

CHARLES R. BROOKS

The Hare Krishnas in India



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The Hare Krishnas

IN INDIA

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Charles R. Brooks

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TRANSLITERATION OF INDIAN WORDS

INDIAN words in this book have been anglicized. The closest English equivalent is given upon a word's first occurrence. Full transliterations with diacritical marks are listed in the glossary. Sanskrit and Hindi vowels are pronounced as follows:

<i>a</i> (as the <i>u</i> in <i>but</i> : <i>paṇḍita</i>)	<i>ā</i> (as the <i>a</i> in <i>father</i> : <i>ghāṭa</i>)
<i>i</i> (as the <i>i</i> in <i>bit</i> : <i>Viṣṇu</i>)	<i>ī</i> (as the <i>ee</i> in <i>meet</i> : <i>śrī</i>)
<i>u</i> (as the <i>u</i> in <i>put</i> : <i>guru</i>)	<i>ū</i> (as the <i>oo</i> in <i>boot</i> : <i>mūrti</i>)

The diphthongs are *e* (as the *ai* in *bait*: *Rādhe*); *ai* (as the *i* in *bite*: *Vaiṣṇava*); *o* (as the *o* in *blow*: *mokṣa*); and *au* (as the *ow* in *cow*: *Gauḍīya*). The underdotted *ṛ* is also a vowel in Hindi and Sanskrit and is pronounced *ri* (as in *Vṛndāvana*).

As for consonants, both the retroflex sibilant *ṣ* and the palatal sibilant *ś* are pronounced as *sh* (*Kṛṣṇa* = *Krishna*; *Śiva* = *Shiva*). *C* sounds like the *ch* in *church*, but with less aspiration (*Caitanya* = *Chaitanya*). There are two *ts* and two *ds*, one dental and the other retroflex. Both are anglicized as simply *t* or *d* (*ghāṭ* = *ghat*; *Gauḍīya* = *Gaudiya*). There are four *ns*—one guttural, one palatal, one lingual, and one dental. The dental *n* carries no diacritical markings and is pronounced like the English consonant. The retroflex *ṇ* is a rather distinct sound produced by curling the tongue backward. This *n* occurs in both *Kṛṣṇa* and *Viṣṇu*. The other *ns*, the palatal *ñ*, and the guttural *ṅ*, are less common. The aspirated consonants are *bh*, *dh*, and *th*. *Bh* is pronounced as in *clubhouse* (*Bhāgavad-gīta*); *dh* as in *roundhouse* (*dhāma*); and *th* as in *hothouse* (*tīrtha*).

The most noticeable difference between Sanskrit and Hindi pronunciations is that Hindi tends to drop the final *a*. For example, *dhāma* in Sanskrit is pronounced *dhām* in Hindi. In most cases, I have dropped the final *a* to more closely approximate the pronunciation of words in Vrindaban usage.

Compound words that are written without a break in the Devanagari script have been transliterated with a hyphen between the individual components (*Radhakrishna* = *Radha-Krishna*). For ease in reading, I

have pluralized Sanskrit and Hindi words by adding an *s* as in the anglicized form. Proper nouns have been handled in the same manner as other words except in cases where another anglicized version is more familiar or more commonly used in the vernacular (*Vṛndāvana* = *Vrindaban*; *Haridvāra* = *Hardwar*).

The Hare Krishnas

IN INDIA

Introduction

EVERY morning at 7:00 the Taj Express pulls out of the New Delhi railway station, its air-conditioned class compartments full of Indian and foreign tourists headed for Agra and a day of marveling at the Mughal splendor of the Taj Mahal. About forty-five minutes before arriving at the Agra Cant station, the Taj halts briefly at Mathura, and from the second-class cars disembarks a varied swarm of passengers: urban civil servants dressed in polyester shirts and pants; Punjabi men sporting colorful turbans and stately beards, their wives in traditional pants and long blouses; Rajasthani farmers with gold rings in each ear, accompanied by wives in saris of brilliant colors. Still others are sparsely clothed in coarse cotton and barefoot, having renounced all worldly possessions to become *sadhus* (religious ascetics), or to take up the life of mendicant widow after a husband's death. Here and there in the crowd can also be seen individuals slightly taller than the rest, with lighter skin—American or European—dressed in the saffron *dhoti* of a *sannyasi* (renunciate) or the dingy loincloth of a sadhu, hair closely cropped except for a lock in the back, a style ubiquitous among the Indian men that crowd the station platform.

This mass of humanity, however diverse, shares one motive as it pushes its way toward the station exit, and many shout out “*Jai ho*” (“Victory”), “*Giri Raj ki jai*” (“Glory to Krishna”), or “*Hare Krishna*” (“Oh Krishna”),¹ raising hands above heads in exaltation as

¹ These phrases are used as salutations and exclamations. *Jai ho* is often shouted at the first glance of a rising sun or moon, or upon sighting a sacred person or object. *Giri Raj* is one of Krishna's many names, referring to the Govardhan mountain about twenty miles from Vrindaban, a place of mythological significance, often considered to be identical to Krishna himself. *Hare Krishna* is an invocation to Krishna excerpted from the *mahamantra*, the chant which forms the center of ISKCON doctrine and well-known throughout India. It has, since the arrival of Western devotees in Vrindaban, been used as a salutation between members. Before their presence there, the most common greetings among residents of the town were “*Jai Radhe*” (“Victory to Radha”), and “*Radhe Shyam*” (“Radha-Krishna”). *Hare Krishna* has now also become a frequent salutation among Indians as well, especially when foreigners are present or at times the Indian actors wish to identify with them. Conversely, if a person wishes to symbolically distance himself from ISKCON, one of the other salutations will be used. In this instance, the *Hare Krishna* exclamation was invoked by both Indian and foreign pilgrims.

they spot the sign on platform number one that announces “Alight Here for Vrindaban Pilgrimage.” Further on a more recent billboard extends a “Welcome to the Land of Sri Krishna Consciousness.” They have all come to *Braj* (the linguistic and cultural area in the southwestern corner of present-day Uttar Pradesh) on pilgrimage—to walk in the same soft and clinging dust in which their god Krishna walked and to bathe at the same *ghats* (river landings) where he teased the *gopis* (village milkmaids) by stealing their saris while they swam.² They will, during their pilgrimage, relive in ritual and imagination many of the scenes from Krishna’s life which occurred, according to popular consensus, about five thousand years ago.

Leaving the dim station interior for the bright hot morning light, the pilgrims are confronted by a hoard of rickshaw and horse-cart drivers, all intent upon securing their business, each insisting that his vehicle is superior to the competition. Few in the crowd, however, will linger long in Mathura, for their destination is Vrindaban. Located some six miles to the north, Vrindaban is considered the “center of the lotus of Braj,”³ and is renowned as the idyllic setting of Krishna’s childhood

² During the month of Karttik, according to the residents of Vrindaban, the gopis went to this spot on the river (today known as *Chir ghat*) to bathe and offer prayers to the goddess Katyayani, beseeching her to give them Krishna as their husband. On the cold morning of the month’s full moon, the object of their prayers happened by and playfully took their saris from the river bank and hung them in a nearby *kadamb* tree (which still stands). From a vantage point in the same tree, Krishna called for the girls to come out of the water and retrieve their clothes. At first refusing, they finally emerged, covering themselves modestly with their hands, but Krishna was not fully satisfied with this display, he wanted a full view. Demanding that they make obeisances to him with folded hands raised overhead, he again denied them their garments. Finally relenting, the gopis bared themselves before Krishna, who then kept his end of the bargain and returned their saris. (The story appears in *Bhagavata Purana* 10.22, 7–27. The textual account, however, says these events occurred in the month of Margashirsha instead of Karttik.) Brahman pilgrim guides who take pilgrims to this site today usually make two points concerning this story. First, Krishna is a playful god, and while religion should be taken seriously, it must also be joyous. Second, in order to approach God, one must bare his soul before coming into his intimate presence.

³ Sripad Baba, a Vrindaban sadhu who has established Vraja Academy, explains that “Vraja is like an ocean where Mathura rests as a lotus floating upon it, and Vrindaban is the lotus’s heart filled with nectar.” According to a pamphlet written by Padmalocanadas, an English devotee who has lived in Vrindaban 11 years, *Braj-mandal* (*mandal* means circle, and is often used in a symbolic manner to refer to the universe, or as a circular pattern used as a meditation aid) measures 168 miles in circumference. “It is stated in the *Adi-varaha-purana* that if one takes the city of Mathura as the center, and measures out 42 miles in each of the four directions, then this is how *Braj-mandal* can be calculated. On the modern day map this will include places such as Agra, Kosi, Bharatpur, Aligarh, etc. Within this circle is an inner section which is in the shape of a lotus. This has a perimeter of 96 miles. Within this area Krishna performs most of his pastimes, very rarely going to other areas” (Padmalocanadas n.d. 2–3).

and adolescence—the period in which his activities are the most esoteric and religiously significant for the *bhakta* (devotee). It is the events of Krishna's Vrindaban *lila* (sports, play) which symbolize for the pilgrims the highest ideal: an intimate personal relationship between deity and devotee. And it is in Vrindaban where this divine relationship can be most easily realized.

Today, however, is not an ordinary day, for it is the eve of the festival of Holi,⁴ and at every village along the tracks from Delhi, the train has been pelted with cow dung and colored water by jubilant children. Now as the pilgrims disembark at Mathura, the very town of Krishna's birth, everyone is drenched by the spray from large syringes filled with colored water, and the mood is one of intoxicated celebration. Many in the crowd wear clothing still colored from past Holis and put aside to be worn only at the next Holi. Others began the day clad in fresh white handwoven cotton clothing purchased just for the occasion, knowing that by day's end it would be colorfully dyed. There are no protests against this constant bombardment of colored water and powder which continues unabated from the first steps onto the railway platform, through the station, and into the yard, for as one elderly pilgrim shouted to half-frightened foreign tourists still on the train, "This is the joy of our civilization!"

Those who arrived on the Taj Express now find themselves on the road with many others of like mind who have come from all parts of India by bus, car, scooter, oxcart, horse cart, camel, or on foot. They share a mood which is simultaneously solemn and joyfully playful, for their Lord Krishna is a fun-loving trickster who is worshiped as much for his pranks as for his miracles. In spite of this playfulness, Krishna is still the full incarnation of Vishnu, highest of gods,⁵ and each person anticipates an awesome experience of direct contact with him—an experience possible not only because he resided in the earthly Vrindaban

⁴ For a first-person account of the festival of Holi, see Marriott 1966

⁵ Even for Hindus who are not Krishna-bhaktas, he is still a significant figure in their pantheon, an *avatar* (incarnation) of Vishnu. In modern Hinduism, Vishnu is one of the chief gods, sharing equally the business of the cosmos with Brahma (the creator), and Shiva (the destroyer), Vishnu himself is the preserver. This conceptualization is perhaps more popular among foreign scholars than with Indians, however, since most elevate their own *ishta devata* (personal deity) to the position of Supreme Lord, and for the Vaishnava, Vishnu holds this status. But for Krishna-bhaktas, especially the *Gaudiya sampradaya* (the Bengal Vaishnava sect founded by Shri Chaitanya), Krishna is no longer a derivation or manifestation of Vishnu, but God himself in an almost monotheistic sense. For them, Krishna is not just an incarnation of Vishnu, rather, all other avatars are incarnations of Krishna. Therefore, Krishna descended onto the earthly plane at Vrindaban as himself, and there can be no higher form.

five thousand years ago, but also because (it is firmly believed) he is eternally present there.

The ride to Vrindaban normally takes about forty-five minutes by horse cart, but this day more than an hour is required, as at every turn in the road all are stopped and persuaded to step down so that they may receive the hospitality of Holi. These roadblocks are composed largely of young men who, filled with *bhang* (a drink made with *Cannabis*), embrace each person they encounter, spreading bright red or green powder across his or her forehead. It is Vrindaban and the surrounding Braj which are famous for having the best Holi in India, and the local residents are not about to jeopardize this reputation. After all, was not Holi Krishna's favorite celebration?

Finally, the families, groups of old friends, and solitary pilgrims reach the outskirts of Vrindaban where many prostrate themselves in the dust, rub it over their head and eyes, and perhaps even taste some of the Vrindaban soil, treating it as the most sacred *prasad* (literally, "grace," spiritualized food). Tears form in many eyes as emotions of a destination reached and expectations of extraordinary experiences to come overwhelm them. Now, before they disperse into various *dharm-shalas* (pilgrim lodges) around town to avoid the midday heat, they are eager to visit some of the most important sites of the town.

Ram Gopal is a *rickshaw-wala* who travels between Mathura Cant station and Vrindaban several times on a good day, and today his business is very good. He explains to his clients that for over a week now, no accommodations have been available in either Mathura or Vrindaban. He is therefore "prayerful" that everyone has written ahead for lodging well in advance. But for most pilgrims, physical comfort is their last concern, and they are prepared to sleep by the river or on the steps of a temple; for it is simply being in the land of Krishna at this auspicious time that is the fulfillment of their most ardent desires. The reality that they are now in Vrindaban *dham* (holy land) floods their consciousness and overshadows any worry about food or shelter.

Volunteering to assist his riders on their initial tour of the sacred town, Ram explains, "There are four temples that you must visit immediately! It is now time for *darshan* (viewing of the sacred images), so it is a must that we hurry. Otherwise you will wait until evening for your first darshan." So it is agreed: hurriedly the rounds should be made.

Immediately past the toll gate on the Mathura-Vrindaban road, Ram makes a left and heads to the area of town called Raman-Reti. As he

turns onto the old Chhatikara road (now officially Bhaktivedanta Marg), the flood of people slows traffic practically to a halt. This steady stream of humanity circulates from dharmshalas to shops to temples to tea stalls, with everyone heading generally in the same direction—two kilometers from the main intersection of Bhaktivedanta Marg and Mahatma Gandhi Marg, to the Krishna-Balaram temple. Over the noise of the crowd Ram explains that Krishna-Balaram is the first temple that should be seen (see appendix 1).

As slow progress is made toward the *mandir* (temple), Ram Gopal points to the spire of Madan-Mohan, the first in a series of temples whose construction began in the late 1400s when Vrindaban was changing from a wilderness retreat to a pilgrimage town. Built by the medieval saint Sanatan Goswami, and patronized by the tolerant Mughal emperor Akbar, this temple once housed the image of Krishna called Madan-Mohan which supposedly was commissioned by Krishna's own earthly great grandson, and rediscovered by Sanatan. Over the years many miracles were attributed to this deity, but the original image no longer resides beneath the tower which dominates Vrindaban's riverfront skyline. Today the image called Madan-Mohan is worshiped at Karauli in the state of Rajasthan, taken there in order to avoid the destructive wrath of Akbar's notorious grandson, Aurangzeb.

Further on is Fogal Ashram, a large dharmshala where many pilgrims stay and where a large entourage of sadhus and *vairagis* (Vaishnava sadhus) obtain free food and shelter throughout the year. Ram laughs that Vrindaban is "75 percent sadhu, 25 percent people." His comments, which are accurate and detailed, are given freely, he says, and he is quick to point out that there is no competition between himself and the hereditary Brahman pilgrim guides or *pandas*. These *pandas* claim a monopoly on this activity at most *tirthas* (pilgrimage site; literally, a ford, or place to "cross over" to the spiritual world), and often possess records indicating a client relationship with some families for generations.⁶ "However," Ram continues with a smile, "if you are happy with my services today, I can return this evening and tomorrow to be your escort without charge. Or you may also find your own panda and pay his fee."

Vrindaban town of ten years ago ended just past Fogal Ashram for

⁶ The term *panda* is used to designate the Brahman pilgrim guide and is derived from the Sanskrit *pana*, meaning "to deal with." The *pandas* in many large *tirthas*, such as Varanasi, are highly organized with well-preserved, meticulous records. In Vrindaban, though the claim is often made for records dating back some ten generations, this is difficult to substantiate.

all but the most stalwart pilgrims, the area still being forested—a retreat for sadhus who wished to conduct their spiritual practices in solitude. Since the opening of the Krishna-Balaram temple in 1975, however, Raman-Reti has become an integral part of the town. Now there are temples, ashrams, and dharmshalas extending to Bhaktivedanta Gate which marks the southwestern extremity of Vrindaban. “Today,” Ram comments, “*Brajbasis* (residents of Braj) complain that you must go all the way to Krishna-Balaram to hire a rickshaw. If you need a ride to Mathura, you can always find one there.”

As the temple is approached, pilgrims congest the dusty street. There is a gentle but steady pushing that begins a hundred meters from the temple itself, extends into the narrow alleyway leading up to its entrance gate, and into the courtyard. Once inside, all strain on tiptoes to catch their first glimpse, over the heads of the crowd, of the sacred images whose darshan they seek.

Everyone knows the proper ritual etiquette to receive the full effect of darshan. Having repeated the process before in many other temples, they are prepared to repeat it many times more during their Vrindaban *yatra* (pilgrimage journey). As each individual crosses the temple threshold, he rubs his hands or fingertips across the entrance floor, transferring the dust of all devotees who have gone before to his own forehead. This ritual both establishes his humility and transfers the *shakti* (energy) and blessing of all the great souls, or *mahatmas*, who have passed there before.

Once inside the temple courtyard, the pilgrims are swept into a clockwise movement, inching slowly toward the holy images in a flow which will allow them each a few seconds before the three altars. Toward the temple front, steps are confronted, taking the worshiper to an elevated stage area upon which he can meet the deities eye-to-eye. During this time, priests of the temple circulate as best they can, making their way through the crowd with good-natured shoves and spraying gallons of saffron-colored, rose-scented water over the hot congregation which receives it with enthusiastic cheers. Center front is located the *samaj* (a group of singers and musicians), singing rhythmic songs to the accompaniment of *pakhawaj* (a two-headed drum, same as *mridanga*), *kartals* (hand cymbals), *tamboura* (a droning stringed instrument), and harmonium, and many sing along, keeping time with their clapping hands. Throughout the dense crowd small groups of enthusiastic devotees also burst into spontaneous dancing to the encouraging shouts of the throng.

As the people climb the stairs to the elevated stage, they are faced

with an image of the temple's founder, stage left and situated at a right angle to the altars. This lifelike figure is sitting on a marble throne and is covered with garlands of jasmine and rose blossoms. If living, he would have a commanding view of the crowd and an unobstructed view of all the *murtis* (images). Pilgrims gaze at the guru's form, some stopping to fully prostrate themselves before it, risking being trampled in the process. Money and flowers are tossed upon his throne, private mantras are muttered, and exclamations of "mahatma" and "sadhu" are heard.

In each of the three main shrines, marble statues about four feet tall stand, clothed in silks and jewels, with offerings of rich, expensive food placed before them. Priests attend each image as if it were living royalty and every pilgrim gazes intently into the deities' eyes to receive the transmission of sacred blessings. Upon the third altar stand Radha and Krishna, lavishly decorated for Holi. It is this divine couple that the pilgrims have especially come to see, and lovingly gaze upon the statues as if they were dear friends meeting after a long separation. The priests accept more offerings of sweets and flowers extended by the crowd, wave these items around the images, and return the now-consecrated objects back to eager hands. Some of the *pujaris* (priests) spray scented streams of colored water from hidden recesses behind the inner sanctum, to the crowd's surprise and delight.

Having received the darshan, some slowly merge with the crowd in the central courtyard for an extended view of the entire chaotic scene. Many join in the chanting which now and then erupts into more dancing. But most, now fully satisfied, hurry back outside to waiting *tangas* (horse carts) and rickshaws and on to other temples and sacred sites.

Similar scenes are enacted in most of Vrindaban's temples daily, but the events at Krishna-Balaram are unique in ways not revealed by a description of ritual and devotee enthusiasm. The distinction, however, is strikingly apparent to anyone present there, for the priests are unmistakably non-Indian. To be precise, the head pujari is French, the temple manager is American, the Brahman cook responsible for preparing the deities' food offerings is English, and the samaj is composed of all these nationalities plus German, Australian, Puerto Rican, and Japanese, along with a few Indians.

THE PROBLEM

Members of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), foreigners to India, yet Hindus by a complex process of conver-

sion and culture change,⁷ have successfully established a temple in the traditional pilgrimage town of Vrindaban, and it has become a popular part of that town's sacred complex. This much was apparent from the scene witnessed my first day there, the day before Holi, 1982. Being previously aware of the ISKCON temple's existence, I had come to Vrindaban to discover whether or not significant interactions were occurring between these non-Indian devotees of Krishna and the Indians of the town.

Furthermore, since in the traditional view, it is an impossibility for foreigners to become Hindu, much less Brahman, as these Western devotees claim to be, a paradox is created by their very presence. Pragmatically, then, I wished to know how this conflict was being resolved in the situations of everyday life in Vrindaban, and what consequences were resulting from that resolution.

At every phase in the process leading up to my being in Vrindaban, I was cautioned not to expect any significant degree of social intercourse between foreign and native groups. This doubt was expressed by Indologists and other scholars, as well as by traditional Indians, reflecting long-accepted notions that severe constraints embedded in the Indian sociocultural system would stifle all but the most superficial encounters. My expectations were different, however, resting upon the fundamental assumption that people who occupy the same habitat sooner or later become involved in a common web of life.

I was similarly encouraged by the empirically based knowledge that ideational notions do not always coincide with practical actions. Even in the face of admitted constraints, these underlying suppositions suggested to me that a good probability for interaction existed, especially if the foreign actors employed an active strategy to win acceptance, as was implied by their human and financial investment in the town.

Apparently, highly staged symbolic interactions were taking place at the Krishna-Balaram temple. On my first day there, I witnessed thousands of Indian pilgrims worshiping in a temple built and staffed by foreigners, and the pilgrims participated enthusiastically. They seemed to accept the mediation of non-Indian priests between themselves and

⁷ I have earlier suggested (Brooks 1979) that ISKCON, as it emerged in the United States during the 1960s and 1970s, was an example of a revitalization movement, defined by Wallace as any "deliberate, organized, conscious effort by members of a society to construct a more satisfying culture by rapid acceptance of a pattern of multiple innovations" (Wallace 1966 143-44). See also Judah (1974) and Daner (1976) for interpretations focusing upon the processes of change and socialization of individuals who joined ISKCON during its formative years.

their gods, and showed respect and deference to the Westerners by ritual gestures.⁸ This suggested to me that the broader arena of Vrindaban town would be a productive setting for research; that other types of significant encounters were occurring. I therefore determined to investigate the nature and extent of interactions between the foreign bhaktas and the Indian population, both resident and pilgrim.

Documenting interactive episodes constituted the project's basic strategy. The study was further framed by the following related questions:

1. What specific types of interaction are occurring between the foreign devotees of ISKCON and Indian pilgrims? Between foreigners and Vrindaban residents?
2. What objects and symbols are designated as important by the actors in these situations? Is there agreement on these objects and symbols? On their meaning? If not, how is disagreement resolved?
3. What physical, sociocultural, and individual consequences result from the interactions? Are the results interpreted as "change" by the actors?
4. What are the historical and contemporary contexts which provide resources for interpretation and explanation of situations by the actors?

These questions reflect a specific problem focus, coupled, however, with a commitment to open-ended research. While their exact content developed during the course of the study, they were informed and guided by a particular sociological perspective.

THE THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE OF SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM

In all phases, from conceptualization to the final interpretations, this study has been guided by the perspective of symbolic interactionism. "Symbolic interactionism" labels a distinctive approach to the study of human social life, yet is difficult to define succinctly. This is not surprising since the perspective attempts to reflect what is, in itself, seen as an uncertain, emergent, and ever-changing domain. Epitomizing the attitude that society ultimately consists of individuals engaged in an open, sometimes frankly unknowable process, the perspective consequently cannot be strictly formulated or highly structured. A

⁸ Two gestures were prevalent: the traditional salutation of respect (consisting of bringing the hands, palms together, to the forehead), and a demonstration of one's inferiority (performed by touching the feet of the other person)

study guided by the principles and logic of interactionism,⁹ will, rather, convey something of the flow and order of the living experience, constructing for the reader an authentic image of the situated reality under scrutiny.

Symbolic interactionism is a perspective which presents a processual view of the social world, focusing upon the importance of situated activity and offering a unified methodological and interpretive strategy for its study. The principles and premises of interactionism have been explicated by Herbert Blumer in his *Symbolic Interactionism: Perspective and Method* (1969); in 1937, Blumer himself coined the words which have come to label the approach.¹⁰ A student and interpreter of George Herbert Mead, Blumer presents a theoretical and methodological perspective that is particularly suited to the empirical study of everyday life.

Symbolic interactionism is an approach, I think, employed by most ethnographic anthropologists; it is consistent and continuous with the traditions of Boas and Malinowski, and informs what Pelto has called "a very generalized 'meta-theory' of anthropology" (1970: 18). While many anthropologists implicitly accept the major tenets of symbolic interactionism for their interpretation of day-to-day human behavior, the assumptions are rarely explicitly stated. Yet, symbolic interactionism itself can be termed a social "theory," one that is especially suited to guide research and interpretation of social and cultural change. If the word *theory* is to be used to refer to symbolic interactionism, however, it must be defined within the context that Blumer intended.

The use of theory in the social sciences can never attain the ideal that has been established by theoretical inquiry in the physical or "natural" sciences. In the physical sciences, theory is composed of "definitive concepts" which "provide prescriptions of what to see" (Blumer 1969: 148). In other words, the scientist assumes, if his theoretical concepts are correct, that they will function to categorize and explain his data time after time, experiment after experiment. Theory directs his research expectations and perceptions so that each experiment acts as a confirmation of it, or else the theory must be revised or changed. Rep-

⁹ In this book I use the terms *interactionism* and *symbolic interactionism* interchangeably

¹⁰ Blumer (1969: 1) states that "the term 'symbolic interactionism' is a somewhat barbaric neologism that I coined in an offhand way in an article written in *Man and Society* (Emerson P. Schmidt, ed. New York: Prentice-Hall, 1937). The term somehow caught on and is now in general use."

licability is the hallmark of scientific truth in the physical sciences, and an elegant theory, *a priori*, will suggest what the results should be.

Social life, however, is not so replicable, and definitive concepts—concepts that have precise, unchanging referents—cannot handle the variability and diversity of social reality. Rather, social theory must be composed of “sensitizing concepts,” concepts that suggest directions along which to look, and as such allow the social scientist to discover and attempt to understand the empirical distinctiveness of different social phenomena.

Geertz has offered basically the same argument by explaining that in the natural sciences theory ideally functions to simplify that which at first seems too complex to understand. But in the study of man, he suggests “that explanation often consists of substituting complex pictures for simple ones while striving to retain the persuasive clarity that went with the simple ones” (1973: 34). In the social sciences, what is needed is not a theory that prescribes what should occur, but one that guides the observer in discovering the unique complexity of the social world he is studying. Moreover, a social theory should also provide guidelines for making some sense of that complexity—a direction for interpretation of the data.

The perspective of symbolic interactionism provides such a theoretical orientation. It does not claim to provide definitive concepts and categories capable of predicting social reality, but it does provide a set of generalized assumptions which can assist in discovering and understanding the dynamics of a particular social reality.

Change with Continuity

Society does not exist apart from activity. Instead of people fitting into already existing, freestanding structures of stable categories and fixed statuses with unchanging roles, the interactionist views society as an ongoing process. Roles and their content, along with any other observable patterns of interaction, develop during the course of activity and can never be fully anticipated or predicted. Structure, if we are to use that term, exists in situations of interaction insofar as actors attempt to maintain a single definition of the situation which is expressed and sustained in the face of a multitude of potential disruptions. This does not imply that there will be only one definition of a situation, but that the various actors in the situation will attempt to present and maintain their own definition, often in the face of challenges.

Process implies change. Even within the most traditional societies

that seem to have centuries of apparent structural continuity, the demands and uncertainties of everyday life dictate an element of unpredictableness. In such environments, as in all others, expected lines of action based upon historical and cultural precedents can still become unexpectedly blocked, compelling the actors to redefine the situation. This becomes all the more certain when impressions of stability are overtly, deliberately challenged by external forces, as they currently are in Vrindaban by the foreign devotees of ISKCON. When such obvious challenges to established values and meanings occur, symbolic interactionism provides an especially useful perspective for the investigation, description, and interpretation of the social world in process.

If an individual is confronted with disruptions or ambiguities in cultural norms and expectations, there is a tendency for explanation and resolution. Goffman (1971: 183) points out that actors engage in "remedial interchanges," where they attempt to reinforce definitions of themselves and the situation that ultimately are seen as acceptable and satisfactory for all parties to the interaction; this is especially the case during encounters in "public."¹¹ The situations of interaction in Vrindaban reflect this human tendency in that both foreign and Indian actors are attempting to present themselves as competent in a common cultural system, a system that the Indians have inherited and the foreigners have chosen to learn. Although actors from both sides appropriate the system in varying degrees, sometimes define common symbols differently, and often view the others with some degree of suspicion, they still share the primary resources of cultural knowledge. Empirically, then, we must observe the dynamics of significant situations, note differences in the actors' interpretations, and watch for the negotiations and compromises which occur. If there is conflict, is it maintained or resolved? Does resolution result in changes in attitude, belief, and meaning, or is there agreement to maintain tension created by the differences? In Vrindaban, how do residents deal with the phenomenon of foreign Hindus who claim to be Brahman, and how do the devotees of ISKCON deal with local people? Is there convergence, coexistence, or hostility? These questions must be considered for each situation and in the general context of ISKCON's position in Vrindaban's sociocultural system.

¹¹ Goffman uses the term *public life* to include face-to-face interactions in the "front regions," which, he points out, may include "private domestic establishments" (Goffman 1971 ix n). It should also be pointed out that actors attempt to reinforce definitions in other types of interchanges as well

Many Indians culturally have difficulty accepting foreigners as valid members of their native system, but at the same time search for clues that the outsiders who do attempt integration have acquired, or are achieving competence. On the other hand, the ISKCON devotees conceive that their understanding of the Indian system actually approaches the cultural ideal more closely than that of the native members. Since the system itself has some degree of inherent flexibility, there is room for resolutorial dynamics to occur. If in this process there is a broadening of norms and meanings to encompass the Western devotees, however, some alteration to the system as understood and practiced by the Indians prior to encounters with the foreigners may also result. These changes, however, since they occur within the symbolic framework of Vrindaban culture, may not be perceived as change to the local people. In fact, they often say that Vrindaban never changes; it changes the people who come there. Analytically, however, changes will likely occur on both sides whenever people deal with a new situation, and the observer must be sensitive to these changes and their consequences.

The present situation in Vrindaban is especially revealing because there foreign devotees are interacting with Indians on Indian terms; they are using Indian categories of persons and things. But as Sahlins has shown, if these common categories are differently valued, in the process of interaction they may be functionally redefined. He states that "the specificity of practical circumstances, people's differential relations to them, and the set of particular arrangements that ensue . . . sediment new functional values on old categories" (Sahlins 1982: 67–68). Indeed, it is the use of traditional Indian categories by the foreign devotees in Vrindaban that predisposes the traditional system toward changes—sometimes obvious, sometimes subtle. In the attempt by Indians to maintain and reproduce their system in these cross-cultural interactions, it is being transformed. As Sahlins has pointed out, we should question "whether the continuity of a system ever occurs without its alteration" (67).

Yet in the face of change, the human compulsion is to continue everyday life, attempting to make sense out of it in terms of past experiences, and Sahlins recognizes this by adding that not only does he question continuity without change, but also "alteration without continuity" (*ibid.*). This impulse to interpret new situations as logically continuous from previous ones, though in fact considerable redefinition is required, is seen by the symbolic interactionists as an underlying fact

of social life. Change will inevitably occur, and inevitably it will be explained in terms of tradition.

That human social interaction leads to change, with that change being explained by invoking historical or cultural precedent, is a recurrent interactionist theme. Ambiguity and conflict in a situation thwart routine behavior and understanding. At the same time, it gives rise to the opportunity for a reassessment of assumptions that appear empirically invalidated. This provides a chance for realignment between symbols and referents, for reformulations of meaning. Concurrently, situationally determined new forms will be interpreted as logically consistent with familiar, preexisting ones, if at all possible.

The Vrindaban context provides many situations of ambiguity and conflict which challenge traditional assumptions. But the Indian mind is not the rigid "traditional Indian mind" of the media, novels, and textbooks. Factually, for Vrindaban, conflicts, contradictions, ambiguities, surprises, and other blockages to expected behavior activate cultural and historical resources that are in reserve for such situations. This allows individuals to successfully cope with meaning challenges, resulting not so much in a disruption of everyday life as an opportunity to invoke and employ the resources. Ultimately, the new meanings will be logically explained and incorporated into a now broader system, still interpreted as traditional.

These are all, of course, micro-level concerns, and are consistent with the idea that symbolic interaction attempts only to make understandable the social dynamics operating between real people in a specific environment. But as Srinivas (1966: 2) has pointed out, ultimately there should be "movement" between the insights of micro-studies and the broader macro-perspective. Inasmuch as this book describes Indian situations, therefore, it is appropriate to consider what questions it raises and what insights it may offer for a more complete understanding of the complexities of Indian culture and social organization.

PROBLEMS WITH THE INDIAN MACRO-PERSPECTIVE

Standard analysis of Indian society attempts to deal with the staggering variation that empirically exists by insisting upon the application of a reified, philologically, and textually derived "caste" concept. Although problems long noted with this approach have led to numerous modifications and reconstructions of the old concept—some showing an inherent possibility for mobility within the "caste system"—these

solutions still suggest that the overwhelming concern of the Indian people and the primary determinant of interaction between them is caste. Situations that do not fit into this pattern are either considered modifications of the standard model or examples that are only superficially atypical (Leach 1962: 3).¹²

Since the processes occurring in Vrindaban that are described in this book gain little or no intelligibility by imposing the standard caste template, it would be tempting to conclude that this is simply an aberrant situation where the true Indian paradigm is somehow nullified because of outside contamination. I suggest that this is not the case. The dynamics of Vrindaban's present sociocultural reality are distinctly Indian, and they point to the general untenability of the position that claims human behavior in India is solely determined by the structural force of the caste system. Such a position ignores the general interactionist view of social reality "as consisting of the collective or concerted actions of individuals seeking to meet their life situations" (Blumer 1969: 84). What is needed is a more responsive Indological perspective that, while not ignoring the cultural aspects of hierarchy that do exist broadly across the subcontinent, goes beyond the mere application of caste as a priori social fact, and is capable of better understanding the complex and varied particulars of social and cultural phenomena in modern India.

This does not entail a high level of abstraction, nor does it necessarily ignore the wealth of ethnographic data compiled over the past decades in support of the caste model. Rather, it only forces us to admit to what Rudolph and Rudolph (1967: 10) have labelled "recessive themes" that are just as important and just as available as sociocultural resources to the Indian population as the "dominant" ones. This also implies that a "historical particularist" approach is needed for the interpretation of Indian situations rather than, or in complement to a

¹² While the word *caste* is used today as if it were an inherently Indian concept, it is important to note that there is no such Indian word, and that no Indian term fully equates with it. Dumont points out that the word is of Portuguese and Spanish origin, meaning "something not mixed" and derived from the Latin *castus*, "chaste." In English, *cast* was used in the sense of "race" from about 1555 and identified with its Indian meaning at the beginning of the seventeenth century. It has been used in a "technical" sense from around 1700 (Dumont 1970: 21). This information indicates, I think, that the caste concept represents an abstraction formulated by observers in their own particular Western context to distinguish the Indian social system from their own. Considering the obviously *etic* nature of the term, it is logical to question its usefulness in particular contexts. Even when caste apparently exists, it is wise to consider that it may only be "an 'idiom,' a language borrowed from elsewhere to talk about social relationships" in Indian contexts (Sturatt 1982: 30).