



# The Hidden Forest

## Story script

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This document will soon be made available in Hindi. Please get in touch if you would like to help us translate it into other languages.



## From the author

I am grateful to have had the opportunity to write and illustrate this piece of drama. It is not often that a writer gets to explore material close to the heart, but this was such an occasion. I first visited the sacred town of Vrindavan when I was seven years old. The colourful memories and vivid impressions from that experience have stayed with me and become enhanced with every subsequent visit as a teenager, and finally as an adult.

I believe that pilgrimage is something innately understood by every human being. Pilgrimages are journeys that remove us from the familiar and reveal a new perspective. The pilgrim undertakes a journey to physical, external destinations where divinity manifests, but on the way is reminded how discovering the sacred sites within the heart and mind is no less important. Just as a wellspring always offers sweet water to the thirsty traveller, one can visit the same holy place again and again and become deeply refreshed each time.

It is vitally important that these sacred sites all over the world are protected. Most are suffering due to a basic lack of care for their preservation and importance. I hope that this simple story helps to create awareness about the ways we can work to protect these places and a glimpse into the illuminating experience that such sacred journeys can provide.

— Jahn timer Harrison



## From the publishers

The Hindu tradition contains many texts, passages and verses exalting the importance of nature and its intimate relationship with humanity. The essence of this relationship is the interconnectedness of all life, be it human, animal, fish, tree or plant.

This deep respect for nature is a central part of Hindu life and worship. Mountains, hills, rivers, lakes and trees across India are considered sacred and are actively revered as places of pilgrimage. These include Govardhan hill and the Yamuna river; both are associated with stories of Krishna and are featured in this story. Both are under environmental threat.

We hope this resource, which celebrates in particular the role of women in leading change in their communities, will inspire people of all traditions to re-evaluate their relationship with the natural world whilst on pilgrimage and in their daily lives.

This story is also available as a story, downloadable from [www.bhumiproject.org/thehiddenforest](http://www.bhumiproject.org/thehiddenforest).

## Overview

'Walking the Hidden Forest' is an original play by Jahnavi Harrison, of approximately 30 minutes duration. It follows four Indian women from different generations as they go on a pilgrimage from their home in chaotic New Delhi to the sacred town of Vrindavan. This town

The four main characters, grandmother 'Nani', her daughter 'Jaya', and grandchildren, 'Shanti', and 'Mayuri' encounter diverse situations and characters on their journey that lead the audience to explore themes about the environment, the relevance of traditional rural living, the power of women, spirituality, consumerism, activism and family dynamics. With humour and poignancy, the rich culture of pilgrimage is experienced, through the eyes of characters with perspectives that audience members of all ages can relate to.

The play calls for a diverse spectrum of supporting roles, making it an ideal choice for a large group to perform, whilst the roles are set up so that it could be dramatized effectively with a smaller cast also. It utilises sound and light predominantly to set mood and atmosphere, but equally has great scope for building a more artistically complex staged production.

The script incorporates sections of traditional Indian storytelling, music and dance, which can be expanded or minimised as desired. For the greatest depth of experience for students, the material could be explored in dance/movement, music, PSHE and English lessons using the supporting learning resources.



**CHARACTERS (in order of appearance)**

RAJU/BOATMAN

NANI

JAYA

MAYURI

SHANTI

DRIVER/ TEMPLE PRIEST

YOUNG KRISHNA

PROSTRATING PILGRIMS/TOURISTS

PRIESTS/ RICKSHAW WALLAH/ LASSI WALLAH

LOCAL WOMEN PILGRIMS/ BRAJ VILLAGERS (ANCIENT)

LADY 1

LADY 2/ MIRABAI

RASA LILA PERFORMERS/ GOPIS

YOUNG RADHA

BUSINESSMAN/ MR CHANDER

RIVERBANK SADHU

BRAHMIN BOYS



## **SCENES**

SCENE 1.....NANI IS DYING.....LATE AT NIGHT  
SCENE 2.....DRIVING TO BRAJ.....MIDDAY  
SCENE 3.....WALKING ROUND GOVARDHAN.....AFTERNOON  
SCENE 4.....POURING MILK ON GOVARDHAN.....AFTERNOON  
SCENE 5.....ENTERING THE TOWN.....DUSK  
SCENE 6.....THE ENCAMPMENT/RASA LILA.....EVENING  
SCENE 7.....ON THE WAY TO BARSANA.....MORNING  
SCENE 8.....CLEANING THE FOREST/BARSANA.....MORNING  
SCENE 9.....VRINDAVAN LASSI WALLAH.....LATE AFTERNOON  
SCENE 10.....YAMUNA RIVER.....SUNSET  
SCENE 11.....BRAJ IS IN YOUR HEART.....MORNING

## SCENE 1 – NANI IS DYING

EXT. Evening. A middle class apartment complex in Delhi, 2012. It is quiet (for India). Street sounds are muffled and no one is around but RAJU the security guard, snoring at his desk.

NANI (O.S.)

Ohhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh! I'm DYING! Help! HELP! Save me! Hai bhagwan! HELLLLLLP! Shri Krishna sharanam mama! Ohhhhhhhhh!

RAJU snorts and wakes up, running off stage to find the source of the disturbance.

EXIT RAJU

Curtains open and NANI can be seen writhing and moaning on the bed. Her granddaughters, MAYURI and SHANTI are next to her, as well as her daughter and their mother, JAYA.

MAYURI

Nani! Naniji, we're here, don't worry.

JAYA

Mayu, quickly, go get Naniji's pills and some water.

JAYA hands MAYURI an empty glass from the bedside table. EXIT MAYURI.

JAYA

Shanti, bed. Right now!

SHANTI

But—ma!

JAYA

NOW!

ENTER MAYURI holding a glass of water and two pills, handing them to JAYA. SHANTI steps back into the hall as if to go to bed, but stays to watch the action. NANI is a little quieter now, but still writhing and whimpering.

JAYA

(holding out the water glass)

Ma, please open your mouth.

NANI refuses to drink, flailing her arms about and knocking the glass of water all over the bed.

JAYA

Ma. Please calm down. Mayuri, go get another glass of water.

NANI

Don't be ridiculous! I don't need water or those stupid pills. I am dying. Can't you tell?

NANI moans and beats her chest. SHANTI whimpers at the doorway, scared.

JAYA

Ma, you are not dying. You just have indigestion. How many kachoris did you eat this evening?

NANI is quiet suddenly, deeply offended.

MAYURI

Nani? (a beat) Nani, singing about Krishna always makes you feel better, shall I get you your bhajan CD?

NANI's eyes are closed and she doesn't respond. SHANTI walks in from the hallway.

JAYA  
Shanti! I thought I told you to

A loud knock at the door.

JAYA  
Now what?

EXIT JAYA

NANI  
(suddenly animated)  
Girls! I need to go home.

MAYURI  
What do you mean Naniji? You are home.

NANI  
No, I mean my real home. I mean Braj. I can't bear it any more, I am so old now, and I don't belong in this crazy city.

SHANTI  
You want to leave us?

NANI  
Of course I'm not leaving you. We're all going on a *yatra* together! If I don't go, I will die, and if I am going to die, I *must* go. Understand?

SHANTI  
But Ma says you just ate too many—

NANI  
Never mind what Ma says, I have decided. We are going to leave on Monday together. Don't worry it will be fun.

MAYURI  
But Naniji, I have my audition next weekend. I have to practice. There's a talent scout coming from Mumbai and everything.

NANI

Hah, talent scout! Useless idiots if you ask me. They don't know what real dance is. You'll see, *beti*, in Braj we will dance like never before, ha?

NANI jiggles her hips jokingly, still lying on the bed.

ENTER JAYA with RAJU.

JAYA

Ma, what in the world—

Noticing them, NANI begins to roll around and moan again.

NANI

Oh help me! Save me! I want to go to Braj! I'm DYING!

JAYA

(trying to usher gawping RAJU away from the door)  
Raju, I assure you, we are fine, please go back downstairs.

RAJU

(taking off his cap solemnly)  
It sounds like she is getting ready for her reunion with the Lord.

JAYA

No, no, I assure you, she just ate—

RAJU

Didi— don't make the mistake I made. I hesitated to take my mother on yatra in her last days and then it was too late. I can never forgive myself. You'd better plan to leave as soon as possible. Don't wait until your husband returns.

## SCENE TWO - DRIVING TO BRAJ

INT. Driving in the car to Braj. Late morning. The wind whips through the windows, speeding down the Delhi Agra highway. The radio is playing a Bollywood hit and NANI is in the front seat next to the DRIVER, practically bouncing with excitement. MAYURI's eyes are locked to her mobile phone screen in the back and JAYA is fussing with bags. Only SHANTI and NANI are upbeat.

MAYURI

Shanti either you're going to sit in the middle or next to the window - make up your mind and stop leaning all over me. There's nothing to look at yet.

NANI

Oh, we are going to Braj! I'm coming! I said I would come and I'm finally going to see Brajbhumi again. Oh my friends, I'm coming!

JAYA

Ma, it's still not too late to make a booking at the hotel. We can sleep comfortably every night at least. Bhaiya, do you know the way to the Amritabhavan Guesthouse?

NANI

I am going home, I am going home!

SHANTI

I am so excited Naniji. Will there be monkeys everywhere?

NANI

Yes, yes, monkeys, and peacocks and cows. Remember Mayu? When you came last time you made friends with that little calf that followed you everywhere?

MAYURI

Mmm. Shanti! Get your sweaty hands off!



JAYA

Ma, I understand that you want to do a yatra the traditional way, but really, I think for your health it's—

NANI

Hold on tight everyone, now the roads really get fun. Govardhan, here we come!

The DRIVER swerves right towards Govardhan.

JAYA

(banging her head on the ceiling)

Ow. Drive carefully!

SHANTI

(looking out the window)

Look at all those yellow flowers Mayu! Oh wow, what's that? A real palace on a lake?

NANI

That's the lake of flowers where Radha and Krishna meet. Kusum Sarovar! We're almost there!

JAYA

(to the driver)

Pull over here in the market bhaiya. I can smell hot aloo bhaji!

The car stops with jolt.

NANI

No time for snacking. We'll eat something later. All right! Let's go! Grab your bags.

MAYURI

So much energy for someone about to die.

They all pile out of the car.

DRIVER

Jaya madam, shall I wait here? I can park just under the mango trees over there.

JAYA

No, no need. Driver, I will call you tonight to take us to the hotel.

DRIVER

Yes Madam. Very good.

NANI

No, no, driver-saab, go home to Delhi. Come back in three days to collect us.

JAYA

Ma, don't be—

DRIVER

(with an understanding nod)

I'll just - keep my phone on?

NANI

Come on! Someone help me put my bag on my back. First stop Giriraj Govardhan, follow me!

EXIT ALL

### SCENE 3 – WALKING ROUND GOVARDHAN

EXT. Afternoon on the sandy pilgrimage path around Govardhan Hill. The path is mostly deserted but for the occasional monkey or pilgrim. They walk in between trees and NANI excitedly points out the sights.

NANI

There's a deer—oh, Giriraj I am here!

SHANTI

Is the hill called Giriraj Nani?

NANI

Yes, but he's not just a hill, he is the greatest devotee of Lord Krishna. He lets him play with his friends in his pastures and caves, he gives everyone sweetest water, fruits and minerals, and he blesses every pilgrim who comes and visits him.

MAYURI

My feet hurt already.

NANI

Ok, ok, let's stop for a moment.

They all sit down on a nearby mound.

NANI

Jaya, do you remember I used to sing you that Mirabai bhajan when you were little? Sant Mirabai sings about how her Lord Krishna lifted this huge hill when he was only seven years old, just to protect his devotees from a treacherous storm.

SHANTI

I'm seven.

NANI pats her on the head and continues.

NANI

On that day there were pillars of rain and giant bolts of lightning falling from the sky. Lord Indra, the king of the demigods, was furious because the villagers chose to offer their worship to Govardhan Hill instead of to him, as they usually did. It was all Krishna's fault, it was on his advice that the villagers changed their ceremony. He wanted them to understand that it was actually Govardhan that was providing everything they could need to live peacefully.

What's worse was that Krishna appeared to be so young. Indra couldn't believe that they paid attention to a little boy over the king of heaven.

ENTER YOUNG KRISHNA in shadow, who in slow motion lifts the Govardhan Hill on the smallest finger of his left hand.

NANI

But as we know, he was far from being an ordinary boy.

Silhouettes of the villagers rush to YOUNG KRISHNA, taking shelter from the storm.

NANI (CONT)

All the villagers, even the cows, were protected under the hill while the storm raged on for seven whole days. The whole time, Krishna was holding up the hill on the little pinky finger of his left hand. His friends all thought he would get tired and drop it, so they used sticks and poles to help him - they say that love is blind, well, no one is more in love than the Braja-vasis. Krishna saved them in the most incredible ways, so many times, but they never suspected his real identity. After one week the storm subsided and Indra was humbled. From that day on, Krishna was known as Giridhari - the lifter of the mountain.

ENTER MIRABAI who watches the scene and sings and dances in praise of Krishna as NANI continues.

NANI

Mora mukuta, pitambara sohe, gale vyjanthimala...Mira ke prabhu, giridhara nagara...Wearing a crown of peacock feathers and a brilliant yellow cloth, he is garlanded with a beautiful wreath of forest flowers. Oh Mira's lord is Giridhara...

JAYA

(singing along)

Giridhara nagara...Oh, I do remember hearing that before.

NANI

Mirabai was a real royal princess in the 14th century. She had all the riches she could have ever wanted, but she left it all behind and ran away to Braj because there is

something more precious than any gold or jewels to be found here.

As NANI finishes, MIRABAI rushes toward YOUNG KRISHNA and embraces his feet. Quick fade to BLACKOUT on the whole stage.

SHANTI

What is it Nani?

NANI

Hm. You will soon find out.

EXIT ALL

#### SCENE 4 – POURING MILK ON GOVARDHAN

INT. Afternoon. A small temple juts out of the hill. Where an altar would normally be, the face of the hill protrudes into the space, the brown rock worn smooth from the touch of millions of fingers. Priests look on as throngs of people filled small paper cups with milk and jostle to pour it over the stone. The collective chatter bounces off the ceiling and adds to the chaos.

NANI ushers everyone to take cups and find a gap in the mass of bodies to squeeze through. They pour their milk and stumble out of the crowd. They continue to walk, shading their faces from the blazing sun.

MAYURI

(impatiently)

Nani - what's the point of pouring milk on a stone?

JAYA

It's just an old custom, Mayu, this place is full of them. Wash your hands now, you don't know how many germs were on those cups.

NANI

(offended)

We pour the milk as an offering to Giriraj. He doesn't need anything from us but we offer it as way of showing our love. That is what Braj is all about.

SHANTI

But how can a stone drink?

NANI

Hah! Not only can a stone drink, but trees can think and animals can speak, they all have a soul, just like we do - their love for Krishna makes even the impossible possible. Now girls, take off your shoes and put them in your bags, we are going to do the next stretch barefoot.

JAYA

But Ma, that's ridiculous, it's not clean.



NANI

Nonsense, the ground of Braj is always spiritually pure.

JAYA

Ma, I don't care what you think you can see, I see dirty sand and I am not walking with my shoes off.

NANI

If you see dirt you can help to clean it.

NANI slips off her shoes and puts them in her bag.  
MAYURI and SHANTI hesitate for a moment and then take theirs off too.

NANI

Watch out for the sharp stones and thorns girls.

ENTER PROSTRATING PILGRIMS. Old, wrinkled men dressed in dirty cotton or scraps of woollen blanket, husbands and wives, even parents dutifully take turns to bow down whilst their children stand around playing. They place a stone at their head when they are lying flat, whisper some prayers, then rise to stand. Then with a step forward to the stone marker, they bow down again. In this way they inch forwards.

## SCENE 5 — ENTERING A TOWN

EXT. Dusk. The road has veered into a small town along the way and now traffic whizzes past, blowing out exhaust fumes. A speaker atop a long pole blasts out a bhajan with what sounds like fifty wailing violins in the background.

SHANTI covers her ears. NANI wanders into the middle of the road, oblivious to the traffic. She is captivated by a big billboard for a golf course.

SHANTI

Nani! Are we going the right way?

MAYURI

(reading aloud from the billboard)

Krishna Paradise Golf Course. Spectacular views of Govardhan Hill while you putt and play. Pilgrimage, at your leisure.

NANI

I don't believe it.

JAYA

Ma, watch out!

A car speeds past, almost knocking NANI over. JAYA grabs for her arm and pulls her back in the nick of time. The driver doesn't stop but blares his horn loudly and JAYA ushers them all out of the road. They quickly get back onto the path again and soon only the moonlight illuminates the way. MAYURI gets out a torch and shines it ahead of them.

NANI

That golf course...my favourite forest used to be there. I don't understand. What is this building - where have all those trees gone? This is not the Braj I once knew.

JAYA

(gently)

Ma, maybe this isn't the place you're thinking of. It's getting dark now, ha? Shall I call the driver?

A large, bustling group of LOCAL WOMEN PILGRIMS overtake them on the path. MAYURI shines her torch on them. They are dressed in colourful cotton skirts, bright pink, mustard yellow and parrot green. Their chunnis cover their heads and even fall over their eyes, and they wear big nose rings and stacks of bangles.

NANI

Radhe Radhe! Where are you headed?

LADY 1

Ma, we are going to Barsana, but first we'll stop for the night in the forest, there's a special rasa lila dance there tonight.

NANI

Barsana! Rasa lila! Can we go?

LADY 1

Of course, my son is playing as Krishna tonight.

MAYURI

Can't we skip it and go somewhere quiet for the night? I really need to practise my dance - the audition is just one day after we get back

LADY 1

You're a dancer?

NANI

Ha, yes she is, but she hasn't seen real dance yet. In Braj every word is a song and every step is a dance of love.

LADY 1

All right, maybe my son can show you a few steps later, it will be fun!

NANI

How old is he? Is he fair?

LADY 1

(laughing)

He's only eleven, but he is a fantastic dancer.

## SCENE 6 - THE ENCAMPMENT/RASA LILA

EXT. Night. A small forested clearing near to the pilgrimage path. Pilgrims have hung mosquito nets on the tree branches and the silhouettes of people are sitting beneath them on rough blankets. A couple of small fires are burning, sending sweet smoke into the air.

NANI leads them over to a fire where LADY 2 is serving a hot meal. LADY 2 gestures to sit down.

NANI

Sit down everyone, we are just in time for dinner.

They sit and the lady serves them hot soup and flame cooked flat bread rotis. They eat with gusto.

NANI

(through her chewing)

The fire is burning cow dung, that's why it tastes so good.

JAYA freezes, disgusted at the thought.

JAYA

Dung? You mean—?

JAYA struggles not to spit out her food.

SHANTI

(delighting in her mother's disgust)

Dung means poo!

MAYURI and SHANTI both giggle, waiting to see if their mother will chew and swallow successfully.

MAYURI

What's wrong with wood?

LADY 2

Using wood every day means cutting trees. Even wood we gather from the ground runs out quickly. Dung? Well, you

just lift the cow's tail every day and there it is, the perfect fuel. You know, everything here in Braj is connected, everything and everyone has a purpose and helps to care for everything else. Just see how the tolerant trees are giving us shelter, the cows have given us this fuel on which to cook, and our friends, the Braja-vasis are nourishing us. This is real life.

SHANTI

Why were you so upset about that golf course Nani? Didn't Nanaji used to play golf?

LADY 2

Things like that have no place here. This is a holy place, for those who love Krishna like us, not for people to stand around all day hitting little balls and admiring the view. They want to enjoy this land, but they don't understand that the more they come here to serve their own pleasure, the more the real Braj goes into hiding.

NANI

I can't believe how Braj has changed. I only recognise this path, but places like that golf course...these were the most beautiful forests you have ever seen. All you could hear were the calls of the koyal birds, and there was no concrete. When Mirabai came here, that is what she would've seen. She was on the run from her husband's family. She must have rested under these trees, and found shelter here. When she was a child her mother had given her a deity of Krishna to worship, and he became her only true love. Her husband's family tried to force her to give him up, but she couldn't. Can you imagine Mayuri? If your father married you to some man who didn't let you dance? That's how she must have felt. She came here, dressed simply and on foot like us, seeking her beloved Lord. Just like me, she didn't live in Braj forever, but she did remain absorbed in love for Krishna for the rest of her life. And long before Mirabai came... oh what stories one could tell.

SHANTI

(tugging on Nani's shawl)

Tell us Nani!

JAYA

(as she shyly reaches for another roti)

Yes Ma, tell us.

NANI needs no further encouragement, and stands, getting into the role of storyteller.

NANI

This place, where we are sitting now, was once the pleasure ground for sweet Krishna and his friends. And at night he would dance in these forests with the gopis. They were little milkmaids who each believed Krishna was dancing only with her. Mayuri, you think you know about dance. Well, this was dance that you could never see anywhere else in the three universes. Under a full moon just like this one, they would whirl and sway and criss-cross and weave in and out. All the gods would assemble in the heavens to watch the incredible sight below. Sometimes they would dance for a whole month, but Krishna would make it seem as if it was only one night. When the sun began to rise, they had to return to their homes in secret, as if they had been sleeping in their beds all along.

ENTER GOPIS laughing and chatting in the aftermath of their dancing.

NANI

And these trees, their trunks wept tears of joy to see their beloved Krishna so happy, and their leaves would tremble in time to the sound of the dancing foot-bells. Actually they were great sages who were blessed to witness this sight because of the great penances they had performed over many, many lifetimes. And now they can tell us so many stories. There are so many songs being sung in the forest if you listen carefully.

NANI puts her ear to the trunk of a tree and closes her eyes.

NANI

(singing)

Jayati te 'dhikam, janmana vrajah, srayata indira sasvad  
atra hi, dayita drisyatam, diksu tavakas, tvayi dhritasavas,  
tvam vicinvate... O beloved, Your birth in the land of Vraja  
has made it exceedingly glorious, and thus Indirā, the  
goddess of fortune, always resides here. It is only for Your  
sake that we, Your devoted servants, maintain our lives. We  
have been searching everywhere for You, so please show  
Yourself to us. The gopis cried and sung this song when  
Krishna disappeared from their sight. They ran everywhere  
calling out



GOPIS join in with her singing, then run to the different trees and call out silently whilst NANI does the same and voices their cries.

NANI

Where are you Krishna! Oh beloved trees, have you seen our Lord? Oh sweet deer, why are you silent? Won't you tell us if Krishna passed this way? Oh parrots, how beautifully you sing the name of our most dear one, over and over, but stop for a moment and speak, tell us if you know where he is hiding.

NANI has exhausted herself in her enthusiasm and sits down again, a little deflated. EXIT GOPIS.

NANI

Braj is a land of such stories. Every living creature here is a part of Krishna's lila and has a story to tell. Those golf course men have no idea.

The fires have gone out now - only small mounds of embers remain, glowing like mounds of rubies in the dark. Oil lamps are lit, and people begin to gather for the rasa lila performance. RASA LILA PERFORMERS enter through the trees, dressed as gopi maidens. They tell the story in dance and song, and the audience of women laugh and cry in appreciation. At the end, YOUNG KRISHNA a charming boy with a flute tucked in his waistband appears to loud applause. He is wearing a full skirt decorated with peacock feathers and he drops to his knees and began to whirl in large circles. The skirt twirls around him, faster and faster to the rhythm of the drummers. MAYURI is entranced.

SHANTI

Why is Krishna dressed like a peacock?

NANI

He is trying to charm Radha, who is upset with him. He disguises himself and dances for her, but look... she is joining him.

ENTER YOUNG RADHA, also dressed as a peacock, but with the jewelled ornaments and braided hair of the

beautiful Radha. The two begin to spin around each other, circling like twin orbits. As soon as the dance is over, the crowd settles down to sleep, and NANI ushers the girls and JAYA to lie down too.

MAYURI

Thank you for bringing us here Nani.

NANI

(falling asleep)

Oh, it wasn't me that brought you...

BLACKOUT

## SCENE 7 – ON THE WAY TO BARSANA

EXT. Morning. The air is filled with the sound of bells. The encampment from the night before is unchanged, but most of the ladies are already awake and getting ready to go.

NANI jostles them all awake and takes them to a nearby water pump where they brush their teeth, wrap themselves in thin cotton towels, and pour buckets of cold water over each other, to much complaint and exclamation. Shivering, they quickly dress in a secluded area and begin walking again, following the chattering ladies.

JAYA

Should I call the driver? Maybe he can get us there faster.

NANI

No. No need. Remember, we are doing this yatra with the real mood of Braj. All we want to bring to this place are our prayers, not pollution from one more car. Let's take a tonga.

SHANTI

(starting to run off stage)

There's some Nani!

NANI

(puffing and panting to catch up)

Don't get on unless the horse looks healthy!

The ladies follow in a colourful procession. EXIT ALL

## SCENE 8 – CLEANING BARSANA FOREST

EXT. Early afternoon. The forest paths at the base of the hill, atop which stands the grand palace of Sri Radha.

The ladies enter, dancing and clapping their hands in much jollity. The girls are clearly sheepish about joining in, but the ladies cajole them into participating and soon MAYURI is happily dancing, much to NANI's delight. Some ladies come out of a house to greet them and offer fresh rotis and water. MAYURI and SHANTI reach out to accept, but JAYA gives them a warning look and shakes her head. NANI notices and makes it clear that she would rather die than refuse the hospitality of the Braj locals. She gives JAYA a sharp look and pours the water into the girls' mouths from a little height, dripping it on their faces with a chuckle.

NANI

When I was young we could drink the river water in Braj. I remember when they made a new sewage system, not long before I got married and left. The system was never finished properly and so the water that supplied the wells became contaminated.

LADY 2

(overhearing them as she collects rubbish)  
Yes, you are right didi, and when tourists began to come here they had to be supplied with all this water in plastic bottles. Now it's just easier and cheaper for us all to do the same, unless we install expensive filters.

MAYURI

Maybe next time we come we could bring our own metal water bottles, then we could just fill them with clean water wherever we go. Isn't it Nani?

LADY 2

A very good idea. I heard that some people are campaigning for big water tanks to be set up everywhere for just this reason – you're a smart one aren't you?

NANI

And she's an amazing dancer. Yes, the best solutions are usually the simplest. Come, let's do what we can to show our love by cleaning Shri Radha's garden.

They start to pick up rubbish, bottles etc. and LADY 2 gives them some bags to put it in. It is already a hot morning and bending down is tiring work. Suddenly they hear a peacock cry and JAYA is captivated.

JAYA

Ma, that's the first peacock I've heard since we've come. What happened to them all? I remember so many from when you brought me here as a child.

NANI

The peacocks are hiding because their homes - the trees - are being destroyed. You can see how dry and hard the ground has become because it is no longer sheltered from the sun. No moisture can stay in these conditions, very few flowers can grow. The bees and butterflies that pollinate all the plants have left for places where there is more nectar to be found. And the parrots, Sri Radha's messengers, where are they?

JAYA and NANI sit down on a rock for a break, whilst in the background SHANTI and MAYURI continue to pick up rubbish.

JAYA

What is to be done? Perhaps the local government need make some big changes.

NANI

That will always be. But it actually comes down to us, who visit these sacred places. Vrindavan was once a great forest - now I hear the song of the trees, crying for Krishna to come back.

They both stand, realising they are almost at the top of the hill.

JAYA

Here we are girls, come, bring your bags, let's take them somewhere where they can be disposed of.

They look around but don't see anything obvious, so approach a TEMPLE PRIEST standing at the door. He is absorbed in texting on his mobile phone and barely looks up to greet them.

JAYA

Excuse me panditji, we're trying to find somewhere to put all this rubbish we've collected from Sri Radha's forest.

The TEMPLE PRIEST lazily points out at the forest, indicating that they should put it somewhere far away from the temple, then goes back to his phone.

SHANTI

(almost crying)

But that's Sri Radha's garden!

BUSINESSMAN

Is something wrong here? Why are you crying so much beti?

SHANTI

We're just trying to put this rubbish we collected in the right place, but they want us to just throw it back in the forest again!

BUSINESSMAN

I see. Everything is Sri Radha's plan is it not? I happen to be visiting from Delhi just to work out how to create safe containers to hold waste along the pilgrimage paths so that everyone can take their turn at cleaning this sacred place. Come, let me take those bags from you. At least I can take them in my car back to Delhi for now.

BUSINESSMAN takes the bags from them and gives them to a rickshaw wallah to carry down to the car.

BUSINESSMAN

Good luck! Remember, some people do still care about this place, and even city folk like us can do a great deal if we all do a little to serve Sri Radha, together.

EXIT BUSINESSMAN

Suddenly they hear bells ringing and loud singing, and they enter the temple. The LOCAL WOMEN PILGRIMS are singing and beating drums before the beautiful altar as if their lives depended on it. The girls bow down and then ALL EXIT.



## SCENE 9 - VRINDAVAN/LASSI WALLAH

EXT. Vrindavan town. Late afternoon. All is bustling and chaotic and there are TOURISTS all around, clearly from other countries or from the city.

JAYA

I'm so glad that ride is over. I think my head is going to be flat on top from hitting it so many times on the car roof!

NANI

Well, that's what happens when you want to get somewhere faster than natural. Something has to give in, one way or another.

MAYURI

So this is Vrindavan Nani? I thought it was supposed to be a forest?

NANI

Yes. It was. Very long ago. Come, let's have a drink before we start our pilgrimage to the different temples.

They stop at the stall of a LASSI WALLAH who starts to make up tall glasses of the yogurt drink, pouring it with a flourish.

NANI

Bhaiya, my granddaughters are coming to Braj for the first time. And this may be the last for me – do you know where we can see a real piece of Braj forest these days?

LASSI WALLAH

(mockingly)

Oh Maiya! These days it is hard to find anything that hasn't become spoiled by greedy men. Of course, no matter how much things change, some old ruins never lose their charm—  
(gesturing to himself)

LASSI WALLAH (CONT.)

But a real Braj forest is a tall order these days. You know, the real beauty of this land can only be seen by the grace of Sri Radha. Once upon a time Krishna accused her of stealing the beauty of the forest. Imagine! Just because she picked a flower without asking, he claimed that her limbs had become professional thieves, stealing the charming softness of the lotus petals and the graceful motions of the swans and elephants.

NANI

The rascal! And then? What did Radha say?

LASSI WALLAH

(enjoying the attention)

That rascal Krishna! He claimed that Radha had stolen the beauty that that Cupid has created here in Braj. Can you imagine? He even threatened to take her to Cupid to apologise, and be punished. But as usual Radha and the gopis protested, and rightly so! They explained that the forest here is actually a reflection of Radha's beauty. Hah! Cupid looks like a hog's behind compared to our Radha! To prove their point, Radharani began walking, and as can only happen here in her land, birds, deer, trees, flowers, and other creatures in the forest suddenly became golden, exactly reflecting her radiance. That showed them! Jai Sri Radhe! Jai Sri Radhe! Come on, say it!

ALL IN UNISON

Jai Sri Radhe!

LASSI WALLAH

(approvingly)

Hah! Yes! Sri Radha is the Queen here, the source of all beauty and happiness. Believe an old man like me. If we wish to see beyond the dirt and our practical struggles we must offer her our hearts, nothing less.

As he speaks, lights fade to blackout. Sounds of Vrindavan town get louder: arati bells, conch shells, crowds, traffic, rickshaw bells, cows, car horns and buses, slowly merging into the sounds of a river and echoes of flute music.

## SCENE 10 – YAMUNA RIVER

EXT. Dusk. The quiet bank of the Yamuna river.  
The first light that appears in the blackout is the towering ghee lamp of a RIVERBANK SADHU. He is circling it slowly in the dark and chanting mantras, accompanied by a small group of BRAHMIN BOYS. Slowly the lights fade up to the golden glow of sunset.

ENTER JAYA, MAYURI, SHANTI, NANI.  
They look out at the river, relieved after a long afternoon walking around the hectic town. They sit down on the steps leading down to the water and gaze at the river.

MAYURI

Are we going to swim, Nani?

NANI shakes her head sadly.

JAYA

I remember swimming here. I learnt to swim here – remember Ma?

NANI

Of course I do. Krishna's friends played here in the same way, all those thousands of years ago. That was until the pure river water was poisoned by the presence of a huge venomous serpent called Kaliya.

JAYA

Will you tell us the story, Ma?

NANI

Kaliya lived in the river and claimed it as his own, letting his powerful venom poison the water until the trees on the banks withered and died and even the air itself became so polluted that birds flying over the Yamuna fell into it, dead. One day, not knowing it was poisoned, Krishna's cowherd friends drank from the river and fell to the ground unconscious. When Krishna saw this calamity he decided to fight Kaliya and kill him.

ENTER YOUNG KRISHNA and a couple of BRAJ VILLAGERS, who enact the story as NANI speaks. The RIVERBANK SADHU and BRAHMIN BOYS continue to chant, but become part of the ancient story, reacting to the dramatic movements of YOUNG KRISHNA with mixed fear and pride.

NANI

He climbed to the top of that *kadamba* tree, dived into the poisonous water and wrestled with the serpent. They fought for two hours. His mother, and all the people of Vrindavan watched terrified from the bank. They were sure Krishna would be defeated and were ready to die with him.

SHANTI

Oh Naniji, did Krishna win?

NANI

Of course! He always does. He was never really in any danger, but just to increase the love of the Braja-vasis, he pretended to be overcome by Kaliya, and allowed himself to be wrapped in his coils. Then, at just the right moment, he leapt free and swinging himself up, he began to dance on Kaliya's many, darting heads, crushing them down beneath his little, powerful feet. Everyone began to cheer and Krishna danced even more jubilantly, winking at them all the while until, finally exhausted, Kaliya begged for mercy. When Kaliya's wives begged Krishna to let their husband go free, he agreed, but banished him to a land very far away, where he would not disturb anyone. Kaliya left, humbled and defeated; the water of the Yamuna river was restored to its natural state and the trees returned to life.

SHANTI

So now we can go in? Kaliya didn't come back did he?

NANI

Not exactly, but you could say he did. There is so much pollution from cities and sewers, and also nobody can stop the businesses upstream putting their poison in the river. So this sacred water can no longer be drunk or bathed in. The fish and turtles have mostly gone, too.

SHANTI

We need Krishna to come back and fight again! Oh Nani, do you think he will? If we ask him kindly?

NANI doesn't respond but takes SHANTI's hand and leads them to the river where they sprinkle drops on their heads. JAYA and MAYURI sniff the water and screw their noses up at the foul odour.

NANI

(with resignation)

So, Mayu - I guess we have to get back for your audition, na? Don't let your old Nani spoil it for you. Shall we call the driver now?

JAYA

Actually Ma, I was thinking, maybe we could just go for a little boat ride before we leave? It doesn't have to be long.

NANI doesn't need any encouragement and leads them down the nearest boat. They get in and the BOATMAN begins to use his long bamboo pole to move them away from the sandy bank. SHANTI reaches to trail her fingers in the water as it swirls around the boat, but draws back, remembering how unclean it is.

SHANTI

It's so sad. Isn't there something we can do? Can we pour in lots of clean water and make it beautiful again?

JAYA

No, beti, that wouldn't work. Some problems are too deep to fix so easily.

NANI

But there are always small ways we can help. Anyone can offer some service in Braj, even the ants and spiders. Even us! What do you think would help?

SHANTI

We could try to pick up more rubbish that we see?

NANI

Yes, that is a good start. What else?

MAYURI

And we could write to some of the big newspapers to make people aware of what's happening?

JAYA

We could try to travel in ways that don't pollute the earth, especially when we visit here, and I'm sure there must be charities trying to change things for the better. We could find out what help they need and get involved with their work.

SHANTI

And we can only eat rotis from poo fires!

BOATMAN

Yes, those things are definitely important. But there is something else that can work more powerfully than all of those things and that is prayer. Krishna is the source of life for the whole earth, and if he likes, he can definitely help us to care for Braj and return its natural beauty and purity.

Suddenly the light flares from the front - the sun has sunk low enough to be lighting up the whole river - they all shade their eyes from the brilliant glare.

BOATMAN

He is her father. Suryadeva, the sun god is the father of Yamuna devi, the goddess of the river. See how he reaches to comfort her. Just as Kaliya did, we have claimed this water as our own and poisoned it with our carelessness. Now Yamunaji, the river goddess, is hiding her face, just like the peacocks of the disappearing forests. One day we will all learn this lesson: without caring for each other, there is no Vrindavan and if we are far from Vrindavan, we are very far from Krishna.

(singing)

Govinda Jaya Jaya, Gopala Jaya Jaya....

Lights slowly fade to blackout, the sound of the water and the boatman's singing remaining.

## SCENE 11 – BRAJ IS IN YOUR HEART

INT. Morning in the Chanders' apartment in Delhi. The family is sitting round the breakfast table. A TV is on in the background and the sound of it starkly contrasts the peace of the boatman's song. Jaya is serving all of them as they chat about the trip.

MR CHANDER

(to Jaya)

You didn't get sick, dear, with all those germs and the pollution?

JAYA

Actually, I realised that some risks are worth taking to visit a place that is so spiritually pure. And I learnt a new way to cook rotis!

MR CHANDER

And Mayu, you were all right missing so much practice time for your audition? Isn't it tomorrow?

MAYURI

Yes, but I've changed my mind about my dance. What do you think, Ma, if I do the peacock dance from Braj instead? The little boy showed me how to do the spins and everything.

MAYURI leaps up, kneels down on the kitchen floor and starts twirling in neat circles on her knees. She grabs the thin cloth of her dupatta and holds it so that it flares out as she spins, her tongue sticking out a little as she tries not to topple over. With each turn, she rises and falls slightly, deftly shifting her knees.

NANI

(clapping)

Wah wah! Magnificent! I knew you were a real Brajbasi girl!

MR CHANDER

And what about you Shanti? Did you learn anything new?

SHANTI looks down at her breakfast, unresponsive.

MR CHANDER

Did you see any peacocks there?

SHANTI

(On the verge of tears)

The real ones were all hiding. Nani said they don't have enough trees to live in anymore. But Baba, I want to go back there! I don't want to live here anymore, I like Braj. I want to go and help clean the river and make homes for the animals and look after the horses and make the streets all tidy again without the rubbish.

SHANTI starts to cry and JAYA pulls her onto her lap.

MR CHANDER

Don't be silly Shanti - this is your home! How will you go to school? Shall we tell your teacher you've decided to be like Mirabai and run away to Vrindavan so you don't have to do your homework?

NANI shushes him with flapping hands and a glare.

NANI

(to Shanti)

Beti, Braj is your home, never forget it. You may not be there in person all the time, but you can live in Braj every day if you carry it in your heart. Whenever you want to be there, just close your eyes and you will see the place, feel the soft sand beneath your feet, hear the cries of the birds and the temple bells, smell the incense and the smoke from the cooking fires. You will see sweet Krishna dancing there on the bank of the Yamuna in the moonlight. You can visit every day like this, and tell others about what you have learned, so that they too can carry the loving, caring spirit of Braj in their hearts. As for me...I'll go whenever Krishna calls, but I think this time he just wanted me to come home for a visit.

ENTER YOUNG KRISHNA, YOUNG RADHA AND THE GOPIS upstage. They move and interact with each other as if from another world. MAYURI starts to practice her dance again and YOUNG KRISHNA and YOUNG RADHA suddenly notice and laugh, charmed at her effort. They continue to look on smilingly at the CHANDER family who are oblivious to their presence.

NANI

(singing in accompaniment to MAYURI's dance)

Govinda Jaya Jaya, Gopala Jaya Jaya...

LIGHTS FADE TO BLACKOUT. EXIT ALL.

END





## Afterword

In the past two decades pilgrimage sites across India have seen significant increases in numbers of pilgrims. This has unfortunately led to growing environmental concerns in all of these holy places. This is no more apparent than in a sacred area known as Braj-Mandala, an area four hours south of Delhi with many sacred places connected to stories of the Hindu deity Krishna. These include Govardhan, Varsana, and Vrindavan.

Due to their close proximity to Delhi, these small villages have seen significant increases in pilgrims on weekends and during religious festivals. Inadequate infrastructure, including roads, sanitation and energy, coupled with rampant development of high-rise apartment blocks are creating serious environmental challenges for these villages and rendering them unrecognisable to seasoned pilgrims.

Where much of our teachings are ethereal or other-worldly, places of pilgrimage give our traditions grounding in the physical, real world. Within Hindu traditions they are places of deep significance, where the teachings of the religion come alive, where seekers and saints meet, and where one can meet God face to face.

We encourage fellow pilgrims, particularly in India, to follow these simple points whilst on pilgrimage:

- Do not use plastic bags or other items made of plastic, such as plates, cups and spoons
- Dispose of litter responsibly
- Set a good example to others
- Plan your journey, car share and use public transport where appropriate
- Educate yourself on the challenges faced by pilgrim towns and see how you can help

## About the author

### **Jahnavi Harrison**

Jahnavi was born and raised in a family of English bhakti yoga practitioners at Bhaktivedanta Manor in Hertfordshire. Her mother, who is a schoolteacher, and her father, who is a priest and writer, instilled a love of communication, education and strong spiritual values. She is a multi-disciplinary artist, trained in both Indian and Western classical dance and music, as well as writing and visual arts. After graduating with a BA in Linguistics and Creative Writing, she travelled internationally with the sacred music band, 'Gaura Vani and As Kindred Spirits', for five years, presenting the dynamic stories and spiritual culture of India for a fresh, contemporary audience. She now resides in London where she teaches and shares through a project called 'Kirtan London' which aims to make sacred mantra music accessible and relevant to a wider audience. She writes regularly on spirituality and the arts for various publications, as well as on her blog 'The Little Conch'.



## Supporting organisations

### **Bhumi Project**

The Bhumi Project is a worldwide Hindu response to the environmental issues facing our planet. It is facilitated by the Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies and the Alliance of Religions and Conservation. The Project aims to educate, inspire, inform, and connect Hindus interested in service to Mother Earth and to build a base of global partners and friends who encourage best environmental practice. Current activities include encouraging Hindu temples to adopt environmentally-friendly practices, working to address environmental challenges at Hindu holy sites, and awareness raising programmes with communities and young people.

### **Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies (OCHS)**

The OCHS is an academy for the study of Hindu cultures, societies, philosophies, religions, and languages, in all periods and in all parts of the world. It is dedicated to preserving India's cultural heritage and promoting a better understanding of it through a comprehensive programme of education, publishing, and research. It is a recognised independent centre of the University of Oxford.

### **Alliance of Religions and Conservation (ARC)**

ARC is a secular body that helps the major religions of the world to develop their own environmental programmes, based on their own core teachings, beliefs and practices. They help the religions link with key environmental organisations – creating powerful alliances between faith communities and conservation groups. ARC was founded in 1995 by HRH Prince Philip. It now works with 12 major faiths through the key traditions within each faith.

### **Green Pilgrimage Network**

Launched in Assisi, Italy, in 2011, the GPN aims to encourage greener pilgrimages worldwide. The nine founding members included St Albans in England, Jerusalem in Israel, Trondheim in Norway and Kano in Nigeria. The Network asks pilgrims to prepare mindfully for their pilgrimage and travel responsibly in the spirit of their faith. It encourages pilgrim sites to receive and accommodate pilgrim visitors sustainably and green their religious buildings, energy and infrastructure.

### **Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs**

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