

## International Vaisnavi Retreat Held in Govardhana

Harvest time in Govardhana. While local farmers cooperatively busied themselves cutting their mustard plants in the fields surrounding the southern part of Sri Giriraja, seventy ISKCON Vaisnavis gathered at Jatipura to celebrate Srila Prabhupada's mercy, as twelve of his disciples shared their 40 years plus of experience in Krsna consciousness. "It went beyond our expectation," the organizers exclaimed. A strong spiritual atmosphere built up. Devotees became deeply inspired.

The opening of the retreat began on the open roof of the hosting guesthouse with an invocation for auspiciousness excellently performed with an Odyssey dance by Russian Vrajavasi Vrndarani Devi Dasi. Offering flowers to Sri Giriraja, she pleaded on behalf of all present for the permission to reside in Govardhana for four days with their mind, senses, and very selves fully absorbed in the fire of sankirtana. The breathtaking view over the broad range of Giriraja, graced by the old temple of Sri Gopalji, captivated everyone's attention from the start. Srila Prabhupada's guru puja, performed by Narayani Devi, brought in the perception of his undisputable presence as devotees devotionally swung to and fro, hands high up in the air, to the sound of Bhava Bhakti's melodious singing.

As the sun set on the horizon of Vraja, the program continued within the guesthouse hall, now transformed into a vibrant temple decorated with Radha Krsna lila posters, in the presence of Sri Sri Radha Govinda Madhava, Sri Sri Giri Govardhana, and Sri Sri Gaura Nitai. The altar was gorgeously decorated with a hand painted backdrop especially fashioned for the event by Vaisnavis from the Ukraine. It featured Srimati Radharani receiving abhiseka on her coronation as the Queen of Vrndavana as described by Srila Jiva Goswami. Devotees offered ghee lamps to Their Lordships, expressing their desire to serve Them. On the floor before the altar, gracious rangolis, traditional colored powder decorations, ornamented the burning lamps area. Appropriately, the evening continued with a Govardhana Lila slide show by Urmila Devi, and concluded with a recitation of the first verse of Sri Siksastakam, complete with a meditative purport on the required mood for chanting the holy name. All looked forward to the coming days.

Four teachers had come together with the aim of bringing the devotees' hearts closer to each other and to Krsna. Their presentations were profound and influential. Narayani Devi, Bhaktivedanta teacher at the VIHE, lectured on the *Teachings of Queen Kunti*, drawing lessons from the great Vaisnavi who stuck it out through thick and thin, thus practically demonstrating how to deal with sufferings in life in a Krsna conscious way, using obstacles as the steps of a ladder to progress towards love of God. From Kuntidevi's wonderful prayers arose deep spiritual insight, determination, and attachment to Govinda, for all to meditate on and aspire to follow. As Narayani lectured on the rooftop of the guesthouse in the cool spring morning, the katha was so pleasing that two beautiful green parrots landed on each side of her, while yellow and black wild bees hummed around her Govardhana Sila.

There were to be three class sessions throughout the day. After breakfasting under a makeshift pandal in the outer courtyard of the guesthouse, amused by peeping monkeys trying to grab their share, all devotees gathered in the temple. Srimati Devi, in the guise of a doctor, had chosen to train one and all

in “Accessing Nama’s AT—All Time Mercy.” Winding its way through transcendental imageries of surgery and therapy, the creative workshop moved the hearts and equipped the intelligence with effective tools to rise from the kanistha to the madhyama platform of consciousness, following guidelines given by Srila Bhaktivinoda Thakura. In the midst of all, Bhava Bhakti rocked everyone with her enthusiastic kirtanas.

Next, Urmila Devi gave a sharp and lively rendering of the Krsna-kaliya lila, drawing from Srimad Bhagavatam, Krsna Book, and the previous acaryas’ commentaries, notably Srila Sridhara Swami, Srila Sanatana Goswami, and Srila Visvanatha Cakravarti Thakura. She had her daughter, an expert dancer, pull up her sari impromptu to demonstrate Krsna’s dance on Kaliya’s hoods, including His facial expressions—a rare sight indeed. The central theme was the envious mentality—its nature, pitfalls, and removal procedure. In addition, the teachings of the Nagapatnis, Kaliya’s chaste devotee wives, seemed to perfectly address the audience.

The fourth teacher, Vraja Lila Devi, a member of the GBC Devotee Care Committee that envisioned the retreat as an avenue to extend care to Vaisnavis, opted to speak on “Choosing Care over Fear.” This poignant presentation explored the depths of the subconscious mind and, like the other talks, invited transformation. A skilled and experienced counselor, Vraja Lila spent her free time hearing and guiding individual devotees through their personal turmoils.

From the very first morning, the dedicated pujari team, headed by Madhu Malati from Nagpur, India, and Avadatta from the Ukraine, served diligently. By 5 am all the Deities were dressed, sporting fancy turbans, and stood amidst the light of vegetarian candles, ready to cast Their merciful glances on the devotees who gathered for japa. The atmosphere grew thick with intensity as many sat tight, endeavoring to chant sincerely, their minds enthused by the association. The Siksastakam meditations resumed daily, accompanied by tamera. They enraptured everyone’s consciousness in the early morning and enhanced concentration through fixedness in a clear purpose and devotional moods. At 6.45am, the altar now fully decorated with garlands and flowers, the conch blew and the sweet sound of Sri Gurvastakam filled the air, followed by the prayers to Lord Nrsimhadeva and Tulasi puja at the back of the temple hall. Dancing and smiling as they circled Srimati Tulasi Devi, the joyful Vaisnavis experienced the blessings of peer association.

After lunch a small market place was set up, where CDs and books published by Vaisnavis were made available, including Narayani’s picture overviews of Srimad Bhagavad Gita and Srimad Bhagavatam, Sacidevi’s bhajanas and Urmila’s talking reading books for children. In the garden, those eager to learn mrdanga beats sat around Daya Rupa Gopi in the cool shade of the flowering bushes, while others chose to get rid of their Sanskrit phobia by gaining knowledge of Sanskrit pronunciation and meter under the tutorship of Bhagavata Vidyapitham student Vraja Sevika. Yet others found interest in hearing Radhika Devi’s versification of the Gopala Campu of Srila Jiva Goswami. A few shared their concern for the need for youth preaching in a fast degrading world that leaves young women, the nourishing force of society, at the mercy of materialistic propaganda, all bent towards suffering in this life and hell in the next. Packed with exciting opportunities, precious messages, and practical tips, the

days passed rapidly but without any sense of hurry. Everything happened on time, leaving no gaps for prajalpa or empty moments. Still, friendships found time to grow.

In the afternoons, blessings showered forth in the encouraging association of Srila Prabhupada's disciples, who freely shared their experiences for all to learn valuable life lessons. Displaying the wide variety of their individual natures and service history, Dina Sharana Devi, GBC for Germany, Austria and Switzerland, Kalpalatika Devi, Kanchan Bala Devi, Radhika Devi, Rukmini Devi, Vaidhi Bhakti Devi, Trisakti Devi, Urmila Devi, and Vrndavana residents Parvati Devi, Narayani Devi, Mahadevi Dasi, and Nirguna Devi, allowed the younger Vaisnavis to find their respective role models and further direction for their life. It was especially inspiring to witness how all these seniors emerged as wonderful devotees, bedecked with their faithfulness to Srila Prabhupada and his mission after over 40 years of ups and downs in the Krsna consciousness movement.

About twelve dedicated Vaisnavis served as staff. Throughout the retreat, the pujari team expertly dressed the Deities for the pleasure and inspiration of all present. Devotees took turns in offering the aratis and singing the morning prayers. The evening program stretched till 8.30pm with devotees delighting in the intricate, amazingly composed verses of Srila Rupa Goswami's Citra Kavrtvani from his Stava Mala, and the pastimes of Krsna Balarama in the forest from the 15<sup>th</sup> chapter of the 10<sup>th</sup> canto of Srīmad Bhagavatam. Each day ended with an informal gathering around ginger and lemon tea, puffed rice and popcorn in the outer courtyard of the ashram, in the coolness of the transparent Govardhana atmosphere.

The last day saw everyone walk to the nearby Surabhi Kunda, where Surabhi Devi had appealed for mercy on behalf of Lord Indra after he inundated Vrindavana with torrential rains. On the banks of the sacred kunda, Narayani concluded her teachings on the Prayers of Queen Kunti. Vraja Lila then put the devotees in pairs and led them in praying to Mother Surabhi to appeal to Govinda for forgiveness of the offenses of their respective partners. A blissful group photo time brought everyone together in unison, calling out to Sri Radha for her mercy. And yet another meditation, on the fifth verse of Sri Siksastakam, took all the devotees off the bodily platform in an attempt to connect with the Lord of their heart beyond the world of material designations as their voices rose in prema sankirtana. At last, Govardhana awarded all the Vaisnavis His close darsana and the chance to offer Him their full dandavats in the holy dust of the parikrama marg. Cows and monkeys gathered around, eager to grab the carrots and chickpeas offered by local vendors. Tea stall keepers watched on and pilgrims snapped pictures of the unusual multicolored transcendental dancing party as devotees returned to the ashram doing harinama.

The closing ceremony had all the participants in the retreat share their realizations under the shade of a tent in the garden. Accepting a 5 rupee bracelet—symbolizing anartha, that which has no value—from the teachers, they took a sankalpa to work on giving up criticism and complaining. On the departure day, just before sunset, gentle rain drops began to fall, an unlikely event in this season, marking the complete success of the gathering in the awesome setting of Govardhana, under the shelter of Srila Prabhupada's mercy.

Looking at fostering a spirit of love and care and generating peer support between female devotees dedicated to Srila Prabhupada's mission, the International Vaisnavi Retreat was held at the foothill of Giriraja Govardhana, Jatipura, India, on March 6-9, 2011. This special event was conceived by the Vaisnavi Care sub-committee of the GBC Devotee Care Committee and organized by the Vrindavana Institute for Higher Education.