

The Economy of Water Transfers in the Religious Ecology of Contemporary Vrindavan

Gerald T. Carney

Every visitor to Vrindavan brings home vibrant images, some full of natural and spiritual beauty, others revealing deep devotional fervor and enduring sentiment, still others highlighting the dissonance between Vrindavan's spiritual significance and her physical reality. The purpose of this paper is to examine some focal images and to probe their significance for contemporary Vaishnava devotion and for Vrindavan's future.

Four Images

This study originated from four images¹ of contemporary life in Vrindavan, a pilgrimage center in western Uttar Pradesh, about one hundred miles south of Delhi, on the banks of the Yamuna River. **One.** On one of my first visits to Vrindavan, some thirty years ago, I saw and photographed a young woman who was distributing water from a large clay pot in a shop stall at the end of Pratap Bazaar, opposite the Shaji Temple. The image of her *jal seva* remained with me for years as a question about her practice and its purpose. Looking further, I came to see that her *seva* was not isolated, but part of a ubiquitous practice that formed an essential layer of the pilgrimage process and site. **Two.** On a later visit, I noticed a flowing well off Bankhandi Bazaar, on the way toward the Banke Bihari Mandir, and the dedicatory inscription from those who had this well constructed in the mid-1960s. Almost immediately, I saw that such acts of philanthropy

were also to be found everywhere in Vrindavan, their religious sentiment still (literally) flowing in the late-twentieth and early-twenty-first centuries, alongside the more anonymous constructions of sealed wells and municipal pumping stations. Like the individual acts of *jal seva*, these dedicated wells formed a layer of devotional life and sentiment. **Three.** Still more recently, while walking the parikrama path in 2004, I saw a newly established kiosk for water distribution riverside from Raman Reti. Its attractive construction linked the image of a stall for individual *jal seva* with freely-running well water, and its dedication was in English, something quite rare.

But in two years' time the kiosk was abandoned, its function moved to a newly-established well outside a nearby compound, which left just the empty memory of devoted philanthropy which endowed a well but not its maintenance and renovation, as needed, to accommodate changes in the water table. **Four.** The final image comes from the spring of 1996 when the municipal government began excavating the Yamuna shoreline along the *parikrama* path west of Keshi Ghat. Two salient features of this image are the vast quantity of plastic bags unearthed in the excavation and the flow of untreated sewage that had carved its own canyon toward the river. While this paper does not directly address the current state of the Yamuna river (for this, see David Haberman's *River of Love in an Age of Pollution: The Yamuna River of Northern India* [2006]), the religious and physical ecology of Vrindavan is fragile and threatened by a host of environmental ills, not least of which is a failure to process solid and liquid waste, the latter the final product of water distribution. We begin, then, with four images: *jal seva*, the dedication of wells, the breakdown of water distribution, and Vrindavan's threatened environment.

An Economy of Water Transfers in a Spiritual Ecology

Provision of water, or water transfer, is so essential and ubiquitous in a traditional society that it constitutes a social system, an economy, a multi-layered pattern of exchange which grounds social relationships onto physical needs. In contemporary Vrindavan, the need for water and the patterns of exchange supplying it cross the boundaries between traditional and modern. The service of giving water, *jal seva*, is a vital part of the pilgrimage route around Vrindavana (the circumambulation or *parikrama* path) and the open-air market, but it is universally observed as well at new temples and in the construction plans of private homes.

The methods of providing water include traditional wells (*kuon*), with

water raised by buckets from an unprotected ground opening; these wells are now very uncommon in urban areas like Vrindavan, except as picturesque historical sites, due to hygienic concerns about an open well-head and supply-based shifts in the water table. The more generic term *pyaus* encompasses dispensing of water by individuals at strategic or seasonally improvised sites, called *pya* or *pyus*, as well as permanently established wells which make water available in urban neighborhoods and in pilgrimage settings. More traditional *pyaus* included both a well for human consumption and a watering trough for animals, emphasizing the mission of the *pyaus* directed to the good of all living creatures (*sarva-janik-pyau*). Such dual provision of water to human and animal needs is now less likely in urban sites but remains both common and necessary in the agricultural land between the city and the Yamuna River to the south.

A spiritual Vrindavan appears in Vaishava religious texts, such as the eighth-century *Bhagavata Purana*, whose tenth book recounts the childhood and adolescent life of Krishna in Vrindavan and the other forests of the Vraja region that spans portions of western Uttar Pradesh and eastern Rajasthan. "Lost" sites described in the Puranas were "found" by several Vaishnava groups in the sixteenth century; these still-vital sectarian communities, especially those associated with Chaitanya and Vallabha, developed overlapping and conflicting sacred maps of Krishna's life which were superimposed on the physical geography of Vraja. Since Krishna's play is eternal, Vrindavan's residents and pilgrims seek to cultivate an emotional sensitivity that will take them beyond the physical and the present to participate in Krishna's eternal spiritual activities. In their eyes and hearts, Krishna's play, his *lila* is happening now and right here in Vrindavan.

First Image: *Jal Seva*

Recall the image of the young woman distributing water near Shajhi Temple. Her act of performing water service (*jal seva*) forms part of a religiously-interpreted network of individuals, institutions, and commercial ventures that supply water in this fashion, either directly or through patronage. But, on closer scrutiny, her actions replicate a still broader pattern of efforts to provide water to Vrindavan's permanent and pilgrim population that includes individual and corporate distribution of water, endowment of wells and pumping stations, and efforts to support effective sanitation and sewage treatment and removal. Because Vrindavan is a sacred place, with Krishna's life mapped onto its geography, effective water provision and

removal play a pivotal role in preserving its sacred character.

Water is an essential need for human life. For those lacking domestic water supply, obtaining water for drinking, cooking, bathing, clothes washing, cleaning, and hygiene is a preoccupation of life, disproportionately placed upon women and children. The heat of the pre-monsoon (April-July) and monsoon (July-September) seasons coincides with the largest influx of pilgrims into Vrindavan for festivals. In anticipation of these needs, the Vaishnava religious calendar pinpoints a date in April-May (Jyeshth II.10) for the opening of temporary watering sites (*pyau*) around the city.² This date coincides with *Ganga dashahara*, the religious celebration of the descent of the Ganges River.³

As the potentially-destructive flow of water comes down from the heavens, Shiva allows the river to fall on his head so that life-giving water can safely come to earth. The civic-minded individuals who establish *pyau* imitate Shiva's service in providing access to abundant and safe drinking water supply; given the work involved in maintaining a supply of water for distribution to others, *pyau* is a respected and significant pious act which is often undertaken as a *vrata* or vow. The setting up of *pyau* is also contemporaneous with the celebration of *jai-vatra* in temples, as deities are served with cool water in the hot season and share this cooling lila and its playful sentiment with worshippers. The physical *pyau* serves as a human drinking fountain for residents and pilgrims alike, allowing them to function in the oppressive heat which regularly exceeds 110° F for weeks at a time.

Some *pyau* are domestic, set up in the doorways of individual homes at strategic locations, run predominantly by women. Intergenerational family groups, including men and children, also provide water outside their homes or residential compounds, much like children selling lemonade on a summer's day, although this water provision is free even of donation. Other *pyau* are year-round fixtures of civic locations like the daily open-air Loi Bazaar fruit and vegetable market where the hard work of carters, merchants and their customers calls for frequent hydration. Along the ten-mile pilgrimage path, fraternal groups of men provide water on festivals when tens of thousands perform the circumambulation of the city. Temples and religious institutions, including the most recently constructed, provide water as an act of conspicuous community outreach.

The Pagal Baba Temple—so-called because of the "crazy" holy man who in the 1970s built this multi-layered "birthday cake" of a temple in what was then arid wilderness on the main road to Mathura—imports water by

tanker truck to allow a woman to dispense water from a stall clearly advertising *mishulka jai seva*, free water service. Once the observer starts looking for such individual efforts at *jai seva* it quickly becomes clear that the practice is everywhere, representing a truly significant commitment by individuals and religious institutions to fulfilling a very basic human need.

In summary, *jai seva* includes

- roots in Vaishnava belief (and in pre-Vaishnava tradition)
- participation in Krishna-lila
- links between physical thirst and religious need
- establishment of an economy of social relationships
- spontaneous popular enthusiasm (fun)
- institutionalization by temples and institutions as well as
- gratuitous action by householders
- support of local business and pilgrim industry
- a religious commitment sustained over years

Second Image: Wells and Donation Inscriptions

Alongside such personalized transfers of water there is a more formal process of water provision, the endowment of wells, which also combines religious, personal, civic, and, occasionally, commercial motivation. Although it is possible to overlook these wells and their endowment inscriptions, especially when they are fallen into disuse, once observed they too appear everywhere as an essential dimension of religious and civic life.

The running well off Bankhandi Bazaar illustrates trajectories of religious sentiment, familial loyalty, secular career, and civic philanthropy in furthering the provision of water in traditional settings. After praise to Krishna ("Jaya Shri Krishna"), the inscription indicates that this donation is from Purushottama Das, who, with his brother Vanaram, both potato merchants,

caused [this well] to be constructed in memory of their parents, then endowed it and entrusted it to the *Nagar Palika Vrindavan* [the Vrindavan municipal corporation].

The inscription goes on to name two senior officials of the Nagar Palika, Shri Gangaprasad Sainand Shri Ramjilal Sinha Gahlaut, its Chairman, and the date of the donation 2021 (= 1965 CE). A large number of similar well inscriptions—identical in outline structure—are found throughout the old

city center from Keshi Ghat to Bihariji, though many of them are severely distressed and the wells they commemorate inoperable. In one example, a couple, "Nirandas and Candrabai, had [this well] constructed for the general welfare and presented it to the *Nagar Palika Vrindavan* on Janmashtami of 2021" under the same two officials. The numerous wells dated from this period indicate significant public works initiatives during the mid-1960s that combined familial and religious piety with enlightened public spirit.

An earlier example of endowed construction of wells linking the philanthropy of a religious institution with service to the municipality is found in the very-distressed inscriptions on a great many long-unused wells on sites extending from Ranji Temple west and south toward the Yamuna:

Shri Hari! [This well] was given to the *Nagar Palika Vrindavan* by the Shri Bhagavan Bhajanashram during the vice-chairmanship of Shri Viracandraji Gosvami.

Shri Bhagavan Bhajanashram is the largest of the charitable institutions which provide financial assistance to the widows residing in Vrindavan in exchange for their *seva* of chanting (*bhajan*) the divine name for hours each day. A visit to this *bhajanashram*, a short walk from a convenient car park, is part of the standard one-day tour of Vrindavan, as is the expectation that the visitors will contribute to the charitable institution's mission. The sight of hundreds of poor widows chanting for hours in what seems like confinement behind monkey-proof grates is also the occasion for press and media reports on their plight. However, one of the seven *sevas* that the institution claims in its 2006 donation brochure is *jal seva*, the managing of funds for maintaining wells for all people (*sarvajanik pyau sancahit*), and the historical remnants of those efforts, now apparently limited to a *pyau* outside the institution itself, show a broad effort to bring water to a population even beyond its target group.

Some inscriptions link commercial sponsorship to pious family memory and religious zeal. Following praise of Radharamanji, a well inscription from 1996 indicates that

This doorway and cold-water well was constructed in pious memory of the late Bhimasainaji Goyal (from Maharauli) by his wife Shrimati Nangi Devi and his son Jagadisha Agrawal. The Bengali Sweet House, Bengali Market, Delhi-2, Ram Navami, 2052.

A more direct commercial link appears on a large yellow cooler tank erected outside one of the two restaurants that compete for the business of pilgrims returning from Shahji Temple, Nidhivan, and Chir Ghat. Following invocation of "*sat guru kripa*," the "cold water *seva* is in pious memory of the late Shri Raman Lal" and provided by "Shiva Builders and Promoters, Vrindavan" with contact numbers provided.

In the dedicated well, the individual and impermanent *jal seva* of an individual or institution becomes permanent, perhaps aspiring to represent one's participation in Krishna's eternal *lila*. The most common purpose of these inscriptions is as a memorial to family members, placing them in memory forever in *seva* to Vrindavan and her inhabitants. While some lack any explicit religious reference—

This well was constructed in memory of the late Shri Prabhu Dayal Sharma, by his son Shri Dinesh Sharma, residing at 5782 Chandraval, Delhi-7.

others add specific devotional or sectarian reference, as on a free-flowing well on a section of the *parikrama* path that is frequented by *sadhus*: invoking "Kunja Bihari Shri Haridas," the inscription simply notes that the *sant seva* was provided by Shrimati Prem Devi. Another, invoking "Shri Radhe," notes that this "*jal seva* was constructed because of Vrindavan in memory of the late Murari Lal Saraph by his faithful wife Madhu Agrawal." Still others address personal tragedy: A younger brother, Ashvant Sinha, placed this inscription, memorializing the donation of this "*sarvajanik pyau* by Shrimati and Shri Shertpal Sinha, [he] the senior inspector of the Vrindavan police station, now resident in district Bulandshaher, in pious memory of their daughter Sangita, born 24 May 1974, died 17 January 1994." Another example of familial memorial begins with a formal "Om namo Bhagavate..." and notes "the construction of this religiously-inspired *pyau* by Kishanlal Gautam and the whole family in pious memory of his father, Pandit Shri Tikaram Gautam, his mother Shrimati Rama Devi, and his elder brothers, Shri Jayanti Prasad Gautam and Shri Govinda Ram Gautam" and that it was "laid at the lotus feet of Shri Hanumanji on 22 April 1997."

Such inscriptions, and the wells they memorialize, are everywhere in Vrindavan, numbering in many hundreds and representing a substantial pious investment in the water infrastructure. Recent constructions, with more conspicuous display of philanthropy, have included large-scale multi-

fauceted watering centers designed to serve whole neighborhoods, but these seem to be no more resilient in the face of water-table decline and inadequate maintenance than their simple individual peers.

Although these dedicated wells continue to serve a large portion of her population, Vrindavan's water requirements cannot be met through the haphazard nature of individual dedication, whose *phyau* are often poorly designed and maintained. A network of municipal sealed wells, with hand pumps, evolved from the 1980s to supplement and, in some cases, replace the traditional *phyau*, but they have also been subject to design problems and to the declining water table, witnessed in the multitude of dry wells in urban neighborhoods. The more recent addition of water stations along the Yamuna portion of the *parikrama* path will be discussed below.

In summary, *phyau* donation includes

- enduring commitment to the *jal seva* economy
- grounding in Vrindavan's sacred space
- traditions dating back more than fifty years
- memorial of loved ones in religious context
- *seva* of institutions for widow and *sadhu* support
- linking of religious, familial, municipal/political, and commercial motives, but also
- compromise by construction, maintenance, and water table problems
- generations of failed wells
- a model of water supply insufficient for contemporary needs

Third Image: Challenges to Water Distribution

Vrindavan's permanent population of eighty thousand swells to at least five times that many during several annual festival seasons, some of which fall in the hottest pre-monsoon months, severely testing the limits of water supply and sanitation. Outside her historical center of temples and religious institutions, a booming construction industry is transforming farmland into residential developments for India's emerging middle-class, further stressing Vrindavan's physical environment and the coherence of religious belief associated with it. In this context, the strategies of water distribution that I have observed and documented over the last decade both highlight the challenges facing Vrindavan as a religious and public space and also provide transformative metaphors of religious fidelity and civic responsibility.

The water kiosk of the *parikrama* path celebrates its donor's generosity—

This *phyau* was built by the kind donation of Dr. Narendra Bansal in memory of his mother Munni Devi Agarwal and his father Devakinandana Agarwal.

The English dedication inscription, the imitation of a tradition *jal seva* stall but with a faucet, and the prominent site on the *parikrama* path all suggest a significant commitment to this construction. However, within two years this *phyau* was no longer functioning, the result of lack of proper maintenance or perhaps a declining water table. The well's devotional intent, a presence of *seva*, clashes with its dysfunctional reality. This well could serve as a symbol of the many challenges facing contemporary Vrindavan.

If one stands outside the entrance to Nidhiban, traditional site of Radha's and Krishna's nightly and eternal tryst, one can see four generations of dry wells, one dating back to the *bhajan-ashram* civic improvement era and the last a municipal sealed well. All are now dry, perhaps too shallow from the start or poorly maintained or left high and dry by the receding water table. There are entire neighborhoods south of the Mathura Road where wells are salinated and there is no access to sweet potable water except through importation in tank trucks. Lines of progressively drier-up wells are found throughout the historical center. Even the multi-faucet watering stations recently constructed in major squares continue to provide a water flow in only a few of the spigots; dedicated wells have run dry apparently in direct proportion to their conspicuous display, while the simpler ones continue their *seva* alongside the individuals and institutions that provide *jal seva* in the more traditional way. Only along the *parikrama* path, in the section which parallels the Yamuna ghats (from Kalidah Ghat and Madan Mohan to beyond Keshi Ghat into the agricultural zone along the riverbank), where there are new municipal wells which provide the drinking and bathing needs of the surrounding populace, does there seem to be a surfeit of available water. This supply seems to be guaranteed by pumping stations supported by funding from the Japanese government that are located at each end of this *parikrama* section. However, the quality of water drawn from wells near the Yamuna is dubious. After years of using progressively safer forms of purification on water drawn from their own sealed wells, even natives of Vrindavan now only drink water from a commercial cooler with a twenty-liter tank. If *jal-seva*, broadly understood, is an essential part of devotional life in Vrindavan, then this *seva* is deeply troubled and in search

of new strategies to provide water to the resident and pilgrim populations.

Vrindavan has been a construction site since the sixteenth century. Significant construction outside the traditional center in Raman Reti and along the Mathura Road began in the 1960s and 70s as various gurus established modest institutions. After the death of its founder, ISKCON made the Krishna-Balaram Mandir an essential stop on the pilgrimage route and Raman Reti another point of entry (more accessible to motor vehicles and tour buses than the narrow lanes and bazaars) to the traditional temples, notably Banke Bihari, Radhadamodar and Radharamana. These earlier constructions appear trifling in comparison to the current situation.

Over the last two decades Vrindavan has seen a construction boom, in Raman Reti, along the *parikrama* path, and on both the Mathura and Chatikara roads up to the crossing with the Delhi highway, and along the Delhi-Agra highway itself. About half of this construction is new *ashrams* of Hindu gurus, both Indian-based and global; having an *ashram* in Vrindavan raises a guru's stature and provides significant opportunities for disciples to encounter their spiritual teacher within the context of Krishna devotion and the pilgrimage calendar. While some of these new religious institutions are quite simple, the majority provide some or all of the amenities to which India's growing middle class are accustomed.

Even with some luxury items, however, these ashrams maintain a clear grounding in religious encounter, notably a Vaishnava sectarian *sadhana* and *guru-seva*. The remaining half of new construction consists of commercial condo developments which are wholly distinct from any particular guru or religious tradition and make no demands on their owners save the purchase price. The hoardings promise a luxury lifestyle with a veneer of generic religious sentiment. One of the claims of every pre-construction prospectus is abundant pure water, sometimes pictured as a waterfall or water temple. While it would be ill-advised for anyone to expect (much less to drink) "pure water from the Yamuna," the water supplies needed for a high-density middle-class lifestyle in developments rising amid semi-arid farmland will further tax ground-water levels. Alongside concerns about one's carbon footprint, there is a need to evaluate the "sponge effect" of construction, how much water is soaked up, its sources and the broader consequences.⁴

One constructive development since 2006 has been the revival of traditional *kunds*, water tanks or pools, in urban areas. Perhaps paralleling the revitalization of Radhakund that was initiated by the religious leaders there,

kund construction and restoration in Vrindavan, especially in the neighborhoods surrounding Rangaji Temple with the support of temple management, has served to improve the water table for those dependent on nearby wells. Clearly, solutions to urban water needs can draw on traditional wisdom as well as on modern technology.

Jal Seva and dedication of *pyaas* manifest a service, at once temporary and permanent, both meeting physical needs but situated in the Lord's *lila* as well as in physical space. If all those devoted to Krishna are participants in his Vrindavan *lila*, then it is a *seva* indeed to protect and cultivate this sacred place. *Seva* becomes a sacred duty to give water, not a passing drink of water to the pilgrim or worker but to the future; *jal seva* blesses the wish to remain always in Vrindavan, not through an inscription on a well that so often and quickly runs dry, but in strategies of cooperative management that will ensure adequate water for the future.

Waste Water Treatment

Correlative to the provision of water for drinking and other domestic needs is the process of the removal of waste, solid and water-based, which includes sewage disposal and solid-waste management. These tasks are complicated by the adoption of "modern" plastic bags and packaging into a market system which previously employed reused and recyclable materials exclusively. Images of the Yamuna riverbank throughout the last decade show the collective impact of untreated effluent flows and accumulated plastic waste.

Collection and disposal of solid and liquid waste is hampered by assignment of these tasks to "sweepers," the lowest caste status. Through the 1980s, free-flowing open sewers carried human waste to the Yamuna. Although water scarcity has reduced free-flow, this solution still endures in many sectors. In others, sweepers collect the waste, solid and human, deposited in the sewers, and cart it away. In recent years, efforts have been made, in limited urban areas and markets, to improve the status and performance of sweepers through guarantees of higher pay and the development of rudimentary waste-management and disposal infrastructure. Prior to these efforts, most of the collected waste was simply redeposited along the riverbank, a factor illustrated in the debris unearthed in the *parikrama* excavations. Now there are transfer stations and vehicles to bring waste to landfill sites. Some composting sites have been established along with limited recycling of plastic containers and bags; a campaign was organized to refuse plastic bags from merchants. Many of these efforts have been initi-

ated by foreign visitors whose love for Vrindavan, religiously motivated, has been matched by shock at her physical reality. Organizations like Friends of Vrindaban and Food for Life—Vrindaban have linked local leaders and foreign support to develop the new waste management systems as well as strategies of garbage collection in containers along the *parikrama* path for transfer to the landfill. These initiatives seek to change a cultural view, among residents and pilgrims alike, that responsibility for the management of waste is essentially the problem of *someone else*. The long-term cultural change envisioned by community leaders leads toward institutional ownership of such responsibility by local groups, turning transient philanthropy into a permanent social structure. Otherwise, efforts at developing waste management systems will remain merely symbolic.

The disposal of human waste, sewage management, presents additional problems of infrastructure and culture, complicated by the swelling of population during pilgrimage seasons and by the effect of local monsoon rains and periodic river flooding in overwhelming treatment facilities.⁵ The various Yamuna Action Plans set benchmarks for waste treatment that, if met, would over time address these issues, and the Japanese government has provided assistance for waste water pumping stations. Since the late 1990s, the Subabh foundation began the construction of sanitary facilities for bathing and toilet use. Some of the earliest of these structures lacked connections to sewer pipes so that the resultant effluent collected in fetid pools alongside the facility. By 2008, usage of these now-connected sanitary complexes has clearly increased, especially in the areas east of Keshi Ghat and near Chir Ghat, although the Sulabh designation is now absent and local management seems to oversee these facilities.

If provision of water by personal and endowed *pyaus* is a *seva*, not only a service to Krishna and other people but also a profound level of enduring participation in his divine *lila*, then the personal and institutional commitment to the cleansing of Vrindavan is also such a *seva* and an encounter with Krishna, bringing together Vrindavan's traditional religious leaders, local inhabitants and merchants, and their political leaders on local, state and national levels. Their *seva* must coordinate with that of pilgrims and of foreign visitors, and with the infusion of international support. If one loves Vrindavan, if one loves Krishna, then one preserves her and purifies the clarity of her *darshan*, making it transparent to reveal Krishna's *lila*.

Participation in this Spiritual Economy

In all of these dimensions, *jai seva*, serving Krishna and people by providing water, is the religious basis for structures of social coherence and community solidarity, for cultivation of the sentiment that underlies authentic devotion, while its conflicted character highlights the social fissures and structural incoherence in Vrindavan's threatened natural and religious ecology.

The pilgrimage to Vrindavan, like the pilgrimage of Vaishnava religious life, is a matter of *darshan* and *lila*, ultimately participation in the divine play which the discerning heart sees. *Seva* in all of its forms, and *jai seva* in particular, provides an entrance into divine play through an environment charged with devotional power, its *shakti* mediated through the natural environment, the *seva* itself, and its religiously and politically institutionalized forms. *Jai seva* and *pyau* donations offer a lens through which one can see Krishna and participate in his play. The generous and oft-playful gift of water invites the pilgrim into a deeper play, while memorial donations situate one's family in enduring service. Photography, like all research, presumes a commitment and faithfulness to what one sees: four images, four windows into tradition and its conflicted future, point beyond themselves and into the heart of Vaishnava religious life.

Endnotes

I am grateful to the people of Vrindavan for their welcome, especially to the family of Dr. Shrivatsa Goswami. My thanks also absolves them from the limits of my learning.

1. This study was provoked by visual images of contemporary religious life in Vrindavan which formed an essential part of a presentation at the College Theology Society meeting in 2007. In this paper I have sought to reproduce the visual data in verbal metaphor and analysis. A PDF version of this paper, including the images, is available on my website, www.jerry-carneyphoto.com. If you have any difficulty in accessing this version, please contact me at gcarney@hsc.edu.
2. The reference to the setting up of *pyau* stalls is found in the section on "Fairs and festivals of Braj" in Alan Entwistle, *Braj: Centre of Krishna Pilgrimage* (Groningen: Egbert Forsten, 1987), 485.
3. These connections with Shiva are based on citations in the previous note from Entwistle: B. P. Mazumdar, *Socio-Economic History of Northern India*

(1030-1194 AD) (Calcutta: Firma K.L. Mukhopadhyay, 1960), 281-2; and P. V. Kane, *History of Dharmasāstra*, Vol. V Pt. 1 (Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1974), 89-91.

4. I published a study of these developments through 2006, "From Ashram to Condo: Transformation of a Religious Ideal," *Southeast Review of Asian Studies* [SERAS] 29(2007): 137-156. A re-examination of these sites in 2008 showed that, while a few developments had failed and the pace of construction was much slower than envisioned, still newer subdivisions and temple complexes far exceeded those that had not succeeded. Marketing had clearly increased, extending now all along the Delhi-Agra highway into Delhi. Among the most successful of the new constructions were those with clear religious ties (temple, tradition/*sampradaya*, *guru*, *sadhana*)—perhaps a lesson in the vitality of religious tradition and devotion.

5. The physical and fiscal challenge of establishing sewage treatment infrastructure cannot be overestimated. We live in a city, Lynchburg, Virginia, which has about the same stable or resident population, eighty thousand, as Vrindavan. Lynchburg also borders a river, the James, which has a tradition of pollution by industrial, human, and toxic waste, affecting not only the river watershed but the entire Chesapeake Bay downriver. The current problem for this city is "combined sewer overflow," the condition when spring and summer rains flow into a *combined sewer* system with sewage effluent and *overflow* the sewage treatment plant, spewing raw sewage into the river system. One only has to imagine the monsoon's effects in Vrindavan to envision how sewage treatment can be stymied by seasonal heavy rains. Lynchburg's timeline and fiscal cost for the remedy, separating rainwater sewer lines from those carrying sewage to the treatment plant, extends to thirty years and \$493 million from local, state, and national governments. In establishing sewage treatment systems, Vrindavan has the "advantage" of developing infrastructure without the necessity to retrofit and accommodate existing lines. Nevertheless, effective sewage control will demand enduring commitments, appropriate technology, and coordination of human and cultural resources beyond the scope of any election cycle or cycles.

Bishnoi: An Eco-Theological "New Religious Movement" in the Indian Desert

Pankaj Jain

Introduction

The Bishnoi community is distributed in several North Indian states, but it is most densely located in Western Rajasthan, where their founder Guru Jambheshvara was born. The name *Bishnoi* means the people of the twenty-nine rules (*Bish* and *Noi*, literally twenty and nine). This community is also called the Prahladapanthi community based on their reverence for Prahlada, the mythical son of the demon king Hiranyakasipu who in the Hindu Puranas had invoked the Narasimha incarnation of Vishnu. Some Hindi authors such as Hiralal Maheshwari have referred to this community as Vishnoi, the followers of Vishnu. This latter name suggests the Hinduization on this (and several other communities) after the partition of India and Pakistan in 1947.¹ However, Bishnois themselves insist that the word Bishnoi is based on the Rajasthan words for twenty (*Bish*) and nine (*Noi*) representing the twenty-nine rules given by their guru² and for this reason they did not approve "Vishnoi" as a replacement for Bishnoi as was done by Maheshwari. 1975 Nagaur District Gazetteer also mentions the connection between the twenty-nine rules and the term "Bishnoi," although the statements of Jambheshvara themselves