

Mathura, Uttar Pradesh

Men From Venus



Men in Barsana, the birthplace of Radha, claim to be women at heart

■ by Shefalee VASUDEV

EVEN WHEN HE WAS A CHILD, MAHAVIR Goswami knew what he would like to be in his next birth. “A woman, a gopi,” he says with an ear-to-ear grin that maps his sense of self rather well. He refuses to allow the “prayers for my future birth” to be strangled by rational debate. “What do you mean why?” he asks, his earnestness now tinged with an indignant tone. “I may have a male body, but at the core of my being is a woman’s spirit. I am an intrinsic part of Radharani,” he adds, the indignation now accompanied by firm righteousness.

Nobody disagrees. At least not in Barsana, the birthplace of Radha, who is recognised in mythological texts as Lord Krishna’s soulmate. During Holi, it is the colours of womanhood, especially the ones extolled by men, that are most vibrant. Goswami’s feminist thoughts have resounding echoes here. Every pandit, *gwal-bal* (cowherd-boy), old man or wayward youth encountered in Barsana seems to be choking with this “I am a gopi” introductions. These are not effeminate men searching for breakthroughs to exit from confused sexual identities. They are normal men who have been brought up to believe singlemindedly that Radha represents the spirit of the cosmos.

Brajbhoomi—the collective name given to Mathura, Vrindavan, Barsana, Nandgaon and Govardhan—is the last place where anybody would expect to stumble upon men from Venus. But here they are, these simple-at-heart Pandit boys, who make a living of selling ritualism to the confused and the devout, with deep yearnings to be recognised for their female spirits. “Everywhere else, Krishna is worshipped as a male God. Here we have turned him into a woman,” says another Radha *bhakt*. Unlike any other Radha-Krishna temple in the world, the idol at Barsana has the blue-skinned God in female attire. The colourful paintings that adorn the ceilings of the temple also depict Krishna in numerous female forms—a female gardener, a female jeweller or a *sakhi* (friend) dotting on Radha. Ornamentally complete as a pretty, coy woman in lehnga-choli, a transparent veil drawn over

the eyes, flowers in the hair, bangles and red lipstick, Krishna is recognisable only by the dark colour of his skin.

Barsana abounds with folktales revolving around Radha’s benign grip on things during the life and times of Krishna. Like the one retold by Kaluwa, another man blessed, as he claims, with womanpower. “When Kansa, then the king of Mathura and Krishna’s villainous uncle, came to Barsana, he fell into a pond and was turned into a woman for six months,” says Kaluwa with undisguised glee.

All the best men of Radha, with jazzy dupattas thrown over their attires, appear busy with Holi preparations. Boys from Nandgaon and gopis from Barsana make Holi what it is—the most popular festival of Brajbhoomi. Holi is not day-long here, it is an entire season, beginning from the day of Vasant-panchami (onset of spring) and culminating in what the rest of the nation celebrates as Holi. The most well-known is the Lath-Mar Holi, where women form groups of four and beat a man each. Men hold leather shields over their heads and are not supposed to retaliate. With unabashed gender abuses flying everywhere and uncensored flirting between men and women, doesn’t the “womanhood” of the men of Barsana take a beating with every swish of the sticks? “During Holi we behave typically like



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FIRST CHOICE: Goswami, the *gwal* who’d rather be a gopi

men because ritual requires it. Otherwise, we are manifestations of Radharani,” explains Goswami.

But curiously, since the days of Radha and Krishna, no marriage has ever been arranged between the families of Nandgaon and Barsana. “Ours is a relationship of love, of companionship; marriage would ruin it,” says Mahesh Chaturvedi, a Pandit bent with age. And what if love blossoms as a byproduct of the liberties that both the genders indulge in during Holi? “We are against marriage, not love. Nobody forbids love,” he replies, looking away.

Liberal? Selectively so, because for Kaluwa, Goswami, Chaturvedi and their umpteen clones, female emancipation only has divine dimensions, not domestic ones. Their wives and sisters still wait to be empathetically heard and at least occasionally loved for being themselves. For being women. But that is another story. ■