

# Circumambulation of the Divine Realm of Vraja

*The following is an extract from an article of the same title in the Harmonist 29.7.193–98 (January 1932).*

The whole attention of the pilgrim has to be given not to the landscape nor to any shrine or figures. It is least of all necessary for him to attend to the activities of himself. It is imperative to turn his attention to the minutest doings and sayings of the *sādhu* under whose direction he has chosen to perform the devotional journey. If he goes on indulging his own fancies and viewing with his own eyes the entities on the spiritual plane he may, indeed, succeed in deluding himself but he will assuredly miss the only legitimate object of his pilgrimage. If he attends and lives up to the instructions of his spiritual guide and does not allow himself to be directed by any other consideration, he will automatically find himself on the plane of *arcana* in course of the performance of his spiritual journey, by the unsolicited and causeless grace of the *sad-guru* (bona fide spiritual guide).

The very first principle, therefore, which all intending circumambulators should accept in their heart of hearts, is to attend fully to the instructions of the bona fide guide and prefer following them to every other occupation. If he tries to do so he will find that the bona fide guide will put him to activities which may be neither such as are to his liking nor what he had previously arranged for. The *sad-guru* will upset all his pre-arranged plans. The pilgrim is not expected to be allowed to guide himself in any way. It is the nature of the conditioned soul to be tempted to assume his own guidance however much he may profess to be guided by another.

It is not the journey but the method of its performance that really matters. Any journey that is performed under the lead of the *sādhu* is a spiritual function. No journey that is not so performed can have any spiritual value. The circumambulation of Śrī Vraja-maṇḍala has the further advantage of spiritual associations which are of great help to the novice on the path of spiritual endeavor. The novice is in a position on such occasions to be put in mind by the *sādhu* that he is never to attend to the scene at all, because what he will see if he does so is not the thing which he should see, but something else, the sight of which will be obstructive of the real function for which he is out on his pilgrimage. The *sādhu* himself will see everything very carefully and minutely, but he will never encourage the novice to any function of the kind. If the novice submits to be so thwarted at almost every step and is prepared to do whatever the *sādhu* tells him to do with loyal faith, he will have gained the real object of his pilgrimage.

## (2)

*In 1932, two consecutive issues of the Harmonist ran the articles “Circumambulation of the Divine Realm of Vraja” and “Circumambulation of Śrī Navadvīpa-dhāma” respectively, each explaining the proper attitude for undertaking parikramā of the dhāmas and stressing the importance of visiting the dhāma with an advanced devotee and constantly hearing from him.\**

***And in Oct-Nov 1932, Śrīla Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī Ṭhākura took a party of devotees on Vraja-maṇḍala Parikramā.***

Śrīla Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī Ṭhākura personally led the group of pilgrims on the 168-mile route. Although such devotional expeditions were regularly conducted by other sects, particularly the Vallabha *sampradāya*, the Gauḍīya Maṭha Parikramā was one of the biggest ever seen in Vṛndāvana. Everything was done in a grand way. The devotees walked in procession headed by the deity of Lord Caitanya carried atop an elephant named Kīrtana dāsa, accompanied by a caparisoned horse and a police band. Along the way, six camels were purchased to help carry loads. Also present were two of the Gauḍīya Maṭha cars sent from Calcutta by train. As they walked numerous pilgrims carried flags and all chanted in *kīrtana*. For the convenience of pilgrims from different provinces, lectures and guidance were given in various languages.

Each evening a small township of almost a hundred large tents was arranged in a semicircle and each group of pilgrims was assigned to a specific section for the night. In the center were tents for the deity, Śrīla Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī Ṭhākura, his *sannyāsīs*, and other leading devotees. Evening halts were not merely for resting, but for *kīrtana*, *hari-kathā*, cooking, and finally honoring of *mahā-prasāda*. Certain wealthy devotees sponsored feasts on different days. Dozens of gaslights and campfires made a pretty scene, yet pragmatism demanded that even in this superlatively sacred place, guards be posted to stave off the dacoits known to infest the locality.

Śrīla Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī Ṭhākura made concessions for the several participants on the *parikramā* who were not committed devotees. For instance, although it is enjoined that *parikramā* be performed barefoot, because the paths of Vraja-maṇḍala were full of thorns Śrīla Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī Ṭhākura allowed the use of rubber-bottomed canvas shoes. And tea-drinking was permitted for those thus habituated. Yet he forbade participants from taking fruit or flowers from the trees, or twigs to be used as toothbrushes, explaining, “Everything in Vraja is meant for Kṛṣṇa’s enjoyment. The trees are *ṛṣis* and *munis*. Do not disturb them.” He reprimanded some *brahmacārīs* after being informed that they had broken off twigs at Rāsa-sthalī to use as toothbrushes.\*

Each day Śrīla Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī Ṭhākura had one of the noted *kīrtanīyās* among his disciples lead Śrīla Bhaktivinoda Ṭhākura’s song beginning *rādhā-kuṇḍa-taṭa kuñja-kuṭīra*, which lists diverse sights and sensations of Vṛndāvana that are *uddīpanas* for love of Kṛṣṇa. And throughout each day he profusely distributed *hari-kathā*.

At that time Vraja-maṇḍala, like almost all of rural India, was materially undeveloped. There were no proper roads, only dirt tracks, and cars were rarely seen. As the party wended through the tranquil pastoral surroundings, Śrīla Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī Ṭhākura described the most important of the innumerable places of *kṛṣṇa-līlā* and revealed their significance to the accompanying devotees. Śrī Vinoda Bihārī Brahmacārī and others would patrol on horseback, keeping the participants in order and coordinating all necessary arrangements.

Both at halts and along the way, *vraja-vāsīs*, including many learned *paṇḍitas* residing in Vraja-maṇḍala, flocked to see and hear from Śrīla Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī Ṭhākura. He spoke with *paṇḍitas* in Sanskrit, common folk in Hindi, and local children in very simple Hindi. Parikramā participants were gratified by the ingenuousness and hospitality of the earthy Vraja village folk in extending their cordiality toward visiting pilgrims. Śrīla Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī Ṭhākura reciprocated by arranging for three to five trucks - full of varieties of sweets and other *mahā-prasāda* items to be distributed daily to *vraja-vāsīs*. Baskets full of tomatoes, long white radishes, guavas, and other fruit and vegetables were carried from village to village, and Śrīla Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī Ṭhākura personally distributed *mahā-prasāda* to all, both young and old. He especially liked to feed *vraja-vāsī* children. But if his disciples stretched out their hands to receive *mahā-prasāda*, he would say, “No, this is not for you.”

During the *parikramā*, early one morning in Mathurā, Śrīla Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī Ṭhākura started speaking to his disciples, beginning by telling them of a saying of his Gurudeva’s that still rang in his ears: “Śrīmatī Rādhārāṇī is *kāṅgālinīra ṭhākurāṇī* (the mistress of the poor).” He further explained that Śrīmatī Rādhārāṇī is Herself the embodiment of guileless freedom from any desire other than to serve Kṛṣṇa and can be attained only by persons possessed of the same selflessness; anyone who thinks himself the owner of anything cannot have Rādhā.

After delivering this impromptu *hari-kathā*, Śrīla Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī Ṭhākura suddenly said, “Now Kṛṣṇa is taking the cows to the forest. So come — we’ll also go!” Accompanied by a group of devotees, he set off for Vṛndāvana.

When approaching Govardhana Hill, participants were warned not to take any *śilās* from there. Then while they were circumambulating, sudden violent wind and rain threw the pilgrims into chaos. The accompanying *pāṇḍā* declared that someone must have made a serious mistake. And Śrīla Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī Ṭhākura asked if anyone had taken a *śilā*. A member of the group admitted to having done so, and then replaced the *śilā*, after which the storm immediately ceased.

At Rādhā-kuṇḍa, Śrīla Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī Ṭhākura lectured before an audience of five hundred. The adjacent rooftops were packed with people straining to hear, and in the crowd below there was no space even for standing. At one point in this lecture he began speaking animatedly on Rādhā-tattva, then suddenly stopped — silent — overwhelmed with ecstasy. After about ten minutes his emotions subsided and he continued speaking.

During this visit, the Gauḍīya Maṭha party fed almost 250 Vaiṣṇavas with delicacies like *ladḍu*, *peḍā*, and *kacaurīs* brought from the town of Vṛndāvana in two cars. And Śrīla Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī Ṭhākura expressed a desire to construct a major Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa temple there, with eight temples for the *aṣṭa-sakhīs*, the eight principal *gopī* assistants of Śrīmatī Rādhārāṇī.

*Although this first Vraja-maṇḍala Parikramā proved highly successful — despite many challenges — it was the last to be conducted under the shelter and guidance of Śrīla Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī Ṭhākura.*