

Braj Research Report

By Ravi Das

For two weeks, ending on the 31st December 2005, an international party of researchers working with *Braj Rakshak Dal*, (www.brajrakshakdal.org) went on a short expedition to record the GPS (Global Positioning System) satellite co-ordinates and collect photographic evidence of some of the most important places of pastimes (*Lilasthalis*) of Lord Krishna and His devotees in Braj.

Using both the *Shashtra* and local guidance to discover the places they trekked all over the hilly region of Braj that extends into the state of Rajasthan. This is a unique piece of research never undertaken before in this region.

The conclusion from this initial exploratory expedition is that much more extensive research is needed. Given the appropriate manpower and resources this area should be systematically covered to rediscover many unknown and important places of Lord Krishna's pastimes. The researchers concluded from this initial survey that as they ventured away from the many established temples in the area, where the *lilasthalis* are well known by the *sadhus* and temple *mahents*, they discovered many unknown places where Krishna's footprints (*charan chin*) are clearly visible, and the regular depressions in the stone that devotees recognize as places where Lord Krishna would eat (*bhojan thali*) when He was herding the cows in these hills. These sacred sites are worshipped by devotees, and have inestimable cultural and spiritual significance.

Over the years knowledge of these sites whereabouts has been lost and now *Braj Rakshak Dal* had begun a programme of systematic research to uncover as many of these sites as possible and ensure their validity by cross referencing them with the *shastra* and in consultation with the local devotees.

Braj Rakshak Dal spokesman Ravi Das explained that this research was undertaken in light of the current policy of the Rajasthan Government to allow the extensive excavation and mining in the area. "If we do nothing to document and research these important sites of Indian culture and heritage, all that will be left for future generations are signs indicating that there once was a place of spiritual significance, but it was destroyed because it was felt that the construction of roads was more important than the protection of our ancient culture"

Braj Rakshak Dal are currently in the process of filing a PIL in the courts to protect this entire area and stop the mining activ-

ities. They propose that this research be completed and all the places of spiritual significance be protected, and that the excavation of stone for construction be moved to a less sensitive place. Ravi Das BRD spokesman commented, "We understand the need for road construction and economic development in this area, but we feel that this is an entirely inappropriate place to use for this purpose. There are many nearby places outside of the protected area of Braj that have plentiful stock of stone for crushing, why choose a place that has such an important place in the culture, history and spiritual heritage of India? Devotees in all parts of the world have voiced their protest but nothing has been accomplished through reasonable discussion so as a last resort we have been forced to take this step of litigation to stop this activity."

Danger at every step

The concussion of the blast shakes the ground, the booming sound hurts my ears as it rents the air and echoes reverberate round the hills. My body shakes as the shock waves hit, and I fall to the ground, the stones and rocks from the blast are hitting the ground all around, bouncing and ricocheting like deadly shrapnel. Finally comes the dust mixed in with the smell

of the cordite used to detonate the explosive. Then all seems eerily quiet as the dust begins to settle.

Under the cover of the dust crawling forward, my GPS satellite tracker and little camera come out, I quickly log the co-ordinates, it is imperative that I get a photograph of this scene of destruction. My two associates try and stop my forward progress, they advise that I don't go any closer, there is danger from the perpetrators; they have become violent with others, if they see us taking

photos it might turn ugly. I consider their advice for a minute and conclude that personal safety is less of an issue than revealing what is happening here. Where am I on this Christmas day, a time when many round the world are thinking about peace on earth and goodwill to men? You might think it is in one of the many war zones dotted around the world, maybe Iraq or Africa perhaps, but you would be wrong. This is not an attack directed against people, but the same motive is behind what is happening here. Money, the new God of many in this



The Sacred Hills of Braj

confused time is the driving force that makes people to do the most unbelievable and destructive activities.

No I am not in a war zone; I am a hundred miles away from the capital of the world's largest democracy India, known as a peaceful, spiritual, tolerant country, with a billion people within its borders. So what is happening here?

My camera is woefully inadequate for this task, there is no high powered telephoto lens to capture the destruction close up, but I can conceal it easily and that right now might be more important. I grab a couple of shots pull out the memory card holding the digital pictures and conceal it while the dust is still clearing. If we are caught I might have to surrender the camera, but I think I got one good shot that showed the blast and I am determined to keep that. I quickly return to the small party of two, pleased I smile to them and pat my trouser pocket, got it! They looked more concerned and less pleased, about my risky strategy.

We start off walking away from the blast zone, I can hear the all clear whistles blowing, signalling that it's safe for the trucks and workers to go in and start loading.

As we walk briskly away, after a couple of minutes voices start shouting behind us. One in the party puts his finger to his lips in the age old sign not to say anything and signals that on no account should I get out the camera. We ignore the increasing volume of the approaching voices behind us and continue at a slightly accelerated pace. It's not too long before six burly, dusty miners accost us. I am not a native of India, and my Hindi just about gets me around, but it doesn't take a PhD linguist to understand what is being said. The tone and gesture make it obvious; these people are not happy bunnies. The other members of the group try vainly to pacify, explaining that we are just a group of harmless tourists, wandering peacefully around this beautiful area looking at the flora and fauna, but I can see it's not really having much effect.

The volume and gesticulation is building and I have been in enough confrontations to know where this is going. My pulse rate is climbing and the fight or flight response is making me aware of possible exit strategies. There are six of them and three of us, the odds are definitely not in our favour. While one in our group tries to peacefully talk our way out of this situation, the other member takes a few steps back, whips out his mobile phone and starts calling the police.

It's not looking good, the voices have become shouts, and the body language is aggressive. We are threatening their livelihood, and their jobs, they know that, we know that. They know what they are doing will not be viewed by anybody as a good thing. They are destroying something valuable for their own profit, and they don't want anyone else seeing it. Our photographs are the evidence that might put a stop to their activities.

When they see the mobile phone it provokes a lot more shouting... who are you calling? One of them snatches the phone and looks at the number... He announces loudly, POLICE.

The leader of the group, in a last ditch attempt to intimidate us demands we all write our names and addresses down. He pulls out a pad and pen and shoves it towards us. I am feeling slightly relieved, a relief valve has opened and the pressure is decreasing. We dutifully write our (false) names on his pad. The leader makes the decision to return to his work, feeling that he has done his duty, and perhaps wondering how long it will be before the police will turn up (they don't). The others turn and follow him like sheep.

As they retreat, we all breathe a sigh of relief, and smiles break out ... Whew! As we walk the sound of distant explosions continue every few minutes. Hundred of trucks pour in and out each carrying a payload of stone. These hills are in Braj, one of the holiest areas in all of India. Most of Indian culture and heritage has a link to this area, music, language, drama, dance, architecture they all have their roots here. Now they are being destroyed, rapidly and systematically. How much is this Holy Spot worth? How do you put a financial value on something as intangible as spiritual heritage? In India, or more specifically in Rajasthan they have done the unthinkable, they have done just that. So what is the going rate? 110 rupees a ton, just over two US dollars, that will buy you the sacred hills of Braj, blown up and smashed to gravel. Will they use this for some lofty purpose? Not sadly in the name of progress, although I am not sure where the progress is to, it simply goes into road construction. More and more people in India are buying cars, and if you have a car, you need a road to drive it on. Maybe Next time you sit in a Honda, Hyundai or Suzuki please be aware that these companies are making a contribution to the wholesale destruction of Braj.

