



# The Hidden Forest



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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.

— Jahnvi 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 script, downloadable from [www.bhumiproject.org/thehiddenforest](http://www.bhumiproject.org/thehiddenforest).



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It was a perfectly normal night in Delhi. The sun had long since set, and the houses and apartment blocks in the privileged parts of the city were now full of heat and light as people settled down for the evening - eating dinner, watching soap operas and sweating over homework. Whining dogs quietened, finding nooks to sleep in for the night. Raju, the tubby night watchman who guarded the Chander family's apartment complex, was slumped over his desk wearing a pair of dark glasses, snoring as usual. It was on that perfectly normal night that a perfectly abnormal sound rang out from the screen doors of the top floor.

The howl sounded like a chorus of dying cats and could be heard throughout the whole neighbourhood. The dogs began to bark and Raju leapt awake, snorting and rubbing his eyes. Upstairs all was in chaos. The sound was coming from Naniji, beloved grandma of the family. She was rolling around on the floor, clutching her chest and shouting:

"Ohhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh! Help! HELP! Save me! Hai bhagwan! HELLLLLLP! Shri Krishna sharanam mama! Ohhhhhhhhh! Save me!"

"Naniji!" shouted Mayuri, the oldest daughter. "Naniji, we're here, don't worry." Naniji either didn't hear, or didn't care.

"Oh. Help me. I'm dying. I'm DYING!" she cried, looking dramatically up at the sky and beating her heart with her tiny fist.

"Mayu, quickly, go get Naniji's pills and some water," ordered their mother, Jaya. "Shanti, bed. Right now."

"But — ma," protested Shanti, her eyes filling with tears.

"NOW!"

Mayuri brought in a glass of water and two white pills and Shanti stepped outside the doorway and continued to watch, trying not to cry.

"Ma, please open your mouth," said Jaya, taking the water from Mayuri and sitting on the bed. She tried to grab Naniji, who was a little quieter now but was still writhing and moaning. Naniji flailed her arms about, knocking the glass of water all over the bed.

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

"Don't be ridiculous," yelled Naniji, finally looking at them. "I don't need water or those stupid pills. I am dying. Can't you tell?"

She moaned again and beat her chest a few more times. Shanti whimpered from the doorway.

"Ma, you are not dying," said Jaya. "You just have indigestion. How many kachoris did you eat this evening?" Naniji suddenly went quiet and closed her eyes, sniffing; a deeply offended expression on her face.

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"Nani?" said Mayuri, stepping forward and patting her arm. "Nani, singing about Krishna always makes you feel better, shall I get you your bhajan CD?" Naniji was silent and kept her eyes shut. After a few moments two fat tears rolled down her wrinkled cheeks. Shanti walked in from the hallway.

"Shanti!" said her mother angrily, "I thought I told you to—" Suddenly there was a loud knock at the door.

"Now what?" Jaya got up to answer it and strode out of the room muttering under her breath. As soon as she was gone, Naniji's eyes snapped open.

"Girls," she hissed, grabbing for them and drawing them closer. "I need to go home."

"What do you mean Naniji? You are home," insisted Mayuri.

"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."

"You want to leave us?" asked Shanti, her eyes welling up again.

"Of course I'm not leaving you. We're all going on a yatra together," she pronounced. "If I don't go, I will die, and if I am going to die," she paused dramatically, "I must go. Understand?"

"But Ma said you just ate too many—"

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

"But Naniji," protested Mayuri, "I have my audition next weekend. I have to practise. There's a talent scout coming from Mumbai and everything."

"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?"

Naniji jiggled her hips, still lying on her back, and winked at Shanti.

"Ma, what in the world—"

Their mother Jaya was standing at the door with Raju the night watchman, who was gawping at Naniji dancing on the bed. As soon as Naniji noticed them, she began to roll around and yell again.

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

"Raju, I assure you, we are fine, please go back downstairs," said Jaya, ushering him away from the door.

"It sounds like she is getting ready for her reunion with the Lord," said Raju solemnly, taking off his cap.

"No, no, I assure you, she just ate—"

"Didi," interrupted Raju, "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." He looked down sorrowfully. "I can never forgive myself." He wiped a tear from his cheek and put his cap back on. "You'd better plan to leave as soon as possible. Don't wait until your husband returns."

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The wind whipped through the Jeep speeding down the Delhi-Agra highway the next morning. Naniji was in the front seat, practically bouncing up and down with excitement.

“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!”

Mayuri glowered, her eyes locked on her mobile phone screen, fingers busy on the keys. She only glanced up when the car swerved to avoid a lorry, failing to hide her alarm. Jaya fussed irritably with the bags they’d quickly packed to the brim with clothes and sunhats and things they were not likely to need.

“Ma, it’s still not too late to make a booking at the hotel. We can sleep comfortably every night at least,” she urged.

“I am going home, I am going home,” Naniji sung to herself, pretending not to hear.

“I’m so excited Naniji,” said Shanti. “Will there be monkeys everywhere?”

“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?”

“Mmm,” said Mayuri from the back.

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

She was cut off by Naniji, exclaiming loudly as the driver turned right towards Govardhan. The roaring highway gave way to an unpaved road. It was lined with simple flat roofed huts, covered with blue tarpaulins and hand painted decorations round the doorways. The car bounced wildly on the uneven ground.

“Ow. Drive carefully,” yelled Jaya as she hit her head on the ceiling. Shanti giggled.

They passed fields of wheat and golden yellow mustard flowers, and green ponds where children played and ladies washed their clothes. A lake appeared on the right, flanked on the far side by hundreds of steps and large arches topped with white domes.

“Kusum Sarovar!” gasped Naniji. “We are almost there!”

Finally they turned down another small road and passed through a bustling marketplace that smelled of frying samosas and steaming chai before stopping with a jolt.

“All right! Let’s go! Grab your bags,” ordered Naniji.

“So much energy for someone about to die,” muttered Mayuri as they all piled out.

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“Driver, I will call you tonight to take us to the hotel,” said Jaya.

“No, no, driver-saab, go home to Delhi. Come back in three days to collect us,” said Nani, winking at him.

“Ma, don’t be—”

“Come on! Someone help me put my bag on my back,” shouted Nani excitedly. “First stop, Giriraj Govardhan, follow me!”



They started walking along the road. After a little time a sandy path appeared alongside and they took it, veering away from the traffic. The sounds of the cars became muffled and bushes of bright pink bougainvillea flowers sprung up on either side. Nani practically skipped along, pointing out things as she walked.

“There’s a deer—oh, Giriraj I am here!”

“Is the hill called Giriraj Nani?” Shanti asked.

“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.”

“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, just to protect his devotees from a treacherous storm sent by Lord Indra. Krishna appeared to be only seven years old, but actually he was not an ordinary boy.”

“I’m seven,” piped in Shanti. Nani patted her on the head and continued.

“When he saw the fear of the residents of Braj, he lifted the hill with the littlest finger of his left hand!” Nani lifted her hand in the air, her little finger pointed toward the sky. “There was space for everyone underneath, as well as all the beloved cows and other animals. They were so relieved to be protected from the pillars of rain and fearsome lightning they almost forgot how unusual it was for a seven-year-old boy to hold up a giant hill on his pinky for a whole week. Some of the boys thought that they should help him, so they propped up long sticks and tried to help share the load. They say that love is blind,” Nani chuckled, “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.”

She began to sing – 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

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beautiful wreath of forest flowers. Oh Mira's lord is Giridhara..."

"You know," Nani continued as they passed a sacred lake on their left, "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."

"What is it Nani?" asked Shanti, jumping up and down.

"Hmmm. You will soon find out," said Nani mysteriously.



After a little time they came to a small temple jutting out from the side of the hill. Where an altar would have normally been, the face of the hill protruded into the space, the brown rock worn smooth from the touch of millions of fingers. Priests looked on as throngs of people filled small paper cups with milk and jostled to pour it over the stone. The collective chatter bounced off the ceiling and added to the chaos. Naniji ushered everyone to take cups and find a gap in the mass of bodies to squeeze through. When they had poured their milk and stumbled out of the crowd, Mayuri asked impatiently, "Nani - what's the point of pouring milk on a stone?" Before Naniji could answer, Jaya spoke:

"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."

Naniji pulled a face like she'd just smelled something bad but didn't look at her daughter.

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

"But how can a stone drink?" asked Shanti.

"Hah!" Nani laughed to herself, "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." Mayuri looked unconvinced but Naniji continued: "Now girls, take off your shoes and put them in your bags, we are going to do the next stretch barefoot."

"But Ma, that's ridiculous, it's not clean," protested Jaya.

"Nonsense, the ground of Braj is always spiritually pure."

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

"If you see dirt you can help to clean it." She slipped off her own shoes and began to walk again. Shanti did the same. After a few minutes of walking, Mayuri took hers off too. In the shade the sand

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was soft and slightly damp. They quickly learned to avoid walking on the parts exposed to the sun that burned their heels and toes and kept an eye out for the sharp stones and thorns that Nani had warned them about. Jaya strode forward in front, flapping flies away with a big fan. They walked in silence, absorbing the sights and sounds. Govardhan Hill was covered with dark trunked flowering trees and occasionally they spotted a large deer or a troupe of squealing monkeys bounding along the top ridge. Sometimes they came across people prostrating on the ground. Old, wrinkled men dressed in dirty cotton or scraps of woollen blanket, husbands and wives, even parents dutifully taking turns to bow down whilst their children stood around playing. They would place a stone at their head when they were lying flat, whisper some prayers, then rise to stand. Then with a step forward to the stone marker, they would bow down again. In this way they would inch forwards, aiming to complete a mile or two each day.



Later, as the sun began to set, the sandy path veered back towards the road and the soft ground turned into tarmac. Their bare feet were tender and the hard ground was unforgiving. Scooters and auto rickshaws whizzed past, blowing out exhaust fumes. They stepped gingerly past piles of litter – plastic bottles and crisp packets and old tyres. A deafening speaker atop a long pole blasted out a bhajan with what sounded like fifty wailing violins in the background. Shanti covered her ears.

“NANI,” she shouted, “are we going the right way?” But Naniji hadn’t heard her. She had walked out a little into the middle of the road and was staring at a huge billboard, her mouth hanging open a little.

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

“I don’t believe it,” mouthed Nani, shaking her head.

“Nani! Watch out!” shouted Jaya, grabbing for Nani’s arm as a car sped by, missing her by a hair. The driver didn’t pause, but blared his horn and kept beeping as he disappeared round the next bend. The girls dragged Nani out of the road as she continued to stare at the sign. They tiptoed through another pile of rubbish where two bony looking cows stood chewing on a plastic bag, and managed to get back on the sandy path. It was almost dark and only the emerging moon lit the path, revealing a tunnel of trees. Finally Nani spoke.

“That golf course...my favourite forest used to be there. I don’t

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understand. What is this building – where have all those trees gone? This is not the Braj I once knew.”

“Ma, maybe this isn’t the place you’re thinking of,” Jaya said, gently. “It’s getting dark now, ha? Shall I call the driver?” But Naniji shook her head and kept walking.

A large, bustling group of local ladies overtook them on the path. They were dressed in colourful cotton skirts, bright pink, mustard yellow and parrot green. Their chunnis covered their heads and even fell over their eyes, and they wore big nose rings and stacks of bangles. Naniji asked them where they were headed and one of them answered:

“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.”

Naniji’s eyes widened, “Barsana! Rasa lila! Can we go?”

“Of course,” said the lady, “my son is playing as Krishna tonight.”

“Nani,” said Mayuri suddenly, “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.”

“You’re a dancer?” asked the lady.

“Ha, yes, she is,” said Nani, “but she hasn’t seen real dance yet. In Braj every word is a song and every step is a dance of love.” The lady nodded approvingly,

“All right, maybe my son can show you a few steps later. It will be fun!” Nani raised her eyebrows. “How old is he? Is he fair?”

“He’s only eleven,” said the lady, laughing, “but he is a fantastic dancer.”



Twenty minutes later they came to a small clearing. Pilgrims had hung mosquito nets on the tree branches and they could see the silhouettes of people sitting beneath them on rough blankets. A couple of small fires were burning, sending sweet smoke into the air. Nani led them to one of the fires and began chatting to a smiling lady that was tending it.

“Sit down everyone, we are just in time for dinner,” she said, as the lady gestured the same. She served them hot, spicy dhal soup that was so delicious they hardly noticed scorching their tongues as they gulped it down. She also gave them each several rotis; thick, flame-licked rounds of unleavened bread with an irresistible earthy flavour.

“The fire is burning cow dung, that’s why they taste so good,” said Nani through her chewing and lip smacking. Jaya had been chewing with great enthusiasm but suddenly froze, her cheek filled with roti.

“Dung? You mean –?” she spluttered, looking like she was about to spit it all out.

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"Dung means poo!" chuckled Shanti and Mayuri burst out laughing.

"What's wrong with wood?" Mayuri asked, sniggering at her mother's expression. The lady at the fire spoke, "Using wood every day means cutting trees. Wood runs out." She laughed heartily, her bangles jingling. "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."

"Why were you so upset about that golf course, Nani?" asked Shanti.

"Things like that have no place here," said the lady. "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 nodded approvingly, "I can't believe how Braj has changed. I only recognise this path, but places like that golf course..." she sighed and closed her eyes, lost in memory. "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 must have rested under these trees, and found shelter here. She was a fugitive, on the run from the family she married into. Her mother had given her a deity of Krishna to worship as a child, and he became her only true love. Her husband's family hated her fixed devotion to Krishna and tried to force her to give him up, but she had long since given away her heart. 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."

"Tell us Nani!" urged Shanti, tugging on her shawl.

"Yes Ma, tell us," said Jaya, trying to hide the fact that she was reaching for another hot roti. Nani didn't need much encouragement. She swept her hands through the air as she spoke, bringing her words to life.

"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 maidens of Braj, the gopis. They were little milkmaids who each believed he 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." Mayuri smiled, shifting in a little closer. Nani pointed up to the star-filled sky.

"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

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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.”

“And these trees,” she leaned over to the nearest tree and gave it a tight hug, laying her cheek on the trunk. “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.” Nani rubbed the trunk with her wrinkly hand, “And now they can tell us so many stories. There are so many songs being sung in the forest if you listen carefully.”

She put her ear to the trunk and closed her eyes. “Jayati te ’dhikam, janmana vrahah, srayata indira sasvad atra hi, dayita drisyatam, diksu tavakas, tvayi dhritasavas, tvam vicinvate... O beloved, Your birth in the land of Braj has made it exceedingly glorious, and thus Indir , 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 sang this song when Krishna disappeared from their sight. They ran everywhere calling out...”. Nani got up and hobbled from tree to tree, shouting into their canopies: “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 sighed, sitting down and stretching out her legs. “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 had gone out now - only small mounds of embers remained, glowing like mounds of rubies in the dark. Oil lamps were lit, and people began to gather for the rasa lila performance. A troupe of young boys entered through the trees, dressed as gopi maidens. They told the story in dance and song, and the audience of women laughed and cried in appreciation. At the end, a charming boy with a flute tucked in his waistband appeared to loud applause. He was wearing a full skirt decorated with peacock feathers and he dropped to his knees and began to whirl in large circles. The skirt twirled around him, faster and faster to the rhythm of the drummers. Mayuri was entranced.

“See how Krishna dances,” exclaimed Nani, clapping her hands. “Lord of the peacocks.”

“Why is Krishna dressed like a peacock?” asked Shanti, her eyes fixed on the performance.

“He is trying to charm Radha, who is upset with him. He disguises himself and dances for her, but look... she is joining him.” Another young boy, this time also dressed as a peacock, but with the jewelled ornaments and braided hair of the beautiful Radha entered. The two began to spin around each other, circling like twin orbits.

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“Thank you for bringing us here Nani,” whispered Mayuri, as they finally lay down to rest.

“Just wait until tomorrow,” said Nani sleepily.



*Observing the peacock dance of Radha and Krishna*



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They awoke to the sound of bells – small ones, big ones, loud ones, soft ones – the air was alive with the sounds of hundreds of morning ceremonies being performed. Naniji jostled them all awake and took them to a nearby water pump where they brushed their teeth, and wrapping themselves in thin cotton towels, poured buckets of cold water over each other. Shivering, they quickly dressed in a secluded area and began walking again, following the chattering ladies.

“Should I call the driver?” asked Jaya, reaching for her mobile phone. “Maybe he can get us there faster.”

“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.” The older ladies overheard them and followed as Nani eyed the row of horse carts. Some of the ladies moved to get on the first one they came to, but Nani ushered them onwards, waving away the advances of the pushy drivers. She frowned at the sad, skinny looking horses.

“If you can care for yourself, you can care for your animals,” she pronounced, striding forward until she found a healthier-looking horse being driven by a teenage boy. She patted the animal on the back and pinched the boy’s cheek, motioning for everyone to get on. With a heave, they were off, trundling their way towards Barsana.



Approaching from a distance, they could see a huge hill covered in trees and topped by a sandstone palace overlooking the town below. Stone staircases led up to the top from the different sides of the hill, and some people were being carried up in palanquins.

“Who lives up there, Nani?” asked Shanti.

“This is Sri Radha’s palace,” said Nani. “She is the best of all the gopis and Krishna’s favourite. Her name is also Brajeshwari because she is the Queen of Braj. Nothing happens here without her grace.”

When they arrived in town, the old ladies got down from the back of the cart and started moving off in a multi-coloured procession.

“Follow us!” called one, as she disappeared beneath her veil. Grabbing their bags, they walked with them. As the ladies went through the narrow streets they clapped their hands and sang in loud, joyful voices “Radhe Radhe Radhe, Jai Jai Jai Shri Radhe!” Nani clapped along, and soon Jaya and Shanti were doing the same. Only Mayuri tagged behind, looking sheepish.

“Arre! Come on! Dance!” said one of the ladies, grabbing her and spinning her around. Mayuri looked startled and annoyed for a minute or two, but compliantly waved her hands about in the air.

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“Yooooooo!” yelled Nani, “Radheeeee!” She sidled up to Mayuri and began dancing with her, until Mayuri broke down laughing and started to dance without inhibitions. They continued their procession out of the centre of the town, through an open field and up a maze of small staircases that led through a patchy forest. People came out of their houses to greet them and some offered them hot rotis or water in gleaming steel cups. At first Jaya refused to let the girls drink anything, convinced that the water would make them sick. But Nani’s expression said she would rather die than be so rude as to refuse hospitality. She gave Jaya a sharp look and poured the water into the girls mouths from a little height, dripping it on their faces with a chuckle.

“It’s true you can’t trust just any old water here,” she said. “But the bottled water isn’t necessarily any better. When I was young we could drink the river water in Braj,” she sighed. “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.”

One of the older ladies was picking up rubbish from the edges of the path and overheard them.

“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.”

“Maybe next time we come we could bring our own metal water bottles,” piped in Mayuri, “Then we could just fill them with clean water wherever we go. Isn’t it Nani?”

“Yes, that’s a very good idea,” said the lady collecting rubbish, “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?”

“And she’s an amazing dancer,” added Nani, proudly. “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.” She handed two plastic bottles to Shanti to put into the bag.

“Ma, what happened to all the real peacocks?” Jaya asked. “I remember so many from when you brought me here as a child?”

“Yes,” said 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?”

“What is to be done? Perhaps the local government need make some big changes.” said Jaya quietly.

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

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They slowed down their walk a bit to pick up litter more thoroughly. They sang the names of Radha and Krishna as they worked and, in no time, they had reached the grand palace at the top. They couldn't find anywhere to dispose of the rubbish, so they approached a temple guardian with a denim jacket over the top of his traditional dhoti. He lazily pointed back towards the forest that they had just left, motioning for them to go and dispose of it further away from the temple. "But that's Sri Radha's garden," said Shanti, her voice wavering. The man shrugged and Nani tutted at him, leading them away.

"He's just a boy, he has no idea," she said. "Let's go inside, we can pray to the Queen of Braj herself for the answer." They washed their hands and feet outside and entered, still holding the bags. They sat down near the village ladies who were now sitting in a lively huddle in the middle of the temple hall, singing at the top of their lungs. One of them beat a dholak drum as if her life depended on it while another stood in the middle and danced, waving her veil in the air.

As the family sat there a man in a suit and tie stepped slowly backwards, trying to take a sneaky picture of the altar on his phone. Concentrating on framing the photograph, he stepped right onto the bag of bottles, almost losing his balance and waving his arms around in the air. He found his footing again and looked at them, annoyed.

"Can't you move those bags?" At that moment a priest noticed the man's phone from a distance and waved his arms sharply.

"Now I've lost my picture too," the man huffed.

"We're very sorry sir," said Jaya. "We weren't really sure what to do with these bags of rubbish – we've been collecting it from Sri Radha's forest for the last hour but there's nowhere to dispose of it, so we came to make a prayer for a solution."

The man looked surprised, and started to smooth his tie down, excitedly.

"But – that's exactly what I came to pray about! I am the CEO of a waste disposal company. I am going to be creating safe containers to hold waste along the pilgrimage paths so that everyone can take their turn at cleaning this sacred place." He looked awkward suddenly. "I am sorry for being so rude. Come, let me take those bags from you. At least I can take them in my car back to Delhi for now."

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*Cleaning Sri Radha's garden on the way to Varsana*



After marvelling at the temple's beautiful interior and visiting the deity forms of Radha and Krishna, they headed out to a vast balcony that overlooked the town below. Almost every house was painted a vivid purple blue, and small figures were busy cooking and hanging laundry on their flat roofs. After descending the hill again, they stopped for a

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drink. As the lassi-wallah frothed the thick, sweetly-flavoured yogurt in tall clay cups, Nani asked him where she could take them all to show them a real piece of Braj forest.

“Oh Maiya!” laughed the lassi-wallah mockingly, peering through his thick glasses. “These days it is hard to find anything that hasn’t become spoiled by greedy men. Of course, no matter how much things change,” he said, gesturing to himself. “Some old ruins never lose their charm, 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.”

“The rascal!” laughed Nani. “And then? What did Radha say?”

The lassi-wallah puffed out his chest, enjoying the attention, and spoke a little louder.

“That rascal Krishna! He claimed that Radha had stolen the beauty 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!

“Jai Sri Radhe!,” they all called.

The lassi-wallah nodded approvingly, then looked up at the palace on the hill, suddenly more serious. “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.”

They thanked the man for his story and, after licking out their last drops of lassi, they set out on the cart towards Vrindavan town once more.



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*The lassi wallah narrates the story of Radha stealing the beauty of the forest*



Despite being only forty-five minutes away it felt very far from the rural villages they had left behind. Traffic clogged up all the tiny roads and alleys leading to the centre of the town. They tried to take a rickshaw through the crowded streets but, getting stuck in a cloud of car horns and exhaust fumes, they decided to get out and walk.

Nani told the girls to put their shoes on again as they stood on the hot black tarmac. They were to visit eight of the hundreds of temples. Their way to the first took them through a bazaar where they felt the shopkeepers sizing them up as they passed. Local people milled around, buying vegetables and homewares, whilst groups of Western tourists sat sipping fizzy drinks in the shop fronts of the tailors and jewellers.

Many of the temples were within walking distance of each other,

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and they made their way around quite quickly. Some temples were very humble and simple, while others were grand and opulent, with rows of garland sellers and beggars outside. Some were full of visitors – restless tourists from Delhi with their jeans and loud mobile phones, and large families from different parts of India, the little girls all looking the same with their oiled plaits and ruffled dresses. Some temples were empty but for a lone priest who sat bent over a dusty book and a donation box next to the altar. In some the worship was flashy, with sparkly curtains that whisked open and closed dramatically and professional musicians playing as evening approached. The scent of incense carried them from one temple to the next, guiding them to the glowing heart of each – the altar where Radha and Krishna were worshipped.



At the end of the day, they finally reached the banks of the Yamuna. After their long journey, the sight of the river brought relief to their eyes and energy to their tired feet. By a cupboard-sized temple on the bank, a bearded sadhu held a gigantic tower of burning oil lamps as he slowly moved in graceful circles. The flames' reflection in the ripples of the water seemed to dance to the rhythm of sacred mantras being chanted by a small group of boys. The girls sat down with their mother and Nani on the stone steps and gazed out at the sun setting on the river.

"Are we going to swim Nani?," asked Mayuri. Naniji shook her head sadly.

"I remember swimming here," said Jaya, quietly. "I learnt to swim here —remember Ma?"

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

"Will you tell us the story Ma?" asked Jaya, and Nani nodded.

"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." Nani pointed at a giant gnarled tree trunk nearby that had been surrounded by a stone platform and steps. Two men were meditating at its base. "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

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watched terrified from the bank. They were sure Krishna would be defeated and were ready to die with him."

"Oh, Nani! Did Krishna win?" Shanti asked, and Nani smiled.

"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." Nani began to demonstrate, jumping her hands across her lap.

"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."

"So now we can go in?" asked Shanti. "Kaliya didn't come back did he?"

"Not exactly," said Nani, "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."

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

Quietly, they all stepped down the staircase to the water and sprinkled drops on their heads. When they were closer, they could smell the foul odour, and realised that the water was not just black because the sky had darkened. Nani sighed.

"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?"

"Actually Ma, I was thinking," interrupted Jaya, "Maybe we could just go for a little boat ride before we leave? It doesn't have to be long." Nani didn't need any encouragement. She grabbed the girls' hands and they walked down to the sandy bank where around twenty long wooden boats were waiting. They were decorated with colourful flags and some were shaded by bright fabric canopies. They picked one and Jaya negotiated the fare as they climbed aboard. The boatman eased away from the bank, using a long bamboo pole to direct their course. Shanti reached to trail her fingers in the water as it swirled around the boat, but drew back, remembering how unclean it was.

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

"No, beti, that wouldn't work," said Jaya. "Some problems are too deep to fix so easily." Shanti's face fell.

"But there are always small ways we can help," said Nani.

"Anyone can offer some service in Vraj, even the ants and spiders. Even

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us! What do you think would help," she asked, turning to Mayuri.

"Well, I guess we could try to pick up more rubbish that we see?"

"Yes, that is a good start. What else?"

"And we could write to some of the big newspapers to make people aware of what's happening," Mayuri said.

"We could try to travel in ways that don't pollute the earth, especially when we visit here," added Jaya, "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."

"And we can only eat rotis from poo fires!" laughed Shanti.

Overhearing them, the old boatman spoke seriously, "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 Vraj and return its natural beauty and purity."

By now they had floated into the centre of the river, where the clatter of the town faded away and all they could hear was the plop, plop as the boatman's pole dipped into the water, and the gentle sound of the current. The sun seemed as if it was resting on the water, turning it for a few moments into a wide sheet of brilliant gold.

"He is her father," the boatman continued. "Suryadeva, the sun god is the father of Yamuna devi, the goddess of the river. See how he reaches to comfort her." He shook his head. "Just as Kaliya did, we have claimed this water as our own and poisoned it with our carelessness and 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."

Nani nodded her agreement, sadly wiping her eyes. The boatman began to sing the names of Krishna, his voice echoing across the water. "Govinda Jaya Jaya, Gopala Jaya Jaya..." That night, as they said goodbye to Vrindavan, Nani lay on the ground and kissed the dust while the girls hugged the nearest trees. Even Jaya looked sad to be leaving as they drove back to Delhi in the dark.



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*The polluted waters of the River Yamuna*



The next morning they told their father about everything they had seen, repeating the stories they'd heard and the lessons they had learned.

"You didn't get sick, dear, with all those germs and the pollution?" he asked Jaya.

She smiled as she answered him. "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," she said, winking at the girls.

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

Mayuri nodded, "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!" She leapt up,

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knelt down on the kitchen floor and started twirling in neat circles on her knees. She grabbed the thin cloth of her dupatta and held it so that it flared out as she spun, her tongue sticking out a little as she tried not to topple over. With each turn, she would rise and fall slightly, deftly shifting her knees.

“Wah wah! Magnificent!” clapped Nani, beaming, “I knew you were a real Brajbasi girl!”

“And what about you Shanti?” asked their father, “did you learn anything new?”

Shanti looked down at her breakfast and didn’t say anything. Nani nudged her encouragingly.

“Did you see any peacocks there?” he asked. Shanti shook her head.

“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!” She got off her chair and her voice grew loud as she started to cry. “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,”

Jaya pulled her onto her lap. Her father spoke jokingly: “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 flapped her hands in his direction and shushed him with a wide-eyed glare. She turned 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.”

Nani shrugged, “As for me, I’ll go whenever Krishna calls, but I think this time he just wanted me to come home for a visit.”



## 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.

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**Green Pilgrimage Network**



