



# Vraj Mandar Parikram

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I generally don't have much luck in India. Within a few days I'm either a spluttering bag of mucus or an exploding bag of stool. Too much information, you may think. But believe me, I'm just lowering you in gently to the grim realities of Vraj Mandar Parikram...

The first time I came to Vrindavan was a few months after I joined. I heard Para (Parasuram das) was going out there on parikram and I really wanted to come, so I ducked out of Watford, got a job in a hospital for a month, and saved up the money for the ticket. It was well worth it. Even when I did get sick after 20 odd days on the road around Vraja, I still somehow managed to enjoy being ill in a room nearby the temple, reading Caitanya Caritamrta, and popping in for the occasional Aindra kirtan. It was bliss.

Since then however, it's been phlegm and diarrhoea all the way. The body, eh? So with more than slight trepidation I set off to attempt the one month tour of Vraja with nothing but a sleeping bag for shelter, and the open fields for a water closet.

## DAY ONE - VRINDAVAN > MADHUVAN

The new books haven't arrived yet from Delhi (Para has ordered 60,000) but we have a few left over from Kartik, so we head off with what we have along with a few hundred Kgs of oranges, all drawn along in a cart-cum-mobile cinema, pulled by two bulls. Almost immediately, the orange distribution turns into an England vs India cricket match, much to the amusement of the Brijbasis. The aerodynamics of the humble orange mean that it can be thrown a good deal further than our usual fruit, the banana. This means that even shopkeepers on the other side of the street are within range of the cart as it passes through busy streets, and of course both sides of the cart are crowded with people stretching out their hands and laughing, trying to grab one.

**The Brijbasis like to see you go for it all ...the louder you sing and the louder you bang the drum, the more they smile and encourage you.**

We move out of Vrindavan, through Chittikara and on toward Mathura along National Highway No. 2, distributing as we go. Put it this way, you wouldn't get away with it on the M1. Trucks brake to enable prasada to be aimed through the passenger side window, and the great circus proceeds.

We arrive in Madhuvan in the dark and go on harinam through the town to announce our arrival, and sure enough, a hundred people turn up to see our new movies, Dhruva Maharaja and Lord Vamanadeva, edited down from about 3 hours to 20 minutes!

The crowd go home and I go door to door on madhukari (traditional begging for alms) asking for rotis. The Brijbasis are very kind and will always give something, even if just one roti. I got lucky and was given some potato kachouris and puris at one house. The family invite me in to sit while I wait for the prasada, but knowing only very little Hindi, I barely fluff through a conversation, much to their amusement! I return to the bullcart where we sit to eat and, lo and behold, a rumble of thunder can be heard. Strange for March. Even stranger, then, that it should absolutely hammer down with rain the entire night. Good job we're under someone's front porch. The lightning is magnificent. Since I'm not getting wet I thoroughly enjoy the spectacle, but it's not so much fun in the morning when the streets have turned into a mudbath. All the local children are being driven up to the next village for some kind of festival in tractor trailers, which churn up the mud. They all return a couple of hours later with toys, balloons and kazoos, looking very pleased.

## DAY TWO - MADHUVAN > VRINDAVAN

Another day, another dhaba. And another exceedingly hot dahl. There's a unanimous decision to get the petrol burner out and cook our own kitchari from now on. We head back through Mathura and just as we reach the other side, my stomach turns to liquid, and I dive into a field in the nick of time. Just as I relieve myself, an irate chap appears, shouting at me in Hindi to get out of his patch. Oh, to be sick in India! Fortunately, Arjuna has magical pills that kill everything in your digestive tract on impact, and the condition lasts no more than a few hours.

**A bogus "prema-avatara" guru has a temple. Rukmini went in there last year and took the guy's photo off the altar in disgust. We didn't get attacked for it this time around, thankfully.**

## DAY FOUR - GOVERDHANA & GANTHULI

We arrive early at Sri Sri Radha Bana Bihariji temple on the bank of Kusum Sarovara, where Krishna braided Radha's hair. It's ekadasi, and the western devotees at the tiny temple kindly offer to share prasadam with us later on. We set off on Goverdhana Parikram on two bareknuckle wooden cart rickshaws. Fortunately most of the 26km route is smooth road, but when it isn't, boy, you know about it! We halt at Govinda Kunda and Uddhava Kunda before arriving in Radha Kunda itself, where we take darshan and sprinkle a few drops of kunda water on our heads. We visit Lord Caitanya's sitting place before returning to the temple for delicious simple prasada. It's then a three hour walk to Ganthuli, where the gopis tied Krishna's dhoti and Radharani's sari together. We perform harinam through the village and attract a large following of kids who dance and chant like crazy and later on sit to watch the movie. These evening harinams of Para's will become a trademark of our trip. The kids love to dance and sing. One thing I learn quickly is that this is no place for English reserve. The Brijbasis like

to see you go for it all out, none of this politely tapping out a beat. The louder you sing and the louder you bang the drum, the more they smile and encourage you. These are Krishna's pure devotees we're talking about.

## DAY FIVE - DEEG

We distribute notebooks, pencils, sharpeners and erasers at two schools in the town of Deeg, and at one we are invited onto a stage to sit and hear all the children of the school chant Hare Krishna. The principal then gave a short speech in English. We order 20 rotis for 1.5 rupees each from a roadside stop-off, and 19 rotis arrive for an asking price of 40 rupees. Arjuna refuses to pay the extra and the guy doesn't back down, so Arjuna sends the rotis back. Rukmini was concerned why he had argued over what is just a few pence to us, but Para explained that it's important not to be seen as fools. We walk on to what we know only as the Banyan Tree village, where Lord Siva sits in meditation on Lord Krishna. On the way we spot our first blue cows of the trip. Blue cows are larger than ordinary cows, and have longer necks and striking markings. They are the same colour as Krishna, and it's said that wherever they are, Krishna isn't far away.

**My stomach turns to liquid, and I dive into a field in the nick of time. Just as I relieve myself, an irate chap appears, shouting at me in Hindi to get out of his patch.**

## DAY SEVEN - BADLI

We spend the heat of the day at Kedarnath, where Rukmini's kitchari turns out a treat, before a short evening walk to Badli. Badli is a great little place but rather risky to get into with a ton's worth of bull cart as there's a steep zig zag slope with high walls either side when you enter the village. Somehow, with Arjuna running behind holding the cart back, Para manages to navigate the street and throw oranges to laughing Brijbasis who are watching from their houses and courtyards. The harinam is a great success, with the children going wild when Rukmini points his camera at them - not shy, this lot.

## DAY EIGHT - KADAMBA KHANDI

Every day is getting hotter now, and we make sure to be off the road during the early afternoon. Today we stop at a famous kunda, where next door, a bogus "prema-avatara" guru has a temple. Rukmini went in there last year and took the guy's photo off the altar in disgust. We didn't get attacked for it this time around, thankfully. After it starts to cool off we travel on through the forest of Kamyavan, which is said will fulfil all desires. It's beautiful, very peaceful, tucked away in a small valley. Inside the forest is a village where we stop a do a movie show. Rukmini shows footage of the local villagers singing "rasia" and dancing that he recorded last year. They have great fun spotting people they knew. The rain threatens once again and our newly bought piece of plastic gets a trial run tied down over the cart. The rain never comes, but the night is spent sweating heavily, being tormented by mosquitos...

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