

BRAJ 84 KOS PARIKRAMĀ: HISTORY, TRADITION AND ARCHAEOLOGY

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Vraja is an old Sanskrit word which has now changed to Braj in popular local dialect. Vraja and Braj/Brij words are presently used to denote a particular area related to the childhood activities of Kṛṣṇa. Vraja word is derived from Sanskrit *dhātu* Vraj which as per dictionary (Katre 1969: 337) means “to go, to walk, to proceed” implying “motion and movement”. The place where cows move or graze has also been called Vraja (*vrajanti gāvo yasminniti vrajaḥ*). In the *R̥gveda*, Vraja word has been used for *gauśālā* or for the areas where cows graze - *yaṃ tvāṃ janāso abhisañcaranti gāva uṣṇamiv vrajaṃ yaviṣṭha* (10.4.2) and prayers have been made for the growth of cattle wealth *gavāmaya vrajaṃ vṛdhi kṛṇudhva rādho adriṣvaḥ* (*R̥gveda* 1.10.7). The *Amarakośa* (3.3.30) provides three meanings of the word Vraja: *goṣṭha* (cow’s stable), *mārga* (pathway) and *vṛnda* or herd (*goṣṭhādhvanivahā vrajaḥ*). In the *Yajurveda* (1.25), the grazing ground of the cows and *gauśālā* have been called *vraja* and *goṣṭha* respectively - *vraja gaccha goṣṭhān*. In the *Śukla Yajurveda* (6.3), reference is found of Vraja related with the grazing ground of cows having beautiful horns - *yāte dhāmānyuśmasi gamadhyai yatra gāvo bhūriśṛṅgā ayāsaḥ*.¹ The *Sāmaveda* (3.318) mentions that Vraja is same as *Goloka Dhāma* – *śūro nṛṣātā śravaśaśca kāmā ā gomati vraje bhajāṃ tvam naḥ* (Chaturvedi 1987: 57). Pāṇini’s *Aṣṭādhyāyī* mentions Vraja where it means a fold, stall, cow-pen, cattle-shed (Katre 1969: 537) – *gocarasañcaravahavrajavyajāpaṇanigamāśca* (3.3.119).

The author has earlier suggested that the word Virāja mentioned in *Atharvaveda* might have some connection with the word Vraja (Gupta 2013: 2). In the *Atharvaveda* (8. 10), the cosmic principle Virāja is successively associated with various classes of beings: gods, *asuras*, men, manes (*pitaraś*), tree-spirits (*vanaspatī*), the seven seers, *gandharvas* and

apsarās, *yakṣas* and snakes. In each case the two chief representatives of the group are mentioned as the calf (*vatsa*) and the milker of Virāja, which evidently is conceived as a cow”. Besides Vraja being one of the most sacred landscapes and originator of various art and iconographic forms, the conceptualization of the cosmic principle in the form of a cow also indicates towards the great association of the region with the cows. This link between Virāja (also defined as cosmic deity) and Vraja is quite significant and can’t be ignored. In the *Harivaṃśa Purāṇa* (Viṣṇu Parva, 9.30), Vraja denotes the interior parts of the region near Mathurā, in a sense the villages of cowmen – *tad vrajasthānaṃ adhikaṃ su śubhe kānanāvṛtaṃ*. The *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* (Pañcama Aṃśa) also mentions Vraja in similar sense. The places of Vraja mentioned in both these texts are: Gokula, Vṛndāvana, Govardhana, Tālavana, Bhāṇḍīravana and Yamunā. The word Vraja is used in similar sense in the *Śrīmadbhāgavata Purāṇa* (10.1.10) – *vraje vasan kiṃkaron madhuparyāṃ ca keśavaḥ*.

Mathurā, the most famous site of Vraja is frequently mentioned in Brāhmaṇical literature. The epics, especially the *Mahābhārata* are stocked with references to Mathurā and the Śūrasena region. The genealogy of solar and lunar dynasties describes several kings who held sway over this land. Pāṇini’s *Aṣṭādhyāyī* mentions a number of references related to Mathurā (all indirectly). The place has been described as a stronghold of Andhaka-Vṛṣṇi clans (6.2.34). Patañjali’s *Mahābhāṣya* while elaborating the *Aṣṭādhyāyī sūtras* mentions that the glory of Mathurā owes to the traditions of *Mahābhārata* (Sharma 1984: 18). In it, Mathurā is mentioned on at least eight occasions and at one place the text (5.3.57) admires the general conditions of this place saying that the people were happy and good looking and better off than the residents of Sāṃkāśya and Pāṭaliputra (Sharma 1984: 18-19). Kauṭilya in his *Arthaśāstra* describes the cotton cloth of Mathurā as of high quality (II.11.115). *Manusmṛti* (2.16) mentions Vraja region (Śūrasena) as part of *Brahmarṣi* country. The *Garuḍa Purāṇa* mentions Mathurā along with other six most holy cities of India.

The *Uttarakāṇḍa* of the *Rāmāyaṇa* (*Sarga* 68-70) deals with the incidents of Madhupurī; the fight of Śatrughna with Lavaṇāsura and the establishment of the capital city Madhurā. The *Harivaṃśa Purāṇa* (54/56-62) provides some important information about Mathurā. It also tells that this city was established in the forest area of Madhuvana by Śatrughna after killing the demon Lavaṇāsura there. It also speaks of the fortification wall, moat, the crescent shape, gardens, high rise buildings, prosperity (in terms of crop production, availability of precious jewels) and the commerce of the city. The *Padma Purāṇa* (73.44-45) mentions Mathurā to be even holier than the holiest city of Kāśī. It further adds that Mathurā is the city of Lord Viṣṇu and is worshipped by many deities as a *sanātana purī* (583.12-14). In the *Varāha Purāṇa* (152.8-9), Lord Varāha tells the Goddess Earth that no place on earth, space

or nether world is so liked by him as is Mathurā which is higher than the heavens in its reputation for being the birth place of Kṛṣṇa.

Area of Braj based on *Purāṇas* and traditions

Among all the *Purāṇas* in which Braj has been mentioned, the reference in *Varāha Purāṇa* is the most significant. The *Mathurāmaṇḍala* section of the *Varāha Purāṇa* solely deals with Braj *maṇḍala*. A part of this text is famous as *Mathurā Mahātmya* (chapter 158). In it, the extent of Mathurā *maṇḍala* has been told as 20 *yojanas* and at many places it has been repeated while telling the importance of various places in this territory (*viṃśatiryōjanāntu māthuraṃ maṃ maṇḍalaṃ | yatra tatra naraḥ snāto mucyate sarvakilviṣai* || 158.1).

In the *Vāyu Purāṇa*, the extent of Mathurā *maṇḍala* has been told as 40 *yojanas*, but this reference has not attained wider popularity as references of the *Varāha Purāṇa* have. One *yojana* roughly measures about 4 *krośa* (kos) or 7 miles (12 km) and hence the traditional extent of Braj is considered to be 84 *krośas*. A popular *kimvadanti* in Braj says (Mittal 1966: 5) - *ita varahada uta sonahada sūrasena uta grāma | vraja caurāsī kosa mein mathurāmaṇḍala dhāma* ||.

Growse (1883: 78) had talked about a similar tradition but it was possibly a corrupt form of the above *kimvadanti*. This couplet had probably got drawn from *Śrīmadgargasamhitā*, one of the important compositions exclusively related to Vraja and its episodes. In it Gargācārya talks about Vraja to Nandarāya in the following *śloka*s (*Vṛndāvana Khaṇḍa*, Chapter 1, *śloka*s 11-12) - *prāgudivyāṃ varhiṣado dakṣiṇasyāṃ yadopurāt | paścimāyāṃ śonapurānmathurāmaṇḍalaṃ viduḥ || viṃśadyojana vistīrṇa sārdayadyojane navai | mathurāmaṇḍalaṃ divyaṃ vrajamahurmanīṣinaḥ* ||

In these references Varhiṣad or Barhad in the northeast direction can be identified with Barhad near Bijaigarh in District Hathras. In the south of Braj is Yadupura or Śūrasena kā Grāma which has been identified with Bateshwar near Shikohabad along River Yamuna. In the west of Braj is Śoṇapura or Sonhad which can be identified either with Saundhad near Hodal or with Sohna near Gurgaon. Gargācārya said that surrounded by these places, the region is called as Vraja by *manīṣis*. While in local tradition, only three side extremes have been mentioned; in *Śrīmadgargasamhitā*, attempt has been made to mention the four extremes by putting Varhiṣad in northeastern direction. In one of the editions of *Vrajabhakti Vilāsa* of Nārāyaṇa Bhaṭṭa published by *Gauḍīya* scholar Baba Krishnadas, the northern limit of Braj has been mentioned as Sonagaon while the reference quoted by F.S. Growse mentions Bhuvana vana as the northern limit. The mention in the *Vrajabhakti Vilāsa* (Chapter 6.1) is as follows:

caturśīti krośāḍhyāṃ caturdikṣu virājitā|
mathurā maṇḍala tkrośamekaṃviṃśatikam bhajet||
caturdikṣu pramāṇena pūrvādikramato gaṇat|
pūrva bhāge stitham kroṇam vanam hāsyabhidhānakam||
bhāge ca dakṣiṇe koṇam śubham janhuvanam stitham|
bhāge va paścime koṇe parvatākhyavanam stitham||
bhāgehuttara koṇastham sūryapatana samjñakam|
ityetā vrajamaryadā catuṣkoṇābhidāyinī||

It appears that the northern limit of Braj would have been Sonagaon and can be identified with Sohna near Gurgaon. Growse (1883: 79) has identified Upahāravana with Sohna as well but for the northern limit he identified Bhuvanavana with Bhūṣaṇa vana near Shergarh which does not appear to be the case. Because of the contribution of *Gauḍīya* scholars, view of greater Braj can be ascertained which has been called as ‘cultural Braj’. Rūpa Gosvāmī on the basis of his researches of various *Purāṇas* had arrived at the conclusion that from Yāyāvāra to Śaukarī Vateśvara, was the position of Braj. Yāyāvāra has been identified with Jewar in Bulandshahr district. Based on the references provided by Nārāyaṇa Bhaṭṭa and the analysis of various scholars like Mittal, and Growse, the following limits of the greater Braj (a single religio-cultural entity) can be drawn: in the north Śoṇapura (Sohna near Gurgaon/ Saundhad near Hodal) or Yāyāvāra (Jewar along Yamuna in District Bulandshahr); in the east Varhiṣad (Barhad near Bijaigarh, Hathras, which would be in the northeast direction actually) or Soron (along Ganga if it is the ancient Saurapura) and Hāsyavan (Hasayan in District Hathras or Hasangarh near Jalesar); in the south Janhuvana (Jajau near Dholpur) and Bateshwar near Shikohabad (in the southeast direction); in the west Apahārīvana (Pahari village, near Govindgarh in District Alwar) or Pahari village (to the northwest of Kaman in District Bharatpur). Mathura city, whether part of ancient Vraja or not, has to be considered the centre point of Braj.²

A beautiful description of Vraja in *Viṣṇu Rahasya* as cited by Nārāyaṇa Bhaṭṭa in *Vrajabhakti Vilāsa* (1.93) is “Mathurāpurī is the *hrdaya* of Vraja, Madhuvana the *nābhi*, Tālavana and Kumudavana the two breasts, Vṛndāvana the forehead, Bahulāvana and Mahāvana the two arms, Kokilāvana and Bhāṇḍīravana the hands, Khādiravana and Bhadrakavana the shoulders, Chatravana and Lohajāṅghavana two eyes, Bilvavana and Bhadravana two ears, Kāmyakavana the *cibuka*, Triveni and Sakhīkūpa the lips, Vihvala etc. the teeth, Surabhivana the tongue, Mayūravana the *lalāṭa*, Mānengitavana the nose, Śeṣasāyī and Parmānandavana the nostrils, Karahla and Kamai the hips, Karṇavana the

linga, Kṛṣṇākṣīpanaka the anus, Nandanavana the head, Indravana the back, Śikṣāvana the *vāṇī*, Dayāvana, Lohavana, Nandagrāma, Śrīkuṇḍa, Govardhana, Jāvavaṭa, Saṃketavana, Nārādavana, Madhuvana, Mr̥dvana, Janhuvana, Menakāvana, Kajalīvana, Nandakūpavana etc. are the fingers of hands and feet of Vraja in the form of Śrīkṛṣṇa. *Indriyas* are the *gau* (cows), *Jīva* is the *Gopa*. Gopāla is the supreme soul (*Paramātmā*). Desires of the *Jīva* are the *Gopikās*.

Another aspect of Braj can be taken as the area in which the language of Braj (Brajbhasha) is spoken. This region is quite larger than the area so far talked about. This area extends up to Gurgaon, Mewat in northwest direction, Gautam Buddha Nagar in north, Sambhal/ Chandausi (Bahjoi), Bareilly, Badaun districts and parts of Pilibhit, Shahjahanpur, Hardoi in northeast, parts of Mainpuri, Farrukhabad, Etawah, Kanpur districts in east, Bhind district in southeast, Morena, Gwalior, Datia in south, Dausa and parts of Jaipur district in southwest and Alwar in west. Among this area the districts where pure Brajbhasha is spoken are: Mathura, Aligarh, Hathras, Palwal, Bulandshahr, Kasganj, Badaun, Bharatpur, Karauli, Dholpur, Morena, Agra, Firozabad and Etah. This vast area has been included by Dharendra Varma, a great linguist (1954: 33) in his analysis of Brajbhasha speaking region. The far off parts of this area are those in which Brajbhasha is spoken with slight regional variations. The area of Brajbhasha speaking Braj region is 38,000 square miles (Varma 1954: 34). In the northeastern direction, this area where Brajbhasha is spoken is quite far off and might have been so because of the presence of original Braj people in this area in good numbers. The area of Brajbhasha speaking Braj region as well as the population is far greater than many important European countries combined.

Geographical Features of Braj

Mathura district is the centre of Braj and it lies between Lat. 27°14' and 27°58'N and Long. 77°17' and 78°12'E and covered an area of about 3625 square km (Joshi 1968). The area of the modern Mathura district is 3340 square km with a population of over 2.4 million people. The whole district of Mathura is a part of Yamuna plains, so the land is more or less plain in appearance. The average height of Mathura district is about 600 feet from M.S.L. The area in the north is slightly higher than 600 feet while in the south and southeast is less than 600 feet. Hence the slope of the land is from north to south and southeast direction. In between this area the River Yamuna flows from north to south.

From geo-morphological point of view, the region of Braj can be divided into three categories: 1. the plains; 2. the hilly area; 3. the *khadar* area. The plain area is much larger and is spread on both sides of River Yamuna in the east and in the west. During ancient

times, there were many *vanas* (forests) and sacred groves in this area which are more or less non-existent now-a-days. The area to the east of Yamuna (the *trans*-Yamuna tract) is more fertile in comparison to the area to the west of Yamuna (the *cis*-Yamuna tract) as *trans*-Yamuna area comprises of *domat* soil (fertile clay). In the *cis*-Yamuna area, there are many fertile pockets like near Tarauli, Bathain-Jab, Mora-Sakna etc. Generally the soil of *cis*-Yamuna tract is sandy. Vegetation in the district is of a dry-deciduous type and the original scanty tree species include *Faras*, *Pilu*, *Chheokar*, *Reonj*, *Babul*, *Kharjal*, *Kadamb*, *Karil*, *Hins* and *Bansi*. Other trees and shrubs do not differ from those in Gangetic doab, though, hilly outcrops at Barsana and elsewhere produce some *Dhau*, *Kadamb*, *Paserid* and *Pilukhan*.

The hilly area is limited to the west and northwest of Braj. These low hills (height less than 100 feet) are the off shoots of Aravalli and have more religious significance than anything else. This area would have definitely been used during the heavy floods in the area of Braj as these were quite safe from floods. The important hills in the region are: Govardhan, Barsana, Nandgaon, Kaman, Sikri and Charan Pahari. *Khadar* area is situated on both sides of River Yamuna in the form of thin strips and is made of soil brought in by river floods. This area is quite undulating in appearance and is not always useful for agricultural purpose. Unlike the generally accepted trend of *khadar* land being fertile, people of Braj often talk of undulating sandy area near Yamuna which is not always fertile, as *khadar* land.

Location of Mathura district is the most important factor which makes it archaeologically and culturally so important. It is situated at the entry-pot of Ganga-Yamuna doab. The *trans*-Yamuna region is climatically a part of the Ganga-Yamuna doab, while the western part of Mathura district with Aravalli off shoots is more associated with the geographical and climatic conditions of Rajasthan. Moving from north to south, it changes from the climatic conditions of fertile Haryana land to a mixed climatic situation. Because of its geographical location as a nodal point various ancient routes passed from here which have now taken the shape of highways and railway tracks, though some have lost their importance because of modernization. One route coming from Indraprastha and going to Malwa-Gujarat region passed from here, following almost the present day routes. One route went to Vidisha via Pawaya; one went to Kaushambi following the course of Yamuna in the east while one very important but less studied route went from here to west and northwest Rajasthan via Kaman, Alwar; other routes went towards Bareilly region crossing Yamuna and Ganga and met with the Mauryan royal highway in between. Thus Mathura district served as meeting place for the desert with doab, hills with plains, north with south and east with west. All these routes were so important that Mathura became an important centre for international trade, position of which, during the Islamic period was acquired by Agra and later on by Delhi,

having almost the same geographical and nodal importance. Location of ancient routes passing via Mathura is also clear from the study of Indian Railways as Mathura is still the biggest junction point of Indian Railways and possibly the only place in the country from where trains can be taken to reach any place.

Rivers and streams in Braj

Yamuna

It is one of the most important and sacred rivers of India after the Ganga. The important towns along the Yamuna or near to it in the Braj region are: Jewar, Shergarh, Nohjhil, Manth, Vrindavan, Mathura, Gokul, Mahaban, Baldev, Runkata, Agra and Bateshwar. In the ancient times Yamuna might have been a navigable river and would have been used as a means of transportation for trade and normal contacts. It was only after the excavations of various canals from Yamuna and dams at higher reaches that it ceased to be such a potent river. This river would have played the most important role in the development of civilization in this region and possibly would not have served as a barrier for the movement of the people. The number of ancient sites on both the banks of the river is quite high.

Karban or Jhirna

It is more of a monsoonal river which dries down during the summer months but takes a larger shape during monsoons. It originates in the Khurja tehsil of Bulandshahr district and then flows in the tehsils of Khair, Iglas, Hathras and Sadabad of the old Aligarh district and Etmadpur tehsil of Agra district. It meets the Yamuna some distance past Agra city. The important ancient towns along this river are: Chandaus, Khair, Mursan and Sadabad. The ancient towns are quite important and some of them might date back to Copper Hoard - Ochre Coloured Pottery cultural period like the site of Sadabad.

Patwaha

It is a small seasonal stream which originates in District Meerut and passes via Khair tehsil of Aligarh district and Manth tehsil of Mathura before merging with the Yamuna near Mirpur. An important ancient town situated along this stream is Bajna.

Sengar and Arind

These are small tributaries of the Yamuna which flow in the tehsils of Aligarh, Jalesar, Firozabad and Shikohabad before merging in it. Important ancient towns along Sengar river are Harduaganj, Barhad, Band Abdullapur, Jalesar and Shikohabad.

Gambhiri and its tributary Khari Nadi

Gambhiri River flows in the southern part of Braj region in the Bharatpur district and Khairagarh tehsil of Agra. Khari Nadi flows mainly in the Kirawali tehsil of Agra and the important town on its bank is Akola, besides many other important archaeological sites on its bank.

Agra Canal, Govardhan Drain and Manth Branch of Ganga Canal

These are the canals which came into existence during recent past (possibly during the colonial rule). These three important sources of irrigation in District Mathura are possibly running on the natural alignment of some dried up streams or monsoonal streams. On the banks of Agra canal, the important sites are: Kosi, Sahar, Bharna Kalan, Aring, Sonsa and Kosikhurd. On the banks of Govardhan drain the important sites are: Kaman, Akata, Unchagaon, Barsana, Hathiya, Janu, Mundsaras, Gantholi, Paintha, Sonkh, Gunsara, Rarah, Santruk, Ol, Beri, Parkham and Pingri. The important sites near the Manth branch of Ganga canal are: Khera, Ahrola, Khayra, Karahari, Harnaul, Nasiti, Jabra, Arua, Barnauli ki Dhari. It is quite possible that during ancient times this stream would have fallen into River Yamuna at Barnauli ki Dhari. Govardhan drain was definitely an old channel with so many important sites.

Besides these channels, there are many other local drains and canal distributaries which have come up in past few centuries and even after independence. Many of these channels appear to be ancient water channels which would have definitely helped the ancient people especially during PGW period in agricultural purpose as well as in other subsistence needs. From the distribution of ancient sites it appears that during the ancient times, people might have formed bandhas (blockades) at these drains or small rivulets during monsoons to collect and distribute rain water for agricultural fields and large ponds.

Important *vanas* of Braj

Braj is the land of sacred groves and forests. Besides the important 36 *vanas* (12 major and 24 *upavanas*) there were many such other *vanas* or small groves in the region. Many of the village names in Braj and the greater region derive their names from various sacred groves.

12 major *vanas* as mentioned in *Braja Vastu Varṇana*

1. Madhuvana, 2. Tālavana, 3. Kumudavana, 4. Bahulāvana, 5. Kāmavana, 6. Khādiravana, 7. Vṛndāvana, 8. Bhadravana, 9. Bhāṇḍīravana, 10. Belavana, 11. Lohavana, 12. Mahāvana. *Vraja Bhakti Vilāsa* mentions Chatravana and Kokilāvana in stead of Madhuvana and Vṛndāvana which seems faulty.

24 upavanas of Braj mentioned in *Braja Vastu Varnṇana*

1. Ariṣṭavana, 2. Satohā, 3. Govardhan, 4. Barsānā, 5. Parmandra, 6. Nandgāon, 7. Sanket, 8. Mānsarovar, 9. Śeṣasāyī, 10. Belavana, 12. Gopālpur, 13. Pārsaulī, 14. Ānyor, 15. Ādibadrī, 16. Vilāsgarh, 17. Pisāyo, 18. Āñjankhor, 19. Karahlā, 20. Kokilāvana, 21. Dadhivana (Dahgaon), 22. Rāwal, 23. Bacchavan (Sehi), 24. Kauravavana.

Vanas of Braj as mentioned in *Vraja Bhakti Vilāsa*

12 Vanas (according to *Padma Purāṇa*)

Mahāvana, Kāmavana, Kokilāvana, Tālavana, Kumudavana, Bhāṇḍīravana, Chatravana, Khādiravana, Lohajānghavana, Bhadravana, Bahulāvana and Belavana.

12 Upavanas (according to *Varāha Purāṇa*)

Brahmavana, Apsarāvana, Vihvalavana, Kadambavana, Svarṇavana, Surabhivana, Premavana, Mayūravana, Mānengitavana, Śeṣasāyīvana, Nāradvana and Parmānandavana.

12 Pratīvanas (according to *Bhaviṣya Purāṇa*)

Raṅkavana, Vārtavana, Karhāvana, Kāmavana, Āñjanavana, Karṇavana, Kṛṣṇākṣīpavana, Nandaprekṣaṇākṣīpavana, Indravana, Śikṣāvana, Candrāvalivana and Lohavana.

12 Adhīvanas (according to *Viṣṇu Purāṇa*)

Mathurā, Radhākunḍa, Nandagrāma, Gaḍha, Lalitāgrāma, Vṛṣabhānupura, Gokula, Baladeva, Govardhana, Yāvavaṭa, Vṛndāvana and Saṃketavana.

Braj 84 kos Parikramā

The concept of Braj Parikramā seems to be related to the pan Indian concept of *tīrthāṭana* (religious tourism). The concept was developed to understand the pilgrim centers in a holistic manner. The Braj Parikramā is related to nature's worship as all the natural sources like groves, rivers, hills, lakes, ponds and even the dust of Braj (Braj-raj) are revered. This concept of worship of nature can be understood by the prevailing practice of Vallabhīya Puṣṭimārgī sect who still call Braj Parikramā as Vanayātrā. In antiquity, the first Vraja yātrā is credited to Uddhava who was sent by Kṛṣṇa himself to Vraja to meet his parents and the *gopīs* and relieve them from the agony caused by separation (*Śrīmadbhāgavata Purāṇa* 10.46.3). It is here that for the first time the importance of Vraja as the *līlā-sthala* of Śrī Kṛṣṇa is highlighted when the *gopīs* tell Uddhava that their mind get absolved in him as

they behold the streams, hills and woodlands as well as the playgrounds graced by the footprints of Śrī Kṛṣṇa :

*Saricchailavanoddesān mukundapadabhūṣitān/
Akṛīḍanīkṣamāṇānām mano yāti tadātmatām//* (10.46.22)

Again *Śrīmadbhāgavata Purāṇa* (10.47.54-55) informs that Uddhava stayed for some months there in Vraja in order to drive away the grief of cowherd women. Celebrating in song the story of the pastimes of Kṛṣṇa, he brought delight to Gokula. *Śrīmadbhāgavata Purāṇa* (10.47.61) again refers to Uddhava expressing his desire of being incarnated as anyone of the shrubs, creepers or herbs in the woodlands of Vṛndāvana, catching the dust of feet of *gopīs*, who trod the path of devotion leading to Kṛṣṇa:

*Āsāmaho caraṇareṇujuṣāmahaṃ syām vṛndāvane kimapi gulmalatauśadhiṇām/
Yādustyajam svajanamāryapatham ca hitvā bhejurmukundapadavīm śrutibhirvimṛgyām//*

Uddhava also says that he repeatedly salute the dust of feet of the blessed women of Nanda's Vraja, whose loud singing of the stories of Kṛṣṇa purifies the three worlds:

*Vande nandavrajastrīṇām pādareṇumabhīkṣaṇaśah/
Yāsām harikathodgītām punāti bhuvanatrayam//* (10.47.63)

Śrīmadbhāgavata Khaṇḍa of the *Skanda Purāṇa* mentions that Vajranābha, the great grandson of Kṛṣṇa, had heard the story of *Śrīmadbhāgavata* from Uddhava at Govardhana. It indicates a second Vraja-yātrā of Uddhava, though he is mentioned to be staying at Badrikāśrama. Nārada is also said to have visited Vraja. *Pātāla Khaṇḍa* of the *Padma Purāṇa* mentions that Nārada searched for Rādhā in Vraja and had the glimpse of *Rāsa-līlā* at Kusuma Sarovara. The *Vṛhad Nārādīya Purāṇa* (*Uttara Khaṇḍa*, 79th chapter, *Mathurā Mahātmya*) gives a detailed account of Nārada's Vraja yātrā mentioning the vanas and upavanas (Shesh 1959: 91-117). *Śrīmadbhāgavata Khaṇḍa* of the *Skanda Purāṇa* gives a detailed account of the life of Kṛṣṇa and how his great grandson Vajranābha was brought to Mathurā by Arjuna and made the king of Mathurā. When Parikṣita, king of Hastināpura, visits Mathurā, he advises Vajranābha to re-establish the places related to the life activities of Kṛṣṇa. With the help of Rṣi Śāṇḍilya many places were re-established, cantonment was established at Govardhana, Dīrghapura (Dig), Mathurā, Mahāvana, Nandigrāma (Nandgaon) and Vṛhatsānu (Barsana). But with passage of time, these places were lost and revived during the medieval period only.

Brajyātrā of Vallabhācārya

From the Vaiṣṇava sources, it is inferred that Vallabhācārya had thrice visited Braj between V.S. 1549 and 1568. The most important place of his reverence was Śrīnāthajī at Govardhana.

Śrīnāthajī was established earlier by Ācārya Śrī Mādhavendra Purī and Vallabhācārya gave him a *bhavya rūpa* and *mandira*. The important places visited by Vallabhācārya besides Govardhana were: Gokula, Vṛndāvana and Mathurā. In V.S. 1550 he initiated Braj-yātrā with his *purohita* Ujāgara Caturvedī and visited the following places in order:

Madhuvana (Kṛṣṇakuṇḍa), Tālavana, Kamoda/Kumudavana, Bahulāvana, Rādhākuṇḍa-Kṛṣṇakuṇḍa, Mānasī Gaṅgā, Parsauli, Anyor, Govindakuṇḍa, Sundara śilā, Girirāja, Kāmavana (Surabhi/ Śrīkuṇḍa), Gahvaravana (Barsana), Saṃketavana, Nandgaon, Kokilāvana, Bhāṇḍīravana, Mānasarovara, Gokula and completed his yātrā reaching at Mathurā.

The places visited by Vallabhācārya clearly indicate that there was already a tradition of *Parikramā* of 12 vanas but it had somehow become uncommon and most of the places had acquired deserted look. This is also confirmed by the data provided by Jinaprabhasuri in the chapter *Mathurāpurīkalpa* of *Vividhatīrthakalpa*, a Jaina text written in the first half of fourteenth century. He mentions five *sthalas* of Mathurā: Arka, Vīra, Padma, Kuśa and Mahāsthala and 12 vanas: Lohajāṅgha, Madhu, Bilva, Tāla, Kumuda, Vṛnda, Bhāṇḍīra, Khadira, Kāmika, Kola, Bahulā and Mahāvana. He also mentioned five laukika tīrthas: Viśrāṃtika, Asikuṇḍa, Vaikuṇṭha, Kālīṅjara and Cakratīrtha. This confirms that the Parikramā of 12 vanas of Vraja existed much earlier in antiquity and was only made popular by the Vallabha and Caitanya sects.

Brajyātrā of Caitanya

Caitanya visited Braj sometime around 1522 CE. During his yātrā, he visited Mathurā (Viśrāmaghāṭa, Keśavadeva, 24 ghāṭas of Yamunā, Svayaṃbhu, Dīrghaviṣṇu, Bhūteśvara, Mahāvidyā, Gokarṇa) and 12 vanas. The important places which he associated with Kṛṣṇa-līlā are: Mādhurī kuṇḍa, Rādhākuṇḍa, Kusumasarovara, Kāmavana (Kelīsthālī, Nandīśvara and various kuṇḍas), Khidaravana, Śeṣasāyī, Khelanavana, Bhāṇḍīravana, Bhadravana, Śrīvāna (Belavana), Lohavana, Mahāvana (Yamalārjuna, Gokula). He also did Parikramā at Govardhana after taking bath at Mānasī Gaṅgā and had darśana of Harideva, visited Govindakuṇḍa and Gantholi. He also visited Vṛndāvana which included Akrūra Ghāṭa, Kāśīhrda, Dvādaśāditya, Keśīghāṭa and Rāsasthala.

Brajyātrā of Gusāin Viṭṭhalanātha

Viṭṭhalanātha, the younger son of Vallabhācārya did Brajyātrā twice in V.S. 1600 and 1624. The record of his second Brajyātrā is available through the work of Jagatananda who accompanied him. This yātrā was completed in 11 days, the description is as follows:

Bhādon (Bhādrapada) Kṛṣṇa 12: Took orders at Gokula and came to Mathurā.

Bhādon Kṛṣṇa 13: After taking bath at Viśrāma Ghāṭa, had darśana at Janmabhūmi and Bhūteśvara, then, visited Madhuvana (Maholi), Tālavana (Tarsi) and Kumudavana (Mukundpur).

Bhādon Kṛṣṇa 14: Śāmtanu Kuṇḍa (Satoha), Gandharva Kuṇḍa (Ganeshra), Bahulāvana (Bati), Araṭha (Artiṣṭapura), Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa Kuṇḍa, Śyāma vaṭa, Kusuma Sarovara, Nārada Kuṇḍa, Śrīnāthajī (Govardhana)

Bhādon Kṛṣṇa 15: Haradevajī, Cakratīrtha, Mānasī Gaṅgā, Brahmakuṇḍa, Dānī Keśorāya, Saṃkarṣaṇa, Govinda Kuṇḍa, Gandharva Kuṇḍa, Govindarāya, Apsarā Kuṇḍa, Rudra Kuṇḍa and Gantholi

Bhādon Sudi (Sukla) 1: Ādi Badrī, Hindolā, Indraulī, Indra Kuṇḍa, Kāmavana, Dharmakuṇḍa.

Bhādon Sudi 2: Bath at Dharmakuṇḍa, circumambulation of Kaman, Vimalakuṇḍa, Kāmanākuṇḍa, Mahodadhī, Ratnākara, Kalirava, Ānkha-miconī, Andhakūpa vaṭa, Surabhi guphā, Khisalinī Śilā, Thāra-kaṭorī cinh, Caurāsī Kuṇḍa, Nandgaon.

Bhādon Sudi 3: Sunehra, after bathing at Dehakuṇḍa had darśana of Baladeva-Revatī, Sankrī-khorī, Chiksaulī, Bhanupur, Mangarh, Dangarh, Danaghati, Ratanakuṇḍa, Naubari, Chaubari, Piri Pokhar, Sanket, Rāsa-cauntarā, Vidhula Kuṇḍa, Madhuvana Kuṇḍa, Jasodī Kuṇḍa, Lalitā Kuṇḍa, Brijbarī, Chachāhirī Kuṇḍa, Dāmodara, Gopeśvara, Akrūra-sthāna, Uddhava-kyārī, Madhusūdana Kuṇḍa, Kadambakhaṇḍī, Mānasarovara, Khidaravana.

Bhādon Sudi 4: After bathing in various Kuṇḍas reached Pisora (Pisaya), Karahla, Anjnokh, Mahrana, Murwari Tal, Vilāsavaṭa, Bathain, Balabhadra Kuṇḍa, Caraṇa Pahādī, Śaṅkhachūḍa killing spot, Bacchavana.

Bhādon Sudi 5: Rasoli, Vaṭavṛkṣa, Nandaghāṭa, Rāmaghāṭa (via Khidaravana) the spot of Pralambāsura vadha and Yamunā extraction, Kātyāyanī devī, Cīraghāṭa, Nandaghāṭa, after crossing Yamunā Bhadravana, Madhusūdana Kuṇḍa, Bhāṇḍīravana, Khijali village (may be Bijauli), Bhāṇḍīrakūpa, Akṣayavaṭa, Belavana.

Bhādon Sudi 6: Mānasarovara, Maṇika śilā, Pipraulī, Lohavana, Brahmāṇḍa ghāṭa, Yamalārjuna līlā sthala, Mathurānatha, Nandakūpa, temples of Śyāmā and Rohiṇī, Saptasamudrī kūpa, Uttaraghāṭa, Gokula, Mathurā.

Bhādon Sudi 7: Daśāśvamedha ghāṭa, Akrūra sthala, Kālidaha, Niṣkandha, Madana Mohana, Cīraghāṭa, Vaṃśīvaṭa, Dharmakuṇḍa, Veṇukūpa, Govindadeva and back to Mathurā.

Nārāyaṇa Bhaṭṭa and Vraja Bhakti Vilāsa

The maximum contribution towards identifying various places of Braj and writing their description for posterity was done by Nārāyaṇa Bhaṭṭa, who was a disciple of famous

Gosvamīs of Vrindavan, great pupils of Caitanya. Basing on various old religious texts, then available to him, he did a great service to Braj and should be credited to have worked for the Braj yātrā in the present day format.

Braj 84 kos Parikramā route and archaeology

Braj 84 kos Parikramā has three routes at present: one outer Parikramā and two inner Parikramās (Map 1)³. Places visited in the shorter inner circumambulation are more or less same as described above in the Braj yātrā of Gusāin Viṭṭhalanātha. It covers major part of Mathura district and Dig and Kaman tehsils of District Bharatpur. The outer Parikramā and second inner Parikramā cover a larger area and also include parts of District Palwal (Haryana) and Aligarh. The important sites on the outer Parikramā route are:

Mathura, Bad, Dhangaon, Tarsi, Nagari (Umri), Kumudvan, Sonkh, Bachhgaon, Konthra, Samai, Bahej, Kuchawati, Dig, Didawali, Tankoli, Khoh (south-west), Adibadri, Alipur Brahman, Barolidhau, Khuntपुरi, Kedarnath, Badali, Luhesar, Agarawali, Kalawata, Bhojanthali, Nandera, Unchera, Parehi, Pai, Jurahra, Wikati, Jakhokar, Nehrida, Suhira, Punahana (north-west), Maryaka, Andhop, Saundhad, Lohina, Banchari, Moroli, Palri, Khambi, Likhi, Hasanpur, Marav, Khajpur, Managarhi, Awakhera, Kaneka, Seupatti, Bajna (north-east), Lalpur, Shall, Jarailiya, Sikandarpur, Tehra, Bijau, Rajagarhi, Karahri, Dadisara, Tentigaon, Erolī, Harnaul, Nasiti, Jawra, Arua, Kasera, Kukrari, Raya, Saras, Itauli, Bandi, Baldev (south-east), Khirari, Jhandipur, Shahpur.

During archaeological investigations in the area, it is observed that majority (50%) of the sites date back to Painted Grey Ware (PGW) period in antiquity and then continued during the succeeding cultural periods, about 40% to the early centuries of the Common era and the remaining 8% to the medieval period, few are just isolated religious sites like Adibadri, Kedarnath, Bhojanthali.⁴

PGW sites: Mathura, Bad, Dhangaon, Tarsi, Umri, Sonkh, Bachhgaon, Bahej, Dig, Khoh, Nandera, Unchera, Parehi, Pai, Jurahra, Punahana, Andhop, Saundhad, Banchari, Moroli, Khambi, Likhi, Hasanpur, Marav, Awakhera, Bajna, Shall, Rajagarhi, Karahri, Tentigaon, Erolī, Harnaul, Nasiti, Jawra, Raya, Bandi, Khirari, Jhandipur.

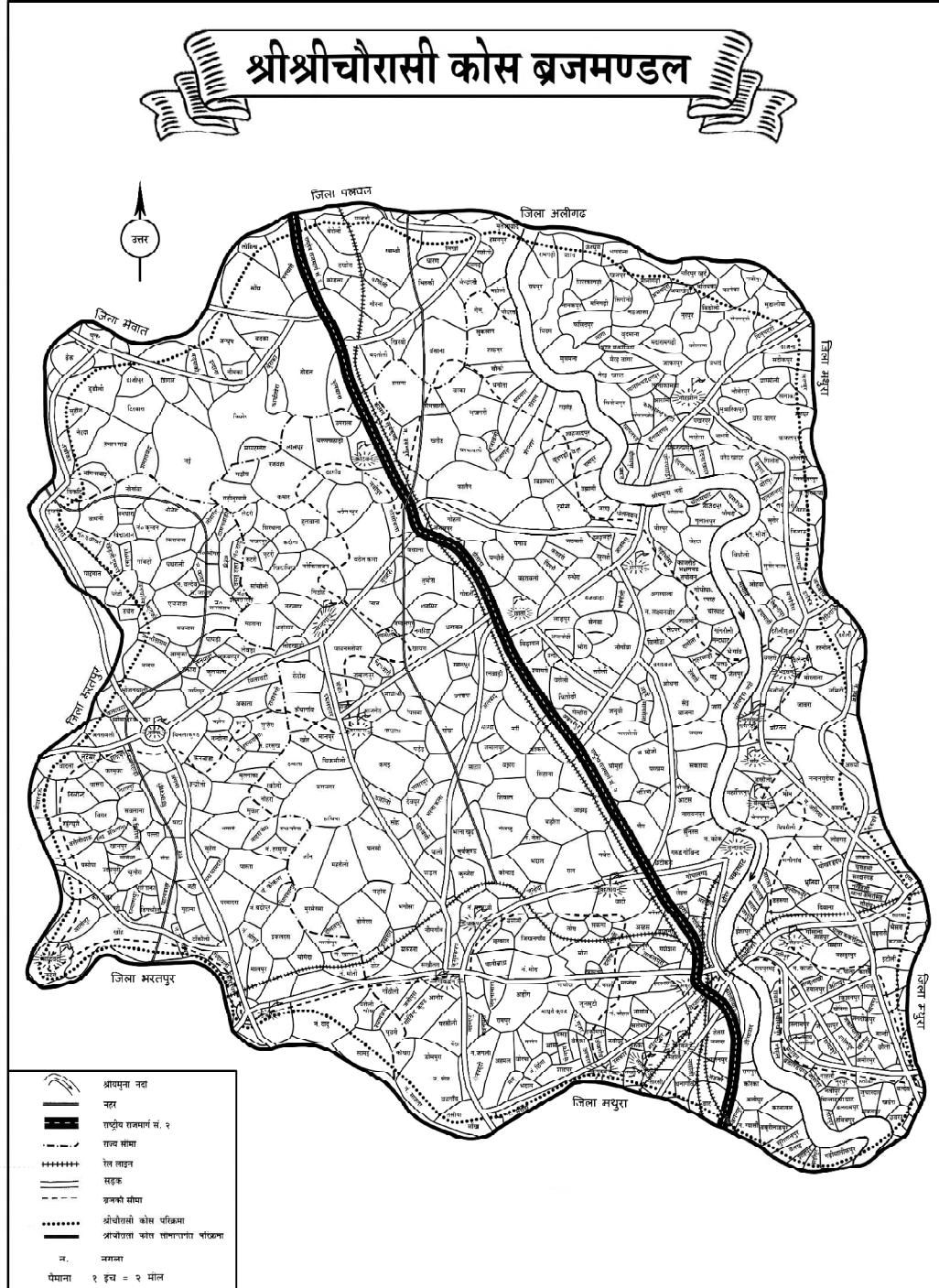
Sites belonging to Early centuries of the Common Era: Kumudvan, Konthra, Samai, Didawali, Tankoli, Barolidhau, Khuntपुरi, Luhesar, Agarawali, Kalawata, Parehi, Wikati, Jakhokar, Nehrida, Suhira, Maryaka, Lohina, Palri, Managarhi, Kaneka, Lalpur, Jarailiya, Sikandarpur, Tehra, Dadisara, Arua, Kukrari, Saras, Itauli, Baldeo and Shahpur.

Archaeology of Inner 84 kos Parikramā*

At present the Inner 84 kos Parikramā of Gaudīya and Vallabha *paramparā* (with slight variations) passes through the following places:

Mathura, Madhuvana (**Maholi**), Tālavana (**Tarsi**), **Mukundpur**, Kumudavana, Śāmtanu Kuṇḍa (**Satoha**), Gandheśvara (Ganeshra), Bahulāvana (**Bati**), **Ral**, **Maghera**, **Jaint**, Garuḍa Govinda (Chhatikara), **Mora**, Datiya, **Aring**, Mādhurī Kuṇḍa, **Jakhangaon**, **Tosh**, **Jansuti**, **Basonti**, Mukhrai, **Rādhā Kuṇḍa**, Śyāma Kuṇḍa, Kusuma Sarovara, Nārada Kuṇḍa, Gvāla Puṣkariṇī, Yugala Kuṇḍa, Killola Kuṇḍa, Mānasī Gaṅgā, **Govardhan**, Indradhvajavedi, **Jamunavata**, Parsauli, **Paintha**, **Sonkh**, **Bachhgaon**, Anyor, Gaurī Kuṇḍa, Saṃkarṣaṇa Kuṇḍa, Govinda Kuṇḍa, Navala Kuṇḍa, Apsarā Kuṇḍa, Śakra Kuṇḍa, Punchhri, Śyāmadhāka, Rāghava Paṇḍit's cave, Surabhi Kuṇḍa, Airāvata Kuṇḍa, Harajī Kuṇḍa, Jatipura, Bilachu Kuṇḍa, Cakreśvara Mahadeva, Sakhitara, **Nimgaon**, **Padar**, **Kunjera**, **Pali**, Dehrawali, **Mana**, **Sahara**, Surya Kuṇḍa, **Pelkhu**, **Bhadar**, **Kaunai**, Jāvaka Kuṇḍa, Gulāla Kuṇḍa, **Gantholi**, **Behaj**, **Devsaras**, **Mundsarar**, **Parmadra**, **Dig**, Badrīnārāyaṇa, **Gohana**, **Khoh**, Alipur, Ādi Badrī, Pashopa, Kedāranātha, Bilonda, Charana Pahari, Bhojan Thali, Kāmyavana (**Kaman**), **Bajhera**, Sunahra, Kadambakhandi, **Unchagaon**, Sakhīgiri Parvata, **Barsana**, Gahavara vana, Dabhala, Rasoli, Prema Sarovara, **Sanket**, **Rithaura**, **Mehrana**, **Satvas**, Nandera, Bhojana Thali, **Nunera**, Śṛṅgāravaṭa (**Singar**), **Bichhor**, **Banchari**, **Hodal**, **Dahgaon**, **Lalpur**, **Kamar**, **Hulwana**, Sancholi, **Gindoh**, Nandgaon, Kadamba Ter, **Jab**, **Dhamsinga**, **Kosi**, **Paigaon**, **Chhata**, **Semri**, **Nari**, **Sankhi**, **Arbai**, **Ranbari**, **Bhadawal**, **Khanpur**, **Umraya**, **Rahera**, **Kamai**, **Karahla**, **Pisaya**, Ludhauri, **Anjnokh**, **Khayra**, Bijwari, Kokilāvana, **Chhoti Bathain**, **Badi Bathain**, Charana Pahari, Rasauli, **Kotvan**, **Khambi**, Seshsayi, Rupanagara, **Majhoi**, Ramapura (Barha), Ujhiani, Khelanavana, Rāma Ghāṭa, Kajroth, Akṣaya vaṭa, Gopi Ghāṭa, Cīraghāṭa, **Nandaghāṭa**, Bhogaon, Jaitpur, Hajara, Barahra, Bajna, Jonai, Sakraya, Atas, Deviatas, **Parkham**, **Chaumuha**, **Ajhai**, **Sihana**, **Pelhora**, **Pasauli**, Barauli, **Tarauli**, Ahuri, **Sehi**, Mai, Basai, **Bhadravana**, Bhāṇḍīravana, **Manth**, Belavana, Mānasarovara-Rādhārānī temple (near **Barnoli ki dhai**), Aira, Panigaon, **Lohavana**, Rawal, Gadhui, **Ayara Khera**, **Raya**, **Sonkh-khera**, **Pachawar**, **Khirari**, **Jagdishpura**, **Karab**, Sihora, **Bandi**, Dauji, Hathaura, Brahmāṇḍa Ghāṭa, Cintāharaṇa Ghāṭa, **Mahāvana**, Gokula, Koyla, Barha, Aurangabad, Mathura, Akrūra Ghāṭa and Vrindavan. Besides, the above mentioned sites, the present day yātrā also reaches and halts at **Qila Beswan** (Dharaṇīdhara kṣetra), **Sonai**, Mansādevī (near **Sonoth**), archaeological sites of significance. Though these areas fall outside the 84 kos map.

* The places marked in bold are PGW period sites.



Among all these places Mathura, Govardhan, Kaman, Barsana, Mahāvana and Vrindavan are the places with most detailed itinerary and a pilgrim returns to these places more than once during the process of Parikramā. Among the above mentioned places, the majority of settlements (in bold) date back to PGW period, few to the Mauryan period. The rest of settlements are datable to the early centuries of the Common era except 5-6 settlements which are early medieval in nature.⁵ Other spots in the above list are ponds and temples which should be considered within the landscape of the ancient settlements. Few ponds are situated at some distance from the ancient settlements too, but, in all probability their antiquity should be considered in relation to the ancient settlements only.

Conclusions

There is possibility that the word Vraja mentioned in Vedic texts is in reference to area around Mathura. Mention of Girivraja in the *Mahābhārata* (*Sabhāparva*, 21) for Rājagṛha confirms that the author of the text was well aware of use of word Vraja for another sacred geographical landscape, that's why for Rājagṛha, the prefix Giri was used to denote Vraja in the hills - Girivraja (Mani and Gupta 2014: 600). All the *Purāṇas* while describing the childhood of Kṛṣṇa do mention Vraja. Which were the spots in the Vraja region known in those early times, is really difficult to ascertain. The spots which are clearly identifiable by names are: Gokula, Vṛndāvana, Govardhana, Tālavana, Bhāṇḍīravana and Yamunā. Besides, these mentioned places the ancient landscape is not clear. But, there can be no doubt that the sacred landscape already existed when Nimbārkācārya (*ca.* 11th century) and Mādhavendra Purī (*ca.* 14th century) arrived in the region and revived the *bhakti* cult to an extent. With Caitanya and Vallabha and their disciples the landscape of Vraja (Braj) came to be known as it is at present. When one tries to understand the etymology of various place names in Braj, the reason offered by the locals citing the tradition seems quite unconvincing at times. In spite of that when one wanders in the region, everything changes and a non-believer becomes a believer, that is the power of this sacred landscape. The beauty of this landscape lied in the sacred groves and the purified Yamuna and thousands of ponds, but unfortunately all these are lost or have taken a bad shape. Except for the small groves at Kamai, Karahla, Pisaya and the hills at Govardhan, Nandgaon, Adibadri and Barsana, I do not remember of sacred groves and landscape at present as everything has changed. What remains are ancient mounds on which modern day settlements are situated and majority of these settlements without a doubt go back to PGW period in antiquity. So, in the ancient times, the landscape of Braj would have comprised the PGW settlements and the sacred groves, ponds, hills, streams and rivers. The landscape of the whole Braj region is different from other parts of

sub-continent can just be understood by the presence of so high number of ancient settlements in close vicinity. Even the surrounding landscape of contemporary Kurukṣetra and Hastināpura regions is a no match to it in that context. After studying and observing the available data and tradition it can be inferred that prior to arrival of medieval reformer saints, few places like Mathura, Vrindavan, Gokul, Mahavan, Baldeo, Govardhan, Kaman, Nandgaon, Barsana were already important and famous but the rural landscape was not that popular. There might have been pre-existing tradition of circumambulation of these sacred sites, particularly Mathura, Vrindavan and Govardhan. The form and nature of 84 kos Braj parikramā prior to 16th century is not clear, but it would have existed in some form for sure, otherwise the settlements related to these parikramā places would not have been so old in antiquity.

NOTES

1. All these Vedic references are also cited by Mittal (1966: 1). These are quite popular in tradition and even one of the greatest classical singers of India, Pandit Jasraji has sung them.
2. All these settlements which are identified with the limits of Braj region are ancient settlements of significant size dating back to Painted Grey Ware (PGW) period in antiquity, except for the Pahari village which is situated on a hill but is surrounded by PGW settlements.
3. The map is in Hindi. Preparation of a map in English would have taken considerable time resulting in delaying of the publication.
4. Painted Grey Ware (PGW) period is a cultural phase in Indian archaeology which is identified with the presence of PGW and associated pottery. On a broader scale it was dated between 1200-400 BCE, but recently Gupta and Mani (2017: 370-379) have proposed possibility of it being much earlier, even contemporary to Mature Harappan phase at some sites. PGW cultural phase is followed by Northern Black Polished Ware (NBPW) period in Mathura region which is generally identified with pre-Mauryan and Mauryan periods. After that Śuṅga and Kuṣāṇa cultural phases follow, Kuṣāṇa period is coeval with Early centuries of the Common Era.
5. Detailed exploration report of these as well as all the sites coming inside the Braj 84 kos outer circumambulation can be seen in Gupta (2013: 16-104).

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