

Back in the Hills

By Ravi das

Okay so you probably know that the demons are blowing up Krishna's Sacred Hills, and the devotees are fighting back. This battle between devotees and demons has been going on since the start of the creation, we always win, so I (naively) think the demons should just give up... but surprise surprise, they don't!

Last year I went on my first expedition to the Sacred Hills of Braj. I am working with The Braj Foundation (www.brajfoundation.org) for the restoration of the Sacred Kunds, Forests and Hills of Braj. Our plan was to visit all the Tirthas (Sacred sites) and Leelasthalis (places of Radha and Krishna's pastimes) and record graphic and geographic data. Last year we had a relatively short period of time, this visit I get to stay for a month. So I am planning to cover every square inch, any missed Tirthas, Leelasthalis, the mountain ranges, natural features, water ways, lakes and mining sites. Comprehensive.

It was agreed that I would start in Bolkhera, on the outer limit of Braj. This is the place where most of the mining is taking place. I was assured everything is now cool in Bolkhera; last time I was confronted by some angry miners, it was a little ugly but it didn't get violent.

The ultimate purpose of this "labour of love" is to collect as much information as possible on the area. There is an ongoing legal wrangle to protect this area, with both sides trying to demonstrate that it is the best interests of the local community, the environment and its heritage to either conserve or exploit it. This has been going on for more than a year and will soon be concluded in The Supreme Court.

As we drive I am studying the case that the miners will be submitting to the court. Their case for eco-friendly mining is compelling. To get the lease from the government they agree to carefully and responsibly take stone for much needed construction, replacing the top soil and unwanted stone when they are finished, plant trees and not pollute the water supply. They will ensure that there is not too much pollution from the stone crushing and minimize the damage to the environment and the local population's health. On paper it all sounds good. As we bump and crash along the roads destroyed by the constant pounding of

the heavy trucks, I look out through the grey mist of dust and witness the result of the irresponsible destructive mining. I conclude that this road to hell is paved with good intentions. Justice is blind, holding her scales; she weighs the evidence and passes judgement. Our service is to make our case for conservation more convincing.

Day 1: Protest

After the ride from Vrindavan to Bolkhera our small party arrive at a small temple where I will set up a base for the first phase of the survey.

The protest at the brutal demolition of these beautiful and sacred hills is in full swing. The little temple is heaving with sadhus and saints from all sampradays and branches of Hinduism including Sikhs and Jains mixed in with a fair number of the local Brajbasi folk. Kirtan echoes into the still evening air as the Brajabasis gather as they have done for many generations, to dance and sing the praise of Lord Krishna.

You can't imagine what it is like to be pursuing a running gun battle, while avoiding buffalos, monkeys, Brajabasis and going over potholed roads at 90 kph.

Added to this mix the DM (District Magistrate) the SP (Superintendent of Police) and half a dozen local (armed) policemen arrive in a small convoy. The Protest is creating a bit of a stir in the usually quiet area of Braj. There are a couple of Sadhus in the camp who in true dramatic Gandhian style have decided to fast until death to stop the mining. In India in general, and in Braj specifically there is still a great deal of respect for Holy men who have dedicated their lives to the pursuit of spiritual enlightenment. They don't want any martyrs to the cause so this is making the local authorities a bit jumpy.

Why is Braj, the centre of worship for many millions of Hindus and Vaishnavas being treated with such disrespect?

I made a plea, on behalf of the international devotees (I hope you all don't mind) that we use our energy to restore and beautify Krishna's Hills, not blow them up. I ask the DM if he wants to be remembered as the person who helped save the sacred land of Braj, or as one who did nothing to stop the environmental abuse.

The room is full of heated comments and impassioned pleas. The DM sits arms folded in a classic posture of intransigence. Old and young, native and foreign put their points, but it is like water off a ducks back. He reiterates that we follow the rule of law, and assures us that when the edict is passed down from on high he will act with immediate determination. There will be no triumph or agreement tonight. He returns to his office, in a cloud of dust, his blue flashing convoy drive off into the night, and we return to our kirtan.

Day 2: Frustration

The day starts well, rising early I am happy to hear the chanting going on around the camp. I bathe and perform my regular sadhana. The winter sun shines weakly as I prepare for the day's survey, I go through the ritual of checking the equipment. The GPS (Global Positioning System) is giving some trouble. It starts okay but fades out after a few minutes. I check all the connections and try a few times. There is no electricity at the temple, it went off at around 10pm last night and hasn't returned. The battery meter shows half charge but something is wrong. This is a vital piece of equipment, without it I cannot establish the time and position of visiting the various Sacred places. I pray that the power will come on soon and continue checking the other bits of technology.

The camera is working. I take a few pictures of the base camp and the rainbow coalition of devotees here to protest the Sacred Hill destruction. The time to go out on the survey agreed with my interpreter and the video cameraman comes, and goes. I am not sure where they are, but they are not where they agreed to be. I don't have the number for the video cameraman, so I conclude that I have to call the Vrindavan office, but the mobile 'phone that went for repair has stopped working. Well, that's two pieces of technology not working. I get out the computer to send an e-mail or SMS message but there is no signal in this area from the mobile service provider. After I have wandered high and low around the camp, computer in hand, searching for a spot to get some signal I give up, frustrated. The technology is not

in a co-operative mood. By now lunchtime has arrived and still no sign of my interpreter or cameraman. The day has warmed slightly, dogs run around barking in the compound, the police sit around drinking tea and the sadhus carry on with the kirtan, everyone seems in a relaxed mood.

After lunch the cameraman and interpreter show up, keen to get on with the survey. It is my turn to be the source of delay and frustration. We discuss our options and decide to go to the nearest town to call the Vrindavan office and try sending e-mail via the computer. There may be some possibility of a signal and it working from there.

The devotees are just about to go out on HarNam sankirtan. I get some karatala and join the party. We walk into the village and chant, about 50 or so Brajabasis joining the group dancing and chanting. The kirtan is lively and enthusiastic. At one point we stop and the kirtan leader addresses the crowd. "Today we have with us a devotee from England, he has come all this way to do some Dham seva, and I would like him to say a few words." With that short intro, the microphone is thrust towards me. I thank the Brajabasis for preserving their land and culture and warn them that they must be vigilant, and always Chant Hare Krishna!

We dance around the village for an hour or two and then make our way back to the temple. Some of the youth of the village have come to ask questions. They also like to see the satellite mapping programme and see all the Holy places they know pop up on the map with the pictures. The funny mixture of cutting edge technology and simple living.

We sit in the moonlight and talk about how Braj Life, caring for the cows and living simply is the blueprint for spirit souls if they want to go back to the spiritual world and live in Golok Vrindavan. Then we eat some thick Brajabasi rotis, drink hot milk and take rest to the sweet sound of The Holy Name.

Day 3: Escalation

The next day I am preparing to leave when I am told that a senior politician is coming to visit. This is the normal escalation of things here, gradually you have to work your way through the ranks till you finally get the attention of the one who can actually make a decision. He will arrive at 9am so I am requested to stay on until then. The sadhus like having a westerner around, they are

proud that someone from the west has come and voluntarily lives like a Brajabasi. I get up like them and do my sadhana, take a bath like them in winter from the well and go out with them and do madhukari (beg for chappatis). It is an important part of my learning to rely on Krishna and try to become a little more humble.

More police start to arrive, the number of silver pips on the shoulder show that these are high level. They don't just carry shotguns like the locals, they have assault weapons and two way radios. Eventually the "big wig" arrives. About 300 of the local Brajabasis have also showed up and the Braj Foundation people from Vrindavan too.

I discuss my technological problems with my co-workers and we conclude that I should get a lift back to Vrindavan and get them sorted out. The meeting is lively and many people have their say. The Politician says he is on a fact-finding mission. We bring out the satellite maps of the area and explain that we will be doing a more complete study over the next few weeks. So I am happy that I am doing my little bit and will soon be able to furnish him with all the facts he may need. The meeting concludes and although nothing has really happened, it is another small step in the right direction.

The Braj Foundation group with the visiting politician is to head off to Jaipur (the capital of Rajasthan) to meet with the Chief Minister. I load my stuff into another vehicle going to Barshana where I hope to be able to get a lift back to Vrindavan. Off we all go. About half an hour later all hell breaks loose...

The car with our party going to Rajasthan is rammed and the mining mafia thugs smash the windows and try and drag Vineet Narain the CEO of the Braj Foundation out of the car! The car I am in has the bodyguards in and they go into action. We stop and one of the guys jumps out and "requisitions" a motorcycle (without permission!) and zooms off. The chase is on! The car with the smashed window gets away with the goons in hot pursuit. The mining mafia are armed and start shooting at the car, fortunately the roads in India are so bumpy that you would have to be blessed by Krishna to actually hit anything.

You can't imagine what it is like to be pursuing a running gun battle, while avoiding buffalos, monkeys, Brajabasis and going over potholed roads at 90 kph. There is a lot of shouting and calling on mobiles. They want to make sure that

this is not a diversionary tactic and the thugs are attacking other targets. After about 20kms the lead vehicle makes the turn for Barshana and loses the villains. We follow in a convoy now consisting of four vehicles with some burly Brajabasis (I wouldn't like to tangle with them!). I sit in the back chanting the Narasimha prayers and doing japa furiously on my beads (well someone has to remember Krishna!).

We finally take shelter of Maan Mandir next to Radha's temple in Barshana. The melee of people is amazing. We are given some maha prasadam and the post event de construction takes place. How did the goons know where we would be? Were they in cahoots with some of the authorities? etc etc.

Whew! So we discuss and it is decided that I cannot venture out to the hills. The survey is postponed until we can get adequate protection. So I would still be out in the hills, wandering around blissfully unaware of what was happening if it wasn't for my broken GPS!

Later that evening we got a report that 300 police surrounded the camp where I was staying, demanding that the fasting sadhus be handed over to the authorities. It was pointed out that fasting is not against the law but the police were insistent. The local village ladies blocked the road in an effort to stop the police but the police under orders manhandled them which infuriated the Brajabasi men. There ensued a battle and the police fired shots and tear gas on the Brajabasis and sadhus. Eventually the locals were overcome and the sadhus taken into custody. We still do not know where they are being held.

So the demons showed their real faces, not the benign eco-miners helping economic development, but ruthless thugs who will stop at nothing to continue their exploitation.

The peaceful life in Braj is once again disturbed by the demons doing their nonsense. Just like it was 5,000 years ago... So they may have changed their external appearance, but the mood is still the same. Kill the devotees, smash the Holy Dham of Braj and stop devotees worshipping the Supreme Lord.

Will these demons never learn? Wherever there is Krishna, the master of all mystics... there will also certainly be opulence, victory, extraordinary power, and morality. Declare it boldly that My devotees never perish!