

# VRAJ - KRSHNA'S PLAYGROUND

## An Exhibition of Photographs by Robyn Beeche

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Matighar, IGNCA

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The IGNCA in its Kshetra Sampada programme has undertaken integrated studies of certain regions in their dimension of the past and contemporary life, the monuments, the living cultural traditions and the life styles. "Vraja" was an obvious choice where one of the most profound cultures grew over centuries.

Vraja, an area of 24Sq. Kms which lies between Delhi & Agra, is popularly known as 'Krishna's Playground'. Celebrations connected with Krishna are reenacted in the monuments, living cultural traditions and contemporary life. Festivals throughout the year in Vrindaban and in the small hilltop towns of Barsana, Nandgaon, Dauji, Mukharai and Phalain.



Robyn Beeche, a well known photographer, associated with the Vraja Prakalpa Project, has been documenting the yearly rituals, and the festivals of Vraja since 1983. The IGNCA, presents an exhibition of her photographs capturing the essence of the culture of Vraj as it manifests in the landscape, in architecture, daily devotions and yearly festivals.

The intensity of Vaishnava Bhakti depends upon the degree to which a devotee can experience, bhava an instant emotional identification, rasa, a refined aesthetic taste of emotion and prema, love towards the deity. Evocation and experience of rasa, bhava and prema by means of ritual offerings, poetry, song,

dance, drama, festive celebrations, pilgrimage, Kirtan, constitute the means and essence of bhakti.

Robyn Beeche's photographs cover almost all the subtle nuances and significant aspects of Krishna worship. Some display the expanse of the agricultural land dusty in the dry months, but green in monsoons. Others, capture magnificent ghats lined with temples and havelis, by the Yamuna river, said to be the meeting point of Krishna, Radha and the gopis. By the 17th century, the imposing temples of Govinda Dev, Madan Mohan, Jugal Kishore and many other were built along the Yamuna river. These still remain as excellent examples of the dialogue of Muslim and Hindu architecture of their time. Ritual time stands still in the fleeting images of the daily devotions (NityaPuja), and yearly festivals (Utsava). Some of her photographs are vivid examples of the way the deity is treated in daily worship with adornments and decorations specifically designed to the time of the day and seasons. She captures the daily service to Krishna which comprises his food (Bhog) and finery (Sringara), as also the adornments and decorations of the temple.

The most spectacular examples are the photographs that display the riotous colour and frenzied joy of the celebrants during the Holi festival in spring; and the preparation of a flower house, a Phul-bangala of Krishna. These photographs display the artistry of the local craftsmen. The tradition of phul-bangala has been carried on for centuries by temple priests and some particular families in Vrindaban. Fresh flowers plucked before dawn are threaded on strings and delivered to the temple. Frames are strung to create intricate jali patterns and small buds are used to embroider exquisite clothes for the deity and become backgrounds for the bangalas. During the hot season a new flowerhouse is created each day, varying themes being utilised. The anointment ceremony (abhisheka) of Krishna, the moving stances of the rasalila, enacted by young children, the cowdung figure of Krishna lifting the Govardhan mountain, the swing festival and the geometrical and stylistic perfection of floor designs, Sanjhis, made by sprinkling powders through stencils, depicting scenes from Krishna's life, are some other subjects covered by her.

That Krishna remains alive in the hearts and minds of the people, is shown in photographs of extreme devotion, such as prostration, pilgrims on a yatra, or collectively participation in Samaj or Kirtan. Explaining the various moods of worship, Robyn Beeche explains, "I see this exhibition as a way of the viewer being able to experience this living space of Vraja, of appreciating these age old traditions which are being kept alive for generations to come. It is by documenting them that I wish to help perpetuate their existence within a rapidly changing society".

### **Vraja Prakalpa Project**

In the course of history certain regions have developed into cultural centres attracting people from all parts of India. These have been places of convergence and of radiation. Often temples or mosques serve as the physical or national focal point in these regions. In the conceptual plan of Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, the holistic study of such centres have been envisioned. IGNCA's project on Vraja has undertaken study of the Vaishnava literature as well as devotional theatre raslila and ramlila, the art of Sanjhi, and Phul - bangla, devotional music, temple architecture as also documenting Nitya Seva and Utsav celebrated in the temples of Vrindaban. The multimedia documentation of all aspects of Vraja project from textual, visual, kinetic, have been done which have resulted in publication of books, audio - video documentation and still photography.



Robyn Beeche, (b.1945) in Sydney, Australia, spent five years working with two professional fashion photographers in Sydney and London. After that she acquired her own studio in London and specialised in beauty photography. The National Gallery of Australia in Canberra has a collection of 42 of her uncommissioned photographs which explored a decade of change in London in the eighties being expressed by various artists and which have become historic.

Since 1982, she has made Vrindaban her second home and has been involved with various creative projects linked with India. In 1989, she directed the film Holi - Festival of Colours and in 1995 held her first photographic exhibition on the Culture of Vraja, at the Piralal Gallery, NCPA, Bombay.

She has contributed photographs to two of IGNCAs publications; Govindadeva - A Dialogue in Stone (1996) and Evening Blossoms (1996). She has also fully illustrated the book, Arts and Crafts of India, published by Conran Octopus, London in 1992. She is currently working on a major publication on Vraja to be published shortly.