

MATHURA

ṣaptapuri

&
the char dharas



Lord Krishna Janmabhoomi Temple Mathura

This article is a researched article and borrows heavily from printed and electronic encyclopedias as well as material provided by our panel of research scholars, astrologers, academics and pundits

Sapta Puri are the seven holy pilgrimage centres in India where the word 'puri' means "town" or "city" suffixed to the word 'sapta' meaning "seven". Specifically, the names of the pilgrimage centres, which are tirthas (holy places), are: Ayodhya, Mathura, Haridwar, Varanasi (Benaras, Kashi), Kanchipuram, Ujjain (Avanti) and Dwarka.

Mathura, located on the right bank of the Yamuna River in the district headquarters of Mathura district, also called Mathura Mandala or Braj Bhoomi, is considered the heart of Indian culture. Krishna was born here and hence it is also popularly known as 'Krishna janmabhoomi' ("Krishna's birth

"In the Kali Yuga, when hypocrisy dominates, all good paths have been lost and heresy is rampant : At such a time, Krishna alone is My Way.

The Malechchhas (non-Hindus) have surrounded all the holy places with the result that they have become infected with evil. Besides, the holy people are full of sorrow. At such a time, Krishna alone is My Way.

... The learned people have become mad with pride: they follow the path of sin and are only bent upon personal gain and reputation: At such a time, Krishna alone is My Way."
.....From The Shrinathji Cult

place"). It is the largest city in Vraja with around 325,000 residents. It is a very busy, noisy, and dusty town with a large railroad junction. Nonetheless, it is an important town for pilgrims. Besides being the birthplace of Lord Krishna, Srila Vyasadeva also took birth here at Krishna Ganga Tirtha on the banks of the Yamuna, where there is a small temple to Ganga Devi and many Shiva lingas. It was also at Ambarish-tila where the great devotee King Ambarish fasted while waiting for the sage Durvasa Muni to return from being chased by Lord Vishnu's chakra, as described in the Bhagavata Purana. Not far from Krishna

Ganga Tirtha is Vishrama Ghat, the best known of all the bathing ghats on the Yamuna in Mathura. Anyone can direct you to it. It was here that Lord Varaha rested after saving the earth from Hiranyaksha and spoke the Varaha Purana. Lord Krishna also bathed and rested here after killing Kamsa, the demoniac king. And Sri Chaitanya also bathed here while visiting Mathura. So many pilgrims come here to perform various rituals and take a purifying bath. You can also watch the aratika to the Yamuna River that takes place every evening around seven PM.

» Continued from page 11

Like Kashi, Mathura is an ancient human settlement. The Greek scholar Ptolemy mentions it as an important city and both Fa-hsien and Hiuen Tsang visited it during their travels. Mathura has been a centre of religion and scholarship for Hindus, Buddhists and Jains. The Buddha is said to have visited Mathura and established a monastery here. The Chinese travelers mention the presence of many Buddhist viharas and stupas but, unfortunately, none survive today. Though archaeologists speculate that the mounds that still exist in and around the city may contain remains of stupas no excavation has been undertaken so far to prove the point.

Mathura was the capital of the Kushan kings in the first century AD. There is a mention of twenty Buddhist monasteries where three thousand monks lived. Two of the Jain teachers and saints, the tirthankaras Mallinath and Neminath were born here and so Mathura became a place for Jain pilgrimage, with many Jain temples and monasteries.

From the 3rd century BC, during the reign of the Mauryas, Mathura became famous as a centre for stone carving. What is amazing is that a great school of sculpture managed to survive here for nearly a thousand years. Some of the finest Buddha images to be found at Sarnath are the creation of the sculptors of Mathura. The artisans used the typical stone available in this region—a red sandstone with beige spots. Akbar later used this sandstone for his palaces in Fatehpur Sikri.

It was in Mathura that the first images of deities were carved in India. In the first century AD, during the rule of the Kushans, the first icons, that of the Buddha, were created here. Then images Hindu deities and Jain tirthankaras also began to be made. Every image of every religion was created with the same meticulous attention to detail and complete devotion. As a centre of stone carving, ancient Mathura must have had many magnificent temples but none have survived. The Mathura museum has an excellent collection of the art of the



Vrindavan-Manadal Yatris

region, going back to the Mauryan, Parthian and Greek period of sculpture.

Mathura's dark days began in the 11th century with the invasion by Mahmud of Ghazni who entered India with the sole aim of destroying its temples and looting their treasures. Just as Somnath fell to the sword of jihad, so did the Hindu temples and Buddhist monasteries of Mathura. The temples would rise again but Buddhism vanished from the region. Mathura's history is just an endless tale of plunder and sacrilege stretching from Iltutmish in 12th century to Sikander Lodi in the 16th century to Ahmed Shah Abdali in the 18th century. Mathura's fate was sealed once the Muslim kings established their kingdom in the Delhi-Agra region. Brajbhoomi and its many temples lay between these two cities and felt easy prey to the Muslim armies... Brajbhoomi, Ayodhya, Kashi have all paid a heavy price for being such sanctified lands.

There was a small period of respite during the reigns of Akbar and Jahangir when the Hindu nobility at the Mughal was allowed to rebuild some of the destroyed temples. But the days of peace were not to last for long. Jahangir's grandson Aurangzeb sent his armies into Mathura-Vrindavan to demolish everything that had been built. The final desecration was the attack by the Afghan invader Ahmad Shah Abdali who torched Mathura in 1757. It is because of this history of plunder and pillage that in spite of being an ancient tirtha like Kashi, Mathura-

Vrindavan has no surviving temple that is older than a couple of centuries.

In the Steps of the Pilgrim

Pilgrims enter Mathura through the Holi Gate and head for the site where Krishna was born and the Keshav Dev Temple now stands. This site is also called Krishna Janmasthan, Krishna's birthplace and is said to mark the spot where the prison cell, where he was born, once stood.

Krishna Janamasthan Temple: The history of the Krishna Janamasthan echoes the tumultuous and conflict ridden history of Brajbhoomi. Once Krishna had faced eighteen attacks by King Jarasandha of Magadh and it seems as if Mathura has known few years of peace since then. The first temple to mark the site of Krishna's birth was built here by his great-grandson Vajranabha, who also built many temples in Vrindavan and Dwarka. Then in the years of the rise of Buddhism, during the rule of the Mauryas and the Kushans, viharas and stupas replaced many of the temples.

The next temple built at the Janmasthan was during the reign of the Gupta king Chandragupta Vikramaditya in the 5th century AD. Legends say it was by far the most magnificent temple in the region and it survived till the 11th century AD, when it was destroyed by the Muslim invader, Mahmud of Ghazni. The next temple built in the 13th century by Raja Vijay Pal was visited by the

» Continued from page 12

bhakti saint Chaitanaya Mahaprbhu but was demolished in the 16th century by armies of Sikandar Lodi. Another great Janmasthan temple was built during the reign of Jahangir by the Raja of Orchha, Vir Singh Bundela. However this temple did not last long, being demolished and replaced by a mosque by Jahangir's grandson Aurangzeb. Today only the basement of this temple has survived.

The present day temple at the Krishna Janmasthan, called the Keshav Dev Temple, was built after India's independence, with the deities consecrated in the garbha grih in 1958. The images in the sanctum are those of Radha and of Krishna as the long haired and handsome Keshav. Tradition says that the original deity installed here by Vajaranabha was called by that name. During medieval times, the original deity was moved out of Mathura for safety and is now installed in a temple near Kanpur. Next to the temple is a small room that resembles a prison cell where Krishna is said to have been born, as the prisons within the fortress of Kansa were located here.

There are shrines to a number of deities around the sanctum in the Keshav Dev Temple. There is an altar to Jagannatha, Balarama and Subhadra, with the figure of Sri Chaitnya worshipping them as he used to do in the Jagannath Temple at Puri. Other shrines have the images of Sita, Ram and Laxman, Hanuman and Durga.



Vrindavan Potara kund where baby Krishnas clothes were washed

The Shivalingam here is called Sri Keshaveshwar. In the nearby shrines of Bhagavat Bhavan and Geeta Mandir ,the walls are inscribed with the sayings and with paintings from the Puranas.

Dwarkadhish Temple: In the 19th century a Gwalior businessman, Seth Gokuldas built the Dwarkadhish Temple in Mathura. Here, Krishna as the Lord of Dwarka, is a resplendent kingly figure, bejeweled and clad in golden silks. Around the garbha griha there are other shrines to Mathuranath, Lakshmi Narayan and Murlī Manohar. Pilgrims also visit the remains of Kansa's fortress, that has become a small hill, called Kansa Tila. This temple stands at the site where Krishna killed Kansa and crowned Ugrasen as the king. Nearby is a

Shiva temple called Rangeshwar Mahadev where Kansa worshipped the god before his fatal wrestling match with Krishna.

Ghats: The Yamuna River flows to the south of Mathura and the banks are lined by the stepped Ghats where the pilgrims bathe. Among them the most sacred is the Vishranti Ghat, where a tired Krishna rested after his battle with Kansa. It is said that Lord Varaha, the boar avatar of Vishnu also rested here after slaying the demon Hiranyakshap.

There are a number of temples above the ghat and among them is one dedicated to the river goddess Yamuna and her brother Yama, the god of death.

Baldeva Tempel: Outside Mathura is the Baldeva Temple dedicated to Krishna's brother Balarama. It is said that this deity was also created by Vajranabha and is the only one that still remains in Brajbhoomi, The two meter high black stone image has the right hand raised in the abhaymudra, a gesture of reassurance, and the left hand holds a cup of Varuni, the wine that Balarama loved to drink. The image was lost for a long time and was then found in the tank behind the temple called Shiv Nagara. The local people call this temple Dauji Mandir, as Balarama was Krishna's dauji, his elder brother. ■



Vrindavan is famous for its Holi celebration

Vrindavan

A pilgrim to Brajbhoomi cannot leave without visiting Vrindavan. Tradition says that the name Vrindavan comes from the groves of tulsi plants that are sacred to Krishan. Another tradition talks of a princess named Vrinda who planted gardens and forests and then got a promise from Krishna that he and Radha would always be present in them. For the Vaishnava pilgrim, Vrindavan is full of memories of the childhood and youth of Krishna. This is where Radha and Krishna's immortal love story still colours the imagination of the people. It is here, in the forests of Vrindavan that the sound of Krishna's flute called the gopikas to dance the raaslila with him. When all the gopis wanted to dance with him, Krishna, the supreme romantic, took the form of many Krishna and every gopika thought was dancing only with her. Many of the episodes of his life have been commemorated with temples and ghats around Vrindavan. He stole the clothes of the bathing women here at Chi Ghat, where people make a wish after tying a piece of cloth to a tree. He protected the people under the Goverdhan mountain and the mark of his feet can be seen at the Goverdhan Shila. Pilgrims circle the hill during their walk thorough the villages of Vrindavan called the Chaunsath Kos Yatra. Krishna defeated the snake demon Kaliya where the Kaliya Mardan Temple now stands.

Govind Devji Temple: Vrindavan is a town filled with temples and pilgrims first head for the oldest temple of Govind Devji, built in 1590. The original image was taken away to jaipur when Aurangzeb tried to demolish the temple. The red sandstone temple was built by Raja Man Singh at the request of his guru Rupa Goswami. It was seven stories high with altars of gold and silver. The temple is shaped like a cross with carved vaulted ceilings and is profusely decorated with carvings. A giant marble lotus was placed in the main mandapa.

A bright lamp used to burn on the top storey and this angered Aurangzeb so much that he ordered that the temple be demolished. However after two storeys had destroyed there was an earthquake and the soldiers

thinking it was the wrath of god all ran away. So the remaining five storeys of the temple still stand but as the temple was damaged by Aurangzeb's army, the worship of the deities is conducted in another shrine behind the temple. The image of Krishna is called Govind Devji and he has the figures of Chaitanya and Nityanand on his sides. The image of Radha Rani that stands beside Govind Devji was sent from Puri to Vrindavan by Purushottam, the son of King Prataparudra of Orissa.

Madam Mohan Temple: This temple was built in 1580 by a merchant named Ram Das. It is said that his boat, laden with goods, ran aground in the Yamuna. When it could not be moved, he prayed to Madan Mohan to free it. Once the boat was saved and he had made a big profit from the goods, he built the temple as an act of thanksgiving. Lord Madan Mohan was worshipped daily here by Sant Goswami and his Samadhi stands at the back of the temple. The original deity was sent to Rajasthan for safety during the reign of Aurangzeb and it is now in the town of Karoli, near Jaipur. As the old temple was desecrated by the army of Aurangzeb, a new temple was built at the bottom of the hill called Aditya Tila by Nanda Kumar Bose of Bengal and the daily worship is performed here.

Krishna Balarama Temple: This sparkling new temple that has been built by ISKON, the sect of Krishna Consciousness. The pretty marble temple has three altars in the garbha griha. In the centre are the figures of the brother Krishna and Balarama. To the left are images of the poet-saints Gaur and Nitai and to the right of Radha and Shyamsundar. The temple also has a shrine to Bhaktivedanta Prabhupada, the founder of the sect.

Ranganathji Temple: This temple was built in 1851 by Seth Govind Das in a mix of north and south Indian styles. Parts of it, like the image in the sanctum and the pyramidal gopuram gateway, are copies of the Sri Rangam Temple of the South. Here the image in the garbha griha is not of Krishna but of a reclining Vishnu as Anantasayana.

He is lying on the coils of the serpent Sheshnaga floating on the Ananta Ocean. The main mandapa has a marble colonnade and there are shrines to Lakshmi, Brahma and Lord Balaji of Tirupati. The entrance is through an elaborately carved torana and before it is the gold plated pillar of the Garuda Sthambha that people call the golden palm tree.

Visitors often notice that the entrance to the Ranganathji temple is through a smaller gateway, instead of the more majestic one. There is a traditional story to explain this odd layout of the temple. It is said that the sage Namdev used to come to the Ranganathji Temple and sing to the deity everyday. Namdev was a poor man and he was always worried that someone would steal his only pair of sandals. So he would tie them around his waist with his dhoti. One day the priests at the temple spotted the sandals and threw Namdev out of the temple. Namdev then went to the back of the temple and began to sing there and the image of Ranganathji turned to face him.

Among the other temples popular with pilgrims is the Radha Damodara Temple built by Raja Man Singh. This temple has the Goverdhan shila, the stone with the mark of Krishna's feet. At the Radha raman Temple, the fire in the Kitchen to cook the mahaorasad is said to have been burning for four centuries. Other important temples are the Radha Gokulanand, Radha Gopinath and the Radha Shyamsundar. The ancient Gopishwar Mahadev is one of the few Shiva temples in the city and Vajranabha is said to have established the Shivalingam in the sanctum. Banke Bihari Temple: There are many sacred groves of trees and gardens around Vrindavan that are connected with the life of Krishna and Radha. In the garden of Seva Kunj, Krishna massaged Radha's feet and decorated her hair with flowers. In the Nidhivana they rested at night. Haridas Swami found the image of Banke Bihari in Nidhivana and established it in a temple. The Banke Bihari Temple is very popular for the unusual manner in which the deities are shown to the devotees. In a ritual called Janki Darshan, a curtain across the

» Continued from page 14

altar is periodically opened for the people to get a glimpse of the deity and then shut again.

Out into the countryside of Brajbhoomi are the two sacred tanks of Radhika Kund and Shyama Kund. Krishna killed the demon Aristasura here when he attacked him in the form of a bull. As the killing of a bull was a sin, the gopikas insisted that Krishna should bathe in the waters of all the holy rivers of the land. Krishna struck the ground with his heel and a pond was created with the sacred waters. Pilgrims come here on Bahula Ashtami to bathe in the two tanks. Around the tank there are the replicas of the important temples of Vrindavan like Radha Damodar, Radha Gopinath and Radha Gokulanand.

All the villages where Krishna lived are also places of pilgrimage. He lived in Gokul till he was seven years old. Here he stole butter and killed the demoness Putana. He lived at Nandgaon from his eighth to his sixteenth year. Pilgrims circumambulate the Goverdhan Hill that he picked up so that the people of Nandgaon could shelter under it when Indra sent down a deluge of rain. The village of Barsana is the home of Radha. Then there are the forests where he wandered, like Madhavana, Talavana, Kumudvana, Bilvavana and Lohavana.

Rituals, Festivals & Fairs

Brajbhoomi celebrates Krishna with a touching adoration during the festivals. Krishna and Radha are still a vibrant presence in Brajbhoomi and you realize this the most during the festivals. Mathura-Vrindavan celebrates all the main episodes of Krishna's life and the most colourful festival are those of his birth on Janamashtami and his playing with colours with the gopikas during Holi. Festivals in Brajbhoomi are a joyous time when a carnival atmosphere prevails, as Krishna is remembered by his adorning devotees through dance and music, folk theatre and prayers.

Janamashtami, Krishna's birthday is celebrated in monsoon month of August/September, on the Ashtami of



Rang Ji Temple Vrindavan, Mathura

Krishna Paksh or the eighth day of the dark fortnight of the month of Bhadra. Temples and homes are decorated with tableaux using dolls and fairy lights showing the main episodes of Krishna's life. Called jhankis, these displays show the scenes of his birth, Vasudev carrying his infant son to safety, episodes from Krishna's childhood in Gokul, his dancing with the gopikas and his romance with Radha.

The folk theatre of Brajbhoomi, the Raasleela, are exciting presentations with songs and dances, with the actors wearing gorgeous costumes. As people watch with bated breath, Krishna's life is enacted by actors with a rustic verve and passion. The audience may be familiar with every nuance of the play but they still away with the mood of the scene, laughing and crying with Krishna. On Janamashtami, all the temples have special pujas at midnight when Krishna was born and the biggest puja is at the Dwarkadhish Temple.

Krishna played Holi with the gopikas, spraying them with colours and dancing the Raasleela with them. Holi also heralds the arriving of spring and it is celebrated with the spectacular festival of colours. In the rest of India, Holi is celebrated for a day but Brajbhoomi sways with colours and music for a week on each other with gay abandon. The men in turbans, carrying drums and flutes, wander down the streets singing the special songs of Holi called Rasiya.

The most famous and amusing Holi is played at Radha's village of Barsana. It is called "Latthamar Holi", a Holi with sticks. Tradition has it that Krishna and his cowherd friends from Nandgaon used to sneak into Barsana with colour and the women used to chase them away with sticks. So on this day the women of Barsana pick up sticks and hit the men with great enthusiasm and the men run and take shelter under large baskets. The main celebration at Barsana takes place at the Ladliji Temple dedicated to Radha. The day after, the people of Barsana go to Nandgaon to play Holi with each other.

Vrindavan's chariot festival takes place in March/April. During the Rath Mela, the decorated chariot starts its journey from the Ranganathji Temple. The procession is led by dancers and musicians and it moves through the town accompanied by huge crowds. The Phool Dola and Hindola festivals are celebrated at the temples for a whole month in July/August. Mathura and Vrindavan also have a tradition of inviting performing artistes to present their art at its temples and some of the greatest classical musicians and dancers perform here before large crowds.

These performances can be enjoyed during the Rang Gula Festival in March/April in Mathura and the Vrindavan Sharadotsav in October.

Shri Braj Chaurasi (84) Kos Yatra



*Like a flowering creeper in the forest wilderness,
Seeking Krishna in his many haunts.
The god of love increased her ordeal,
Tormenting her with fevered thoughts,
And her friend sang to heighten the mood."*

from Barbara Stoler Miller's translation – "Love Song of the Dark Lord" a translation of the the 12th century Sanskrit devotional epic poem "Gita Govinda" composed by Jayadeva Goswami, the most celebrated Vaishnava Hindu poets of India As a masterpiece of Vaishnava literature, Gita Govinda is dedicated to Lord Krishna and recounting his love affairs, separation and union with the Radha. Chaitanya Mahaprabhu (1486-1534), was so fond of the Gita Govinda that he heard its recital every day, and its music (kirtans) became the favorites of the masses of Bengal and Orissa.

It is generally thought that the Shri Braj Chaurasi (84) Kos Yatra revolves around 84 mandirs; this is not so. In ancient times Kos was used to measure the distance and not the current kilometers. 84 Kos means 252 kilometers in total. The pilgrimage comprises Vrindavan, with its 12 vanas (forests), 24 upvanas (groves), the sacred hill Govardhan, the divine River Yamuna, numerous holy places along its banks and Mathura (birth place of Lord Krishna), Mahavan, Baldeo, Kusum Sarovar, Barsana & Nandgaon is undertaken annually by lakhs of devotees from faraway places.

This Yatra is known as 84 Kos as it depicts the entire life journey of Lord Krishna, the places where Lord Krishna born and brought up, his dalliances with Radha, his Lelas etc. Also famous by the name of char dham Yatra as once Nand ji and Yashodha maiya (his foster parents) told Lord Krishna that they wanted to go for char dham yatra. Lord Krishna for their convenience called all the char dhams in the sacred bhumi of 84 Kos.

Basically, Vraja is the land of Krishna. If you really want to understand the pastimes of Krishna, you have to know Vraja. And if

you want to know the significance of Vraja, you have to understand Krishna's pastimes. Krishna was born in Mathura 5,000 years ago but lived in Gokula for three years, then moved to Chatikara and Vrindavan for three years, then lived in Nandagram for three years, and from age 10 to 28 He lived in Mathura. After this He moved to the western coast of India where He lived in Dwaraka for over 96 years. Thus, He stayed in this world for 125 years, but some of His sweetest and most attractive pastimes were performed in Vraja.

Shri Braj Chaurasi (84) Kos Yatra , Vrindavan is the site of an ancient forest which is the region where, according to the Mahabharata, the Supreme Lord Krishna spent his childhood days. The town is about 10 km away from Mathura, the city of Lord Krishna's birthplace, near the Agra-Delhi highway. It hosts hundreds of temples dedicated to the worship of Radha and Krishna and is considered sacred by a number of religious traditions such as Gaudiya Vaishnavism, Vaishnavism, and Hinduism in general.

Vrindavan has an ancient past, associated with Hindu history, and is an important Hindu pilgrimage site. One of its oldest surviving



temples is the Govinda Dev temple, built in 1590, with the town founded earlier in the same century. It is believed that the essence of Vrindavan was lost over time until the 16th century, when it was rediscovered by Chaitanya Mahaprabhu. In the year 1515, Chaitanya Mahaprabhu visited Vrindavana, with purpose of locating the lost holy places associated with Lord Sri Krishna's transcendent pastimes. Chaitanya wandered through the different sacred forests of Vrindavana in a spiritual trance of divine love. It was believed that by His divine spiritual power, He was able locate all the important places of Krishna's pastimes in and around Vrindavana.

In the last 250 years, the extensive forests of Vrindavan have been subjected to urbanization, first by local Rajas and in recent decades by apartment developers. The forest cover has been whittled away to only a few remaining spots, and the local wildlife, including peacocks, cows, monkeys and a variety of bird species has been eliminated or are close to it. A few peacocks are left in the city but monkeys and cows can be seen almost everywhere. ■