

Understanding *Vraja-vāsa* and *Vraja-vāśīs*

Śrī Caitanya Mahāprabhu and His followers adored the land of Vṛndāvana and its vicinity as the highest *līlā-bhūmi* (place of pastimes) of Lord Śrī Kṛṣṇa, being a non-different manifestation of Goloka Vṛndāvana, the vertex of the spiritual universes. Śrī Caitanya Mahāprabhu declared that to reside in Vṛndāvana is a principal constituent of *bhakti*, and in *Mathurā-māhātmya* Śrīla Rūpa Gosvāmī ascertained that to quit one's body in Vraja-maṇḍala guarantees entrance into and eternal life in Goloka Vṛndāvana.

Accordingly, many persons came to live in Vṛndāvana, which was studded with innumerable temples and *āśramas*. Yet Śrīla Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī Ṭhākura pointed out that various nondevotees had also settled in Vṛndāvana, many for solving their economic problems by becoming beggars. He did not recognize them as genuine *vraja-vāśīs*—but as intruders like Agha, Baka, and Pūtanā—those who entered Vṛndāvana with a deceptive attitude and harbored in their hearts a most malicious spirit of envy toward Kṛṣṇa. He stated that although anyone living in Vṛndāvana is benefited one way or another, the real Vṛndāvana is appreciated only by a pure devotee:

***Vraja* means “to walk.” Anyone always walking the path of satisfying Kṛṣṇa is a *vraja-vāśī*.¹**

***Vraja-vāśīs* are all *nitya-siddhas*, are free from illusion, are followers of the principles of Vaiṣṇavism, are simple, and are sincere friends to Vaiṣṇavas.²**

To instruct materialistic persons, Śrī Caitanya Mahāprabhu visited Vṛndāvana and took *darśana* of the pastime places therein. Forgetting this, conditioned souls accept Vṛndāvana as their field of enjoyment within the material world and thus rebel against Śrī Mahāprabhu and His teachings. The manner in which *prākṛta-sahajiyās* conceive of the *dhāma* and proclaim themselves *vraja-vāśīs* or *dhāma-vāśīs* is actually quite different from factual spiritual residence in Vṛndāvana, for by taking it as a place for their sense gratification they make their residence in the material world and increase their material disturbances. This is not the attitude of pure devotees. Even though Śrī Svarūpa Dāmodara is an eternal *vraja-vāśī*, from accounts of his activities it is not heard that he ever visited Bhauma-Vṛndāvana (Vṛndāvana manifested on this plane). Similarly, there are no authorized documents stating that exalted personalities such as Śrī Puṇḍarīka Vidyānidhi, Śrī Haridāsa Ṭhākura, Śrī Śrīvāsa Pandita, Śrī Śivānanda Sena, Śrī Rāmānanda Rāya, Śrī Śikhi Māhitī, Śrī Mādhavī-devī, and Śrī Gadādhara Paṇḍita Gosvāmī ever visited Vṛndāvana *dhāma*.

Notwithstanding, popular opinion is that many persons devoid of *śuddha-bhakti*—*prākṛta-sahajiyās*, *karmīs*, *jñānīs*, and others with intentions separate from service to Kṛṣṇa—also visit, see, and reside in Bhauma-Vṛndāvana. Such *vraja-vāsa* may bestow upon persons devoid of *bhakti* the fruits of going to *svarga*, of *mukti*, or

those fruits attained through renunciation of both sin and piety. But proper and true transcendental *vrndāvana-vāsa* is attained by those possessed of spotless spiritual vision, according to the stanza *premāñjana-cchurita-bhakti-vilocanena*.³

In the next period [i.e., after Lord Caitanya's disappearance], Śrīla Narottama dāsa Ṭhākura in Kheturī and Śrīnivāsa Ācārya in Jājigrāma, and after that Śrīla Jagannātha dāsa Bābājī in Gauḍa-deśa, Śrī Bhagavān dāsa Bābājī in Kālnā, Śrīla Gaura Kiśora dāsa Bābājī in Navadvīpa-*dhāma*, and Śrīla Bhaktivinoda Ṭhākura in Calcutta, were solely devoted to Śrī-nāma and certainly did not live anywhere but Vṛndāvana.⁴

Those persons who have developed a strong desire to unceasingly serve the Lord are entitled to go to Vṛndāvana. Foolish persons, situated outside Kṛṣṇa's internal energy and primarily concerned with board and lodging, lack eligibility for entrance into the Vṛndāvana that eludes material vision. Vṛndāvana is not like other ordinary places meant for eating, sleeping, and so on, or for the mundane proclivities of acceptance and rejection. This supramundane land is the eternal place of worship for devotees firmly attached to Kṛṣṇa and free from desire for material enjoyment. Śrī Sanātana Gosvāmī set the standard by taking shelter at Śrīman Mahāprabhu's lotus feet and being empowered by His mercy, one becomes qualified to enter and reside in Vṛndāvana.⁵

Śrīla Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī Ṭhākura further elaborated:

Sahajiyās think that by buying a ticket they will go to Vṛndāvana and engage their bodies, saturated with the consciousness of “I” and “mine,” in sense enjoyment. This they call *vraja-vāsa*. And immorality, debauchery, cheating, avoiding service to real Vaiṣṇavas, avoiding chanting the names of the Lord, and seeking fame—this they call *hari-bhajana*. While giving up worship of the Lord’s devotees they make a show of living in Vraja. With the material body they try to enjoy Kṛṣṇa. So many sinful persons have mustered together in Vṛndāvana and Navadvīpa. Absorbed in satisfying their senses, they do not understand a single word of the pure Vaiṣṇavas, and instead commit offenses at their lotus feet. Śrī Caitanya and the Gosvāmīs are merciful to those who worship the devotees of Kṛṣṇa.⁶

Shortly after completing the 1932 Vraja-maṇḍala Parikramā, Śrīla Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī Ṭhākura suddenly clapped his hand to his forehead, exclaiming, “I am so unfortunate to have traveled throughout Vraja-*dhāma* yet not to have found a single Vaiṣṇava.” His astonished disciples questioned how that was possible, since they had observed many *vraja-vāśīs* strictly following vows and worshiping the Lord by chanting, reciting *śāstra*, worshiping deities, and performing various other services. Śrīla Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī Ṭhākura replied that all such *sādhus* were simply *kaniṣṭha-adhikārīs*.

In a lecture during his last visit to Vṛndāvana, Śrīla Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī Ṭhākura noted:

Bhagavān was present at Śeṣāśayī for many days, but Śrī Gaurasundara, proceeding there while singing the *Bhāgavatam* verse *yat te sujāta-caranāmburuham staneṣu*, revealed the glories of this place and manifested His dancing *līlā*. The Gosvāmīs in the line of Śrī Gaurasundara were also ignited by sentiments similar to His. Yet nowadays there is no one here with whom to discuss or from whom to hear such topics.⁷



Despite his disdain for unqualified persons claiming to be *vraja-vāsīs*, Śrīla Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī Thākura accepted even the insects of Vraja-maṇḍala as *vraja-vāsīs*. When some disciples tried to shoo away flies buzzing around him during a lecture in Mathurā, he said, “These are all *vraja-vāsīs*. You should not disturb them.”⁸

¹ *Amṛta Vāṇī* 127; *Śrīla Prabhupādera Upadesāmṛta* 384.

² *Gaudīya* 11.216.

³ *Śrī Brahma-saṁhitā* 5.38

⁴ CC Madhya 16.280–81, commentary.

⁵ *Śrīla Prabhupādera Goloka-vāṇī* 1.213–14.

⁶ *Gaudīya* 20.321.

⁷ *Śrīla Prabhupādera Goloka-vāṇī* 1.245.

⁸ *Gaudīya* 11.220.

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