

## *Project Clean Radha Kunda*

It's early morning. The horizon glows orange and red as the sun's rays squeeze their way through gaps between the many asramas and temples surrounding Radha Kunda to glint and glitter upon Her holy waters. Abhay Charan Prabhu has just arrived from Vrindavan to offer his daily service to Radha and Krishna's liquid forms. Under his supervision, some resident widows begin their cleaning work. Remnants from yesterday's many pilgrims litter the ground – rubbish carelessly tossed to the wayside or even into the kundas themselves. Piles of refuse dumped by local residents are heaped here and there. The monkeys and pigs are already rummaging through them scattering the garbage about. Scum from the many flower and ghee lamp offerings gather in corners and along edges of Radha Kunda, Shyam Kunda and Lalita Kunda. Another day of cleaning in Radha Kunda has begun.

Keeping the Radha Kunda area clean is a task that demands daily vigilance and time intensive labor. It's a service that local residents are happy to do sometimes voluntarily or else for some meager payment. The problem was two-fold. Where would the money come from and who could oversee the cleaning?

Last year during Purusottama Masa (mid April – mid May), we observed on our daily pilgrimage to Radha Kunda that though the immediate areas around Radha Kunda (the water and the ghat, or stairs surrounding the kunda) were being kept clean, many other spots were sorely neglected. After much prayer and brain storming, we came up with the idea to find sponsors for each area, something like America's "Adopt a Highway" program. Within a day, we had our first sponsor for Manasa Pavan Ghat at Shyama Kunda. And almost immediately upon setting up our website, radharani.com, more sponsors made their pledges – for Jihva Mandir and the surrounding alleys. And so Project Clean Radha Kunda began.

Progress was slow the first few months. Though we found a manager immediately and though he and ladies from his asrama spent hours each day cleaning the Radha Kunda area, it was difficult to convince him of the importance of cleaning the specified neglected spots that were being sponsored. His focus was on Radha Kunda itself, and he and his crew only gave a token effort to cleaning other areas.

Working with him meant that we slowly learned about some of the politics of Radha Kunda town. He was careful to only take donations from us in secret. If someone were to find out that Westerners were paying him to clean Radha Kunda, they would possibly inform the higher-up Pandas who would then insist that our manager hand any and all moneys over to them, only to then pocket the money for themselves and do nothing. Apparently there is motivation amongst temple managers/property owners to keep Radha Kunda area at a level of disorder with the hope that there will be a continuous flow of donations given for renovation and cleaning work. And of course, 90% of the money generally just ends up lining their pockets. Finally we understood why the area is in such disarray and we realized the need to pass off the project as a group of devoted local volunteers without ever giving away that money was coming in from the outside.

But we still needed a reliable manager, someone who would be happy to focus on the spots that were

being sponsored, the spots that no one else was cleaning. After more prayer and brainstorming, a name came... Abhay Charan Prabhu. By Srimati Radharani's arrangement he was both available for the task and willing. The day he came on board, another sponsor came forward. And within the next few days, our sponsorship doubled to include cleaning of Lalita Kunda, Lalita Kunda Samadhis and gardening at Jihva Mandir. It was as if Srimati Radharani was smiling upon our efforts.

Finally, the cleaning was happening. Every morning, our new manager commutes from Vrindavan. And by afternoon he departs with Lalita Kunda, Manasa Pavana Ghat, Jihva Mandir and the surrounding alley ways and areas spotlessly clean. After several trips to Delhi, he found out that it would be better to make some pool leaf rakes than to buy Indian models for skimming the scum out of the kundas. He has made contact with the "Maharaja" of Radha Kunda and, without telling him that money is coming from the outside, has gained the Maharaja's support for the cleaning effort. He engaged willing widows who would otherwise be begging on the streets. And the cleaning is happening!