



# Interwoven Concepts of Ascetic, God, and Relic: An Iconographical Innovation During Pre-Modern Period in South India

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## Abstract

This research brings to light a paradoxical phenomenon of mummification and veneration of “whole-body relic” of the ascetic whose remains are enshrined in a *vr̥ndāvana*. The term *vr̥ndāvana* is normally attributed to the garden where Kṛṣṇa and the *gopis* danced in eternal bliss. However, the relic of the ascetic head of a sectarian monastery is termed as *vr̥ndāvana* as well. There are numerous relic memorials in the sectarian *Vedānta Vaiṣṇava Dvaita* monastery and its branches, where it is worshipped particularly in the state of Karnataka. This paper is an investigation into the rationale for the naming of the whole-body relic memorial as *vr̥ndāvana*. Such an attribution in term to a memorial and icon of an ascetic head and a transformation of its meaning is a conundrum. I argue that the rationale for such an adoption lies in the geographical, mythological, metaphysical, and philosophical connections between Kṛṣṇa’s *vr̥ndāvana* and that of the ascetic. The sources that I have used in order to comprehend the traditional concepts and historical context include ancient *Pūraṇas*, archeological and artistic evidence, *bhakti* poetry, and discussions with living ascetics. This multidisciplinary exploration reveals the inventive genius of *Dvaita* monasteries and the sacred interchangeable concept-status and sacredness, dead and living between the ascetic and God.

**Keywords** *Vr̥ndāvana* · *Maṭha* · Relic · Guru · Monastery · *Dvaita*

## Introduction

An ascetic is looked upon with utmost reverence in Hinduism: his feet are worshipped, he is crowned, and accorded titles. He imparts knowledge, eternal values, and philosophical knowledge and is a source of divine power. The efficacy of his

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power and sacred status lies in the fact that he is a *saṃnyāsin* (ascetic/monk) who has renounced the temporal concerns of worldly life. He commands respect and a high status in Indian society whether he belongs to Jain, Buddhist, or Hindu religions. But rarely do we see an image of an ascetic on the Hindu temple. This query and in particular the rise of his status in various dimensions, icon and relic, has been my framework to probe into this complex topic that led me to examine the institution of the ascetic, namely, the monastery or the Hindu *maṭha* in Karnataka which led me to the strange icons within. It was like a huge square box adorned with flower garlands and saffron cloth; I was told that that it contained the relics of the ascetic who lived in the monastery. Worship of the relics of a human being is an anomaly as Hinduism considers death as polluting and the ashes of a deceased person are immersed in the river Ganges in Hinduism. I began by investigating into the reasons for the enshrinement of the relics within the monastery and the naming of the icon as *vr̥ndāvana*. This article particularly focuses on the term and its meaning, the “whole-body relic” and the icon of the head of a particular denomination of Hindu Vedanta *Vedānta Vaiṣṇava* monastery.

The method of inquiry followed here is multidisciplinary due to the multifaceted nature of the icon. Usage of artistic and textual evidence within a historical context as well as oral traditions and discussions with ascetics and scholars have been utilized. The field work was conducted in *Dvaita* centers at Mulbagal, Sannati, Malkhed, Udipi, Hampi, Mantralaya, Tumkur, Kaladi, Kolar, and Sode in the state of Karnataka. But the topic is replete with problems. There are no historical records or literary references to the burial practices or to the manner of its construction or even a description of its form. There are very few secondary readings on this topic. Research on the literary aspect of the *vr̥ndāvana* as the garden of Kṛṣṇa has been conducted by Maura Corcoran in 1995, but there is no mention of the *vr̥ndāvana* of the monk.<sup>1</sup> There is only the small monthly Kannada magazine, *Sudha* that contains merely few images of the icon. Other works in Kannada are largely about the interpretation of *Dvaita* theology, pilgrimage sites, and biographical aspects of the ascetic.

Before attempting to comprehend the reason for the usage of the term *vr̥ndāvana* for the icon, it is crucial to uncover few relevant aspects about the concept of an ascetic and his institution—the monastery.<sup>2</sup> The popular words for an ascetic are many, such as guru, *sadhu*, *sant*, *bhikku* (in Buddhism), *muni*, *baba*, *saṃnyāsin*, *tirtha*, *ananda*, *swami*, and *acharya*. He is also a teacher of spiritual knowledge and informs the community about values of Hinduism using ancient scriptures and mythological stories. By a transmission of his spiritual experience, he kindles our inner spirit by his “light,” leading to our psychological transformation that can be qualified as liberation. Despite the YouTube talks and numerous books, the ascetic has been recognized as an imperative tool for spiritual growth due to the personal touch he provides. There is something special about him—his inspiration, charisma,

<sup>1</sup> Diacritical marks have been used for Sanskrit words, but not for names of persons or Gods or places, references, and footnotes.

<sup>2</sup> Maura Corcoran 1995

and wisdom that inspires and provides solace from the chaotic dualities of life. The ascetic has an option of living within a monastery<sup>3</sup> or staying as a renunciate outside the institution.<sup>4</sup>

The Hindu institution of the ascetic is the monastery or *maṭha*. The origin of the word is from the root word, *maṭha* (*maṭh*, to inform). There exist various kinds of *matha* orders, and they differ in their religious beliefs, rituals, philosophy, organizational structure, imagery, and disciplinary codes. Almost all are headed by an ascetic *saṃnyāsīn* (ascetic)<sup>5</sup> who is often a celibate.<sup>6</sup> Between the fourth and ninth centuries, it was a rest house for travelers and ascetics, a religious and educational institution often associated with a temple.<sup>7</sup> Between the ninth and twelfth centuries arose the *Śaiva*, *Vaiṣṇava*, *Vedānta*, and *Lingāyat* monasteries which were supported by powerful kings. Royal patronage had repercussions on Vedic teaching and learning and most importantly, on the trajectory of *maṭhas*. The founders of each major monastic order institutionalized the system through forces of lineage, individual identity, symbols, icons, philosophical theories and religious practices. It was the period when Islamic armies were invading that led to the movement of population from north and west to South India. This also contributed to the complete collapse of Buddhist monasteries which had relied on great kings for land and money grants.<sup>8</sup> Meanwhile, the Buddhist *sangha* had greatly influenced the formation of Hindu *Vedānta* monasteries.

## Relation Between *Vedānta*, *Vaiṣṇava*, and *Dvaita Maṭhas*

Between the ninth and fourteenth centuries, there arose a parallel system in the state of Karnataka, namely, the *Vedānta maṭhas* that included *Advaita*, *Viśiṣṭādvaita*, and *Dvaita maṭhas* that based their philosophy on the *Vedās* and *Upaniṣads*. The *Advaita maṭha* was established by Adi Sankaracarya (788–820) who began to articulate commentaries on the *Upaniṣads* (also known as *Vedānta* (at the end of the *Vedās*). Few centuries later, Ramanujacarya (1017–1137) founded *Viśiṣṭādvaita maṭhas*, and in the thirteenth century, *Dvaita maṭhas* were established by Madhvacharya (1199–1278).<sup>9</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Rao 2020

<sup>4</sup> He is known as Jagadguru, *ananda*, or *tirtha*.

<sup>5</sup> Cenknor, William. *A Tradition of Teachers: Sankara and the Jagadgurus. Today*. Columbia, Mo.: South Asia Books, 1983: 8.

Bhadri, K.M. *A Cultural History of Northern India: Based on Epigraphical Sources form the 3.<sup>rd</sup> Century. B.C. to 700 A.D.* Book India Publishing Ctol Delhi, 2006. 167.

<sup>6</sup> Rao 2020, 2. There are approximately 90 monastic orders in Hinduism, and about 70 impose celibacy.

<sup>7</sup> Miller, 1976: p. 6-7 Miller, David M. and Dorothy C. Wertz. *Hindu Monastic Life the Monks and Monasteries of Bhubaneswar*. London: McGill-Queen's University Press. 1976.

<sup>8</sup> Eswar N. K 1990: 649–53.

<sup>9</sup> Glasenappu (1923).

Other *Vaiṣṇāva* philosophical traditions include those founded by Nimbarkar (1162), Vallabhacharya (1500), and Gaudiya Madhva traditions.

Other *Vaiṣṇāva-ācāryas*—Ramanujacarya, Viṣṇusvami, and Nimbāditya, contributed to defeat the theories of Adi Sankaracarya.

The Advaita monistic philosophy of Adi Sankaracarya believed that the *ātman* (individual soul) and *brahman* (universal soul) are identical while the *Dvaita* (Dualist) order believed that the former is dependent on the latter. In addition, Dualist monasteries of Madhvacharya were *Vaiṣṇava* and firmly believed that *Viṣṇu* and his ten *avatāras* (incarnations) are the greatest gods, unlike Advaita religious practice where worship was accorded to *Śaivite*, *Vaiṣṇavite*, and *Śakta* gods and goddesses. Vedanta *maṭhas* grew to be popular religious, educational, and philosophic institutions with a multifarious function. Headed by an ascetic who was learned in the interpretation of the Vedas, *Upaniṣads*, Epics and *Pūraṇas*, they grew to be formidable institutions at key sites with numerous branches in Karnataka.<sup>10</sup> The development of these large *Vedanta maṭhas* was due to the charisma of the ascetic head and his organizational ability, scholarship, and leadership qualities apart from the institutionalized *guruparampara* (lineage), systematization of Vedic philosophy, and royal patronage. However, it was only in the Vedanta *Dvaita* monastic order that the paradoxical phenomenon of whole-body relic worship in the form of the *vr̥ndāvana* was (and still is) conducted.

### ***Vr̥ndāvana*: Description, Enshrinement, and Proliferation**

Etymologically, the term *vr̥nda* means a multitude, or an assembly; it can also be translated as *vr̥nda vr̥nda—āvana* protection of a collection of knowledge, indirectly meaning the guru/ascetic head who was a learned scholar. The term also means the garden/forest/orchard of *Vr̥nda*, wife of *Viṣṇu*.<sup>11</sup> In this forest/garden of *Vr̥nda*, *Kṛṣṇa* is said to have danced with his female devotees, *gopīs*.<sup>12</sup> The term *vr̥ndāvana* is also related to *Tulasī vr̥ndāvana* which is a sacred pot with the *Tulasī* plant, that is worshipped by women in almost every Hindu household and sacred to *Vaiṣṇavas* for the worship of *Viṣṇu* and *Kṛṣṇa*.<sup>13</sup>

A *vr̥ndāvana* is a non-figural, immovable stone sculpture in the form of a container/shrine ranging between 5×5 ft and 9×9 ft. (Fig. 1). Installed on a stone platform, it has a defined iconography: it is a closed cubical with a hollow space in the center for placing sacred objects, such as precious stones. Below the structure is a pit in which the embalmed body of the ascetic head is deposited. It does not merely consist of post-cremation remains like those of the Buddha but the entire

<sup>10</sup> Sringeri and Kanchipuram are centers of *Advaita* philosophy, Melkote and Srirangam of *Viśiṣṭadvaita*, and Udipi, Sode, Malkhed, and Anegondi of *Dvaita*.

<sup>11</sup> The term *vr̥ndāvana* has its origins in the *Śaivā* and *Vaiṣṇāva* versions of the mythological tale of *Vr̥nda* described in the *Padma Purāna*. The story is part of the narrative of *Mayasiva*. Mandalika 1894.

<sup>12</sup> Those who hold that *Viṣṇu* is the greatest god. The image of Lord, *Kṛṣṇa*, was installed in the “temple” Udipi in 1250 CE by *Madhvācārya* (see Chapter 5, p.).

<sup>13</sup> Frederick J Simoons, *Plants of Life, Plants of Death* (Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998), 7–40.

Pintchman 2005

“whole-body relic” of the *saṃnyāsin* belonging to the *Dvaita* order.<sup>14</sup> Thus, the *vr̥ndāvana* may be called a mortuary or sepulchral structure. A typical *vr̥ndāvana* consists of three superimposed square stone terraces—a base, body or central short shaft, and a top layer or slab that is surmounted by a running leaf/petal design on all the four sides.<sup>15</sup> Some have a lotus-shaped top (Fig. 2); others may contain a *Tulasi* plant (Fig. 3); others are decorated with symbolic motifs, such as ladders (Fig. 1) or small generic images of an ascetic, or of gods (Fig. 2).<sup>16</sup> Above the *vr̥ndāvana* (within the sanctum of a monastery) is placed a small metal image of Kṛṣṇa (Fig. 4) or an *avatara* of Vishnu, such as Rama or Narasimha. These mortuary structures are normally erected on the banks of rivers near temples, but the growth of built environment in these areas has led to the incorporation of *vr̥ndāvanas* into monastic architecture.

The relics in a *vr̥ndāvana* can be “divided” and multiplied to install a new *vr̥ndāvana*. However, since it is a “whole-body relic,” it cannot be divided in the strict sense of the term. A particle of *mṛttikā* (sacred soil) or a deposit from the original whole body *moola* (original) *vr̥ndāvana* can be reinstalled to create secondary *mṛttikā vr̥ndāvanas* and secondary or branch *maṭha*. Thus, each *Dvaita maṭha* that has a *moola vr̥ndāvana* (with the original mummified body) is known as a *moola maṭha* with its own branches in different geographical areas. Among the major centers that contain the *vr̥ndāvana* are Udipi with about 20 *vr̥ndāvanas*, Navavr̥ndavana in Anegondi with nine, Mulbagal with five, Malkhed with seven, Sode with 12, Gokarna with eight, and Kolar with four. Among them, the most famous is the pilgrimage site of Mantralaya known for the *moola vr̥ndāvana* of Raghavendra Swami.

### Enshrinement of Relics

In Hinduism, there is no cremation of the deceased body of an ascetic as it does not have to be purified by fire.<sup>17</sup> The renunciant is understood to have performed his own cremation during initiation and hence there are no postmortem cremations; instead it is either buried or his whole body immersed in a river.<sup>18</sup> In *Dvaita maṭha*, the funerary practice for the ascetic head consists of embalming, deposition and construction of the *vr̥ndāvana*. Normally after the death, of the ascetic, the body is washed and clothed with a saffron cloth. It is placed in a sitting posture, facing east

<sup>14</sup> In the case of the *vr̥ndāvana*, which contains the entire deceased body, I have used the term “whole-body relic” which denotes an expanded meaning due to a lack of a proper equivalent term in Sanskrit or Kannada. In the local language, Kannada, the dead body is called *sarīra* and only after the body has been transferred inside the container it is termed a *vr̥ndāvana*. The term whole-body-relic has been used by Johnston. Johnston 1976, 231.

<sup>15</sup> The *vr̥ndāvana* is a built sculpture made up of dressed stone slabs of different sizes, and as the uppermost layer appears like a slab and is smaller in size than the other two parts, I have called it a slab.

<sup>16</sup> Examples are the *vr̥ndāvanas* of Sudheendra Tirtha, Sripadaraya, and Padmanabha Tirtha.

<sup>17</sup> Oman, John Campbell *The Mystics, Ascetics, and Saints of India; a Study of Sadhuism, with an Account of the Yogis, Sanyasis, Bairagis, and Other Strange Hindu Sectarians*, London: T.F. Unwin, 1903, 158–61.

<sup>18</sup> Marco, Giuseppe De. The Stupa as a Funerary monument: New Iconographical Evidence. *East and West* 37 (1) 4: 1987: 224.

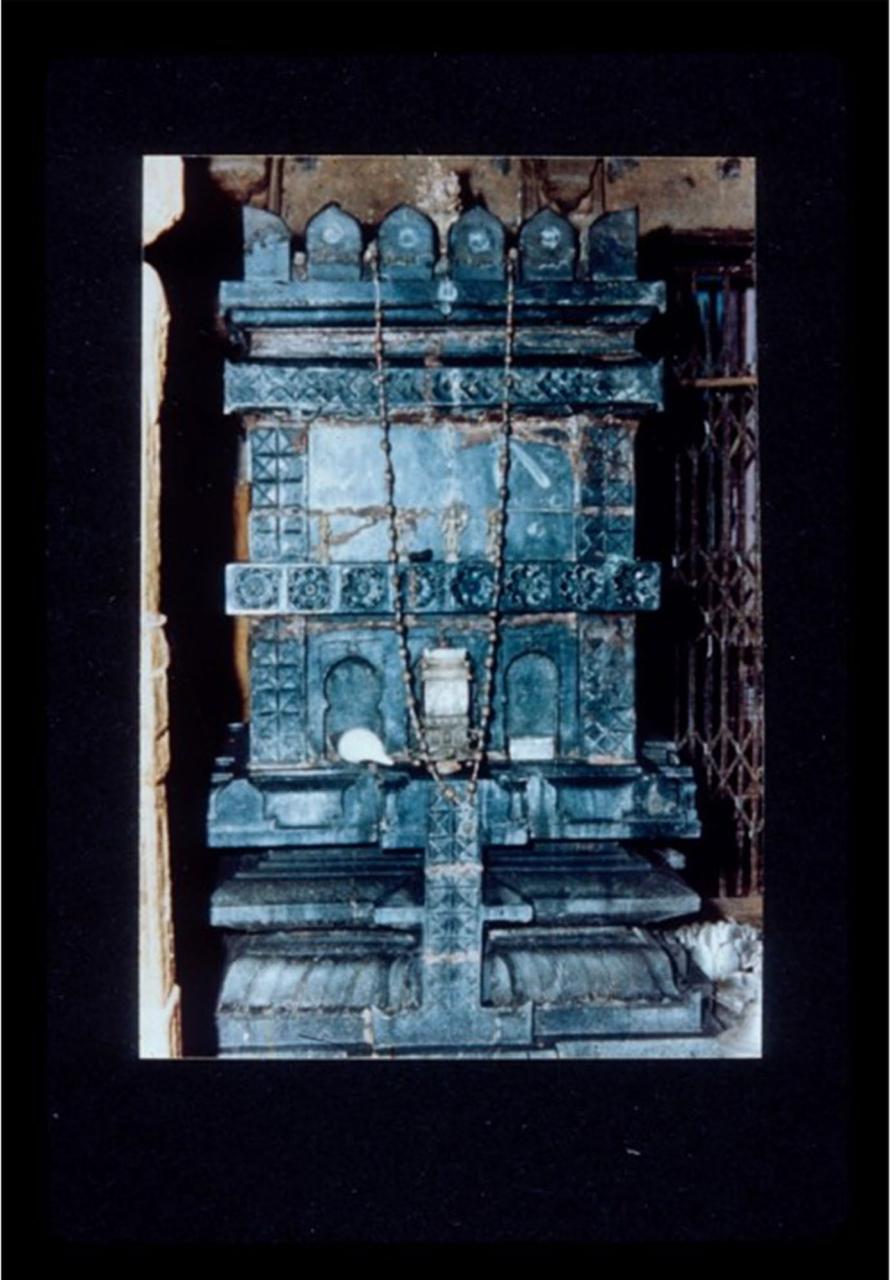


Fig. 1 *Vrindavana* of Raghavendraswami, Mantralaya

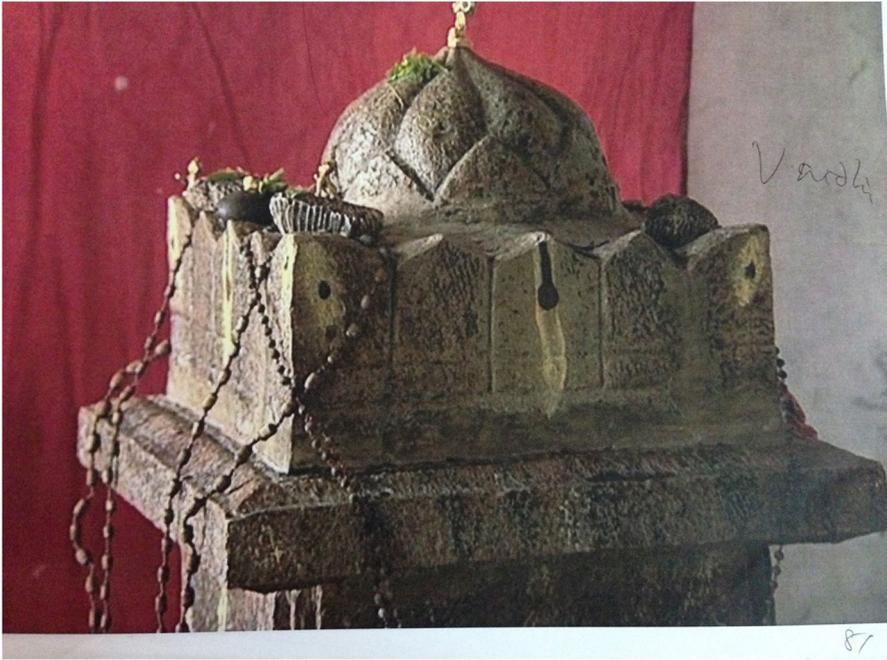


Fig. 2 *Vṛndāvana* of Vidyanidhitirtha, Yaragola

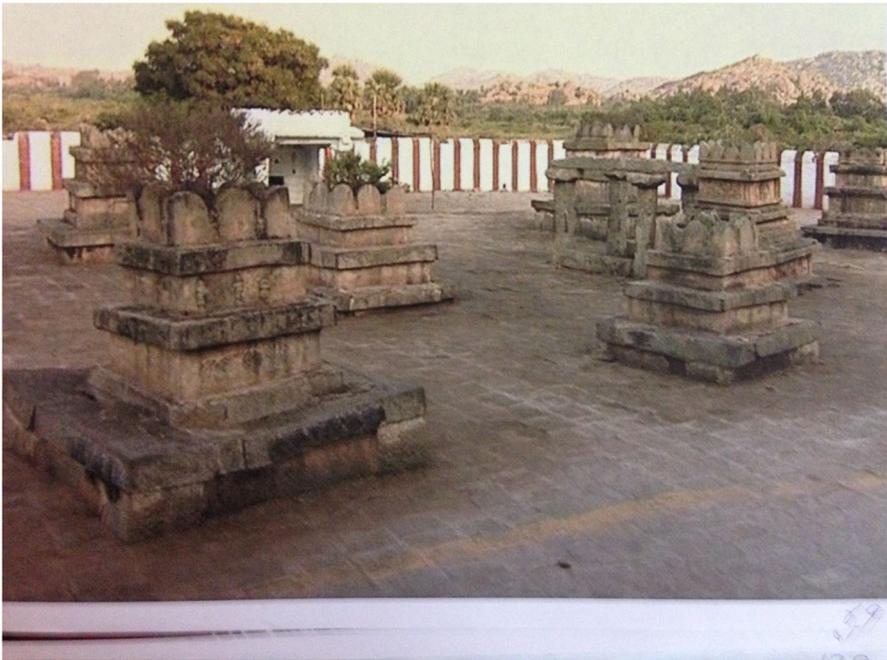


Fig. 3 Nava *Vṛndāvana*, Anegondi



**Fig. 4** *Vṛndāvana* in worship, Uttaradi *matha* Hospet

or north east, and sand and salt are piled over it.<sup>19</sup> Coconuts are broken to crack the skull which affords the imprisoned soul to be “liberated” from the body.<sup>20</sup> Three months later, on an auspicious day, it is taken in a procession (by placing it in a sitting posture followed by monks and disciples)<sup>21</sup> and deposited in a pit. Heaps of camphor and salt are poured on it.<sup>22</sup> A stone *vṛndāvana* is constructed above the pit, and precious stones, beads, and gold objects, small images of deities, and 108 *saligramas* are deposited inside.<sup>23</sup> After the deposition of the mummified body, the ritual of *pratishthāpana* (or establishing the image) is conducted with the help of

<sup>19</sup> In other parts of India, when a *saṃnyāsīn* dies, his body is buried in a grave like a pit, in which the body is made to sit up facing east or north east with its arms supported on a wooden rest.

<sup>20</sup> Oman, John Campbell *The Mystics, Ascetics, and Saints of India; a Study of Sadhuism, with an Account of the Yogis, Sanyasis, Bairagis, and Other Strange Hindu Sectarians*, London: T.F. Unwin, 1903.158–61.

The coconuts that are broken on the head is said to have miraculous powers of begetting children to women who have problems conceiving. Discussion with Principal of Pejawar *matha* school.

<sup>21</sup> His body rests on a T-shaped wooden structure.

<sup>22</sup> The term relic has been used to denote the embalmed body of the ascetic head. In Kannada language, the death of the head of a *matha* is referred to as *vṛndavanastha adaru*, becoming in a state of *vṛndāvana*, referring to his final *mokṣa* or liberation.

<sup>23</sup> *Saligramas* are round black fossils that look like stones, the aniconic symbol of Viṣṇu.

offering lights, flowers, orange robe recitation of Vedic chants, and *Vaiṣṇava* sacred marks, such as the *sankha* and *cakra*.<sup>24</sup>

### Proliferation of *Vṛndāvana*

As mentioned above, only the Vedanta *Dvaita maṭhas* house the relics of the ascetic head. But there is no *vṛndāvana* for Madhvacharya as his body was never found. After his death, his disciple Naraharītīrtha erected the first *vṛndāvana* of Padmanabhatīrtha (1317–1324)<sup>25</sup> in Navavṛndavana, Anegondi, near the capital city of Vijayanagara (Hampi) across the river Tungabhadra (Fig. 3). Soon, other disciples set up their own *maṭhas* which ultimately divided into *Aṣṭa maṭhas* and *Deśastha maṭhas*. The former with its center in Udipi are the Palimaru *maṭha*, Adamaru *maṭha*, Kṛsnapura *maṭha*, Puttige *maṭha*, Sirur *maṭha*, Sode *maṭha*, Kanayur *maṭha*, and Pejavara *maṭha*. The Desastha *maṭhas* were divided into the Uttaradi *maṭha*, Sosale Vyasarja *maṭha*, Kundapura *maṭha*, Raghvendra Swami *maṭha*, Sripadaraja *maṭha*, Majjigehalli *maṭha*, Kudli *maṭha*, Balegaru *maṭha*, Subrahmaṇaya *maṭha*, Bhandarkeri *maṭha*, Bhimana-katte *maṭha*, Citrapura *maṭha*, Gokarna-Partagali-Jivottama *maṭha*, and Kasi *maṭha*. In each of these denominations in their main and secondary monasteries, there is a *vṛndāvana*. From the past 700 years, the whole-body relics of the ascetic heads of 28 *maṭhas* are deposited within the mortuary icon.

## *Vṛndāvana*: Mythology, Geography, and Theology

### Mythological Story of Vrnda

The term *vṛndāvana* has variations in meaning and interpretation. Apart from the popular meaning of Kṛsnas' garden and the *Tulasi* plant, it is about the story of Vrnda. It has its origins in the *Padma Purāṇa*<sup>26</sup> in the mythological story of *samudra manthana* or Churning of the Ocean. The warrior, Jalandhara, could not be defeated by either Siva or Viṣṇu due to the devotion of his wife Vrnda towards him (*pativṛtadharmā*). Hence, he attempts to seduce her, but at that moment, Viṣṇu's "vehicle" Garuda (eagle) appears in the sky. In the *Vaiṣṇava* version of the story, Viṣṇu cheats on Jalandhara's wife, Vrnda, and "excites" *kāma* (sexual love) in her.

<sup>24</sup> In the Sri Vaisnavite and Dvaita traditions, blessed food, *payasa* (sweet dish made of milk), is distributed to women who would like to conceive but are unable to do so.

It is believed that the *Vṛndavana* is sealed. But Acharya GVK states that Sri Vedavedya Tīrtha is said to have removed the stone covering of the vrindavana of Sri Vadiraja Teertha in his meditation and was overjoyed, but before he could see it the cover reverted back to its original position. Acharya, U. R. *Udupi: An Introduction. Udupi: Sri Krishna Matha*. 1989. 50.

<sup>25</sup> The eight later *vṛndāvanas* are Jayatīrtha (1365–1388), Raghuvaryatīrtha (1502–1537 of Uttaradi *maṭha*), Kavindrātīrtha (1392–1398), Vageesatīrtha (1398–1406), Vyasarayatīrtha (1447–1539), Srinivasatīrtha (1539–1584 of Vyasaraya *maṭha*), Ramatīrtha (1564–1584 of Vyasaraya *maṭha*), Sudheendratīrtha (1614–1623 of Raghavendra Swami *maṭha*), and Govinda (1534).

<sup>26</sup> The mythological story in the *Padma Purāṇa* 1894 is part of the narrative of Mayaśiva.

Vrnda flees and finds herself in various fearful forests till at last she finds out that she has been cheated. She immolates herself and is transformed into a goddess, Vrnda Devi. In the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, Vrnda is transformed into goddess Tulasi who is the wife of Kṛṣṇa. Tulasi is the sacred pot along with the *tulasī* plant that is worshipped by women in almost every Hindu household. Hence, above some *vṛndāvanas*, as in Anegondi, one can find a *Tulasī* plant (Fig. 3). More importantly, the pot, in which it is grown, is in the form of a cuboid stone/brick structure, which resembles the shape of the memorial, *vṛndāvana*. Having established the link between *Tulasī* and Kṛṣṇa, we now move on the relation between Kṛṣṇa's *vṛndāvana* and that of the ascetic.

### **Vṛndāvana and the Garden of Kṛṣṇa**

The popular concept of *vṛndāvana* means the garden of bliss where the *Vaiṣṇava* God, Kṛṣṇa, danced with Radha and his girlfriends, the *gopis*.<sup>27</sup> But what is relevant for our study is that, above every stone, sepulchral structure can be found a small metal image of a *Vaiṣṇava* god, such as Rama or Narasimha or Kṛṣṇa (Fig. 5). The rationale for the placement of the image of Kṛṣṇa was in the narrative of Madhvacarya. He had found the image in a ship that was in danger and had rescued it by his miraculous powers and had installed it in the “temple-*maṭha*” in Udipi in 1250.<sup>28</sup>

### **Description of the Geographical Site of Vṛndāvana**

We move now to the next link between Kṛṣṇa's *vṛndāvana* and that of the ascetic head. For the meaning of the former, Marcuo Corcoran provides a detailed analysis of its meaning with a description of the site from literary evidences, particularly the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* and *Harivaṃśa* (quasi-historical texts).<sup>29</sup> *Vṛndāvana* as an ethereal place of Kṛṣṇa is referred to in all the three *Purāṇas* although there are slight variations in meaning. In the *Harivaṃśa*, it is a terrestrial and extra-terrestrial site. In the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* (300–100 BCE), *Vṛndāvana* is a terrestrial place as well as celestial one. In the *Mahābhārata*, both the transcendent and immanent forms of Kṛṣṇa have been described, but it treats him as a hero and historical events take place in time and space while retaining Visnu as a

<sup>27</sup> Recent excavations have proved that Kṛṣṇa was a historical personality and that his deification process occurred gradually. Rao S.R.1999.

<sup>28</sup> The Dvaita monastery was a Vaisnavite one that considered Visnu to be the highest God and Kṛṣṇa was the most important *avatara* of Vishnu.

<sup>29</sup> I use Corcoran's analysis of *vṛndāvana* as mythological, symbolic, and geographical site to interpret the form and meaning of Guru *vṛndāvana*. Corcoran, 1995, p. 92.

There are number of dates assigned to the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* ranging from 400 to 900 CE. According to Dimmit and Buitenen, there is no one date of composition for the Purana. Dimmit and Buitenen 2012, 5.

transcendent deity.<sup>30</sup> In the *Padma Purāṇa*, it is stated that the site of Vr̥ndavana (around Mathura) is in a geometrically ordered form like a *maṇḍala*: square in shape with four doorkeepers within which are 16 segments (in the form of lotus petals) over which are 12 segments (called woods) and an inner core that has eight divisions in the form of eight petals. Vr̥ndavana as a place of beauty and enchantment, love, and *ananda* (bliss) is described in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*. This space of eternity is untouched by the material world and is a metaphysical space with a divine nature. Thus, the construct of the term *vr̥ndāvana* undergoes transformation from the forest of Vr̥nda, a goddess, a sacred site to a theological concept.

The geographical site of Vr̥ndavana was identified by the *Gauḍīya Gosvāmīs* in the sixteenth century to have been near Mathura, the birthplace of Kṛṣṇa. There is sufficient evidence to prove that the site existed earlier than the discovery by the *Gauḍīya Gosvāmīs*. The Jain *Vividhatīrthakalpa* (1307–1332) identifies the site as related to Kṛṣṇa.<sup>31</sup> F.S Growse proved that Mahmud of Ghazni had seen it in 1071.<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, Nimbarka (seventh century), who hailed from the South, is said to have lived in Vr̥ndavana near Mathura. Both Madhvacharya and Naraharitirtha (who built the first icon, *vr̥ndāvana*) had visited the site.

## Vr̥ndāvana, Metaphysical and Religious Concepts: Site and Icon

The garden of *vr̥ndāvana* as described in the *Purāṇas* as consisting of 12 forests with its four sides and corners can be related to the square form of the icon (Fig. 1). According to the Dvaita interpretation, the four corners represent the four *vyūhas* (emanations) of Viṣṇu, namely, *vyūha* forms of Viṣṇu, Vāsudeva, Sankarṣana, Pradyumna, and Aniruddha, as doorkeepers. The four *vyūhas* also stand for four concepts: individual consciousness, intellect, mind, and ego. The four sides symbolize the *bhagavata rūpa* or God's form, *ananta rūpa* or eternal form, *sveta rūpa* or pure form, and *vaikunṭha rūpa* or heavenly form respectively. The lotus petals are in the form of "tenes" that run around above the *vr̥ndāvana* (Fig. 1). *Vr̥ndāvana* is the pericarp of the thousand petalled lotus and is also its center, where Kṛṣṇa lives.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>30</sup> In the *Surasagara*, the *vana* is also the scene of the meeting of Radha and Kṛṣṇa. In *Vr̥ndāvana Sata Līla* by Dhruvadāsa (1629), *vr̥ndāvana* is the site where the eternal sport of Radha and Kṛṣṇa takes place. Corcoran 1995, 4.

According to the *Bṛihad Vahana Purāṇa* (v.24), it is eternal; later, it states that the wind of creation which is derived from *maya* and the three *guṇas* do not touch the forest, that which has no beginning or end and which provides eternal happiness. This space of eternity is untouched by creation; hence, it is not a material creation and not a real space, but a symbolic space.

<sup>31</sup> The Jain texts allude to the site near Mathura. This is 150 years before the re-discovery of the *vr̥ndāvana* as described by Vallabha or the *Gauḍīya Gosvāmīs*. Corcoran 1995, 114.

<sup>32</sup> Growse 1883, 9.

<sup>33</sup> Vāsudeva, Saṃkarṣaṇa, Pradyumna, and Aniruddha with a *yoga-pīṭha* (yogic throne) are the *vyūha* forms. These are emanations in human personalities.

Furthermore, the *vr̥ndāvana* is on a higher level than the rest of the *Vr̥ndāvana/Mathura-mandala*: in the *Gauḍīya* theology, *Laghubhāgavatamṛta*, it is described as surrounding Mathura and it designates the whole area as Mathura-mandala. Here, we find an attempt to depict the *vr̥ndāvana* symbolically (as a mandala). *Vr̥ndāvana* is the pericarp of the thousand petalled lotus and is also its center where Kṛṣṇa lives.

**Fig. 5** Votive *vṛndāvana* of Raghavendraswami



The *vana* of *ānanda* (bliss) where Kṛṣṇa danced with the *gopis* is clearly expressed in the *Bhāgavata* (VI, 4, 48) “In me whose attributes are infinite both individually and collectively and constitute my essence.” According to B.N.K. Sharma “what is infinite is blissful. There is no lasting bliss in what is limited.”<sup>34</sup> This is the eternal state of *ānanda* of the mummified body as the ascetic was pure and thus his body is eternal and even beyond decay. Furthermore, in *Dvaita* philosophy, there is no absolute death for the individual soul or *jīva*, particularly for the ascetic, and hence, the *vṛndāvana* is worthy of worship (as stated in the *Guru stotra* of Raghavendraswami).

The *Dvaita* ascetics incorporated and applied the symbolic meanings to the mummified body and converted it into an icon that led to an increase in the sacred status of the expired ascetic as well as that of the lineage of *Dvaita* ascetic heads.

<sup>34</sup> *Laghubhāgavatāmṛta*—see Rupa Goswami, 2014; Sharma 1961, 136.

By establishing the icon, the monks transformed dead organic matter into a sacred object and compared it to the blissful state (in the garden of Kṛṣṇa) that the ascetic had achieved. Kṛṣṇa lived in Vṛndāvana and by analogy worship to the *vṛndāvana* meant worship to Kṛṣṇa. In addition, *Dvaita* ascetics were constantly attempting to prove their philosophy as superior to that of Aḍi Sankaracarya's *Advaita*, and one of the ways was to introduce the icon that could be worshipped elaborately as that of a God (within a Hindu temple). Worship of the icon with *mantrās* from the *Vedās*, offering of flowers, lights, music, and symbols along with the provision of free blessed food to the devotees led to public support. Thus, the icon proved to have facilitated the spread of *Dvaita maṭhas* along with its numerous branches. There were multifarious factors for the naming of the commemorative monument of the ascetic: the rise of the ascetic and of monasteries, their desire to maintain traditional education system within the institution in the wake of Islamic conquest, popularity of Kṛṣṇa, the competition between *Dvaita* and *Advaita*, the narrative stories about the biography, and power of miracles by the ascetics, but most importantly its relation with Kṛṣṇa's *vṛndāvana* as the sacred space of bliss.

### **Vṛndāvana and the Bhakti Movement**

Another link that provides support to the naming of the mortuary icon stems from the popular term *bhakti*. *Bhakti* has been defined as love towards God, religious devotion, surrender, *brāhmaṇaubhāva* (experiencing communion with God) without finding any fault in him by the *śiṣya* (disciple).<sup>35</sup> It was incorporated by Ramanujacarya and Madhvacharya who reinterpreted the Vedic concepts and praised the love of Kṛṣṇa. They incorporated the devotional content and synthesized it with *Dvaita* theology. The *bhaktivāda* (argument of *bhakti*) was also a means to supersede the *Advaita* doctrine. According to him, *bhakti* is concerned with *saguṇa Brāhmaṇanda* and is directed towards a personal object with attachment to the God which cuts the argument by Sankaracharya, 'I am Brahman' in which case there is no object of love. *Dvaita* order of monks particularly Vyasa-tirtha elaborated the concept of *bhakti* by the inclusion of surrender to God, as well as constant meditation, *yoga*, *upavāsa* (fasting) during *ekādasi*, *japa* (chanting), *vrata* (vow), *sravana* (listening), and *smarana* (remembering) God. The *haridāsa bhakti* movement (servant of God) was propagated by the *kirtanās* (songs) composed by ascetics and saints that led indirectly to the popularization of the cult of ascetics. In fact, it was the *Dvaita* ascetic Naraharī-tirtha who had constructed the earliest *vṛndāvana* and who also popularized the movement in Karnataka.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Narayanan and Veluthat 2000, 390–92.

<sup>36</sup> Others who composed devotional songs were Padarajātīrtha and his two disciples, Purandaradasa and Kanakadasa, including Vadirajātīrtha, Raghavendraswami, Vijayadasa, Gopaladasa, Jagannathadasa, Praneshadasa, and Mohandasā.

The Haridāsa movement was divided into two—the *vyasakuta* (compositions in Sanskrit) and *dasa kuta* (in the local language of Kannada). Naraharī tirtha was the earliest saint who began the *Dāsa Kūṭa bhakti* musical tradition in Karnataka which emphasized the *Dvaita* philosophy of love of Kṛṣṇa.

## Conclusion

A relic/icon of the expired ascetic head of the Hindu monastery and its sacred status is a conundrum, especially the usage of the term *vr̥ndāvana*. It was the genius of the ascetic heads of *Dvaita maṭhas* that invented and re-conceptualized the meaning of the mummified “whole-body relic” into a sacred icon by elaborate worship. The *maṭha* was a place for him to practice institutionalized renunciation with detachment and yet a place to train priests, teachers, students and ascetics. It led to an involvement by the public for worship of the lineage of ascetics (and gods) and propagation of *Dvaita* theology. The incorporation of the mortuary immovable structure into the premises of the *maṭha* led to its daily veneration that transformed it into a sacred icon. Its multifaceted content/meaning with its unique aniconic form, relic worship, and naming it as the blissful garden of Krishna further enhanced the sacred status of the monastery. The *vr̥ndāvana* represented eternal, divine *ānanda* and the equanimity of a yogi experienced by the ascetic heads.

Historical reasons contributed significantly to the rise of the ascetics such as the preceding history of the monastery, particularly the Buddhist *saṅgha*, Saivite ones in Central and South India, royal patronage, and the voluminous theological treatises. The contribution of Madhvacarya was significant in reinterpreting the *Advaita* doctrine, infusing it with *bhakti* towards Visnu/Kṛṣṇa and even turning the *maṭha* into a temple with the image of Kṛṣṇa. Furthermore, the living head of the *maṭha* with his charismatic leadership, knowledge, and renunciation inspired the community to transform the monastery into a congregational place for worship and conduct death rituals and festivals, apart from provision of free feeding and lodging. The *bhakti* movement provided additional stimulus that led to a re-contextualization of the icon.

Here, the dead and living and material and the immaterial were woven together in the *vr̥ndāvana*. It is possible to infer that applying the term *vr̥ndāvana* with its popular connotation with Kṛṣṇa’s garden to the mortuary icon led to an increase in the status of the monastery but more importantly that of the living ascetic head. By the innovative strategy of naming the icon as *vr̥ndāvana*, the concepts of an ascetic, God, and relic were integrated. This was a symbolic appropriation that had deep religious and sociological effect on the community. Convincing evidence supports the fact that the re-interpretation and re-definition of the term can be grasped by a synthesis of various perspectives: mythological, ontological, philosophical, and historical.

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The paper does not claim to have the final answer to the mortuary icon but is merely a discussion that can lead to further research.