

Vraja Mandala – A Timeless emotion – Understanding the Cultural Heritage Landscape

The enigma of Vraj is timeless, older than civilizations & kingdoms, Vraj lives in its own splendor even today. However, understanding the Cultural heritage of Vraj through the four Yuga's, needs a multi prong approach spanning across the ancient texts of Sanatan Dharma, archaeology, art & crafts, dance forms, festivals, language & the natural heritage of Vraj. The natural heritage of Vraj plays a dominant role in defining the Cultural heritage of this sacred piece of land, since the beauty of Vraj lies in its natural flora & fauna coupled with much of its religious history centered around these natural heritages.

Although multiple Purana's speak in details about the most pious piece of land called Vraj mandal whose "Rajo" (the dust) is considered even holier than the water of the Ganges, let's look at a couple of puranic itihasa events described in Srimad Bhagwat Purana (10.47.54-55) & (10.47.61), speaks of the wishes & pursuits of Uddhava the cousin of Devaki Putra Krishna in Vrindavan & Gokul interacting with the Gopika (Cowherd Women) & composing the Uddhav Geeta. The Srimad Bhagwat Khanda of the Skanda Purana speaks of Maharaj Vajranabh's efforts, post his coronation by the Pandavas in Mathura mandal to renew the Vraj Yatra of Uddhav Maharaj. The Patala Khanda of the Padma Puran speaks of Maharshi Narada's exploits & search of the supreme being coupled with visions obtained in various places of Vraj manadala. However, the current day sacred places of Vraj mandala although revived by Sri Krishna Chaitanya Bharathi (Sri Chaitanya) & his six key disciples, are these places were tied to the past times of Devaki Putra Krishna & his consort Sri Radha from the Dwapar Yuga. 100 years after the end of Dwapar Yuga, the great grandson of Devaki Putra Krishna, Maharaj Vajranabh revived them with the help of Maharashi Shandilya & around this time only he sculpted several Krishna images / vigraha's, some of which are found & worshipped even today. Probably this gives an important clue, as to why Mathura developed as the epicenter of sculpting work in later periods with the emergence of the legendary Mathura School of Art. Thousands of images found in this region from all the ruling era's only confirm to the fact that indeed Mathura had emerged as the epicenter of Sculpting.

Although the 84 kos (1453 sq. miles) spans across present day Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan & Haryana, the Vraj Bhasa spoken till date in multiple area's of these states, yet the splendor of Vraj Sanskriti is not confined to these states alone. It has gone Global. The festivities of Vraj assumes a complete form particularly thrice a year – Janmashtami, Damodar / Kartik month & the famous Holi of Vraj, where foreign tourists also soak in the colors of Vraj. Vrindavan lies in the heart of the Vraj Mandal & the presiding deity is Srimati Radharani. The 84 kos Vraj parikrama one of the most revered pilgrimages of Bharat Varsh forms the very ethos & soul of Vraj Mandal.

The Vraj Mandal consists largely of the towns / villages of Vrindavan, Mathura, Mahavan, Gokul, Barsana, Raval, Goverdhan, Nandgaon, Jait, Jatipura, Koshi Kalan, Kama & Baldeo. These places are all associated with some or the other leela's/ pastimes of Sri Krishna's childhood. He wandered as Gope Valak (Cowherd Boy) till the age of 11, in this huge Vraj Mandal before departing for Mathura to kill Kamsha. The spiritual & cultural heritage of Vraj is much larger than described in any of the texts & as such draws millions of devotees & tourists across the globe. During the course of this discussion, one also has to remember the tremendous strategic, cultural, political, commercial & military importance of Mathura alone as well, which has been known by the names of Madhupuri, Madhura, Surasena through various Yuga's & finds its mention as one of the main trade center's on the Uttarapath as mentioned by Swambhu Manu in his Manusmriti. Manu also identifies it's location as a town of supreme importance of Bramhavarta.

Historically Vraj Mandal has been plundered multiple times, starting as early as 06th Century CE by the Huna's. The biggest blow was delivered in 1018 CE, when the Afghan Invader Mahmud of Ghazni plundered Mathura. Later Vraj Mandal was further desecrated by the likes of Qutub Uddin Aibak, Sikandar Lodhi, Aurangzeb & last but not the least by the Afghan Ahmad Shah Durrani (Abdali) in the mid-18th Century. The descriptions of this last genocide by the Durrani forces are not only bone chilling but are barbaric to say the least.

The Heritage preservation of Vraj slowly started taking shape after the formation of Archaeological Survey of India in 1861 CE. The true acceleration happened with the arrival of British Collector FC

Growse, the Collector of Mathura (1868CE-74CE), the conservation & preservation picked up with his personal interest & intervention in every corner. To know & understand Vraj, it's extremely important to understand & gain information on the life of Sri Chaitanya & Sri Vallabhacharya, the two magnanimous saints of the Bhakti movement, under whom Vraj Mandal was resurrected & Vaishnavism regained its old glory & Bharat got back Vraj Mandal. Exactly 508 years back Sri Chaitanya landed in Vraj Mandal after undertaking a treacherous & most demanding journey on feet from Bengal. Later he sent Six of his Key disciples to search & re-establish all the key Sri Krishna leela sthali's & vighraha's. These Six disciples are popularly known as the Shoro (Six) Goswami's. They are as mentioned below:

1. Srila Rup Goswami.
2. Srila Sanatan Goswami.
3. Srila Gopal Bhatta Goswami.
4. Srila Raghunath Das Goswami.
5. Srila Raghunath Bhatta Goswami.
6. Srila Jeev Goswami.

They form the presiding & guardian body of Vraj Mandal of Gaudiya Vaishnav Tattwah. Although we will examine these details in a little more detail later in this paper, the key objective of this paper is to examine the cultural heritage of Vraj in all its elements per say. Vraj Mandal or Mathura Mandal is not without the Sri Krishna Janmabhoomi or the Katra Keshav Dev/Deo or the birthplace of Devaki putra Krishna, but this paper will not dwell into the macro or micro details of this piece considering that it's a complete subject which needs due justice to be done for the sake of the readers.

Before we delve into the understanding the Puranic context & the reference points for Vraj specifically in Mahabharata, it's important to know of its definition & character as presented in the various Vedas. The term "Vraj" derived from **the Sanskrit Word "dhatu"** which means motion & movement is an indicator of the larger context for Vraj used in the 04 Vedas & later in the various Purana's. Let us see what each of the Vedas enumerate:

- **Rig Veda** – “Gausala or the areas where the cows graze.” (10-4-2) & (1-10-7)
- **Yajurveda** – “Grazing ground of the cows” & Gaushala mentioned as “Vraja” & “Gostha”. (1-25)
- **Sukla Yajurveda** – “Grazing ground of cows having beautiful horns” (Adhyaya 6, mantra 3)
- **Samaveda** mentions “Vraja” is the same as “Golaka Dham.”
- **Harivamsha & Srimad Bhagvatam** - “Vraja” is used as the interior parts of Mathura, villages of cowmen or Yadavas. (Harivamsa, Vishnu Parva, 9-30) & Bhagvatam (10-1-10).

It is to be borne in mind that although multiple Puranas in Sanatan Dharma speak of the sacred piece of land called Vraj Mandal also known as Mathura Mandal (as per Varaha Purana). On a closer examination of the ancient texts, it is observed that following Puranas provide a reach yield on the piousness, antiquity & geography of Vraj in details with a considerable stress on its natural heritage which forms the very essence & beauty of Vraj. The Skanda Purana, Vishnu Purana, Harivamsha Purana, Padma Purana, The Mahabharata or even the Varaha Purana goes on to describe the geographical limits of Vraj from the earliest of Yuga’s, albeit in the current day political map they have been divided into three different states as mentioned earlier. However, the most striking feature of all these descriptions are the natural heritage or the forests / Vana’s, the kunds/sarovars, mountains/hills/tilla’s or even the widespread Yamuna flowing across the Vraj mandala.

On critical examinations of these ancient texts one can see the reference of as many 50 plus Kund’s & Sarovar’s & 04 types of forests / Vana’s. Although sadly these forests through the Yuga’s have been lost to man-made efforts & lack of conservation, but in the current socio-political scenario the afforestation driven by widescale urbanization of the Vraj mandala poses a huge threat to the existing flora & fauna apart from the wanton destruction of the spiritual heritage of Vraj much preserved through these forests, mountains, hillocks or the Kund’s. Interestingly the entire Mathura Mandala would be full of mounds / hillocks which are formed by the free-flowing Yamuna from the silts that are being carried during the monsoon. This phenomenon has been observed for all the

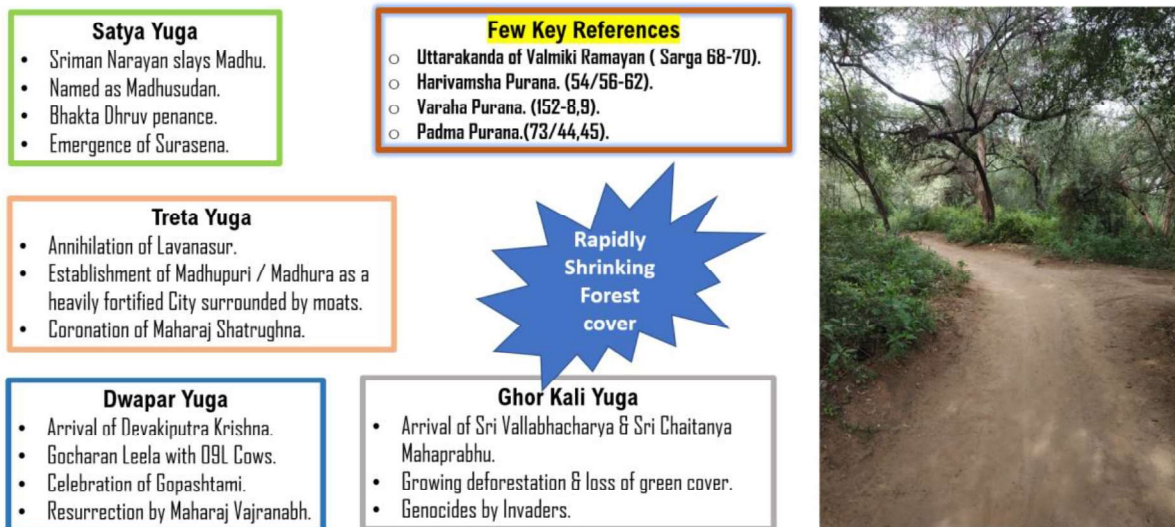
bygone Yuga's & even true today. As such this has resulted in the presence of multiple Tilla's named after puranic personalities & has a deep relevance & influence even today. These Tilla's historically & archaeologically has acted as a natural store house of not only many artifacts, sculptures, scriptures, manuscripts, copper plates, inscriptions but also even today stands as the resting place of many of the famous temple's. Not so much excavated but archaeologically rich & potential sites ready to overturn history once explored by the beleaguered ASI or the UP-State archeology department.

The Purana's through the ages refer to some 12 prominent Vana's or forests of which a few prominent one can be even found today, much reduced or urbanized completely or partially with the likes of Vrindavan, Madhuvan, Kamyavaan (present day Kama), Talvaan, Bhandirvaan & so on. Out of all these forests we will consider Madhuvaan as our prime site for a detailed study through Yuga's capturing the key events coupled with the sacredness of this site. In order to perform this deep drive, it's indeed extremely important to understand why it is mandatory to study our ancient scripture's if we are to study & understand our Cultural Heritage more holistically. The three texts which provide us with invaluable information on the Vraj mandala are The Mahabharat & Harivamsha Purana (Khilli /appendix to Mahabharat) & the Srimad Bhagwat Mahapuran (Bhagwatam). They provide us the details of the lineage, history, exploits & socio-economic structure of the Vrishni & Andhaka clan of Yadava's to which Devaki putra Krishna belonged to. In the recent times Sri Krishna's character has been identified with Devaki Putra Krishna as found in the Channdogya Upanishad & very meaningfully validated by Historian & scholars like Dr. Meenakshi Jain & Prof Dr. Kapil Kapoor in their various talks & books in the recent times.

Coming back to Madhuvan & to analyze the series of events that this site has witnessed from our Puranic Itihassa right from Satya Yuga to Ghor Kali Yuga, one must move through in a chronological manner through each of the Yuga's. Madhuvaan (**Village: Maholi, Distt: Mathura**) **27.4705° N, 77.6364° E** is located apprx. 10 kms from the current day Mathura City. The puranic texts which primarily cover these event's can be enumerated as below to name a few **Uttarakanda of Valmiki Ramayan (Sarga 68-70), Harivamsha Purana. (54/56-62) , Varaha Purana. (152-8,9)**

& Padma Purana.(73/44,45). Although the site is most famous for the legendary Child Devotee Dhruva Maharaj, the Son of Maharaj Uttanpadh & grand son of Swayambhu Manu attaining his moksha here with the arrival of Sri Vishnu on the Dhruva Tilla which is preserved even today, but the other events as well which are directly linked to the continuous resurrection of Vraja mandala through the various Yuga's can be highlighted as shared,

Madhuvan through the Yuga's (Village: Maholi, Distt: Mathura) 27.4705° N, 77.6364° E



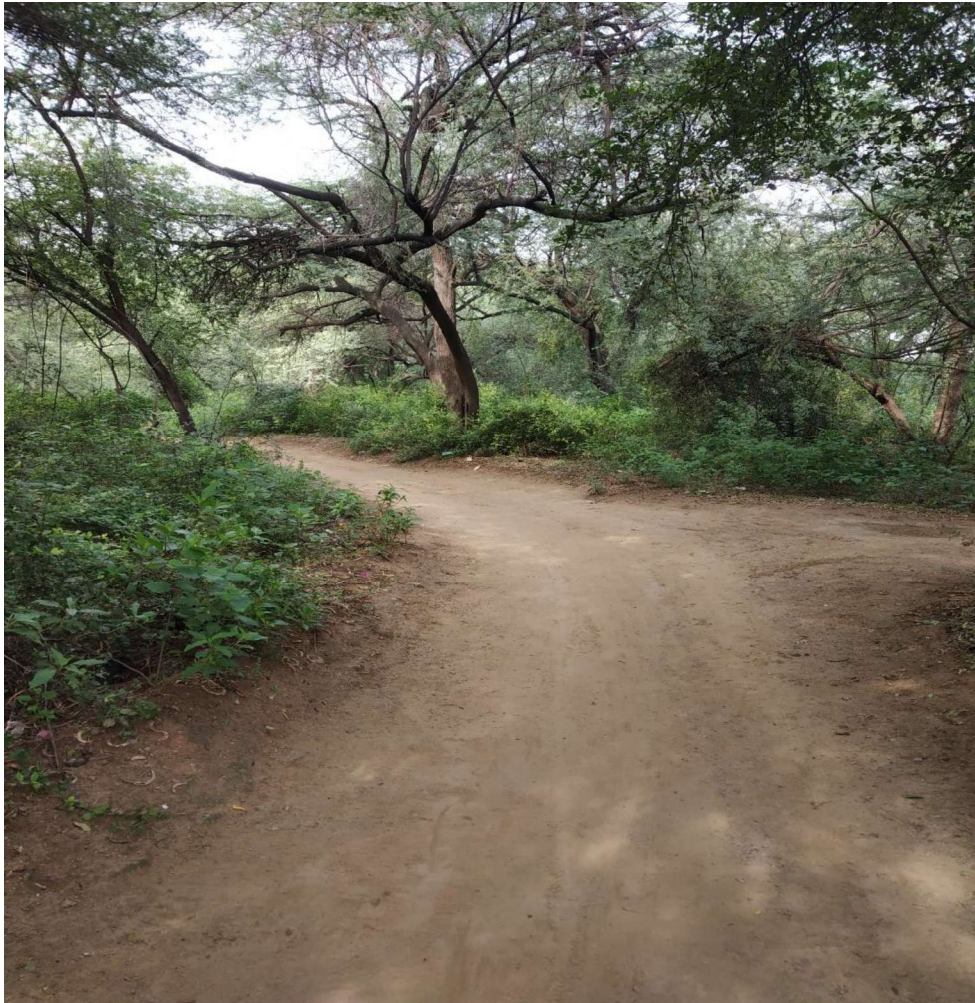
Sources : Vishnu Purana, Adi Varaha Purana, Srimad Bhagavatam, Padma Purana & Harivamsha Purana

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The very reason of picking Madhuvan as a sample is that across all the Purana's Madhuvan finds the No.1 spot in all the texts amongst the 12 major van's of Vraj along with the 24 other Upavan's or the smaller forests. For the knowledge & information of the readers it will be important to know the names of the 12 major van's which are as follows:

1. Madhuvana.
2. Talavana.
3. Kumudvana.
4. Khadirvana.
5. Vrindavan.

6. Bhadravana.
7. Bhandirvana.
8. Belavana.
9. Lohavana.
10. Mahavana.
11. Bahulavana, &
12. Kamavana (Kama)



(Picture 1 – The Present Day Madhuvan at the Maholi Village, Photo's by Surya Roy)

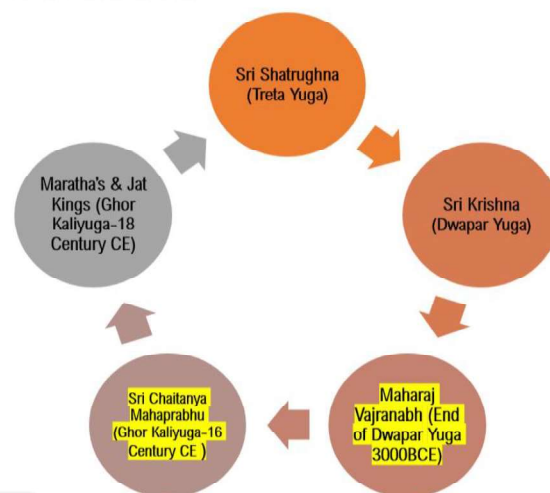


(Picture 2 – The Present Day Dhruva Tilla, The place where Dhruva Maharaj attained Moksha at the Maholi Village, Photo's by Surya Roy)

On the other hand, while trying to understand the Cultural Heritage of Vraj mandala it also becomes imperative to understand in greater details the ancient, early medieval, medieval & modern day Vraj vis a vis the Yuga's & the political, religious, military , art & crafts, festivals & archaeological marvels that stands today & their gradual evolution, antiquity & historicity, so to say the various phases of resurrection of Vraja mandala or Mathura Mandala.



Resurrection of Vraj Mandala



**FS Growse – Collector
Mathura (1868CE – 1874CE)**

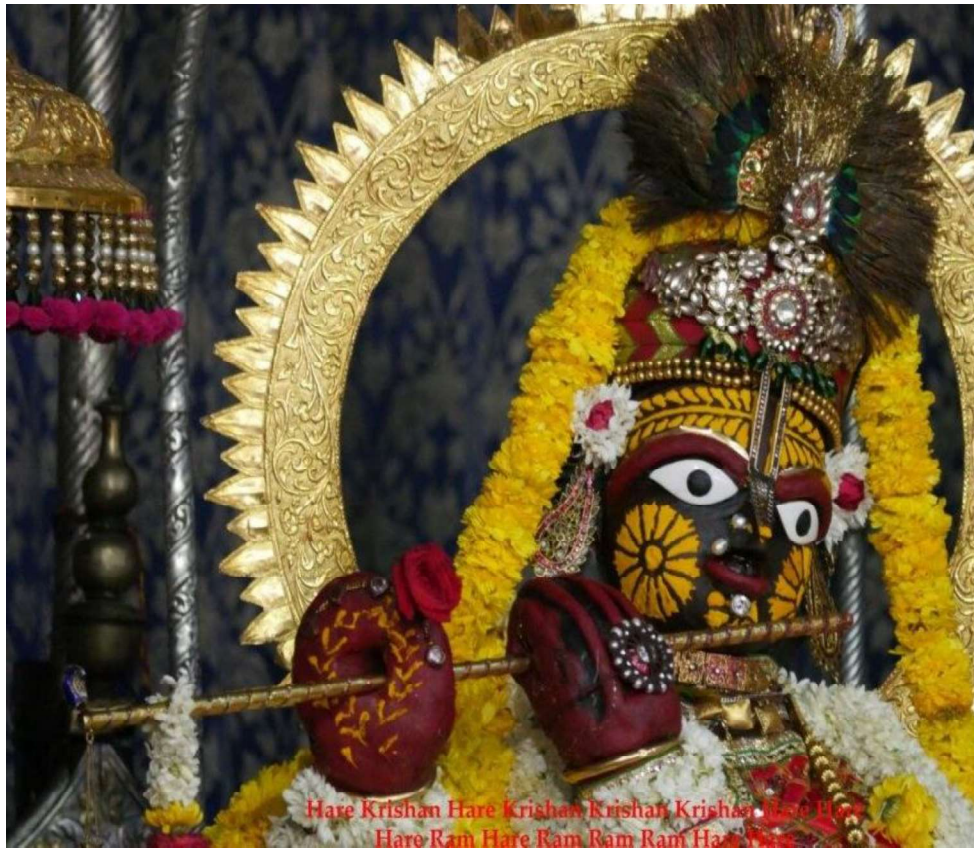
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Treta Yuga marks the first resurrection of Mathura Mandala with the advent of Lakshman the Youngest brother of Sri Rama of Ayodhya, wherein he kills Lavanasur to establish the modern & port city of Madhupura, a fortified one with moats & acting as a key trade center. This was followed by the resurrection at the hands of Devaki Putra Krishna & then came the Bhakti movement which lead to the modern-day resurrection by Sri Chaitanya & Sri Vallabhacharya. This was also the time when multiple events were flooding Vraj mandala leading to the kick starting of the urbanization of Vraj mandala. With Mughal emperor Akbar approving the construction of 04 grand Red Sandstone temple's between 1570 CE – 1574 CE, began a glorious era of temple architecture in North India which was unprecedented. With the commissioning of the opulent Govind Dev Ji temple in 1590CE by Raja Man Singh the entire dynamics changed. This was followed by or preceded by the construction of the Madan Mohan temple, Jugal Kishore temple, Gopinath temple or the Haridev temple. Sadly all of them were the subjects of Mughal Emperor Alamgir Aurangazeb's iconoclasm in 1670CE. It is would be worthwhile to note that a single Farman was used to bring all the temples in the Vraj / Mathura region by the Mughal forces. Nevertheless, the Govind Dev Jew temple even today bears the mark of its glorious past in terms of Indo Islamic style of architecture which was described as "poetry on stone" by the Mathura Collector Fredreick Salmon Growse while conserving this architectural marvel the biggest of its kind to come in the 500 years of Islamic rule

in North India. It is imperative that we discuss a little more on the history of the Govind Dev Jew considering its splendid architecture & divinity associated with the vigraha itself. The Harivamsha & Bhagwat Purana identifies this as the key vigraha of the Gaudiya Vaishnav Tattwah & sculpted by Maharaj Vajranabh the Great grandson of Devaki Putra Krishna with striking similarity to the face of Sri Krishna. The deity was expectedly excavated out of Gomatilla by Srila Rupa Goswami somewhere between 1525CE – 1535 CE, & a small temple was built by Raja Bhagwan Singh father of Raja Man Singh the leader of the Kachhwaha clan of Rajputs from Jaipur.

Subsequently after Emperor Akbar's approval post his visit to Vraj, this grand temple was conceptualized & envisaged to be built over a period of 12 years. Akbar's farman found also states the allotment of 134 bighas of land for the upkeep & maintenance of the temple. A massive 07 Storey 220 ft high, Nagada Style of temple with its interiors holding both the Mughal arches & Bharatiya Jharokas, arcade & carves lead to an marvelous creation, whose name & fame had spread to distant lands, till this was desecrated in 1670CE. Out of the 07 storey's, three storey's still lives as a mark of its glorious past. The Vighraha can now be found in the Jaipur City Palace where it reached after a 44-year treacherous escape through meandering routes to Kanakghati on the outskirts of Jaipur.

(Picture 3 – The Present-Day Govind Dev Jew Image, Jaipur City Palace, Jaipur, Photo sourced from Internet).



Hare Krishan Hare Krishan Krishan Krishan Hare Hare
Hare Ram Hare Ram Ram Ram Hare Hare



(Picture 4 – The Present Day Govind Dev Jew Temple, Gomatilla, Vrindavan City, with the author at the temple site survey, Photo's by Surya Roy)



(Picture 5 – The Present-Day Govind Dev Jew Temple, Gomatilla, Vrindavan City, showcasing the beautiful Jharoka's & arcades, Photo's by Surya Roy)

Archaeology per say rose to a new level with the advent of the Maratha & Jat rulers taking control of Vraj mandala. The Chattri's of the Jat kings at Kusum Sarovar in Govardhan is one such beautiful sample or even the various haveli's that started developing under the Maratha's. The Haveli Sangeet was an automatic extension being added to the Vraj culture so to say, which later spread its wings to other states of Northern & Western India & even today forms an integral part of the Classical gharana & Vraj culture. Musical & religious tapestry at its best.



(Picture 6 – Kusum Sarovar, Chattris of Jat rulers, Goverdhan, Photo sourced from Wikipedia)

The extensive spread of Buddhism & Jainism with Mathura as epicenter coupled with their patronage from Sunga, Saka, Khashtaps, Kushan, Mauryas & to some extent Gupta kings also leads to the findings of thousands of artifacts, sculptures, motifs, iconography of the Buddhist & Jain era's & even today many tillas remain unexcavated which is undertaken will yield extremely rich archeological finds. Interestingly 70% of the inventory of the Mathura Museum today comprises Buddhist & Jain items spread from the Kushan, Gupta's & Mauryan era.

Vraj or Braj is not complete in terms of its Cultural heritage without discussion on the Holi or Vasant Utsav, the Braj Parikrama, Sanji art forms & its famous culinary delights particularly focused on the dairy products for which the region is famous from the Dwapar Yuga. Interestingly each of these elements finds its primeval origin to Devaki Putra Krishna only. While the Vraj parikrama has a rich legacy & antiquity starting from Dwapar Yuga & so does the Vasant Utsav an international festival which spreads over a period of 40 days in various forms & seen as an offshoot of Women empowerment in the recent times. Vraj ka Holi can be classified into the below:

1. Lathmaar Holi celebrated in Barsana.
2. Folen's firewalk & Panda Mela.
3. Dauji's Huranga in Baldeo, Mathura.
4. Mukhrai's Charkula Nritya.
5. Gulal Kund ki Holi.
6. Phollon Ka Wali & Laddu Holi.



(Picture 7 – Phollon ka Holi, Vrindavan, Photo sourced from Wikipedia)



(Picture 8 – Folen Ki Holi, Vrindavan, Photo sourced from Wikipedia)



(Picture 9 – Lathmaar Holi, Vrindavan, Photo sourced from Wikipedia)

Each of these have a very detailed process & legacy with absolute feast to the eyes through the color riot that happens. To summarize Vraj or Braj is just not limited to Cultural Heritage, it's a emotion, ecstasy, the epicenter of all sampradaya's of Vaishnav's, the center point of the ancient Bhagwat Cult, Pancha Veera worship or even the Shaiva & Shakta sampradaya's to a great extent. The region blessed by the pious souls, sadhu's & Mahatma's starting from Sri Chaitanya, Vallavacharya, Meera Bai, Surdas & so many who have been born in this Jammu Dweep for the salvation of the millions of souls residing in this land.

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