).

### **The Process of Offering Food to Krishna**

Since individuals in the community often meditate or worship in their own way—whether it be through chanting, dancing or other—the way in which individuals worship in regards to prasadam also varies. In service to Krishna, devotees can gather food, prepare food and offer food. The devotees who offer food to Krishna on temple altars follow a general set of principals; there is a long way and a short way to offer food on the altar, but there is a minimum number of steps that one should complete every time. As previously mentioned, food offerings must be done at the same time every day. Before a devotee can offer food, he must purify his hands, mouth and feet with Gangi water, or water from the River Ganga. In the *Bhagavad Gita*, Lord Krishna refers to the river when he says, “I am the wind of purifiers, Rama of warriors, I am the dolphin of water-monsters, of the rivers I am the Ganges” (*Bhagavad Gita* 10: 31). If no Gangi

water is available, it can be created by turning a Tulasi leaf with one's finger in a bowl of water while chanting. After the devotee is clean, he or she puts a tray of food on a purified table in front of the deity and surrounds the tray by dividers so that other devotees do not lust over the food. Some devotees place a pillow and a flower down next to the table and "invite Krishna to sit" (Kamagiri, personal communication, October 17, 2010). Devotees believe that Krishna's senses are interchangeable and he can eat the offering through his glance (Anandavidya, personal communication, September 29, 2010).

Many mantras can be said when offering food to Krishna. For example, if the cook was not "in the right mind" or was lustful while cooking, the devotee offering the *naivedya* may say a mantra for purification, or to apologize and "fix" the food (Kamagiri, personal communication, October 17, 2010). According to Kamagiri, standard prayers include offering respects to one's own guru, praying to Lord Caitanya and pledging obedience to Krishna. However, one can simply say the Maha Mantra, a common and basic Hare Krishna prayer, and ask Krishna to accept the food as long as he or she does so "with love and devotion in the heart" (Kamagiri, personal communication, October 17, 2010). Many disciples also bring a photo of his or her guru, ring a bell and light incense when offering prasadam. After waiting at least 15 minutes to "let Krishna eat," the disciple will come back, purify the table again, pay respects, remove the tray and clean the area. This entire religious performance "sanctifies the food and frees the person eating it from the karma involved in the collection and preparation of the ingredients" (New Vrindaban Community, 2010).

### **Dietary Restrictions**

The only food that can be offered to Krishna and, as a result, the only food that members of the community of New Vrindaban eat, is that of a vegetarian diet. Followers of the Hare

Krishna movement maintain a strictly vegetarian diet not because of its health benefits, but because it is what Krishna expects (Kamagiri, personal communication, October 17, 2020). First, the devotees believe that Krishna does not accept meat as an offering because in the *Bhagavad Gita* (9: 26) Krishna states “A leaf, a flower, a fruit, or water, who presents to Me with devotion, that offering of devotion I accept from the devout-souled (giver).” In the scriptures, Krishna makes no mention of accepting meat. Additionally, the practice of vegetarianism expresses two fundamental principals of Hare Krishna philosophy: non-violence and service to Krishna. Non-violence means “not to stop the progressive life, materially or spiritually, of any living being” (New Vrindaban Community, 2010). According to the community’s beliefs about karma and reincarnation, if an animal is killed before it has lived out its life, it has to be born again into the same type of body in order to complete that life cycle and be promoted upwards to the next species. It is for this reason that killing an animal is an act of both material and spiritual violence (New Vrindaban Community, 2010).

According to Harinam, a devotee who has lived in the New Vrindaban community for 26 years, followers of Vaishnavism recognize that plants are a living thing and that, therefore, by eating plants they are involved in an act of violence. According to the scriptures, if one kills another living thing, he or she must pay consequences for his or her actions. Since devotees must eat something to stay alive, however, Krishna says that they can eat plants and that they will be released from their sins by first offering the food to Krishna (Harinam, personal communication, October 27, 2010). Food is considered a love exchange between devotees and Krishna: They offer food to their Lord and he gives them back prasadam.

### Variations in Practices

According to Prabhupada, devotees should simplify practices to such a degree that anyone can do them. For example, someone who has just joined the movement would only do the basics when cooking or offering prasadam, like having a picture of his guru when he cooks, using clean pots and/or not tasting the food as he cooks. As long as one understands why he or she is doing it, one can simply do the basic steps until he or she decides that it is time to do more. For this reason, devotees use the *Bhagavad Gita* as a “handbook:” People understand and interpret the service in different ways and then practice according to how they interpret offering food. Most devotees have an understanding of the main goal and then they personally choose whether to do more or less. The most important thing is that devotees do not just worship blindly, but instead understand why they do certain worship practices like offering *naivedya* and receiving prasadam (Harinam, personal communication, October 27, 2010).

When it comes to mantras recited when offering food to Krishna, it depends on the individual. According to Shankarananda, this idea can be best described when looking at two extremes: a person who has little to no interest in God and an individual who is fully devoted to God. Individuals who have no interest in God are only asked to do the minimum so as to encourage them and make it easy for them. The Lord of all living entities sees one’s mood and inner intentions, so even if he or she does not say a mantra or cook something correctly, Krishna will accept it if the Lord is in one’s heart. Similarly, people who have disadvantages—they are not educated, they do not have the resources to prepare a large meal, they have children who occupy much of their time—are still accepted by Krishna if they keep him in their heart because Krishna understands that not all individuals have the resources to do the maximum.

When looking at the other extreme, one will find a completely devoted person who is so worried about eating something unacceptable that he only eats what he himself cooks because it is the only way he can be certain that his food is “good.” The fact that the “rules” are different for different people shows that there is always room for improvement and is meant to keep people in the movement. In other words, a very devoted person is told that he “must follow these rules” so that he does not get lazy while an uninterested person is told that he does not have to follow strict rules so that he does not get scared away by commitments. The same can be said for many ideas in Eastern theology (Shankarananda, personal communication, October 27, 2010).

In addition, offering food to Krishna in the home is often different from offering it in the temple. For example, the offering may not be on time because of a weekend vacation or there may not be time to offer seven times a day because of small children in the home. According to Madhavananda, who has lived in New Vrindaban for 26 years, whenever and wherever one gets food—as long as it is vegetarian—one can offer it in his or her mind, even by simply reciting the Maha Mantra. The most important thing is that the food be offered with love and devotion; one can offer Krishna food three to four times a day, but if it is not done with love and devotion, he will not accept it (Madhavananda, personal communication, October 27, 2010).

### **Prasadam as it Relates to Sacred Texts**

The core of Vaishnavism philosophy and the reasoning behind prasadam can be summarized in Krishna’s statement in the *Bhagavad Gita* (9:27): “Whatever thou doest, whatever thou eatest/ Whatever thou offerest in oblation or givest/ Whatever austerity thou performest, son of Kunti/ That do as an offering to Me.” Devotees believe that every part of their lives must be an offering to Krishna. They believe that every breath they take, even while sleeping, is an offering to Krishna because they are maintaining their bodies for service to Him.



Therefore, by offering food to Krishna and then eating it, they are keeping their bodies healthy and nourished to be able to serve and worship Him effectively (Sivarama, n.d).

Although Krishna has *naivedya* restrictions, he is not difficult to please. He is “generally perceived as an unambiguously benevolent deity, easy to please and worship, who likes the food, the songs and the love of his many devotees” (Moreno, 1992). Based on Krishna’s statements in the *Bhagavad Gita*, Vaishnavism devotees refrain from eating and giving Krishna meat as well as distasteful food, such as garlic, onions or mushrooms. The *Bhagavad Gita* divides food into three classes: Those of goodness, those of passion, and those of darkness. In the text, Krishna explains that the foods which are beloved to the man of goodness are “tasty, rich, substantial and heart-gladdening” (*Bhagavad Gita*, 17: 8). Devotees recognize these foods as milk products, fruits, vegetables and sweet, fatty foods (Dasa, n.d). Foods that are “pungent, sour, salty, very hot/sharp, astringent [and] heating” are the foods of men of passion and cause “pain, misery and sickness” (*Bhagavad Gita*, 17: 9). Onions, garlic and extremely spicy foods are excluded from devotees’ diets based on the lines in the *Bhagavad Gita*. Krishna goes on to say that foods that are beloved to the man of darkness are “spoiled, its taste lost/putrid and stale” (*Bhagavad Gita*, 17:10). Followers of Vaishnavism understand these foods of darkness as food that has been cooked hours before consumption and is no longer fresh. Meat, fish and mushrooms are also considered foods of darkness (Dasa, n.d). Based on the scriptures, devotees in the Hare Krishna movement only eat prasadam and offer food that is considered of the highest class. According to Madhupati, a six year resident of New Vrindaban, foods of darkness can promote a downward spiral into health and relationship problems and foods of passion can promote sexual promiscuity. Foods of goodness, however, “cool [one] off” and “promote a consciousness that is very inquisitive and relaxed” which allows “[one] to spring off to the transcendental platform”

where “[he] can start questioning life and [his] role in life” (Madhupati, personal communication, October 27, 2010).

Krishna also divides worship into the same three classes: Goodness, passion and darkness. Worship that is classified as goodness can be defined by devotees who offer food to Krishna “which is offered as contemplated by injunctions/with the thought that it is simply one’s duty to offer it” and with “the mind/ concentrating” (*Bhagavad Gita*, 17:11). Devotees must offer food to Krishna with love and devotion in their hearts. Otherwise he will not accept it. Devotees who offer *naivedya* to Krishna “for mere hypocritical ostentation” are those who worship with passion. The worship of darkness is where “no injunction is observed nor food given out/no holy texts recited nor sacrificial fee paid/ [and] devoid of faith” (*Bhagavad Gita*, 17:13). Devotees aspire to worship with goodness, which means recognizing the importance of giving *naivedya* and reciting words for Krishna.

The *Bhagavad Gita* (3:12-13) explains that the gods give gifts to humans, so it is necessary for humans to give gifts back to the gods as well. If devotees failed to give back to the gods, they would become “nothing but a thief”. The *Bhagavad Gita* (3:13) goes on to say “Good men who eat the remnants of (food offered in) worship/ Are freed from all sins/But those wicked men eat evil/Who cook for their own selfish sakes.” These lines explain why devotees in New Vrindaban eat only a prasadam diet. If they cooked for their own sake, they would be sinning. Devotees choose to eat a vegetarian prasadam diet to honor Krishna’s wishes and because God expects them to eat only prasadam. These lines also show the three-tiered approach to Prasadam: Exchange (food from God to devotees through nature), reciprocity (when devotees offer *naivedya* back to God) and redistribution (when devotees receive prasadam) (Rosen, 2004).

Prabhupada taught his disciples instructions on ways to live to better honor Krishna. He was passionate about the importance of *naivedya* and prasadam so he strived to pass his enthusiasm for devotion onto other devotees. According to Prabhupada, devotees should not discriminate and have likes and dislikes with prasadam because it means devotees are not appreciating the essence of prasadam. Prabhupada said Krishna consciousness is “to satisfy the senses of Krishna, not to satisfy my senses” (Prabhupada, 1983). He taught that Krishna can eat anything that is given with love and devotion, even if it is not materially tasteful, because Krishna “accepts only the devotion” not “food of this material world” (Prabhupada, 1983). Because of this, devotees should accept all prasadam if it is cooked sincerely. If a devotee does not like the taste of prasadam, Prabhupada said it is because he or she is “not [spiritually] elevated sufficiently” (Prabhupada, 1983). If prasadam is too spicy, for example, it is the fault of the cook not performing his duty correctly because he is offering food of passion (Prabhupada, 1983).

### **The Cultural Importance of Food**

The diverse religious landscape of the United States has provided its inhabitants with ample opportunities to experience the cultures of various world religions without leaving the country. Not only do Vaishnavism communities like New Vrindaban offer a location of worship and practice for Hindu immigrants and their descendants, but also they offer non-Hindu individuals the opportunity to partake in important aspects of Hare Krishna cultures, such as prasadam.

Observers of Vaishnavism and other Hindu religious sects who have visited India note that there are only slight differences between the practice and consumption of prasadam in India and the United States. However, the nature of prasadam is universal, so the differences are solely

a result of American culture and demographic (Madhavananda, Personal Communication, October 27, 2010). Regarding Indian culture, Anandavidya of New Vrindaban and Divyesh Patel of the Greater Cleveland Shiva Vishnu Hindu Temple said that prasadam is a major staple of the food culture in regions of India which they have visited. This is because prasadam is practiced in the majority of Hindu sects. It is estimated that approximately 30 percent of India's 1.1 billion inhabitants are vegetarian and thus are eligible for observing prasadam (*The Hindu*, 2006). Although the majority of the population is not vegetarian, millions of Indians live in parts of the country where vegetarian practices are rooted in the tradition of prasadam.

America's religious landscape hosts a wide array of religious communities which take part in food sanctification and observe certain rules with regard to the preparation and consumption of food. Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism are the five largest religions in the United States, all of which adhere to food regulations and/or sanctification rituals (Adherents, 2005).

In Christianity, food regulations vary based on specific denominations. Protestants, for example, observe very few rules concerning food and, in general, simply advise against gluttony (Advameg, 2010). However, in stricter denominations, such as Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy, restrictions on meat and fish are set in place during certain time periods of fasting (Advameg, 2010). Judaism has dietary regulations through its laws of Kashrut. This implies restrictions on certain animals, while those permitted must be koshered through the complete removal of blood (Rich, 2007). Vegetables must be free of any insects, and meat and dairy must never be mixed (Rich, 2007). Islam invokes similar traditions in its meat sanctification through the practice of Halal, which forbids the consumption of pork and details guidelines for slaughtering animals (Pak Butchers, N.D.). Many Buddhists, like followers of Vaishnavism,

advocate a vegetarian diet in order to reject violence (Advameg, 2010). Different food regulation and sanctification practices are practiced throughout the United States, and prasadam is another example of the importance of food in religion.

### **Prasadam in an American Context**

In the words of Madhavananda, “Prasadam is universal.” In New Vrindaban, where much of the food is grown locally, there are few challenges to observing prasadam. However, in the case of Anandavidya, who has spent the last 15 years traveling the U.S. distributing *Bhagavad Gitas*, observing prasadam may be a bit more challenging. When traveling, he does not have deities in a temple. Because of this, he has to offer his food to a portable deity; in the case of a professional meeting, he may have to silently offer his food as not to draw too much attention. Anandavidya’s experience exemplifies the slight challenges a devout follower of Vaishnavism may face living in America. Prasadam is universal in Vaishnavism, but its full observance is abbreviated in order to accommodate the busy and hectic culture of America.

### **Pluralism**

As defined by Diana L. Eck of the Harvard Pluralism project, “Pluralism is not just diversity alone, but the energetic engagement with diversity.” As New Vrindaban exists on the American landscape, its residents occasionally work to extend beyond the community’s borders to engage and share its practices with others in the United States. In the case of prasadam, this has been done through the *Krishna Food for Life* campaign. Stemming from the religious imperative of extending selfless love to all human beings, Vaishnavism followers who take part in the campaign cook and serve prasadam to both the needy and those who are not in need (Rosen, 113). In particular, New Vrindaban devotees have been engaged with serving students and the needy in the Pittsburgh metropolitan area (Madhupati, Personal Communication, 2010).

This fulfills many parts of the religion's food culture, such as avoiding animal exploitation by offering prasadam, helping the needy and serving God by offering his food to both him and his children (Rosen, 113). When New Vrindaban devotees branch out to surrounding areas to distribute prasadam, they are sharing and allowing others to engage in a very important part of the Hare Krishna culture. Historically, New Vrindaban has also held some very important interfaith conferences (Anandavidya, Personal Communication, October 13, 2010). Representatives of all faiths were present to discuss their own religions in comparison with the Hare Krishna movement. Naturally, prasadam was served to all attendees of this conference, indifferent of religious background.

### **Conclusion**

The receiving of prasadam from God's leftovers is not only between one devotee and Krishna, but is community-based too. Devotees believe that the gift of prasadam is so great that it must be shared with others. Based on the *Taittiriya Upanisad* text, devotees of Krishna believe that food should always be first given to guests before oneself. The text explains that if food is given to guests first, it will later come to the giver first. If the food is given out in the middle, it comes to the giver in the middle. If food is given out last to guests, it later comes to the giver last (Nikhilananda, n.d). The importance of community when sharing prasadam is also recognized in ancient Vedic scripture. The *Sam Veda* says in text 19 that "the giver of food protects one and all" and giving prasadam is considered "the noblest form of donation" (*Vedas*, n.d). The text explains that donating food blesses devotees. According to the scripture, if devotees do not offer food to others, or store more food than needed, God will destroy all food (*Vedas*, n.d).

According to Prabhupada, sharing prasadam with non-devotees is essential in creating a peaceful society because it converts non-believers into devotees. He said "when the people take

to eating only prasadam offered to the Deity, all the demons will be turned into *Vaishnavas*...It is then and then only that a peaceful condition can prevail in society” (Dasa, n.d). The belief in sharing prasadam was clearly prevalent in New Vrindaban. Because of the communal aspect of partaking in the preparation, offering and consumption of prasadam, residents of New Vrindaban naturally invite followers and non-followers alike to participate in one of the most basic, but essential, parts of their religion. Hare Krishna devotees offer food to God with love and devotion in their hearts through *naivedya*, and after receiving God’s holy leftovers through prasadam, they share that love and devotion with non-devotees through communal food. By offering prasadam to those who do not practice Vaishnavism, the devotees in New Vrindaban epitomize the essence of the Pluralism Project. Through researching the reasons, both personal and scripture-related, behind practicing this ritual, individuals can better understand and appreciate prasadam in the context of New Vrindaban and its importance in reaching the goal of pluralism in America.

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The Sanctity of the Cow in the Vaishnava Tradition and This Practice at New Vrindaban

Krista Liles, Melissa Papic & Bethany Scott

Ohio University

## Introduction

The Hare Krishna community, New Vrindaban, located in West Virginia exemplifies the belief in the sacredness of cows through several different methods: Intolerance for inhumane treatment including the slaughter or euthanizing of the cow, treating the cows affectionately, and revering the five sacred products of the cow (milk, curds, ghee butter, urine and dung) because of their healing, cleaning, and sustenance uses.

A few miles from the center of New Vrindaban, there is a cow sanctuary with approximately 20 cows that are able to roam on 165 acres. Balahabdra Das along with his wife Chayadevi started ISCOWP (The International Society for Cow Protection) in 1990. The mission of ISCOWP is to provide a safe haven for cows and use them for methods other than slaughter such as the training of oxen for farm use (Das, 2002).

While visiting New Vrindaban in September, 2010 the authors of this paper were able to visit the ISCOWP farm with Balabahdra Das. From their outside perspective it was clear that Balabahdra truly cared for the cows. The loving bond between Balahbadra and his cows was greater than a typical relationship between a master and his pet. His relationship with the cows was that of respect and honor; acting as a servant to Krishna's beloved animal. As he moved about the farm he would speak highly of the cows while greeting and praising each of them. Balahabdra explained the importance of treating the cows with affection, because it was a way to show his love for Krishna. According to Balahbadra Das, a cow that is treated with affection can produce milk for up to seven years, which is far greater than the usual, one to two year milk span of a cow that is abused.

These beliefs of the sacred cow stem from sacred Vedic literature and the *Bhagavad-Gita*. However, the sanctity of the cow is a belief that needs examination, because at first glance

the reasoning behind this virtue is not easily seen. Explanation of the sanctity of the cow will be revealed through scriptural foundation, the belief's place in Hindu tradition and how this belief is portrayed in the Hare Krishna (Vaishnava) tradition at New Vrindaban. The reverence of animals and the cow will also be further investigated in other major world religions to show the pluralism of this belief.

### **Scriptural Foundation**

#### **In the Vedas**

The sanctity of the cow is referenced in the ancient Hindu texts known as the Vedas. In the Vedas the cow was viewed both as the sacrifice (*yajna*) and as a symbol for worship. The cattle were used largely in the past as sacrificial victims to maintain order in the universe. "If the sacrifice ended, then cosmic order (*rita*) would fall out of balance and the universe would regress into a chaotic state" (Korom, 2000). The four legs of the cow are implanted at the four corners of the universe. The four directions of the Earth were covered by the cow and cow was seen as "complete and self contained"(Korom, 2000).

A creation myth from the Vedas refers to the cosmic waters, where everything originated. The cosmic waters were also seen as cows. Indra, a hero and Hindu personification of thunder and lightning, went to the waters to try to establish order. Indra was holding the cows, which were seen as chaotic water, captive in a cave. In the RgVeda (1.32.2.) the passage reads, "Like lowing kine in rapid flow descending, the waters glided downward to the ocean". The cows released from the cave were pregnant and gave birth to the sun. From this release of water or "cows", life was born: "The heavenly bodies are put into motion, and the deities as well as the demigods and human beings are given their own functions" (Korom, 2000). When the waters were released, the darkness disappeared and the dawn appeared. Indra placed the milk in the

udders of the cows, which aided in the creation of the Earth. The milk of the cow was referred to as *soma*, or the almighty blend. Once the milk was placed in the cows, all that was needed for the Earth was complete: the moisture from the breasts of the cows, the sun, and order for both humans and gods (Longanathan, 2003). All living beings depended on water and “because the cow is associated with its release, it too has taken on this holiness” (Korom, 2000).

The Atharva Veda is a collection of ancient Hindu hymns used in private rituals in situations such as sickness, marriage, the harvest and war (Cush, Robinson & York, 2008) This veda is the fourth and last veda; and it is next in significance and importance to the Rig Veda. The hymns contained in the Atharva Veda are more varied and less complicated in language than the other three Vedas (Das & Sadasivan 2010). In the Atharva Veda, the cow is referred to as being synonymous with Lord Vishnu, the main god in this Hindu religion. According to the passage of the Atharva Veda (10:30), “The Cow is Heaven, the Cow is Earth, The Cow is Vishnu, Lord of Life” (Griffith 1896).

The mother cow, Surabhi, according to Vedic legend was one the treasures that was churned from the cosmic ocean. The surabhi cow is said to have descended from the spiritual worlds and manifested herself in the heavenly spheres. Surabhi cows can be identified by their distinguished hump on the back and soft folds of skin on the cow’s neck. It is believed that all cows in the world today are direct descendants of the surabhi cows and thus cows are considered sacred (Das, 2005).

### **In the Mahabharata and the Bhagavad-Gita**

The *Mahabharata* is an epic poem about five royal brothers who ruled a large kingdom. The story revolves around the struggle of the brothers to get back the kingdom after the eldest brother gambled it away in a game of dice (Flesher, 2000). The battles that ensued were between

two sets of royal cousins: the Kauravas and the Pandavas. The mention of the sacred cow in the *Mahabharata* refers to the cow as a gift of the highest caliber and as a necessity in sacrifices.

The cow is mostly mentioned in book 13, section 76. Referring to the cow as a gift, Bhishma, a leader of the Kauravas and one of the great heroes of the *Mahabharata* says, “A cow, lawfully acquired, if given away immediately rescues the whole race of the giver.” This section also states “The cow is my mother. The bull is my sire.... The cow is my refuge.” This plainly shows how the cow is at least symbolic of a mother of the earth, and through the gift of a cow, one can show the greatest respect and esteem for another.

Concerning sacrifice the *Mahabharata* says, “Cows represent sacrifice. Without them, there can be no sacrifice... cows are guileless in their behavior and from them flows sacrifices... and milk and curds and butter. Hence cows are sacred,” (Das, 2010). And although this is referring to the sacrifice of the cow, it could be referring to the milk and other products of the cow, which were often used to prepare the fire during sacrificial ceremony. Even if this is referring to the actual sacrifice of the cow, it is still a sign of reverence because of the high value placed on the sacrifice of the animal during Vedic times.

The *Bhagavad-Gita* is an episode in the sixth book of the *Mahabharata*. This portion of the *Mahabharata* is in itself regarded as one of the most holy books in the Hindu and Vaishnava tradition and follows a conversation between Krishna and Arjuna, one of the Pandavas cousins fighting for his kingdom. The *Bhagavad-Gita* refers to the sanctity of the cow in two separate passages.

The first of these references is in the 10th chapter, 28th verse and states, “The Lord is engaged in herding these Surabhi cows.” According to Swami Prabhupada in *Bhagavad-Gita As It Is*, Lord Krishna was involved with the herding of the Surabhi cows in the spiritual world. The

second passage is in the 18th chapter, 44th verse and says “Farming, cow protection, and business are the qualities of work for the *vaisyas* and for the *sudras* there is labor and service to others.” The *vaisyas* were the social group described in the Rg Veda, whose *dharma* was working with agriculture and trade. This passage is meant to show that working to protect cows is an aspect of *dharma*, or religious duty, that one is expected to perform by supporting the sanctity of the cow.

### **In the Bhagavata Purana**

In 300 A.D., the *Bhagavata Purana*, which is one of numerous Hindu sacred texts known as the *Puranas* was recorded into written word. The *Bhagavata Purana* is ancient Hindu folklore compiled into 12 books, which focus on devotion (*bhakti*) to incarnations of Vishnu, particularly Krishna and his personal interactions (*lila*) with his devotees (Arya & Day, 2003). Its importance is obtained through its stories, which are composed of tales from Krishna’s childhood and adolescent years. The tenth book of this particular *Purana* begins by describing the events, which led to Krishna’s earthly birth, and it is in this folklore that one first sees Krishna’s love for cows. Queen Pavanarekha was deceived by a demon who took the form of her husband and proceeded to enjoy her. Ten months later Kansa, a demon-child, was born. As a young-man he killed his father (King Ugrusena), assumed his power, and shortly thereafter banned the worship of Vishnu (Archer, nd).

The Earth appealed to Brahma in the form of a cow, to vanquish Kansa as his crimes increased and more and more land was destroyed. In response, Brahma sent requests that Vishnu the Preserver go to Earth in the transcendent form of Krishna. Krishna was born of Devaki and Vesadeva, the richest cow herder in Gokula. However, to keep Kansa from killing Krishna at birth he was transferred to the home of his foster-mother Rohini, another cowherdress. As a

child the divine Krishna was mischievous, often using his powers to get out of trouble with his foster-mother. The young Krishna spent much of his time gathering household furniture, which he would stack, and then he would climb up to reach cream that his foster-mother hung from the ceiling. He did this for most of his childhood, until in adolescence he assumed his duty as a cow herder. As Krishna grew he conquered many demons in hopes to rid Earth of all evil (Singer, 1966). Learning the ways of the cowherdresses, Krishna began spending time in the pastures, where he would feed the cows. The cowherdresses (*gopis*) began falling in-love with Krishna as he became more handsome and charming. He played pranks on the *gopis* and he played the flute for them as they danced in the forest. As time went by Krishna gained the respect of the cowherds and the love of the *gopis*. Then came the time for him to rid Earth of Kansa, the tyrant. He defeated Kansa and his followers through fighting them in a wrestling arena. At the end of the match Krishna dethroned and killed Kansa, then dragged his body to the river Jumna. This marked the end of the tale, where all of Earth's demons were destroyed (Prabhupada, 1996).

Although the cows played a minor role in this tale, the cows provided Krishna with what he loved most as a child, cream. "The aspect of the sacred cow first grasped here is not its role of divine assimilator but that of producer of cream, the rich, enjoyable delight of the Lord" (Gold, 1987). This story also explains how Krishna first gained devotees, with the *gopis* who loved him and the cow herders who admired and respected him. Scholars believe that the behaviors of worship to Krishna have been translated into the idea of a many-sided sacred cow. This involves not only the animal, but also the ideals of helping those who care for the cow, those who revere its products, and those who offer its milk to Brahma or gurus (Gold, 1987).

### **As a Hindu Belief**

A recent phenomenon in Hinduism is the apex of the spiritual status of the cow that is seen today. Symbolically it is unifying politically and spiritually, as well as representational of prosperity and revered as economically exemplary. The behaviors associated with the sanctity of the cow in Hinduism, especially demonstrated in India, began during the Vedic period with the cow being the most valued sacrifice. This leads to today's ritualistic use of the five products of the cow and the purity believed to be achieved through using these products.

In India, Mahatma Gandhi was a well-known pioneer of the independence movement, and is known for conducting this nonviolently. Gandhi cemented the sacred cow as a symbol, which remains in the Hindu tradition today, by strongly supporting the protection of the cow. For example he once said,

One can measure the greatness of a nation and its moral progress by the way it treats its animals. Cow protection to me is not mere protection of the cow. It means protection of all that lives [that are] helpless and weak in the world. The cow means the entire subhuman world. (Patel, 2007)

This quote is an example of how Gandhi was able to use the cow as a uniting symbol, bringing the Hindu people of India together during a turbulent time. In 1947, when British colonialism ended in India, the cow could represent a distinction of India away from the former “meat eating” colonizers (Balaji, 1998).

Beyond uniting the people of India politically, Mahatma Gandhi was also able to unite them religiously. For example he once said, “if anyone were to ask me what the most important outward manifestation of Hinduism was, I would suggest that it was the idea of cow protection,” (Kaufman, 2004). This is an example of how the cow is used as a spiritually unifying element. In a religion such as Hinduism, where many liberties are taken by the individual to choose beliefs and practices, the sanctity of the cow remains one element of Hinduism that is widespread and universally accepted. This makes the reverence of the holy cow a common ground for



worship, and unites those of the Hindu tradition. William Crooke stated reverence for the cow is “the most powerful link which binds together the chaotic complex of beliefs which we designate as Hinduism” (Korom, 2000). The cow is also unifying through the five products she produces being a tangible faith tool, allowing people of all “sociocosmic” or *dharma* levels to utilize the cow as a source of spirituality (Korom, 2000).

The five products of the cow are also one element that designate the cow as economically valuable. Even during the Vedic period, when the sanctity of the cow was still in development, the cow was of high economic value, and was at the center of sacrifice and used in offering (Sanctity, 2010). The products of the cow, Milk, ghee butter, curds, urine and dung, are used in many rituals and during Vedic times were the first essential requirement of sacrifice, which involved pouring milk and ghee on the sacrificial fire (Biardeau, 1993). In Hindu mythology a cow symbolizing prosperity, named Kamadhenu (or Kamaduh) also exists, “from whom all that is desired is drawn” (Biardeau, 1993). Starting in the early centuries AD and through even today, the gift of a cow, especially to a Brahman, is thought to be very pious and valued, because it is more than giving respect to the Brahman, it is also showing respect for the larger “sociocosmic” order, *dharma*. Alternatively, killing of the cow during the early centuries AD was viewed as killing a Brahman, and further reinforced the tenant of cow protection (ReligionFacts, 2010).

Besides being economically valuable, the five products of the cow are used because of their purity in a religious right. This is because the products of the mother cow are said to be products of deities, through the in-habitation of deities in cows. In fact, Deryck Lodrick, a scholar who researched the implications of cow sanctuaries (*goshalas*) in modern India said, “[there are said to be] 330 million gods resid[ing] in every atom of the cow” (Lodrick, 1981).

Some examples of the uses of these products and their purifying qualities are: Using diluted cow dung mixture as a cleaning agent for homes and places of worship, applying burnt cow dung ash to anoint the face and body with its purity, and the consumption of cow urine as a cure for removing tumors or as a tonic to drive out bad spirits (Korom, 2000). A mixture of all five (*pancagavya*) is considered to be the most pure substance concerning the products. This belief is shared in the Hare Krishna Movement, with *pancagavya* believed to have miraculous healing powers and the ability to balance the three ailments (*dosas*) of the body: bile, air, and mucus (*pitta, vata, kapha*) (Bhaktivandata, 2009).

A final manifestation of the belief of the sacred cow in Hinduism would be the *goshala*, which is a place for protection and preservation of the cow. Reasons for protecting the cow binds all of the beliefs concerning the sanctity of the cow previously discussed. These places are often seen as a religious holy site, and pilgrimages sometimes occur (Lodrick, 1981). Protection of the cow is seen not only through institutions such as a *goshala*, but also in the laws of India, which prohibits killing a cow in all but three geographic areas (Balaji, 1998). Currently the right-wing political party is proclaiming a campaign, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to harden laws against the killing of the cow and to make the laws more wide spread. The law would decree the punishment for killing this sacred animal as a prison sentence of up to seven years and a fine of 50,000 rupees (1,000 USD) (Nair, 2010).

These examples of Hindu practices reflect the strong belief in the mother cow is a uniting symbol politically and spiritually, as well as a strong economic asset. The products of the cow have their purifying quality, and all of these demonstrations of the belief lead up to a strong determination to ensure the protection of the sacred cow. The history preceding the cow in the Hindu tradition shaped this sacred animal into the highly revered representation that it has today.

### **In Vaishnavism**

Within the Vaishnava scripture, The *Bhagavad-Gita*, Lord Krishna is portrayed as a wise, powerful being. “This elder Krishna is [very ancient], and associated with certain other personages; he is always the son of Devaki and Vasudeva, and the younger brother of Balarama, the slayer of Kansa, Daityas and Demons of every kind” (White, 1970). The folklore from the *Bhagavata Purana* of Krishna as a child growing up with the Gokula cowherds is popular with the Vaishnavites. Followers understand that cows were very dear to Krishna and hope that through helping the animal they will receive benefits from the Lord (Reddy, 2009). Some believe that the sanctity of the cow stems solely from Lord Krishna when he appeared thousands of years ago as a cowherd. He has been described as the child who protected the cows (*bala-gopala*). In addition to this, Krishna's other holy name, *Govinda*, translates to "one who brings satisfaction to the cows" (Kaufman, 2004).

### **Within New Vrindaban**

In the Vaishnava Community, New Vrindaban, the cow is believed to be one of the seven mothers of the Earth and is a pinnacle part of their belief system. Due to this, the cow is not an animal to the Vaishnavites, but rather a mother, and consequently receives human and affectionate treatment throughout its life. The Vedic scriptures guide the Vaishnavites in their beliefs and efforts to continue to revere the cow, which in turn maintains a sense of stability and harmony throughout the community because the cow is believed to maintain balance in the universe.

In an interview with Harinam Dasi, a New Vrindaban devotee, she stated that she and her fellow Vaishnavites admire the cow for how much it offers without asking for much in return. Having owned a cow herself, Dasi recalls only needing to keep the cow well fed and its

environment clean in order for it to produce an abundant amount of milk. She would use much of the milk to make ghee, which she relied on for cooking. The cow's dung did not go to waste either, as it was used in her garden as a natural fertilizer. Dasi also talked of Govardhana Puja, a Vaishnava festival that honors the cow (Dasi, 2010).

The celebration of Govardhana Puja takes place after Diwali, which is a major Hindu and Vaishnava tradition called the festival of lights usually taking place in October or November. This tradition comes from the following legend: Krishna asked the cow herding people of Mathura to worship him instead of the rain God, Indra. When the people complied with Krishna's wishes, Indra became angry and sent terrible rainstorms upon them for seven days. Krishna then saved the people by picking up the mountain Govardhan with his little finger to shield the people and their cows from the torrential rains (Cush et al., 2008). To commemorate this legend, a Vaishnava tradition exists in which an opulent feast which was prepared to be offered, especially at a temple in Mathura, and often a mountain of cow dung is made to represent Govardhan. This mountain is then covered with flowers, worshipped and prayed around (Gautam, 2010). At New Vrindaban, the figure of Krishna holding up Govardhan was constructed out of cow dung, not the mountain, with decorations adorning the temple. This tradition shows how the products of the cow are again very important in rituals and traditions of Krishna Consciousness, with the cow dung being used to represent such a significant element of the legend.

### **Reverence of animals in other religions**

The reverence of bovine is a central belief to the Hindu faith; however there are other religions such as Christianity, Judaism and African tribal traditions that also revere animals and

scripturally justify the proper treatment and respect that should be given to animals, in particular the cow.

### **In Christianity and Judaism**

In the Old Testament of the Bible, which is a holy text for Christianity and Judaism (in which this text is called the Torah), makes many references to the respectful treatment of animals, and in some cases specifically the cow. Many of these references are considered covenants sent to Moses are found in the books of Leviticus, Exodus and Deuteronomy. The passages focus on topics such as animal sacrifice and concern for animal well-being.

Animal sacrifice was first mentioned in Genesis 15:9-17, with the cow being one of the first five animals to be sacrificed to God. This sacrifice of the cow could show great respect and worth, because it could be said that the animals are being similarly equated to the sacrifice of human life (Hiers, 1998). Also, referring specifically to cattle and oxen, a covenant in Leviticus 22:28 states that the mother cow and its young are not to be killed on the same day, which places an emphasis on having care and concern for the animals. Although, they may be killed or sacrificed.

Alternately the Old Testament states laws that pertain to the well-being of animals. A passage in Exodus 23:4 states, "If you meet your enemy's ox or his donkey wandering away, you shall surely return it to him," which can be thought of showing concern for the well-being of the cow, by commanding people to assist the ox in times of need. Deuteronomy 25:4 also states that an ox is not to be muzzled when he is threshing grain, because "it would be cruel to deny the ox food when he has it all around him" (Hiers, 1998).

A final passage in the Bible the mentions the cow in Isaiah 66:3, “But he who kills an ox is like one who slays a man;” which is a very interesting verse when relating it to the beliefs of Hinduism and Vaishnavism, as they believe that killing a cow would be like killing a mother.

### **In African-tribal Tradition**

Four African tribes the Dinka, Shilluk, Nuer, and Bari have the most fully developed worship of the bull. Such tribes as these depend directly on the state of their herds. The Dinka tribe in particular is the most protective of their cattle. They believe them to be flawless and regal, and thus are never slaughtered. Reverence of the bull is done under the Dinka name of Madyok meaning "the great God." One ceremony, Congo, is performed for the animal and can last for several days. This special worship consists of singing, music, and dancing. If the bull responds to the celebration with a bellow, the tribe believes that it is a sign that the animal is pleased, and they will continue the ritual. For these tribes the loss of a bull is the worst possible tragedy (The Royal African Society, 1906).

### **Conclusion**

The love for the cow that devotees at New Vrindaban demonstrate is a physical manifestation of their love for Krishna. By treating the cow with respect, admiration and love those living at New Vrindaban feel that they are directly showing their respect, admiration and love for Krishna. The other practices and rituals of their faith may not directly show the love for their bovine companions, but the rituals and practices often have subtle ties to them. Whether it is the practice of nonviolence or respecting the land, these devotees know that it all stems from the mother cow. The cow is a mother and a central part of the Vaishnava religion. Devotees at the Hare Krishna Community, New Vrindaban revere the cow in order to maintain peace and balance in the in the universe. The cow is one of the seven mothers of the earth synonymous with

the creation of life itself. To hurt the cow brings violence and corruption to the world thus disrupting the balance of the world. Furthermore, the Vaishnavas at New Vrindaban sincerely praise the cow through its five products, Krishna folklore, and the special worship of Govardhana Puja. In other religions around the world, be it through Hinduism, Christianity, Judaism or tribal traditions in Africa, the animal is still widely revered and loved through their unique beliefs and practices.

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