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Dear Sai brothers and sisters,

Our sacred journey this month is to the Lord's playground; Brindavan and where Lord Krishna is adored as Banke Bihariji.

Banke Bihari Mandir



The charming Lord

Banke Bihari Mandir is a Hindu temple dedicated to Lord Krishna, in the holy city of Vrindavan in the Mathura district. Banke Bihari was originally worshiped at Nidhivana. Banke means "bent in three places" and bihari means "supreme enjoyer." Lord Krishna will be standing in the Tribhanga posture. Haridas Swami originally worshipped this Deity under the name of Kunji-bihari.

History

The original Banke Bihari Temple was established by Swami Haridas of the Nimbarka Sampradaya, a contemporary of the six Gosvamis, in Nidhivana. It is said that he discovered the Banke Bihari deity at Nidhivana sometime in the 16th century. Banke Bihari was moved here when this temple was constructed in 1864. Originally Banke Bihariji was worshiped alone. Later a small deity of Radharani was added.

Rituals

During Jhulan Yatra, the swing festival of Lord Krishna, a number of silver-plated and some solid silver ornamented swings are shown at this time. The main day of Jhulan Yatra is the third day of the waxing moon, at which time Banke Bihari is placed on a golden swing (hindola). The curtain before the Deities is not left open like at other temples. Every few minutes the curtain is pulled shut and then opened again. It is said that the brilliant eyes of Banke Bihari will make you unconscious if seen for too long a stretch. It is the only temple where loud temple bells are not used to wake Krishna in the morning. It is believed improper to wake a child with a start. He is woken gently. There are thus no bells even for Aarti, as it might disturb Him.

The Deities do not get up until 9 am, because it is believed that Banke Bihari has been up until late at night sporting. Mangala-arati is only one day a year in this temple, on Janmasthan. The autumn full moon day is the only day that the Deity holds a flute, and also on this day He wears a special mukut (crown). Banke Bihari comes off his altar and can be seen in full view on the last five days of the month of Phalgun, during the Holi festival. He can be seen with four gopis, who are seen just at this time. The image of Bihariji installed in the Shri Banke Bihari Mandir, is the one granted to Swami Haridas by the celestial couple Shyama-Shyam themselves. Submitting to the desire of devotees The Lord appeared in person with his divine consort and left back a black charming image before disappearing.



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Banke Bihari Mandir

Swami Haridas

Swami Haridas ji was born to Shri Ashudhir and his wife Smt Gangadevi on the day of Radha Ashtami i.e. eighth day of second (bright) fortnight of Bhadrapad month of the year 1535 Vikrami(1478 A.D.). He was born in a small village, now known as Haridaspur, near Aligarh in Uttar Pradesh. The lineage of the family can be traced back to Shri Gargacharya. Shri Gargacharya was the kulguru (family guru) of Yadavs and visited Brij secretly for conducting the Namkaran Samskar (naming ceremony) of young Krishna and Balram on request of Sri Vasudev. A branch of the family migrated to Multan (now in Pakistan), but some of them returned after a long time. Sri Ashudhir was one such migrant who after returning from Multan settled at the outskirts of Brij, near Aligarh.

Swami Haridas was the reincarnation of Lalita 'sakhi' (female friend), of the inner consortium of Lord Krishna. This easily explains the fact that even in his childhood; he was more into meditation and scriptures, while other children of his age were busy playing. He was married at the suitable age according to the time to Harimati. Even after his marriage, young Haridas stayed away from worldly pleasures and concentrated on meditation. Harimatiji was such a saintly soul herself that on realizing the inclination of her husband, she prayed intensely and was bodily transported to the heavenly abode of Lord by entering the flame of a small lamp in the presence of Haridas. No physical remains were left behind!

Soon after that Haridas left his village for Vrindavan, which was a dense forest at that time and chose a secluded spot, which is now known as Nidhivan, to practice his music and to enjoy eternal bliss of meditation. He constantly and continuously meditated on Nitya Ras and Nitya Bihar of Lord at Nitya Vrindavan. His way of Sadhna was to compose and sing songs in the praise of Lord. While on earth, living in a mortal state, he facilitated his regular unobstructed entry in the Nitya Bihar and always enjoyed the pleasure of closeness of Lord. He chose a secluded and densely forested area, Kunj, in Nidhivan as his gateway to the nirvana and was mostly sitting there, singing, meditating and surfing in the ocean of eternal bliss.

His disciples were curious about this place and one day with permission of Swamiji, they all entered the kunj. But instead of seeing anything they were almost blinded by bright, intense light, which seemed to fill the whole place. On knowing of their plight Swamiji himself went there, and then after his requests, lord appeared in person with his divine consort, pleasantly smiling and in a playful mood and casting a spell of charm on every living being present there. Those who witnessed this, were so spell bounded by the beauty of the Lord and his consort, that they couldn't even blink their eyes, it seemed that all of them had turned into stone statues.

The legend as handed down to the generations of Goswamis, says that the beauty of the divine couple was such that no one wanted to lose the sight and proximity of divinity, but then what kind of divinity is it, which cannot make a mere mortal swoon and charmed enough to forget and give up the world and its luxuries? The beauty of the divine couple was so much that lesser mortals, like you and me, won't be able to bear such a heavenly beauty. Sensing this Swami Haridasji requested both of them to take a single form, as the world won't be able to bear their image. He requested them to take a single form like Ghan(cloud) and Damini(lightning) thus giving a perfect metaphor to the combined beauty of dark Lord and his fair consort, Radhaji.

Also he wanted his beloved lord to be in front of his eyes always. Granting him his both wishes, the couple turned itself into one single black charming idol, the same one that one can see in the temple today. The charm and beauty of Shri Banke Bihariji is the only reason why the 'darshan' in the temple is never continuous but is broken by the curtain drawn on him regularly. It is also said that if one stares long enough into the eyes of Shri Banke Bihariji, the person would lose his self consciousness.










Thus came into existence the physical form of Lord Banke Bihari, popularly know as Bihariji. The responsibility of Seva of Bihariji was handed over to Goswami Jagannath by Swamiji himself. Goswami Jagannath was one of the principal disciple and younger brother of Swamiji. By tradition, the Seva is performed by descendents of Jagannath Goswami till day. Initially the deity was installed in a temple close to the first appearance in Nidhivan. A new temple befitting the glory of Bihariji was constructed in 1862 AD. Goswamis themselves mobilized resources for the construction. The temple is an architectural beauty in itself and follows the contemporary Rajasthani style.

The seva of the Bihariji is unique in its own way. It is performed in three parts every day ie Shringar, Rajbhog and Shayan. While shringar (which includes bath, dressing and adornment with jewelry like crown and necklaces) and Rajbhog (feast) is offered in the forenoon, Shayan Sewa (shayan means sleep) is offered in the evening. The temple doesn't have a tradition of Mangala (early morning) seva. Swami Haridas did not favour Mangla Seva as he wanted his child like Lord to take complete rest and did not want to disturb him out of deep slumber so early in the morning.

Gopeshwar Mahadev

Lord Shiva is regarded as the foremost Vaishnav, as He is an ardent devotee of Vishnu. More correctly speaking it is a relationship of mutual respect. While Shiva will not lose any opportunity to please Vishnu, Vishnu also does not forget to worship Shiva regularly and with all humility. This relationship of mutual regard leads to celestial unification of two and, as saints and sages proclaim, They are the same! They are not different from each other!

On a pleasant night of Sharat Purnima, when Krishna was performing Maharasa on the banks of Yamuna near Vamshivat in Vrindavan, Lord Shiva along with mother Parvati reached there to participate in Rasa. Mother Parvati was readily granted entry into Rasa Mandal but Shiva was detained at the outskirts of Vrindavan by Vrinda Devi, the presiding deity of Vrindavan. Vrinda Devi explained to Him, "There is no male in Vrindavan other than Krishna. The spirit of Rasa is to please Raseshwari Shri Radha as a sakhi (friend) so as to maximize the bliss or Rasa Ras. A male devotee, however exalted he may be, can never develop this sakhibhav and is thus not worthy of entering into Rasa Mandal." Shiva was left with no option but to sit at the entry point of Vrindavan and watching the magnificent Leela of Divinity.

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Determined as he was, Shiva meditated intensely on Raseshwari Shri Radha Herself seeking her grace. Knowing His determination Devi Radha, the merciful universal Mother, dispatched her confidante Lalita to initiate Shiva in Sakhibhav. Lalita explained to Shiva the secret of Raas Leela and advised him to take a dip in holy Yamuna which will induct Sakhibhav in Him. On taking the dip, Shiva emerged as a young charming gopi and was taken into Raas Mandal by Lalita herself. Krishna smiled naughtily at this new entrant. He affectionately called him Gopeshwar.

Lord Shiva is worshipped as Gopeshwar Mahadev in Vrindavan. The temple is situated near Vamshivat and is thronged by a large number of devotees everyday. Those who wish to enjoy the bliss of Raas Leela must seek grace of Gopeshwar and pray for induction into Sakhibhav. All Vaishnava saints and sages regard Lord Shiva as their eternal Guru because He is the supreme Vaishnava . There is no other Vaishnava who can explain the subtleties of Bhaktiyog or Sadhna so beautifully. However, Shiva considers Lalita as his Guru as Lalita Devi facilitated his entry into Raas Mandal. It is worthwhile to remember here that Lalita is not different from Radha, as she is the mirror image and intimate friend of Shri Radha.

Jai Radhe Krishna
Our sojourn continues next month...Till then Sai Ram