

North to Siberia

Volume 3, Chapter 1

January 18, 2001, Barnoul, Siberia.

Today I am traveling by train through the vast desert region of northern Kazakhstan, in central Asia. I am alone in one compartment and Sri Prahlad and his wife, Rukmini Priya, are in another. We are heading north towards Russia. Our 34 hour ride will conclude in Barnoul, deep in the snows of Siberia, where we will have one and a half days of programs with the local devotees. It will be the beginning of a 4 week tour throughout Russia.

We have just left Almaty, the capital of Kazakhstan. There we participated in the Vyasa Puja festival of my dear godbrother, Bhakti Branga Govinda Maharaja. Over 200 devotees came from central Asia, Russia and even Europe for the event. When we first arrived in Almaty we drove out to visit Maharaja's developing farm project, "Sri Vrindavan Dhama", 45 minutes outside of the city. Maharaja purchased land there 3 years ago. I was amazed at how much he has achieved in such a short time. Sri Vrindavan Dhama has a small but beautiful reconstructed house that serves as a temple, where the main Deity is a very large Govardhana Sila. They also worship a large Nrsimha salagram, that I sent them last year. He is probably the most terrifying Nrsimha sila on earth and Maharaja told me that since He arrived at the farm, our movement has met with little resistance in Kazakhstan.

The property has a very large barn, where they keep about 15 cows and bulls. It also serves as base for their small prasadam and candle making businesses. The property has a lot of land where they grow fruits, vegetables and grains. I also noticed a large lake, renamed "Radha Kunda" by the devotees – along whose banks are many "Dacha's" or small cottages, used as retreats by the people of Almaty in the summer. Maharaja has purchased a number of them for housing his devotees.

Sri Vrindavan Dhama reminded me a lot of "New Vraja Dhama" in Hungary. The Hungarian farm project manifested over 10 years by the strong desire of Sivarama Swami and is already famous throughout Hungary. Obviously, Govinda Maharaja has started Sri Vrindavan Dhama in the same spirit and no doubt it will eventually achieve the same fame within Kazakhstan. I know, however, how much blood, sweat and tears go into starting and developing such a community. Men, money and capital don't come easy in this world. But in Krsna consciousness we always have a special incentive; the mercy of Krsna. By His grace

alone we can accomplish the great tasks that our spiritual master, Srila Prabhupada, has requested of us. Govinda Maharaja has shown his worthiness as a disciple of His Divine Grace, by developing New Vrindavan Dhama practically from dusty fields alone. Srila Prabhupada once said that a project is, “only as good as the man who is heads it up.”

We observed Maharaja’s 50th birthday anniversary in a medium sized hall on the outskirts of Almaty. We focused mainly on lectures and kirtans. Some of the kirtans went for as long as 3-4 hours. The devotees also did two excellent dramas of Krsna Lila. I have always noted that devotees from Russia and Central Asia are very talented in music, art and drama. In Bhagavad Gita, Krsna says that He is the “ability in man” and surely the Lord’s grace came through the beautiful dramas we saw at that festival. The dramas were actually taken from Rupa Goswami’s play, “Lalita Madhava”. They were done so well that we all had the good fortune to experience what may have been genuine sentiments of affection for the Lord. I saw many devotees crying.

A snow storm was raging as we left our apartment in Almaty to go to the train station yesterday. We just barely made the train. The devotees had reserved us 1st class compartments; although by ‘western’ standards they would have been rated much less. But they are comfortable and, most important, warm. Rumors have been circulating that in Siberia there is a record cold front of minus 47 degrees. A week ago I was in Sydney, Australia, where the temperatures were around 32 degree ABOVE zero. I find the drastic temperature changes one of the most difficult things about being a traveling preacher. Generally the body becomes accustomed to the heat of summer or the harshness of winter by gradually going through the temperature changes of Spring and Autumn, respectively. But preaching calls us to places according to need and we have to accept the austerity of facing the heat or cold head on.

As our train proceeds through the barren desert like area of northern Kazakhstan, the scene outside remains the same hour after hour; an endless horizon of snow. The land is flat and the monotonous view is only broken from time to time by a small settlements of old wooden houses. I can’t imagine how people live out here! I see them shuffling from house to house all bundled up in old coats and fur hats. The fur hats are typical of Russia and the countries that used to be part of it’s empire. Full fur coats are also quite common.

Sometimes the train stops at a station and a few people, waiting patiently in the snow and freezing wind, jump on. At that time, a few brave souls get off the train to buy refreshments from the old ladies on the platform. They mainly sell meat and vodka – and what appears to be a flat bread. The old ladies are the poorest of all, as seen by their attire, which sometimes consists of only an old coat and rags around their bodies. Their faces are red from the cold. Because Kazakhstan borders western China, the Kazakhstan people all have black hair and slanted eyes.

Because we don't speak any Russian we can't ask anyone when we will cross the border into Russia. I want to be prepared, because past experience has shown that it can be a real ordeal.

The border guards in the "outpost" crossings can be very difficult. They sometimes like to intimidate foreigners. They demand to see all the things in our bags, and create an atmosphere of fear and anxiety. But we can't communicate with the lady in charge of our coach, so I place myself on "red alert" and have my bags and identity papers ready at all times. I also sleep with all my cloths on, so that I won't be embarrassed by the border guards bursting into my compartment in the dead of night and shouting at me in Russian.

There's not much more to report in a small cabin during 34 hours of riding up through Kazakhstan and into Russia. We finally cross the Russian border 27 hours into the journey. By some quirk of fate, the knock on my door was surprisingly soft and when I opened it the border guard was a rather shy young woman in military fatigues. She silently took my passport and came back a half hour later with it stamped. She then looked briefly into the cabin and without a word left. It was the easiest entry I've ever had into Russia.

We arrived in Barnoul at midnight in the midst of a huge blizzard. About 40 local devotees were having a rousing kirtan on the platform. My heart went out to them – it was 12 degrees below zero outside and the wind was raging! As I jumped off the train, the cold hit me and I zipped my jacket up to the neck. But when I tried to speak to a few devotees on the way to the car, my lips were so cold I couldn't say the words.

As we drove to a devotee's apartment, the temple president, Visnu Tattva das, a disciple of Prabhavisnu Swami, told me that the morning program the next day was to begin at 7 am. That meant only 4 hours of sleep! He had also scheduled a darsan with my disciples (who

haven't seen me in 3 years) for the late morning, then Deity worship and japa, lunch ... and a big evening program. Senior devotees rarely visit this isolated area, so devotees are really excited about the evening festival. They have invited many important people from Barnaul. Devotees from other regions of Siberia are also supposed to be coming, but Visnu Tattva says some may not make it because of the bad weather.

Then our next train leaves for our next destination and deeper into the Siberian winter. I almost fainted when Visnu Tattva told me the journey will take 27 hours!

The Barnaul Stirs Nostalgia

Volume 3, Chapter 2

January 19, 2001, Barnaul, Siberia.

Today we awoke at 5 am, after only 4 hours of rest to prepare to do a program in a hall in downtown Barnaul. I had trouble sleeping last night because my body seemed to be still moving; an uncanny feeling, which no doubt came from being on a moving train for 34 hours the day before.

But I had an interesting dream. I dreamt that I was walking along the Kali Gandhaki river in Nepal, looking for salagram silas with my godbrother, Bimala Prasad das. I often dream that I am either on my way to the Kali Gandhaki river – or along it's banks. In fact, the dreams are so intense that I can only attribute them to the fact that I have actually traveled in the mountains of Nepal several times in this life.

Or could it be that I was there in a previous life? In a purport in Srimad Bhagavatam (4.29.64) Srila Prabhupada confirms this possibility. He writes, "In dreams we sometimes see things that we have never experienced in the present body. Sometimes in dreams we think that we are flying in the sky, although we have no experience of flying. This means that once in a previous life, either as a demigod or astronaut, we flew in the sky. The impression is there in the stockpile of the mind, and it suddenly expresses itself. It is like fermentation taking place in the depths of water, which sometimes manifests itself in bubbles on the water's surface."

Two weeks ago I had an unusually spiritual dream. I dreamt that after a long time I was returning to New Mayapura, in France. In the dream I was surprised to see that everything was overgrown and falling apart. But from within the temple I heard a conch shell blowing and sounds indicating the alter curtain was about to open. I rushed in and sat for a few

moments before the curtain, eager for darsan of Sri Sri Radha Govinda Madhava. Suddenly, the curtain opened and everything on the alter was shining beautifully like the sun. It was very clean and nicely decorated. My eyes searched for Sri Sri Radha Govinda Madhava and when I saw Them I started crying. The more I looked at Them, the more I wept. When I awoke that morning, I found my pillow wet with tears. I got up from bed and looked in the mirror. My eyes were red from crying. I said to myself in the mirror, “You rascal! Why can’t you cry for Krsna like that in real life!”.

But inside I was happy, knowing that somewhere in my hard, stone like heart, there might even be a little glimmer of love for Sri Sri Radha Govinda Madhava!

Unfortunately, my dreams are not often so transcendental. Because of the unusual places I travel and preach, and because of the anxieties I have from many responsibilities, I often dream of war – or trying to escape from unknown enemies.

After taking bath, myself, Sri Prahlad, Rukmini Priya and Visnu Tattva prabhu left the apartment building to go to the program. When we stepped outside I was shocked! In the few hours we had slept a huge snowstorm had covered everything within site with blankets of snow. Visnu Tattva told me that Siberia has had more snow this winter than in the last 25 years. We are seeing the cold face of Siberia at it’s worst. We struggled to get to our car, and slipping and sliding through the roads of the city in our vehicle, we somehow managed to get to the hall for the morning program. I couldn’t imagine there would be many devotees there, as access through the city was so difficult; but as is typical in Russian ISKCON , when we entered the hall there were over 200 blissful Vaisnavas eager for Krsna katha and kirtan.

As no book was available, I spoke about the importance of devotee association. I based my class on a verse from Caitanya Caritamṛta, Madhya Lila 22. 128:

sadhu-sanga, name-kirtan, bhagavata-sravana
mathura-vasa, sri-murtira sraddhaya sevana

“One should associate with devotees, chant the holy name of the Lord, hear Srimad-Bhāgavatam, reside at Mathura and worship the Deity with faith and veneration.”

Rupa Goswami states in Bhakti Rasamṛta Sindhu that these processes are so potent that even a small attachment for any one of these five items can arouse devotional ecstasy even in a neophyte.

After class we returned to our apartment, worshipped our Deities, took prasadam, and then I met with a group of disciples. I must say it was quite an intense meeting. Because many of these disciples had not seen me in 2, or even 3 years, they were absorbed each second; watching my every move – listening to every word. I was tired and had a headache coming on, but I forced myself to ignore these conditions, and sat up straight, attempting to be the proper representative of Srila Prabhupada I should be. By speaking philosophy and quoting appropriate verses from Bhagavad Gita, I inspired the devotees – but as soon as they left, I collapsed in bed for a half hour rest before the evening program.

When we arrived at the hall that evening, there were twice as many devotees as were there in the morning – over 400. They had come from numerous surrounding towns and villages. There were also many guests. The atmosphere was “electric” in anticipation of class and kirtan. The mood somehow reminded me of Poland 12 years ago, when I first started preaching there.

There were many teenagers in the audience, with a type of innocence about them, which I attributed to the fact that Siberia still remains to this day somewhat isolated from the “mainstream materialism” that is rampant even in Eastern Europe and Western Russia these days. Later in the evening all these young people stood and chanted and danced without abandon. It left me with a sense of nostalgia for the past.

Over 50 devotees participated in a wonderful drama about the appearance of Lord Caitanya. It was so well done that I imagined it took weeks of preparation. That they had gone to so much trouble and expense for me touched my heart, and when it came time for me to speak to the general devotees and guests, I gave an impassioned lecture about the purpose of life, which I think was well appreciated. After the talk, Sri Prahlad led a wonderful kirtan.

To conclude the evening, the devotees brought a huge cake onto the stage, which I distributed, piece by piece, to over 500 people. The numbers in the hall had swelled, because after our program the hall was to turn into a disco. As our program was finishing many young people started showing up for the disco, standing on the perimeter of our festival, watching in amazement. Many were pulled into the kirtan by the devotees and guests and many came forward for a piece of cake.

Overwhelmed by the ecstatic mood, a number of them showed signs of respect as they approached me for the prasadam; bowing their heads or folding their hands in 'namskara' as they saw the devotees do. It was an unusual experience for me, as young ladies in short dresses and heavy make-up and tough looking boys in 'designer' clothing came respectfully forward for the Lord's mercy. All glories to Sri Krsna Samkirtan!

Sojourn in Novosibirsk

Volume 3, Chapter 3

January 20, 2001, Novosibirsk, Siberia.

Today when we awoke, we returned to the hall for a last program before leaving Barnoul. Although we had all taken rest late that night and the program was early in the morning, 200 devotees were there to greet us and listen to class. I spoke on Rupa Goswami's verse from Bhakti Rasamrta Sindhu, which gives the standard for pure devotional service:

anyabhilasita sunyam

jnana karmady anavrtam

anukulyena krsnanu

silanam bhakir uttama

"When first class devotional service develops, one is devoid of all material desires, knowledge of impersonalism and fruitive activities. The devotee must serve Krsna favorably, as Krsna desires"

Our acaryas have said that this verse is the essential verse of Bhakti Rasamrta Sindhu, upon which the rest of the book is based.

At 11:30 in the morning we rushed to the station to catch the train to our next destination, Krasnoyarsk. I was happy to see that four of my lady disciples had purchased tickets for a compartment on the train. They boarded the train with stockpiles of prasadam for the 26 hour train ride. I settled into my compartment and happily sat finishing my rounds in a rare moment of peace and solitude. I watched the white, cold countryside flash by as the train proceeded deep into the Siberian countryside.

Darkness set in after a few hours, just as we arrived in Novosibirsk, the capitol of the Siberian region. As the train pulled into the station, I saw on the main platform a big neon

sign that displayed the time and temperature. It is a curious thing that in each and every train station in Russia, there is a huge sign displaying time and temperature. I stared out in disbelief; the time was 6 pm, the temperature 20 degrees below zero!

Suddenly Uttamasloka, who is accompanying us as my Russian translator, came to my cabin and said the train will be delayed in the station for 5 hours.

I immediately asked, "Is there a temple in this city?"

He replied to the affirmative. I asked how far away it was and another devotee innocently replied that it was only 15 minutes from the station. I told Uttamasloka to go out on the platform and call the temple to inform them that we were coming for a surprise visit. We would walk the short distance. Little did I know what it is to walk even ten meters in 20 degree below zero weather!

Within minutes our little band of ten devotees had jumped off the train and began the short walk to the temple. A chilling wind had come up, driving the temperature down to 30 degrees below zero. I had never experienced anything like it in my life. Any small portion of exposed flesh on my body immediately experienced intense pain from the cold. After walking just fifty meters, I couldn't imagine going one step further. We were just outside the train station and so I asked Uttamasloka to order a taxi for us to continue to the temple. He found a big taxi-van and we all piled in, thankful for the warmth inside. After half an hour, we arrived at the temple. Luckily, we hadn't attempted to walk the "15 minutes" distance!

Arriving at the temple, we were greeted by twenty very enthusiastic devotees. Sri Prahlad led kirtan and I spoke on "atiti -seva"; receiving the "unexpected" guest. I mentioned that in Vedic culture the householder has five duties to perform; to honor the forefathers, the earth, the devas, the animal and any unexpected guest. I told the story from Srimad Bhagavatam of King Rantidev, who received 3 different guests in his home. He respectfully fed them according to their desires, but in the end had no prasadam left for himself and his family members. Later the three personalities revealed themselves as Brahma, Visnu and Siva and blessed him for his proper etiquette in serving his guests. Sri Prahlad then led an amazing kirtan which sent the devotees to Vaikunatha.

After three hours we got back in the taxi and returned to the train station. As we walked in, all eyes were upon us! Here we were, dressed in dhoti and saris, in one of the coldest places on earth. Besides that, our colorful attire greatly contrasted with the dark, heavy leather coats

and fur hats that everyone else wore. The people of Siberia are a hardy bunch; all the men look to me like burley woodsmen. Many of them are bigger than me and with all their dark furry, winter clothing come across as a bit intimidating. Russian people in general have a sort of tough looking demeanor about them. They don't easily smile. But that's deceptive, because actually Russian people are generally soft-hearted.

As we walked through the throngs of heavy set men and women in their furs hats and skins, several people called out, "Hare Krsna!" in gruff voices. As we approached our train, I was thinking to myself that although it's so austere to travel and preach here, I actually prefer it to other countries where life is more opulent and there are more facilities. Here in Russia everyone shares common austerities and the only noticeable "opulence" I've seen is the bright faced and colorfully dressed Hare Krsna devotees.

Finding our way to our train we settled in for the overnight ride to Krasnoyarsk. Earlier in the day, Jananivasa, my Russian secretary, had given me a mobile telephone that works throughout the entire country.

As it is expensive to use, I'll have it mainly for receiving calls. But as I had not heard from Nandini and Radha Sakhi Vrnda in over a week, I decided to call them. They are two disciples in Poland who are in charge of organizing our Polish Festival Programs. Both of these ladies have taken on an incredible amount of responsibility on the tour. They are reorganizing it as a legal foundation, arranging all the festivals for the upcoming spring, summer and fall tours and handling all the initial preparations for the gigantic Woodstock festival this coming summer. Recently they had been in Zary, looking for accommodations for the 400 devotees we expect to join us for our preaching at Woodstock in August.

When I called them they reported that the local priest in Zary is doing everything he can to place obstacles before us. During the last two Woodstock festivals we had stayed in a large school, not far from the center of town. But when Nandini and Radha Sakhi Vrinda visited this school to rent the facilities, they adamantly refused. At every school they went in town, they encountered the same cold mood. Finally one school authority informed them that the local priest had sent word out, that no school should cooperate with the Hare Krsna's in their attempt to get facility for Woodstock. The priests are very powerful in Poland, especially in small towns. People are afraid of them because if they don't cooperate with the priests, that may lose their jobs.

Determined to find accommodation, Nandini and Radha Sakhi Vrnda persevered and finally found two schools who agreed to rent their facilities to us. Nandini said that the local mayor, who is our friend, had stepped in and used his influence.

Putting down the phone, my heart was pounding and I was back in the “fighting mood” I live in six months of the year in Poland. I mentioned to Uttamasloka that I can’t think of many places in the world, aside from China and Islamic countries, where our movement still faces so much hostile aggression. He replied that he sees the aggression in proportion to the amount preaching that we have done in Poland. It’s a devoutly Catholic country, where countless numbers of Srila Prabhupada books have been distributed. The hostility arises from the church due to our success in preaching. But it’s not easy to live with that hostility year after year. It also means we can’t ease up on our preaching for a moment. If we were to slow down, the church would immediately take any “territory” we have gained over the years.

We have to keep up a blistering pace, especially on the tour. But after ten years of festivals, my body is showing signs of aging. I pray the Lord will give me the required strength to go on. But what can He do with this aging body? He can inspire us in the heart to do His service, but he can’t bring back our youth. I suppose the answer lies with disciples like Nandini and Radha Sakhi Vrnda.

As I looked out the window, I thought of their constant engagement and struggle to set up our festival programs. They are working day and night, even now in the winter season. I drifted off to sleep that night, thanking the Lord for disciples like them and asking Srila Prabhupada to bless them.

Military Bearing on Parade

Volume 3, Chapter 4

January 21, 2001, Krasnoyarsk, Siberia.

Throughout the night I tossed and turned, unable to get proper rest as our train wound its way through the Siberian countryside. Several times I woke up and peered out the window.

Though it was total darkness, the white snow acted as contrast that seemed to shed light on the frigid winter scene. Sometimes we would pass villages, and I could see lights on in little wooden houses. Our “Trans-Siberian Express” would stop at larger towns and passengers

would board. Several times I saw dogs on the platform, looking for food. They had thick, furry winter coats, but I wondered how they survived the bitter cold. Anyone who was outside moved quickly from place to place, unable to bear the misery.

In one sense the passing countryside looked very beautiful. But that's the way maya works; she appears attractive, but in essence she is there to make us suffer. Lord Siva is called Rudra and his wife Durga, who is in charge of the prison house of material existence, is sometimes called Rudrani, which means: "She who makes you cry forever". Once, Srila Prabhupada's secretary suggested that Srila Prabhupada take some much needed rest in at a chalet in the snowy mountains of Switzerland. After spending only a few days there in December, Srila Prabhupada wanted to leave, referring the to the place as a "white hell".

At noon our train pulled into the station in Krasnoyarsk. Within moments a strongly build man in his mid-forties was at the door of my compartment, offering obeisance's in the hallway.

He said loudly, "Srila Gurudeva, welcome to Krasniyarsk!".

He identified himself as my disciple, Guru Vrata dasa, and the president of the local temple. Within moments his men had secured all our baggage and had it neatly lined up on the platform outside. Then he led myself, Sri Prahlad, Rukmini, Uttamasloka, Jananivasa and the four matajis accompanying us, to vehicles waiting for us outside the station. Arriving there, we found four nice cars parked neatly in a row, complete with drivers standing at attention by the doors. Within seconds our bags were loaded in the trunks of the car and we were gone! The whole affair came off like a well-planned military procedure.

It reminded me of Srila Prabhupada's purport to the 30th verse of the 3rd chapter of Bhagavad Gita wherein he says:

"This verse clearly indicates the purpose of the Bhagavad-gita. The Lord instructs that one has to become fully Krsna conscious to discharge duties, as if in military discipline."

In the car I inquired from Guru Vrata if he had every been in the military.

He smiled and replied with a resounding, "Yes!"

He said he had been the personal driver and assistant to the commander of his army battalion. That explained his military precision in picking up the "troops" at the train station!

We arrived at our apartment and after a quick shower and a few moments of writing this diary, we were again on our way to a big hall program. On route I inquired from Guru Vrata about the city of Krasnoyarsk and our preaching there. He said the city, which is literally in the middle of Siberia, is populated by over one million people. The temple has only twelve devotees, but a very large and active congregation. There are over twenty Nama Hatta centers. Guru Vrata praised the regional secretary of the area, Laksmi Narayana das, a disciple of Nirajana Swami, for the success in the overall preaching in the region. Laksmi Narayana prabhu has made many devotees as he travels giving seminars on Krsna consciousness.

As we entered the hall, I saw first hand the results of his efforts: there were over five hundred blissful devotees waiting for us! I wasn't prepared for such an amazing scene.

The hall itself was quite bright and beautiful by Russian standards. But the real light came from the effulgent devotees. I remembered the story when Srila Prabhupada was walking across the street in London and a policeman grabbed the arm of one of his disciples and said,

"Look! That man is glowing!"

As I proceeded to the stage, devotees made a clearing and bowed down as I came by. I felt unqualified to receive such respect, and kept in mind a similar scene I saw in a photo, wherein Srila Prabhupada is walking into a temple and devotees are offering him respectful obeisances from all sides.

In my mind I thought, "Srila Prabhupada, they're all your children. Let me help you, by bringing them to your lotus feet."

I was soon speaking from the stage about Srila Prabhupada's original visit to Moscow in the early 1970's and how by his grace alone, Krsna consciousness has met with great success in Russia. I recounted to the audience how I had come a number of times in disguise to preach in Moscow in the late 1980's. In those days there were only around fifty devotees in Moscow and I never imagined the movement would grow bigger, considering the severe repression we were experiencing under the communist government at the time.

Brahmananda prabhu once said that when he was a devotee in ISKCON's first center at 26, 2nd avenue in New York, he himself never imagined Krsna consciousness would go beyond the boundaries of the Bowery! But Lord Caitanya and Srila Prabhupada have their plans for a

worldwide movement and so it was that I found five hundred glowing devotees deep in the Siberian countryside.

We had kirtan and I gave a class about the glories of Lord Caitanya and the holy name. I felt happy with the class, but later on Jananivasa pointed out that many of the people in the audience appeared to be intellectuals. I think he was indicating that the class could have been deeper for them. The other day when I asked Uttama sloka if a class I had given was understandable by another audience, he also remarked that my classes are generally simple. He didn't mean it in a derogatory way; but after hearing from both these disciples that my preaching was "simple" I felt a little uncomfortable. The fact is, I never was an intellectual and neither am I so advanced so that I can deliver classes like Bhakti Caru Maharaja or Radhanatha Swami. In general it seems devotees are happy with my classes, but I took the remarks of Uttamasloka and Jananivasa to be from the Lord Himself, and resolved myself to study harder in order to become a better speaker. I must also strive to become more pure, for that is the real potency behind preaching. If we are tinged with material desire, then certainly the Lord's message will not appear attractive as it comes down through us.

Srila Prabhupada, please help me to become qualified. Traveling and preaching are my main services to you!

Gypsies in tune with Bhakti-Yoga

Volume 3, Chapter 5

January 22, 2001, Krasnoyarsk, Siberia.

Exhausted from the program the night before, and tired in general from days of intense travel, I slept until 6am. When I awoke, the apartment was quiet and dark. All the devotees had gone to the temple.

The night before I had suggested that Sri Prahlad give class the next morning. Everyone took that idea to heart and gave me the few hours of extra rest I needed.

I showered and then sat down to chant my rounds peacefully, but intensely. I consider that to be real japa – sitting and chanting with concentration. Even standing or pacing back and forth while doing japa doesn't produce the same results for me. I have trained myself, whenever possible, to simply sit and chant. I can't say I always do it. My schedule as a traveling preacher means my sadhana is not always as regulated as I'd like it to be. But

sitting and concentrating on the holy names is my preferred japa. When I'm too old and can't travel another mile, I'll be happy just to sit and chant. Hopefully my heart will be purified enough that I can sit peacefully without material desires. That would be the ideal way to leave the body.

Yesterday, Sri Prahlad was speaking to me about the glories of a sadhu's death. He was referring to a devotee who dies in Vrindavan, surrounded by other devotees who are loudly chanting the holy names. But a traveling preacher, serving in a foreign country, may leave his body in awkward circumstances, eg, he may die in a car accident, succumb to a serious illness, or even be killed by aggressors. But if he was in the midst of service to his spiritual master, I would say his death would also qualify as a true sadhu's death. Certainly the Lord would not forget him.

vayur anilam amrtam

athedam bhasmantam sariram

om krato smara krtam smara

krato smara krtam smara

"Let this temporary body be burnt to ashes, and let the air of life be merged with the totality of air. Now, O my Lord, please remember all my sacrifices, and because You are the ultimate beneficiary, please remember all that I have done for You." [Isopanisad - Text 17]

At noon the devotees took me to the temple to perform a marriage ceremony. On the way, my driver asked if I'd like to see the "pride and joy of Krasnoyarsk."

I replied, "Yes, of course."

He drove me downtown to a beautiful small park that ran alongside the main street. To my amazement there were 30 or 40 gigantic ice sculptures throughout the park. Krasnoyarsk is renown for these works of art. From November through March the temperatures are below freezing here, so these beautiful sculptures remain unchanged. There were sculptures of huge swans, temples, flowers, boats and castles. Most were more than 5 meters tall. The artists take the ice from the nearby river and bring it to the park, where they carve the blocks with big tools into these beautiful creations. Because the water in the river is so clean the sculptures are practically transparent and appear almost like pure crystal. At night they are

adorned with colorful lights. People come from all over Siberia to see them. It truly looked like a Winter Wonderland.

The marriage ceremony in the temple went well. I gave a 45-minute lecture that was both grave and humorous. Because it was a wedding, I wanted the atmosphere to be light. But because Krsna consciousness is, after all, serious business, I also interspersed my lecture with sober instructions to the couples. I requested them to remain faithful and chaste to each other, to be strict in following the regulative principles, to work out any differences in a Krsna conscious way, and to find time to share their good fortune as devotees with conditioned souls. After my talk, I went step by step through the marriage procedure. Sri Prahlad then expertly performed the fire yajna with all the appropriate mudras and mantras.

I'll soon be greatly missing Sri Prahlad. He and his wife, Rukmini Priya, are seriously thinking of moving to Brisbane, Australia, next September to begin household life in earnest. The Brisbane devotees are ecstatic about the possibility of obtaining such a talented and qualified devotee in their area, and have offered to help Sri Prahlad obtain Australian citizenship. Losing him will be difficult for me. We've been preaching Krsna consciousness side by side around the world for 11 years. Together we built the Polish festival tour from nothing to the incredible success it has been in recent years.

Such experiences make for deep and profound friendship. Bhakti Bringa Govinda Maharaja put it aptly the other day. He said that Sri Prahlad and I are soul mates. The sense of losing such a companion can be expressed only in the words of Srila Narottam das Thakur: 'Se saba sangria sange ye koilo bilas Se sanga na palya kande narottama das' "Being unable to obtain the association of Lord Gauranga, accompanied by all those devotees in whose association He performed His pastimes, Narottam simply weeps."

After the wedding, I had a discussion with 10 men from a local gypsy community. At the hall program the night before, I had noted with curiosity their ecstatic chanting and dancing. They had also listened attentively to my lecture. Afterwards, I inquired from Guru Vrata if these men were serious. He replied that they were. I have met gypsies often in my travels in Europe and Russia. Generally they are a closed community and infamous for their bad habits of begging and stealing. But I have always found them receptive to our chanting and dancing. Tradition has it that the gypsies originally came from India, and whenever I mention

this to them they acknowledge it. However, to my knowledge not a single gypsy has ever joined our movement.

Guru Vrata invited the gypsies to the marriage ceremony, where I was pleased to meet them. I began by acknowledging that a group of gypsies had once saved my life. In the early 1970s my sankirtan party was camped for a week by a river in France. A group of gypsies were camped nearby and we gradually became good friends by chanting and taking prasadam together. One day a local motorcycle gang came to our camp and threatened to beat us. It was a very intense scene, as some of them had knives. We stood our ground, but in reality had little chance of winning a fight. Suddenly the gang members whirled around, jumped on their motorcycles and sped off.

I thought, “We must have scared them somehow!”

But turning around I saw the reason they left so quickly was the gypsy men had come running to defend us, brandishing their own weapons above their heads.

I spoke about gypsy culture and some of its similarities with Krsna consciousness. Traditionally, gypsy women stay at home and take care of their children; there is no divorce; and there are words in Romany, the gypsy language, that have meanings akin to Sanskrit. For example, the word bhakti (loving devotion in Sanskrit) means “the highest happiness” in Romany.

To my surprise, the men told me that they were regularly chanting on beads and studying our philosophy. They said they were also instructing their families and friends in Krsna consciousness and were holding weekly Nama Hatta sessions in their gypsy community. They had received strong opposition at first, but as they are leaders in the community they eventually got other gypsies to start chanting.

When they started speaking to me enthusiastically about the need to spread Krsna consciousness, I had the funny feeling that these men could well have been devotees in their past lives. Srila Prabhupada once said that Lord Caitanya has placed His devotees all over the earth planet in order to spread the sankirtan movement. Srila Rupa Goswami hints in his play, Lalita Madhava, that such devotees, although they take birth in seemingly inauspicious circumstances, are always looked after by the Lord:

“Noble lady, great souls are always saved from sufferings. Even if, somehow or the other, a devotee takes birth as an animal in the jungle, as a human being in one of the directions of this world, as a demigod in the celestial planets, or even as a resident of hell, the Supreme Personality of Godhead always brings him to His lotus feet. The Lord never wishes to abandon him.”

[Introduction Text 14]

In appreciation of the service rendered by his disciples, Srila Prabhupada once said that his guru maharaja, Srila Bhaktisiddhanta Saraswati, had sent them all to help him in his preaching mission.

One disciple spoke up and said, “But Srila Prabhupada, how could that be? We were all so sinful before we met you.”

Srila Prabhupada replied, “That is all superficial; as soon as you heard the chanting of Hare Krsna, you came running!”

Looking at these gentlemen, I saw dark-skinned gypsy men – but their eyes shone like any other devotee’s. As we concluded our talk, I told them I was ready to come to their community anytime to preach. They smiled and said that the community wasn’t ready for that yet, but when it was I would be the first devotee they invited. I’m eagerly looking forward to that opportunity.

Sri Krsna sankirtan, ki jaya!

Ice-Cold in Irkutsk

Volume 3, Chapter 6

January 23 – 24, 2001, Irkutsk, Siberia.

Early in the morning we arrived at the train station in Krasnoyarsk to catch our train to Irkutsk, a 24-hour journey further east into Siberia. The black night and freezing temperatures combined with the lack of lights on the platform to make for an eerie atmosphere. As we stood there old speakers blared out passionate instructions to passengers waiting for their train. People moved quickly through the cold air. No one smiled and few talked. The station was old, nothing having changed much since it was constructed. It could have easily been a scene from the 1940s. After a while our antiquated train lumbered into the station and we boarded. The devotees had again kindly reserved us first-class compartments. They were OK, but mine had first-class fleas who enjoyed my company

immensely. We shared a common interest, my body, and as the day wore on they outnumbered me and became the actual proprietors.

From the early morning into the evening I worked on my correspondence. By a stroke of fate, my compartment had an electrical output that worked and I was able to plug my computer in. I worked diligently answering the 132 letters in my inbox. By 11pm I had succeeded in answering all of them. I considered it a great achievement; as I had been working on those letters since November.

Falling asleep I had another interesting dream. I overheard the conversation of some thieves as to where they had hidden a valuable treasure chest of jewels. The next day I ventured into a forest with several devotees to find it. There was myself, Vara-nayaka and Gaurangi dasi. We came across an abandoned house and went inside. I pried up the floorboards and found a huge chest of jewels.

The dream was in full color. We lifted the jewels out and were amazed by the strands of pearls, emeralds and rubies. Gaurangi was saying that we would never have to worry about collecting funds for the Polish tour again and that we should run with the treasure chest. But Vara-nayaka said that it was dangerous – that perhaps the thieves would find us. To Gaurangi's astonishment, I closed the treasure chest and said, "Let's not take the risk." Then I woke up.

As the train rolled through the Siberian countryside, I lay on my bunk thinking about the dream. Perhaps I had it because of the pressure I am under to bring in enough funds to run the Polish tour for five months a year. There is only myself and one sole disciple, Rasamayi dasi, collecting. It's another responsibility, on top of being a traveling preacher.

We arrived at Irkutsk at 2am. A group of devotees were waiting on the platform to receive us. I didn't have to speculate why they weren't chanting – the neon sign outside read 32 degrees below zero! The men entered the compartment, collected our baggage and helped us off the train. As we drove to a house outside the city, I asked the local devotees what Irkutsk was famous for? They smiled and said in unison, "Cold weather!" They told me that a few days ago it was 54 degrees below. I asked them what it was like to be in such cold weather? They replied that it's so extreme that people have to take special precautions. When walking outside, one has to be especially careful with one's eyes, they can be easily damaged by the

severe cold. Exposed skin starts to bleed. One even has to be careful while walking in the forest, because at those temperatures tree branches explode! The people here have learned the art of survival. There are three planes of glass on all windows in the houses and many homes have underground tunnels to a neighbor or friends' houses to avoid the extreme cold. When it gets that cold the whole city closes down, public transportation doesn't function, people don't go to work and kids don't go to school.

We are only 200km from Mongolia. Because that's one place I have never been, I inquired from the men if it would be possible to visit there and preach. They replied that it was possible, but a special visa is required. They said that Laksmi Narayana prabhu, the regional secretary in Siberia, had recently been there and had made several devotees.

We arrived at Bhakta Andre's home, a beautiful house just outside the city. He's a successful businessman and an active member of the local yatra. When we entered the house I sat and discussed with some of the devotees, although it was 4am. At one point they eagerly brought forth my disciple, Guna Avatar das, who had recently won the Christmas Marathon. They were obviously proud of him, and rightly so for he had distributed over 500 big books on the streets of Irkutsk in the wintry conditions. I thanked him for his service and talked with the boys about the glories of book distribution. I mentioned that I had distributed books for almost 10 years, and that if I had the opportunity I would gladly return to that service full time.

Guna Avatar seems to be of Eskimo origin. We are getting closer to the east coast of Russia, near Japan. Northwards is where the Eskimo tribes live. They have perfected the art of living in these cold lands. Their ice-huts are well known throughout the world. Later in the evening, Uttamasloka told me that one of Prabhavisnu Maharaja's disciples, Vicitravirya das, comes from the Eskimo tribes. His local tribe had selected him as the best candidate to send to the big city to educate with the aim of one day returning and helping the tribe. They collected funds for years and when he was 18 they sent him to Vladivostok to attend the university. He was the pride and joy and the future hope for the tribe. But soon after arriving in Vladivostok he met the devotees and joined the movement. He eventually returned to visit his village in dhoti and tilak. It was quite a surprise for his people, but through his preaching they appreciated his new-found faith.

We took rest at 5am and rose at 8am to perform our sadhana. We took some extra rest in the day and at 3pm went to do a hall program in Irkutsk with the local devotees. Driving into

the city from Bhakta Andre's we passed by Lake Baikal, the Pearl of Siberia. With a depth of almost 10km, it's the deepest freshwater lake in the world. It is a tourist spot here in Siberia, but I didn't have a clue as to what attracts people. All we could see was frozen water covered with meters of snow! One thing that did catch my attention was a number of cars on the lake! The weather is so cold here that the lake freezes to the point that you can park a car on it. People drive out, drill a hole in the ice and fish through it. The devotees told me that every year in the spring, several cars sink through the melting ice with the fishermen inside. That's what I would call instant karma.

Entering the city we passed several areas with wooden houses more than 200 years old. Many have intricate woodwork carvings on the fronts, an opulence that is rarely seen in Russia. During the communist era, when many of the present buildings were built, the rule was to make everything as modest as possible.

When we arrived at the hall I was once again taken aback by the large number of devotees waiting for us. More than 400 devotees had assembled, a number of them journeying 1200km for the program. Because Jananivasa had previously noted these hall programs consist of many intellectuals, I decided to speak on the scientific basis of Krsna consciousness. One by one, I brought up Srila Prabhupada's arguments on the existence of the soul, emphasizing that life comes from life. I also spoke on the existence of God and the origin of the universe. The ideas came easily and sastric verses flowed forth. Establishing Krsna as the source of everything, I said that we, as His parts and parcels, are duty-bound to serve Him. I concluded the class in my favorite way, by glorifying the holy names as the easiest and most sublime method of understanding the Supreme Creator, God. At the end of the class, the audience applauded.

Inspired by hearing the glories of the holy name, Sri Prahlad led one of the best kirtans I've ever heard him perform. He started out slowly, gradually bringing in his beautiful melodies and developing the kirtan to an ecstatic crescendo. The devotees were in bliss. In particular, I noticed a 10-year-old girl dressed in blue chanting very enthusiastically. She had initially caught my attention because she had sat throughout my entire lecture without moving, listening to every word. As the kirtan started, she closed her eyes and chanted attentively. Each time I looked over at her she was fully absorbed in the kirtan. After half an hour, I was startled to see tears rolling down her cheeks, as she chanted with obvious feeling. I thought

to myself, "Perhaps she's just a sentimental kid." But I began to doubt my judgment, as she remained there for the whole two-hour kirtan chanting from her heart. When the kirtan reached its peak her arms were raised, her teary eyes looked upward, and she chanted with abandon.

At the end I thought to myself, "Who is this young girl. A demigoddess from a higher planet?"

Little girl in blue
One day I want to be like you
Weeping as I chant the names
Oblivious to name and fame
I saw you from the very start
Chanting with love, from your heart
For hours you remained the same
Fully absorbed in the holy names
Why can't I cry when I chant too?
Why don't I raise my arms like you?
The answer must be my lack of surrender
The truth must be that I'm a pretender
But seeing the tears streaming down your face
Has once again given me faith
That the holy names are all that be
That the holy names can save even me
Little girl in blue
I pray someday I'll be like you
With tears in my eyes and arms to the heavens
Chanting with love, chanting with blessings

Sankirtan to the Pacific

Volume 3, Chapter 7

January 25, 2001, Irkutsk, Siberia.

We rose early today and chanted a few rounds before going to the Irkutsk temple. When we arrived, the small building was packed with young devotees. Reminiscent of ISKCON in its early days, devotees were dressed in improvised dhotis and saris, the men in white linen and

the ladies in cheap, local cloth with popular Russian patterns. The young ladies wore plastic jewelry and self-made bindis. There were no fancy saris and no expensive jewelry. If devotees in western temples had to wear these bright, white linen sheets and candy-colored saris they would probably die of embarrassment. But the new-found enthusiasm of these young men and women for Krsna consciousness made up for any lack of sophistication in their dress. Eager to chant with them, I led guru-puja to Srila Prabhupada and we sang and danced in great happiness. The window panes shook and the floorboards heaved as the kirtan went on for more than an hour. I took special pleasure in having kirtan with these devotees, whose lack of material opulence in their lives gives them a kind of advantage to taste the nectar of the holy names. In the midst of the kirtan one verse came to my mind:

janmaisvarya-sruta-sribhir
edhamana-madah puman
naivarhaty abhidhatum vai
tvam akincana-gocaram

“My Lord, Your Lordship can easily be approached, but only by those who are materially exhausted. One who is on the path of [material] progress, trying to improve himself with respectable parentage, great opulence, high education and bodily beauty, cannot approach You with sincere feeling.”

[SB. 1.8.26]

After the morning program I chanted and then read from Ananda Vrindavan Campu, by Kavi Karnapura. I am doing my best to keep whatever taste I have for Vrindavan, after recently spending three months there. Each year I am trying to develop and strengthen my attachment to Vrindavan, the very goal of our lives, by residing there and increasing my hearing and chanting. I spent a large amount of my recent trip at Govardhan Hill at the Bhaktivedanta Swami Sadhana Asrama, which is overseen by my god-brother, Kesava Bharati prabhu. ISKCON owns an old palace there, which has been renovated and now serves as an asrama for brahmacaris and sannyasis in particular. Each day I would rise early, chant the holy names and study Caitanya-caritamṛta. In the afternoon I would bathe in nearby Syama Kunda and Radha Kunda as often as possible. The glories of such holy tirthas are beyond a sadhaka like me, but I hoped that by rolling in the dust of such sacred places I could better understand the depth of Krsna consciousness and become more qualified as a spiritual master to inspire my disciples to go back home, back to Godhead. I was also intent on purifying my heart, so that I can improve my preaching services to Srila

Prabhupada in western countries. I can't say if I actually made any spiritual advancement while there, but I do miss Vrindavan terribly. I'm torn between residing there and preaching here. A proper balance of the two is the secret, I believe. Both activities feed and stimulate each other.

This afternoon I delivered a lecture at the hall from Bhagavad-gita 18.58.

mac cittah sarva-durgani

mat prasada tarisyasi

atha cet tvam ahankaran

na srosyasi vinksyasi

"If you become conscious of Me, you will pass over all the obstacles of conditioned life by My grace. If, however, you do not work in such consciousness but act through false ego, not hearing Me, you will be lost."

I carefully pointed out the various obstacles we face in our lives as devotees, internally and externally, and concluded with Krsna's offer to help us overcome them. The internal obstacles are no doubt lust, anger and greed, and the more subtle desires for name and fame. The external obstacles are non-devotees who may obstruct our service in spreading the sankirtan movement. But the formidable task of overcoming these obstacles is reduced by the Lord's mercy:

Om namo bhagavate narasimhaya namas tejas-tejase avir-avirbhava vajra-nakha

vajra-damstra karmasayan randhaya randhaya tamo grasa grasa om svaha;

abhayam abhayam atmani bhuistha om ksraum.

"I offer my respectful obeisances unto Lord Narasimhadeva, the source of all power. O my Lord who possesses nails and teeth just like thunderbolts, kindly vanquish our demon-like desires for fruitive activity in this material world. Please appear in our hearts and drive away our ignorance so that by Your mercy we may become fearless in the struggle for existence in this material world.

[SB 5.18.8]

That evening, Uttamasloka and I left for the airport to catch a flight to Vladivostok, the furthest city east in Russia. Because we couldn't afford the airfare for all our group, Sri Prahlad, Rukmini Priya and Jananivasa took a train west to Omsk, where we will meet them in a few days. I didn't envy the prospect of their 42-hour train ride.

However, our flight wasn't a bowl of cherries either. Uttamasloka and I were to board the plane at 1am, which is typical in Russia. The flight was coming from Moscow and making a stopover to pick up passengers in Irkutsk before proceeding to Vladivostok. As the flight was delayed, we waited in a lounge at the airport where I fell asleep at the computer at 2am trying to catch up on my diary. Finally we boarded a bus to take us to the plane. As usual, we were let off at the steps leading up to the plane where we had to wait more than half an hour at 20 below zero before boarding. As we entered the plane all the window and aisle seats had been taken by the passengers who boarded in Moscow, and not one of them was eager to let another passenger take the middle seat between them. All the middle seats were piled up with coats, hats and various parcels. The 20 of us who boarded had to literally beg the other passengers to allow us access to the vacant seats.

The air hostesses stood chatting near the kitchen cabin, wanting nothing to do with our dilemma. I know only one word in Russian, spasibo, which means thank you. I was going up and down the aisle saying spasibo, spasibo to all the passengers in their seats. They looked at me incredulously, because what I should have been saying was pozhalusta, please. After 100 thank you's, one man took pity on me and gave me his aisle seat. To him I offered my most hearty "spasibo!"

Of course, no seat on a Russian airliner is anything to brag about. The planes are rarely cleaned inside. The seats smell of years of sweat and grime, and on a number of occasions I have even encountered fleas. And I don't think I've ever met an air hostess who has smiled even once. They just "do their duty." I settled in as best I could, but didn't manage to sleep even a minute all night.

When we arrived in Vladivostok four hours later, the captain announced that the police would be checking everyone's documents before we left the plane.

I thought to myself, "They're still going to do that?"

During the communist era, Vladivostok was off limits to most Russians and all foreigners. Even people who lived there could hardly come and go. It was a restricted area because it has a huge naval base, being a port on the Pacific Ocean. Each time I used to come to Vladivostok, in the years just after glasnost and perestroika (openness and rejuvenation), the authorities would carefully check our papers, and sometimes interview us, before allowing us

to come into the city. Now here it was 10 years later, and they were still sensitive to who is coming in and out.

The police officers made their way fairly quickly through the plane checking documents. When they came to me, I casually handed them my passport and Russian visa. They stopped and inspected it carefully and then started asking me questions in Russian. Of course, I could neither understand them nor answer them, and Uttamasloka had already left the plane. They seemed very upset about something and were demanding an answer. The rest of the passengers all looked at me intensely, and I got the feeling I was in big trouble. But what could I do? I just smiled at the officers and said, “Jai Nrsimhadeva!” At that, one of them put my passport in his pocket and ordered me off the plane. I was escorted to the passenger bus where I met Uttamasloka, and together we all went to a special office in the building. Uttamasloka told me not to worry, as he felt it wasn’t anything serious. He said whatever it was could probably be solved by a few rubles under the table.

We were soon met by Vrajendra Kumara prabhu, the temple president of Vladivostok, who had come to pick us up. As it turned out, I hadn’t fulfilled the visa requirement of registering within three days of entering the country, and the police fined me several hundred rubles. I suppose it was nothing to be nervous about – but as they say, “once burnt, twice shy.” For those of us who preached here in communist times, when we see “red” we still become a little nervous, like the bull.

Obstacles Mount in Poland

Volume 3, Chapter 8

January 26, 2001, Vladivostok, Russia.

Because our flight arrived so late in Vladivostok, I didn’t actually take rest until 6am. I laid on my bed and dozed off for a few hours, waking to the sound of men at work fixing the apartment above us. When I sat up I couldn’t figure out where I was. It happens to me from time to time when I’m traveling and staying in a different place every night. Unable to get my bearings, I called out to Uttamasloka, who didn’t respond. He was fast asleep in the next room. I grabbed my bag and took out my boarding pass from the flight last night. It read “Vladivostok,” and I everything came back. I was at the end of the world.

As I was preparing to go to the temple in the late afternoon to give class, I decided to call Nandini and Radha Sakhi Vrnda in Poland. I was anxious for news about their trip to the north of Poland to secure schools for bases for our summer tour. I had a premonition that after the recent problems they had encountered in reserving a single school in Zary for the Woodstock festival in August, they may encounter similar problems in the northern coastal area as well. I was right. Nandini informed me that all but one school in the north refused to work with us. Everywhere they went they received the same cold treatment.

Finally, one sympathetic director of a school confirmed that only two days earlier the Catholic Church had sent its representatives throughout the entire coastal area, threatening that any school director who cooperates with the Hare Krsna movement will lose their job. Although a number of directors were sympathetic to our cause, they weren't prepared to take the risk. The single school that agreed to accept us was in Gryfice, our first base each summer. The director is our long-time friend and has the courage to stand up to the Church.

It is clear to me now that the Church has a strategy to try to stop us this summer. It is a well-coordinated scheme that is already in action. I doubt that it is limited to just scaring school directors into not helping us. I feel that we will soon be confronted by many obstacles they have planned. Securing only one base out of our normal three poses many problems for us. The Baltic Sea coast is long and we cannot reach all areas from one base. I'll have to rethink our own strategy. We may have to revert to camping, but I know the Church will approach camp grounds as well. One school director offered to contact her sister, who owns a farm halfway along the coast. She suggested that we could stay there. Living in tents will be austere for devotees, but it may be the only option.

I discussed with Nandini about bringing the situation to the attention of the public. Many people love our festivals and they should know how the Church is scheming against us. One of my disciples in Poland recently wrote me a letter attesting to the fact that our festivals have made a big impact in the country:

Dear Gurudeva,

Please accept my humble obeisances. All glories to Srila Prabhupada.

At the moment, I am traveling and distributing prasadam in the Silesia area. During the December Marathon I was distributing books. I met many people who had visited your summer festivals last year. From those festivals, they received a very good impression of

Krsna consciousness. As a result, most of them happily bought books from me. From this I could see potency of your programs.

Just today, a girl in a shop said that she knows what prasadam is. I asked where she learned this and she replied that she was at your festival in Pobierowo. She even showed me photos! In them I saw her dressed in a sari together with a devotee. She said she cannot forget the festival. As a result of your festivals we book distributors are finding people more and more enthusiastic, tolerant and well-wishing to devotees.

Your servant,

Sri Ram das.

Nandini said that she and Radha Saki Vrnda would be meeting the ISKCON Communication (Poland) devotees to inform them of the situation and ask that we make a plan together. I have some apprehension that the ICP devotees may not want to raise a fuss. Often their strategy is that diplomacy means to cool things down, not heat them up. But I will insist that we bring this issue to the public, if only because the future of the tour depends on it.

My blood was boiling as I put the phone down. The most frustrating thing is to fight an evasive enemy. It is obvious that the Church is trying impede our preaching, but who do we attack and where? I couldn't calm down all the way to the temple for the evening program. Even as I sat giving Bhagavad-gita class, my mind was distracted by the recent events in Poland. Several times I lost my train of thought. So as to make some sense of the class, by incorporating my mood I gradually developed the theme into Krsna fighting the demons. I mentioned that demoniac forces also attack the Lord's sankirtan movement in Kali-yuga and that we have to call upon Lord Nrsimhadeva to protect us. With great enthusiasm I chanted several slokas that are one with my heart after many years of preaching:

vidiknu diknurdhvam adhau samantad

antar bahir bhagavan narasimhau

prahapayal loka-bhayam svanena

sva tejasa grasta samasta tejau

"Prahlada Maharaja loudly chanted the holy name of Lord Nrsimhadeva. May Lord Nrsimhadeva, roaring for His devotee Prahlada Maharaja, protect us from all fear of dangers created by stalwart leaders in all directions through poison, weapons, water, fire, air and so

on. May the Lord cover their influence by His own transcendental influence. May Nrsimhadeva protect us in all directions and in all corners, above, below, within and without.”

durgesv atavy-aji-mukhadisu prabhuh
payan nrsimho ‘sura-yuthaparih
vimuncato yasya mahatta-hasam
diso vinedur nyapatams ca garbhah

“May Lord Nrsimhadeva, who appeared as the enemy of Hiranyakasipu, protect me in all directions. His loud laughing vibrated in all directions and caused the pregnant wives of the asuras to have miscarriages. May that Lord be kind enough to protect me in difficult places like the forest and battlefield.”

Lord Nrsimhadeva, You appeared to protect your devotee, Prahlad Maharaja. Please help us, who are serving his desires to deliver all fallen souls rotting in this material existence. Alone we are helpless against the demoniac who aspire to stop Your sankirtan movement. Please give us the courage, strength and inspiration to be successful in Your service!

Chanting Cures all Ills

Volume 3, Chapter 9

January 27, 2001, Vladivostok, Russia.

Upon rising today, I spent 10 minutes organizing my paraphernalia. I first rolled up my sleeping bag and mat and placed them in a corner of the room. Then I neatly folded my dirty clothes and placed them in a plastic bag near the door for washing later. Afterwards I put away my clock, flashlight, drinking cup and glasses in their respective places in my bag. I even organized some of my host’s belongings. I’ve realized over time that one cannot think of Krsna in an unclean, untidy atmosphere. It’s a little difficult living “out of a bag” for 32 years, but the secret is in Srila Prabhupada’s formula: a place for everything, and everything in its place. Each day I take the time to clean and organize things around me, even if I’m there for only a day.

During the past year I’ve also tried cutting down on several things: my eating, my possessions, and unnecessary talk. For his own benefit, a sannyasi should carry only the basic necessities of life and depend on the mercy of the Lord.. Lord Caitanya Mahaprabhu

gave several instructions to Ragunath das Goswami that I strive more than ever to imbibe as guidelines in my life as a sannyasi:

gramya-katha na sunibe, gramyavarta na kahibe bhala na khaibe ara bhala na paribe

“Do not talk like people in general or hear what they say. You should not eat very palatable food, nor should you dress very nicely.”

amana manada hana krsna nama sada la'be vraje radha krsna seva manase karibe “Do not expect honor, but offer all respect to others. Always chant the holy name of Lord Krsna, and within your mind render service to Radha and Krsna in Vrindavan.”

At one point, I was down to a single, small traveling bag, but out of necessity (and for service) the list of possessions seems to have grown again. For this diary I require my computer; for my bad back I need my traveling sleeping mat; for cleanliness I take my own sleeping bag; and because I often cross through different time zones and seasons, I'm obliged to carry summer and winter gear. The best I can do in the spirit of renunciation is to carry the smallest version of whatever I need. Thus I have a compact Sony Vio computer; a tiny sleeping bag; a winter jacket that rolls into a bag the size of my fist; and, believe it or not, a collapsible danda. Lord Caitanya, please count me among your followers in the renounced order, despite my extra luggage!

Although many ISKCON sannyasis don't use their dandas any more, I try to. Last year I was becoming negligent in carrying it, then I had a dream of Srila Prabhupada wherein he chastised me severely for not carrying a danda. Not taking the dream seriously enough I continued to travel minus a danda, when I had the same dream again! After that I began to think seriously about carrying a danda and was planning to make a small one for traveling purposes. Two nights later I again dreamt that Srila Prabhupada was admonishing me for not carrying the mark of a sannyasi, a tridandi staff! Since that very morning I carry a danda wherever I go!

At 7am myself and Uttamasloka left for the temple to perform an initiation ceremony. On the way I saw many young ladies hitch-hiking. As I had never seen this in Russia, I asked my driver, Kailash Candra, why the girls were taking such a risk. He replied that they were prostitutes. He said the city is rampant with prostitution, drugs and crime. Vladivostok has degraded rapidly in recent years. It's a prime target for these vices because it's a port and it

shares a border with China. It certainly appears as a rough-and-tumble city to me, the only shelter being our temple perched upon one of Vladivostok's many hills.

It was the first time I had seen the particular building we now have for a temple here. The city officials, who are very appreciative of our Food for Life program, arranged that we could have this facility for free. Formerly it was a kindergarten. The devotees are repairing the spacious building and developing the small park that surrounds it. The temple room is complete and Gaura-Nitai and big Jagannath Deities grace the altar.

I gave a one-hour lecture on the 10 offenses to the holy name, giving particular emphasis to inattention. In the Teachings of Lord Caitanya, Srila Prabhupada lists inattention as one of the 10 offenses. Srila Jiva Goswami has written that inattention while chanting is the most serious offense, because from inattention one commits all the other offenses to the holy names. As the ceremony proceeded I accepted new disciples, giving them the names Jivdoya das, Gaura Karuna das, Visnu Smaranam das, Anuttama das, Satyavati dasi, Vraja Kumari dasi and Nirasraya Krsna dasi. This brings the number of my spiritual sons and daughters to 1158.

After the ceremony I met all my disciples from the region. The mother of one of my disciples came to me with a unique problem. She has two sons. Her devotee son recently moved to western Russia, but her second and younger son lives with her. Her problem is that last year the younger son entered the local College of Parapsychology and Magic. When she said this, I looked at Vrajenda Kumara to see if what I heard was real. He told me that many Russian people have a fascination for these subjects and the college is very popular. It is accepted as a bona fide institution. She complained that her son is majoring in Black Magic and stays up all night chanting strange sounds and calling all kinds of weird spirits and ghosts into the apartment. I got goose bumps just hearing the story! She went on to say that he's the best student in his class, but she was terrified by his results. She was the first mother I ever heard who was disappointed that her son was achieving exemplary grades! She asked for advice and I told her to try to convince her son to give up school! I also told her to take shelter of the holy names. I asked for a Krsna book, and read Srila Prabhupada's advice from the chapter "Putana Killed." I often quote this passage when people ask me how to deal with subtle spirits.

“Thus mother Yasoda chanted different names of Visnu to protect child Krsna’s different bodily parts. Mother Yasoda was firmly convinced that she should protect her child from different kinds of evil spirits and ghosts – namely Dakinis, Yatudhanis, Kusmandas, Yaksas, Raksasas, Vinayakas, Kotaras, Revatis, Jyesthas, Putanas, Matrkas, Unmadas and similar other evil spirits, who cause persons to forget their own existence and give trouble to the life airs and the senses . . . no such ghosts and evil spirits can remain where there is chanting of the holy name of God.”

This evening I gave Bhagavad-gita class in the Hare Krsna Cafe in downtown Vladivostok. The small store-front was packed with more than 100 devotees and guests. I spoke on Bhagavad-gita 2.59 for over an hour and a half, emphasizing the importance of strictly following sadhana in order to have the strength to resist the temptation of maya. I offered my own theory that many devotees leave Krsna consciousness simply because they don’t chant the holy names enough. I remember in the beginning of the movement when I joined, besides our strong commitment to chanting japa in the temple room in the association of other devotees each day, we would also go for street chanting for up to five or six hours a day. In the evening we would return for arati and then have class. We were literally absorbed in the holy names for as many hours as possible each day. Of course, the method of sankirtan changed and with it harinam sankirtan became a weekend affair at best. That may well have been necessary. Nevertheless, we did lose a lot of association with the holy name, which is our savior and redeemer. I feel that if devotees found time to chant more now there would be less personal and collective problems in our movement.

“The name is the purest form of knowledge, the best of all vratas or vows and the highest meditation. It gives the ultimate auspicious results and is the most sublime renunciation. Chanting is a matchless spiritual activity, the holiest of pious activities, and the supreme path of self-realization. It offers the greatest liberation and goal. The holy name is divine and situated in the paramount spiritual realm, it is super-excellent devotional service and the best purifying agent, showering love of Godhead. It is the essence of all scriptures, the cause of everything, the supreme Absolute Truth, the most worshipful object, and acts as the supreme spiritual instructor and guide.” [Sri Harinam Cintamani]

Course Set for Godhead

Volume 3, Chapter 10

January 28, 2001, Vladivostok, Russia.

We left our apartment at 6.30am for the flight from Vladivostok to Omsk. Typical of Russia, the airport is an hour and a half outside the city. One always has to give plenty of time to get to Russian airports, as poor road conditions, police checks and bad weather are common. During the drive I spoke to Vrajendra Kumara about my visit. I always like to work closely with the temple presidents in the temples I visit. Upon arriving I generally inquire about the present situation in the temple, its strong and weak points, and ask the temple president if there are any particular points or issues he would like me to emphasize (or avoid) in classes. During the visit, I prefer the temple president to be present when I meet the individual devotees.

Vrajendra Kumara is one of those rare devotees who has been in charge of his temple since its inception, in his case since 1990. He was born and raised in Vladivostok, graduating from the local university with a degree in Japanese Language and Culture in 1983. Fluent in English as well, he got a job as an interpreter on an Australian-based cruise liner sailing between Australia, Japan and Russia. During communism in Russia, he had the rare opportunity to leave his country and travel abroad for his work. In 1983, when the ship was docked in Sydney, he asked the cleaning ladies to bring him all the English books left behind in the passenger cabins. They found only one: Srila Prabhupada's *Coming Back – the Science of Reincarnation*. On the way back to Russia he read the book with interest. Stopping in Cairns, further north along Australia's east coast, he and some shipmates were granted a short leave from the ship. As they were walking through the town mesmerized by the opulence of a western democratic country, they met a Hare Krsna devotee. Vrajendra Kumara mentioned that he had *Coming Back*. When the devotee learned he was Russian, he requested him to visit the local temple. But Vrajendra Kumara and his shipmates didn't have time, and returned to the ship. Actually, one of the men disappeared and later asked the Australian government for asylum, which was granted. From just a short contact, Vrajendra Kumara started chanting Hare Krsna. A few months later he met Russian devotees while he was taking an advanced training course for his company in St Petersburg.

Although Krsna consciousness was banned in those days in Russia, he enthusiastically became a practicing devotee. Continuing to work for the shipping company, he regularly

chanted. Unlike many devotees who were persecuted and jailed for their practices, Vrajendra Kumara remained free and gradually began preaching Krsna consciousness in Vladivostok. When democracy came to Russia in 1990, he opened the temple.

Several disciples came to see me off at the airport. Vrajendra Kumara introduced me to one of them named Bhakta Anatoly. A middle-aged man, he works in the mayor's office in a nearby city. An enthusiastic preacher, he has most of the 80 workers and members of the city council chanting 16 rounds a day. They meet regularly to chant and discuss Krsna conscious philosophy. Twice a month they go into the woods for a retreat, which consists mainly of big kirtans. Anatoly introduced me to the deputy mayor of his city, a distinguished-looking woman in expensive clothing. She is also chanting 16 rounds a day.

The flight was austere by any measure. In Russia people are allowed to carry practically as much hand luggage as they want on to the plane. There are no baggage compartments in the cabin – just overhead railings where everyone stuffs their belongings. Large bags are jammed under the seats or in the aisle. Dogs and cats (there were four big dogs and two cats on the flight) sit under people's legs. After waiting an hour in the plane before taking off (no explanation was given as to why we were delayed), we spent two hours flying to Khabarovsk. Upon arriving in Khabarovsk we had to leave the plane and wait in the airport lounge for an hour and a half. Then we were subjected to the check-in procedure again, although we were boarding the same plane.

We followed a similar routine when we landed four hours later in Irkutsk. We left the plane, took a bus to the terminal, waited an hour and checked in again! Then we waited another hour to board. By the time we had taken off for Omsk I was ready to call it quits. The only concession was a well-dressed lady who boarded in Irkutsk and sat across from us in the aisle. When she saw us her face lit up.

"Hare Krsna," she said. "My son is a devotee in your organization."

She remained silent for a few minutes, and then to the surprise of the other passengers loudly blurted out, "Do you have any prasadam?"

Of course we did, and we gave her a big bag of samosas, cake and gulabjamans.

Then she said even louder, "I love prasadam!"

She and her friend devoured the prasadam during the four-hour flight to Omsk.

After 12 hours of traveling we finally landed, exhausted, in Omsk. The temple president, my disciple Siksastakam das, picked us up and drove us straight to a hall program. A local television crew jumped in the van and interviewed me during the entire one-hour drive to the program. Immediately upon arriving I went on to the stage and delivered a lecture to 200 devotees about the meaning of om.

“After being situated in this yoga practice and vibrating the sacred syllable om, the supreme combination of letters, if one thinks of the Supreme Personality of Godhead and quits his body, he will certainly reach the spiritual planets.” [BG 8.13]

I purposefully chose this topic as the city itself, Omsk, contains this auspicious combination of letters, OM. I mentioned that even unconscious chanting of the holy name, or a portion of it, produces auspicious results.

“One who chants the holy name of the Lord is immediately freed from the reactions of unlimited sins, even if he chants indirectly [to indicate something else], jokingly, for musical entertainment, or even neglectfully. This is accepted by all the learned scholars of the scriptures. [SB 6.2.14]

I humorously suggested that the devotees approach the city authorities and request them to drop the last two letters of the city’s name and simply call it Om. Srila Prabhupada himself once asked the devotees in Chicago to ask the airport authorities there to rename O’Hare Airport O Hare.

After the lecture, a distinguished and intelligent-looking man came forward, offered obeisances and respectfully gave me several fruits. He told me his first contact with Krsna consciousness was during my last visit to Omsk three years ago. That visit had inspired him to seriously take up the process of devotional service. I wanted to speak to him, but so many devotees were coming forward that he was gradually pushed to the back. Later I lamented that I didn’t take the time. Siksastakam told me that he was the former head of the KGB in the Siberian region, a PhD, lawyer, prominent scholar and member of the city council in Omsk. If anyone could change the name of the city, it was him!

Investments in the Future

Volume 3, Chapter 11

January 29, 2001, Omsk, Russia.

This morning we went to the temple in Omsk for the program. The temple is a 100-year-old wooden house in a neighborhood just outside of town. The entire area was covered in meters of snow. We walked into the temple and I sat down on an old vyasasana to give class. As soon as I sat on it I was attacked by bed bugs. Their method of giving a double bite in the same area is indicative of their presence. I requested Uttamasloka to ask how old the vyasasana was, and after inquiring he told me it was nine years old and stored in the attic upstairs. I maintained my composure while giving class, surrendering to the probability that the bites represented reactions to past offenses to Vaisnavas who were more qualified than me to sit on the seat.

After class I saw a young boy and his sister whom I had met two years ago. They had come to Omsk from southern Russia on a three-day train ride just to see me. I am quite attached to them, for their story is one that breaks the heart. In 1995 they lived with their Russian parents in Grozny, Chechnya, when Russian forces invaded to crack down on Chechen militants. It was a vicious and brutal war in which no one was spared, including women and children. The fighting in Grozny was so fierce that practically the entire city was leveled by daily bombing and shelling. Troops from both sides of the conflict roamed the streets for months, engaging in fire-fights and shooting innocent civilians at whim.

Seven year old Amrta Keli and her 10-year-old brother, Vinode Behari, lived underground in the cellar of their house (it was all that was left of the building) for five months without going outside. The sounds of nearby explosions shook their small shelter and the stench of death outside entered within. The only thing that kept the family sane was their practice of Krsna consciousness. Most of the day they would chant or read from Srila Prabhupada's books. Several times a week the mother and father took turns at venturing outside into the mayhem to search for food and water. One day the mother left and didn't return. The family waited for her in great anxiety, and when she didn't come back the next day the father went outside to look for her. He found her not far from their shelter, felled by a sniper's bullet to her head. He returned and broke the sad news to the children. The glamour of war is only in the minds of fools who have never seen the faces of such poor children.

Only because of Krsna consciousness did the family survive their ordeal. The philosophy of Bhagavad-gita and the chanting of the holy names gave them relief from the anguish of war. With the help of Russian troops they eventually escaped, but the children were deeply scarred by the emotional pain they had endured. By the time I met them in southern Russia, they were receiving professional counseling to deal with the nightmares and emotional outbursts they often experienced.

When I spoke with them I was touched by their sincere attachment to devotees and the holy names. They somehow seemed much older and more realized than most children their age. No one needed to convince them of the miseries of material existence and no one had to tell them to chant their rounds. Because I gave them special attention, they opened their hearts to me . . . and I gave mine to them. I spent a lot of time with them, knowing that the real counseling they required was the love and affection of a Vaisnava. We spent hours together walking and talking, and a deep friendship developed. Our meeting this morning rekindled our feeling of love.

For most of my devotional career I have tried to give time and attention to the children of our movement. They are our future and will one day continue with the work we have done. Though young and innocent they are responsive to the love we give them, and such attention serves as a foundation for their faith in devotees and the Lord. The other day I received a wonderful letter from a young lady in America, thanking me for the attention I gave her as a child and asking for spiritual guidance now that she has grown up.

Dear Indradyumna Swami,

Please accept my humble obeisances. All glories to our beloved Srila Prabhupada. Please allow me to introduce myself. My name is Sachi. My parents are Vamanadeva das and Sangita devi dasi (a disciple of Srila Prabhupada since 1973). I first met you in 1980 when you visited the Honolulu temple where we were living. I was only a 3-year-old little girl at the time. You were so kind to me and danced with me during aratis and even had me drive with you to harinama in Waikiki. When you were leaving Hawaii, you gave me a photo of your Nrsimhadeva Deity which I treasured. Growing up in Honolulu and the Los Angeles gurukulas (not in the asramas), we were taught the zonal acarya system which was in place in ISKCON at that time. Still, I somehow always felt a connection to you. Even at a young

age I told my friends that I was going to someday take initiation from you. In retrospect, this is surprising because we knew of and had only 11 initiating gurus in the movement.

I am now 23 years old, living with my parents and sister outside of the Philadelphia temple and about to receive my Master's degree in Psychology. As a teenager I went full circle, so to speak, in my spiritual life. Having been born in ISKCON, I felt a need to explore other religions to be sure that Krishna consciousness was how I wanted to live my life. After a year-long search I came back to Srila Prabhupada. Just recently my mother gave me a bhajan tape made by you. Hearing your chanting rekindled the sense of connection I felt to you as a young child. I cannot fully understand or explain this spiritual feeling. I am in no means feeling qualified to approach you at this time for possible initiation. I sometimes have questions regarding Krsna consciousness, and am asking you if I can occasionally write to you with my inquiries. I approach you and ask for this assistance with all sincerity and humility.

Your servant,

Sachi dasi.

Just the other day a devotee asked me why I give so much attention to the children in our movement. When thinking about it later, I remembered a story from my own youth. When I was a young boy I loved American football and was a loyal fan of the local professional team, the San Francisco 49ers. When I was 10 years old, my father took me to the city for a big game they were playing that would decide if they would win the national championships. The stadium was packed to capacity with fans rooting for their home team. My father worked in the advertising business with a prominent organization, BBD and O. He recently had been working on an advertising campaign with the 49ers and had developed a close relationship with their quarterback, Y. A. Title. Title was one of the best quarterbacks American football had ever seen, and he was the pre-eminent hero of all American boys. We knew everything about him, and his performance on the field was our constant meditation. Just before the game was about to begin my father took me down to the field to meet him. I was shaking like a leaf at the prospect of meeting the famous Y. A. Title. I'd be a big man back in my neighborhood, especially if I could get his autograph! The team charged out of the locker room on to the sidelines to begin warming up for the game. My father approached Title, who came over to meet me. A huge man, made even bigger by his padded uniform, he got down on one knee and shook my hand. It was as if a demigod had come down from heaven to

meet me. Many years later my father recounted to me my conversation with my childhood hero.

Title said, "I'm happy to meet you, son. Your father told me about you. He says you like football."

I said, "Mr Title, I love football and one day I want to be like you."

"Fine, son," he replied. "Let me give you a few tips. In fact, I'll let you in on a few secrets about how I make my touchdown passes. Keep it between you and me and you'll lead this team one day."

He proceeded to show me his special way to hold the ball and how he threw it high in the air. "Learn this trick and you'll be a winner," he said. "But remember, son, football's not just about technique, it's about being a good person, too. You have to do good in school and learn your lessons.

And don't be intimidated by guys who smoke. You have to be healthy to play good football."

"Can I ask you one more question, Mr Title?" I said.

"Yes, son, of course," he replied.

At that moment the whistle sounded indicating the game was about to start, and the rest of the players ran on to the field. But Title remained with me on the sideline, down on one knee looking me in the eye. The 49ers' head coach came over and growled, "Title, out on the field. The crowd's waiting. Move!"

Title looked over at him and very coolly said, "I'm making an investment here. This little boy wants to play football. I'm HIS coach, OK?"

The 49ers' coach stormed off, and the multitudes waited for me to ask my last question.

"Mr Title, will you sign an autograph for me?" I said.

"Of course," he replied. "Anything else?"

"Yes," I said. "Can I write to you sometimes?"

He said, "You sure can, boy. You're the next quarterback and you'll need lots of tips! Your father and I are having lunch next Tuesday. Come along and I'll give you the address then."

With that he ran on to the field . . . and won the game.

Title gave me only 10 minutes, but he made an impression on me for life. He was always in my thoughts as I practiced sports in high school and college. His 10 minutes gave me the inspiration to become a star athlete in football and swimming. I was the captain of my high school swimming team for four years in a row, and I remained undefeated in the 200 meter backstroke that entire time.

Of course, advancing in Krsna consciousness is infinitely more challenging than athletic competition, and our children need inspiration from the beginning of their careers in devotional service as well. So whenever a devotee child approaches me I try to kneel down and give them that 10 minutes. I know it can go a long way. As Sachi wrote: “Hearing your chanting rekindled the sense of connection I felt to you as a young child. I cannot fully understand or explain this spiritual feeling . . . I sometimes have questions regarding Krsna consciousness and am asking you if I can occasionally write to you with my inquiries.”

Yes, Sachi dasi, please do write back. You’re the next generation and you’ll need lots of tips!

A Train Ride West

Volume 3, Chapter 12

January 29 – 30, 2001, Chelyabinsk, Russia.

Our train left Omsk at 3pm headed for Chelyabinsk, a 12-hour ride west. On the journey we passed through northern Kazakhstan. There was no immigration or Customs, however, because the train made no stop there. On the way I was thinking about our last kirtan in Omsk, the night before we left. There were about 200 devotees in the hall. Sri Prahlad was playing an ancient accordion; aptly described by Uttamasloka as an old squeeze box. I had a clay drum that had also seen better days. The best sound I could get out of it resembled a thump on a wet cardboard box. Jananivasa played the only pair of karatalas available, which sounded like two pieces of lead banging together. But all that made no difference. Sri Pralad was leading and had us diving and surfacing in the nectarian ocean of the holy names.

At one point the devotees swayed back and forth in unison, while at other times they broke into small groups and spun around in eccentric circles, smiling and laughing and sometimes

rolling on the ground. It was the type of kirtan where one loses any sense of time and wish it would go on forever. It's often like that when Sri Prahald leads. He's a gifted musician with a taste for the holy name. I couldn't think of a better combination of qualities.

Momentarily, I stepped a little to the side, just to watch the bliss. Here we were with 200 devotees and only three old, useless instruments. It reminded me of scenes from South Africa where, when passing through impoverished black townships, I've often see small groups of little boys with no instruments whatsoever just clapping their hands, happily absorbed in singing an ancestral song. But our kirtan was the most ancient of hymns, descending directly from the spiritual sky and lifting us to the greatest heights of happiness and bliss. As the township boys sang:

"Down on the corner, down on the street, Willie and the poor boys singing a song that can't be beat!"

A few hours into the journey, Jananivasa informed me that little Amrta Keli and Vinode Behari were with their father on the train on their way back to southern Russia. I immediately asked him to get them. He searched through the long train, and an hour later brought the family to my compartment. I proceeded to tell stories of Krsna and His devotees. When I began the pastime of Bivamangala Thakur, Amrta Keli's eyes lit up and she took over, telling the lila in much more detail than I. Afterwards, I asked their father if they could all stay in Chelyabinsk with us for the program. He replied that they had special tickets for disabled citizens of war that couldn't be changed. To buy new tickets for the three-day journey home would be more than he could earn in a year. In English I inquired from Jananivasa how much such tickets would be, and he replied \$150. When I told the father and children that I'd be happy to pay for those tickets, their mouths dropped open in disbelief. In fact I added a few more dollars, so they'll be accompanying us all the way through Ekaterinburg, Perm, and on to Moscow.

"That's my investment – I'm their coach."

At one point in the journey, two young men who appeared to be close friends met Jananivasa in the corridor just outside my cabin. They were rough characters, but showed a little interest in what we were doing. Jananivasa spent a few minutes explaining the philosophy to them. Eventually one of the friends left, and \$800 in bills dropped out of his

pocket as he walked away. The other so-called friend stooped over, picked the money up and quickly put it in his pocket. Staring intensely at Jananivasa, he said to him that if he told his friend that he'd found the money he'd "smash him in the face!" A few minutes later the first boy returned in anxiety. He told his friend he had lost his money and began desperately searching for it throughout the corridor. His friend feigned sympathy and half-heartedly began to look for the money as well. The first boy was practically in tears. After some time they gave up and stood talking with Jananivasa again. Jananivasa very carefully began explaining the law of karma, how for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. When he used the analogy that if one steals from someone then in a future birth the same thing will happen to him, the boy who took the money off the floor became a little nervous. As Jananivasa went into more detail of the results of sinful acts, the thief broke out in a sweat. Finally, he looked over his shoulder and blurted out,

"Oh look, there's the money on the floor!"

In one careful motion he took the money from his pocket, threw it on the floor, picked it up and gave it back to his friend.

When Jananivasa told me the story, I reflected how a real friend is one who helps you in times of adversity, not abandons you – or worse yet takes advantage of your misfortune.

apatsu mitram janiyad/yuddhe suram rne sucim
bharyam ksinesu vittesu/vyasaneseu ca bandhavan

"A friend is tested in adversity, a hero in war, an honest man when in debt, and relatives in time of distress." [Hitopanisad Part 1, Text 73]

Sometimes a friend can help us solve our problems. But the very least he can do is share or sympathize with our misfortune. In dealing with my own disciples' problems, I can always offer the ultimate solution of going back to Godhead, but sometimes I am at a loss to offer a practical solution to a material difficulty. In such cases I just try to be a good listener. Sometimes that alone is the best medicine.

utsave vyasane caiva/ durbhikse rastra viplave
raja dvare smasane ca/ yastisthati sa bandhavan

"One who accompanies another during festivals, in misery, in famine, in national calamity, in court, and finally in the crematorium is the real, true friend." [Hitopanisad Part 1, Text 74]

We arrived in Chelyabinsk at 3am. Upon arriving at Russian train stations, my conditioned reaction is to first look out of the window at the neon sign displaying the temperature. When I saw the temperature in Chelyabinsk I thought,

“Wow, it’s warm here! It’s only 10 degrees below zero.”

Siberia has made me a veteran of Russian winters. Real cold means anything less than 40 degrees below! As the weather wasn’t too bad I wore only two coats (as opposed the three), and jumped off the train with the other devotees. The Chelyabinsk devotees had not arrived in time to pick us up, so we waited outside the station for them to come. The temperature soon got the better of me, and I told Uttamasloka to order a taxi to take me to the apartment where we would be staying. As soon as he called for a taxi we were deluged by drivers offering us their services. They were all screaming at the same time and bargaining with Uttamasloka. Sri Prahlad said,

“Mosquitoes sucking blood.”

Standing in the middle of it all, I appreciated Guru Vrata’s military precision in “picking up the troops” in Krasnoyarsk. A traveling preacher, however, should never expect, what to speak of demand, any facility as he moves through the world. He is everyone’s servant. But if facility is offered, he should be thankful and express his appreciation to his hosts by sharing the very best of his Krsna consciousness with them.

We arrived at the apartment at 4.30am, and instead of sleeping I stayed up and chanted my rounds. Then after studying a little, we left for the morning program. A devotee must constantly be studying and learning in order to make his preaching interesting. I’m giving class twice a day during these tours, and although it’s a routine of sorts for me, for most of my disciples it’s the class of the year for them, because many see me only once a year. It’s essential I deliver the philosophy in an authorized way, while at the same time inspiring them in their progress. I can’t afford to be tired – a headache is no excuse to refuse class and I can’t even afford to be a minute late for the program. Every second counts for them.

At the hall the devotees had a small reception for me, and then I gave class on Srimad-Bhagavatam 1.6.1. The verse spoke of the glories of Narada Muni. I briefly told his history and emphasized that, like us, he became a devotee by the mercy of a Bhaktivedanta, a pure devotee of the Lord. Simply by taking the remnants of prasadam from such a pure Vaisnava,

the very nature of the transcendentalist became attractive to him. I enjoyed giving class and relished the long kirtan we had afterwards. In fact, we could have been anywhere in the world, but really we were in Vaikuntha. Although I sometimes hanker for the old days in Russia when we preached in secret and literally ran for our lives from the KGB, I appreciate the big movement here now and the many devotees who have come as a result of those original seeds we planted. The ranks are still swelling here. There are also more facilities. I sat for a few moments on the vyasasana before leaving, thinking how much Srila Prabhuapa sacrificed for all of us to come to this stage. It was very austere here when he came, but he didn't mind if he could spread the message of Lord Caitanya. Once Govinda dasi wrote to Srila Prabhupada inviting him to come to Hawaii to rest and work on his translations.

Knowing that he already had plans to visit Moscow, she attempted to attract him by saying that it was mango season in Hawaii. Srila Prabhupada wrote back,

“Preaching in the snows of Russia is sweeter than the sweetest mango!”

Just as I thought that, a devotee came up and handed me a ripe red mango! I'd never seen a mango in Russia! I laughed and said to myself,

“Srila Prabhupada, now we have the best of both worlds here – mangos and preaching! We have no excuse not to work hard to push on this movement here for your pleasure.”

Angels of Mercy

Volume 3, Chapter 13

February 02, 2001, Chelyabinsk, Russia.

Last night I had my first good sleep in months. I have a back problem which seems to be slowly getting worse, but last night it gave me no pain. A few months ago I had tests done in India, and the doctors said that two of the disks in my upper back are quite damaged, most likely resulting from the accident I had in South Africa several years ago. I suspect that the area was initially weakened from 10 years of carrying a book-bag and 30 years of playing heavy mrdungas. Constant travel also adds to the stress on the disks. I suppose these are what could be termed occupational hazards in the service of the Lord. During the past few months the pain has become quite intense, so much so that sometimes when lecturing I lose

my concentration. But mainly the pain manifests at night when I lay down and pressure shifts to my back. For six months I have tried many different medical remedies, with no relief.

So as a last resort I recently wrote to Hari Priya dasi, who lives in South Africa. Although a white South African, Hari Priya is a certified sombona, a tribal doctor trained in the art of natural healing as practiced among the Zulus – a prominent South African tribe. I am generally very conservative in dealing with alternative medicine, what to speak of any “mystical” medicine. I generally prefer the allopathic approach, though I am well aware of the undesirable side affects that often accompany it. However, in the past I experienced remarkable results from Hari Priya’s healing:

Just after my accident five years ago (when I was hit from behind by a van and thrown 20 meters down the road), I was laid up in bed for five months. According to the police report I should have been killed, but surprisingly my injuries, although very painful, were limited to badly damaged ligaments, muscles, and cartilage in my knees and legs. My short-term memory was also adversely affected. Most doctors said I’d have trouble walking for the rest of my life. They recommended surgery to try to correct the problem. At that point Hari Priya stepped in. She visited me and said she would call in her “angels” to help me.

I thought, “Angels! What in the world are you talking about?”

However, that night I had an amazing dream. I was laying down on a bed of flowers in a beautiful forest. I was surrounded by handsome men and beautiful women bearing effulgent wings. They were bent over my knees applying a golden ointment, while singing prayers in glorification of the Supreme.

At one point I told them, “I have to go and do service now!”

They smiled at me in a compassionate way and said, “Service can wait for now. We’ve been sent to treat you. Be still for once in your life!”

When I asked who they were they replied in unison, “We’re angels of mercy!”

At that I woke up. Without being conscious of it, I got out of bed and walked to the bathroom. On the way back to my bed, I stooped over and put a Prabhupada bhajan in the tape recorder. Then I got back in bed and pulled the covers over me. Suddenly it dawned on me –

for months I had been unable to go to the toilet unassisted! My eyes opened wide when I realized I had just walked back and forth to the toilet alone. Of course, my legs hurt from the endeavor, and my doctor probably would have scolded me severely – but I had done it! I reflected on my dream as if it was a real-life experience and thought to myself, “What’s going on here? Angles of mercy! Is this real?”

When asked about dreams, Srila Prabhupada said they are generally nonsense, but I suppose there are exceptions to the rule. I don’t know if angels actually came to help me, but when I saw Hari Priya that day and shared my dream with her she just nodded her head convincingly and smiled.

During the weeks that followed I made rapid progress in my recovery. Boy, were the devotees surprised when they saw me dancing at the Ratha-yatra festival one month later on the streets of Durban!

My final conclusion: Srila Prabhupada said, “The best plan is the one that works.”

When writing to Hari Priya about my back I asked if angels needed visas to visit Russia and if they could tolerate the cold! She said she’d inquire. After last night’s painless sleep I must say,

“Bless those angels souls!”

Theater Tradition in Ekaterinburg

Volume 3, Chapter 14

February 02, 2001, Ekaterinburg, Russia.

Before leaving Chelyabinsk yesterday we held a program in a small orphanage. The local devotees have been visiting the orphanage several times a week for the past six months, distributing prasadam, having kirtan and entertaining the children in various Krsna conscious ways. They took on the project as a way to win the favor of local city officials. The devotees are in the process of completing construction on a small, but very beautiful temple near the center of town. It has attracted much attention, and in order to keep any opposition at bay the devotees have taken on charity work of a spiritual nature. The orphanage readily accepted

the devotees' offer of help. Like many orphanages in Russia it is independent, surviving without government aid.

The 50 children, ranging from 7-14 years of age, were eagerly awaiting our arrival. They were especially keen, as they were told foreigners would be coming.

I was a bit taken aback by the facilities the children lived in. The building was quite old, there was little furniture, and from the way the children were dressed it appeared their clothes were handed down from one generation to another. However, they were well disciplined and clean – and elated that we had come.

As we entered all eyes were upon us. I stepped forward to give a short introduction in English (which was translated into Russian), and some of the kids' mouths dropped open. They were all sitting up straight in chairs, and when I called them to come and sit with me on the floor there was a stampede to see who could sit closest to me. I had a captive audience and took full advantage of it, telling the children of my adventures in the Amazon Jungle. Each time I brought up an alligator, a piranha fish, a spider or a snake there were exclamations of surprise . . . and several "Hare Krsnas!"

At the end of the story, Sri Prahlad led an ecstatic kirtan and the children danced blissfully, loudly chanting the holy names. When I distributed fruit prasadam there was another stampede. I suppose things that we take for granted are much appreciated by those less fortunate than us.

We embarked on a four-hour journey to Ekaterinburg in a caravan of cars at 3pm. We were on our way to do a small program there. I was a little uneasy, however, as a snowstorm had started. I also noticed that the three cars we were traveling in looked old and unreliable, but it seemed the best our hosts could do, and as "beggars can't be choosers" I didn't make any objection. One hour into the journey one of the cars broke down. In the midst of the snowstorm we tried our best to get it started again, but to no avail. So we divided the passengers and luggage between the two remaining vehicles and, leaving the driver with the disabled car, continued on our way. One hour later, in the middle of nowhere, one of the vehicles ran out of petrol! With no recourse, we tied a cable to it and towed it.

At one point the police pulled us over and checked our papers. The snowstorm made driving difficult, but we managed to hobble into Ekaterinburg five hours later. It was a long and

arduous trip. But when I looked at my watch and saw the day and date, I realized our mistake – we had begun a journey on Thursday afternoon!

According to astrological calculations, it is inauspicious to begin a journey on a Thursday afternoon. One of Srila Prabhupada's secretaries told me that Srila Prabhupada himself was cautious not to travel at this time, to the point of postponing a Thursday afternoon departure to Friday morning. It is said that Srila Bhaktisiddhanta Saraswati dealt with the problem of having to leave on a Thursday afternoon by putting his shoes and baggage outside the door the night before, indicating that the journey had already begun.

Knowing that the workings of material nature are never fully auspicious, a devotee is careful how he proceeds in life. Once, when a devotee sneezed at the beginning of a journey, Srila Prabhupada stopped walking, until Brahmananda explained that the devotee had a cold, after which Srila Prabhupada continued. If someone sneezes for no apparent reason before a journey, it is considered inauspicious.

The hall program last night was a preview of a puppet theater being prepared for the Polish tour by my disciple, Subhuddi raya. A talented artist, he has put together an amazing production of Kṛṣṇa's Vrindavan pastimes. The 20 large puppets are skillfully and attractively presented. The entire production covers more than 12 meters of stage. Professional, colorful and dynamic, with a beautiful soundtrack, it came across as a major production. It gave me confidence that this year we will have a wonderful stage program that the Polish public will love.

We arrived exhausted at our apartment at 11pm. To my surprise, 30 disciples were waiting for me with a reception! Not wanting to disappoint them, I sat and received their loving gestures of fruits and flowers accompanied by a sweet kirtan. Then I gave a short lecture, several times catching myself falling asleep. At the stroke of midnight they brought in a big cake for me to distribute. At the same moment, however, a distraught young lady appeared at the door and asked to see me. With tears in her eyes, she came into the room and told me that her mother, my disciple, Gitanjali dasi, who is gravely ill with cancer, was about to leave her body. She begged me to come and see her.

Picking up a pair of karatalas and a mrdunga, myself, Sri Prahlad, Rukmini Priya and Uttamasloka quickly left the apartment for a waiting car. The journey beyond the city took

over an hour and a half. We finally arrived at Gitanjali's apartment at 1.45am. Entering her room, we saw her frail, thin body covered by blankets. Hearing us, she opened her eyes and smiled. I placed my garland around her neck, and sitting next to her began giving her final instructions. It was not the first time I have been in such a situation, so I knew what to do and how to proceed.

There is really only one subject matter to dwell on at death, and that is the beautiful pastimes of the Lord in Vrindavan. As Gaudiya Vaisnavas, that is the specific goal we must fix our minds on at the moment of death. That, of course, takes a lifetime of preparation. We must purify our hearts of all material attachment and then awaken our love for the Lord.

Srila Prabhodananda Saraswati prays: "Today or tomorrow this worthless material body will leave me and all the material happiness connected with it will also leave. Because material happiness is temporary, it should be understood to be only a mirage of the real happiness. O my mind, please abandon this false happiness and enjoy the real, eternal happiness of devotional service within the land of Vrindavan."

[Vrindavan Mahimamrta Sakata 1, Text 24]

Before describing the beauty of Vrindavan and the pastimes of Radha and Krsna, I first wanted to see if Gitanjali had any remorse about leaving this world. If any attachments remained in her heart, I would encourage her to let them go so she wouldn't become entangled again in this world of birth and death. I gently inquired if she was ready to leave. She spoke softly and said she had no reason whatsoever to remain here. So confident was she that later on Sri Prahlad and I remarked how she was indeed fearless in the face of death. I recounted a few pastimes of the Lord to help her fix her mind, and then led kirtan. During the kirtan I was praying to Srila Prabhupada to please give her the qualification to achieve an auspicious destination. By 4am it was clear that she wasn't going to leave her body immediately, so I stopped the kirtan and spoke a few last words to her. In a weak voice she thanked me for coming, and said that now all her desires had been fulfilled she would soon leave peacefully.

Her eyes followed me intensely until I left the room. Srila Prabhupada, please take her soon and place her in your association! Grant her an auspicious destination.

As you wrote to Jayananda: "Krsna is very kind, for He has taken away your diseased body and has now given you a body which is suitable to your desires to serve Him in the spiritual world."

We returned to our apartment at 5.30am and took rest, rising at 8am to perform our sadhana. At 11am we went a hall to perform a wedding for 15 devotee couples. Most of the devotees were my disciples, many of whom I have known since they were children. It is very satisfying to personally help them through the various milestones of their lives. Of course, traditionally it is not the business of a sannyasi to perform a marriage ceremony. He is supposed to be aloof from such things, being in the renounced order. Following in Srila Prabhupada's footsteps, however, we do it to encourage our disciples. At a marriage Srila Prabhupada presided over in Montreal in 1968, he said:

"So I am a sannyasi. I have renounced my family life. I have got my children, my grandchildren, I have my wife still living, but I have separated from them. This is called sannyāsa. Why I am taking interest again, this family life of my students? Because I want to see them properly progress towards spiritual life. Therefore, although it is not the business of a sannyāsé to take part in marriage ceremony, in this country, just to save my students, both boys and girls, from sinful activities, I am personally taking interest that they may become good gentleman and lady by marriage."

This evening the older children presented a theater of Kṛṣṇa's Vrindavan lila. For a number years, each time I visit Ekaterinburg these children have performed theater for me. Under the guidance of my disciple, Subuddhi raya das, they practice for months before I come. They memorise pages of lines and carefully refine all their movements in the play. The dramas are always straight from Srimad-Bhagavatam, Brhat Bhagavatamṛta, or from Srila Rupa Goswami's plays like Lalita Madhava or Vidagdha Madhava. The subject matter is always very deep, the acting very professional, and the mood permeated with love. Srila Prabhupada once said that the purpose of theater is to invoke spiritual emotions in the audience. He related how he once took part in a drama about Lord Caitanya when he was in school. He and his friends practiced for six months before their first performance. When they presented the play, he said many people in the audience cried. As we sat and watched the children's production in Ekaterinburg, many of us also shed a few tears. It was clear that loving relationships in the spiritual world are far superior to any of this world. The play made me hanker to be back in Vrindavan, but I spent several months there recently and now it's my duty to travel and tell others of that transcendental abode. But it was a pleasant surprise to be transported there again for two hours by the wonderful acting of these young adults.

“Where do all people automatically and effortlessly obtain pure ecstatic love for Kṛṣṇa? Where does the Supreme Personality of Godhead manifest His supremely wonderful pastime from? Where is the empire of the bliss of devotional service to Kṛṣṇa’s lotus feet manifest? O brother, listen I will tell you a secret. All this is present here in Vrindavan.”
[Vrindavan Mahimamṛta Sataka 1, Text 24]

Faith Grows in Chechnya

Volume 3, Chapter 15

March 02, 2001, Perm, Russia.

We caught the train from Ekaterinburg at 1.30am en route for Perm. The first thing I noticed upon entering my compartment was its unique reddish color, almost that of dark red wine. I laughed, because in an unusual way it caused me to remember Srila Prabhupada. When devotees were ordering a new Ambassador car for Srila Prabhupada in India in 1974, they asked him what color he would prefer.

He replied, “Wine color.”

I took it as my good fortune that I was riding to Perm in Srila Prabhupada’s preferred color for transport, red wine!

Instead of sleeping I decided to finish my rounds, then dozed off towards the end of the night for an hour or two. Later this morning, as we approached our destination, a Russian soldier passed Uttamasloka in the corridor and asked if he could speak to me. I agreed, and Uttamasloka brought the man into my compartment. He introduced himself as Sergeant Eugeny Gorbunov, a career soldier in a special unit of the army. A deeply religious man, he had recently come back from fighting in Chechnya and wanted to talk about how the experience had brought him closer to God. He said he rarely found anyone in the military with whom he could share his realizations. He was dressed in fatigues and had a special inscription sewn on to his clothing. When I inquired about it, he said it identified his blood type and was standard for all Russian soldiers serving their compulsory two-year term in the army. Then he opened his shirt and showed us the same information, tattooed in bold blue letters by the army on his chest!

“This is for career soldiers,” he said.

From his shirt he also produced what he described as his traveling altar. It was a small, three-piece metal frame with beautiful pictures of Jesus, Mary and St Michelle. Looking at them with faith and devotion, he described how they had recently saved his life. The way he spoke, it was as if the pictures were conscious personalities. I admired him, because this is a realization I strive for in my own Deity worship. Accustomed to fighting and callous to the horrors of war, Eugeny began describing in detail a recent battle he fought in Chechnya. He was part of a convoy of 50 trucks ferrying 800 soldiers south from Grozny, the capital of Chechnya, to the Caucasus mountains where Chechen rebels have taken refuge. Along the way the convoy was ambushed by rebels and a fierce fire-fight took place.

Eugeny jumped out of his truck and took shelter behind a wheel, returning fire with his AK-47. But the well-planned ambush had him and the other soldiers pinned down, and the Chechens took full advantage. Using mortars they picked off 47 of the trucks one by one. By a miracle of God, according to Eugeny, the remaining three trucks were spared and the Chechens disappeared into the mountains. Only 45 of the 800 Russians survived. Although a committed soldier, Eugeny expressed his disgust with the war. He said that years ago he served side by side with Chechen regulars in the Russian army, and the current fighting in Chechnya is simply the business of politicians eager for power. He listened patiently as I described the law of karma, and how we are all bound by destiny – by our past pious and impious activities. When I said that the only way to become free from such reactions is to take shelter of God, he pulled out his altar and looking at it with devotion said,

“Yes, this is so.”

I felt humbled in his presence, because he seemed to have more realizations in taking shelter of God than I. I have “book knowledge,” but he’s had real-life experiences that have tested his devotion to God and brought him closer to the goal. We talked for over an hour, and when it was time for him to go we exchanged addresses so we can write to each other. As I was leaving the train he embraced me and asked me to pray for him. We had our photo taken together and decided we’d meet when I come through Russia next autumn. But he frankly told me that he was on his way back to Chechnya and didn’t know if he’d survive this time.

Arriving in Perm, we were met by devotees and whisked away to do a marriage ceremony for 11 couples. When I reminded our hosts that we hadn't bathed yet, our driver made a detour to our apartment where we quickly showered before going to the temple.

It was the second wedding I had presided over in two days. There were many guests, and I also noticed a number of parents whose children were obviously the ones taking their wedding vows. Because the parents appeared a little uncomfortable, I assumed that many of them were visiting the temple for the first time. To put them at ease I thanked them for coming in my welcoming address, and then noted their service to their sons and daughters. I began the lecture by saying that because life is fraught with difficulties, we require all the help we can get to pass through it and make our way back to the kingdom of God. It was a logical point, and many of them nodded their heads in agreement. Then I emphasized that the first helping hand comes from our loving parents, who take on the initial burden of raising us from infants to young adults. With that they all smiled and looked around for acknowledgment. When the audience clapped and their sons and daughters smiled at them, they relaxed in their chairs and thoroughly enjoyed the rest of the talk and the ceremony.

As in yesterday's marriage ceremony, I carefully injected humor and sobriety into the program. The ladies loudly cheered and applauded when I mentioned that a woman is considered the "better half" of the marriage – because as Srila Prabhupada said, women are generally more soft hearted and inclined to religious duties. But the audience became quiet and thoughtful when I mentioned that in modern society three out of four marriages end in divorce, and therefore the couples being married must strive to make Krsna the center of the relationship (not sense gratification) to ensure their ultimate success.

As is always the case with Krsna conscious weddings, the event was festive, colorful and blissful – and very long! When it finished everyone disappeared to stretch their legs, but came running back a few minutes later when it was announced that Sri Prahlad was about to begin a kirtan. Within a few minutes Sri Prahlad had us all dancing wildly, including many of the guests. I noticed that even a few of the parents who were silent and grave at the beginning of the wedding were now dancing gleefully with their sons and daughters. Such is the power of the holy name!

"May Krsna's holy name, which is a reservoir of all transcendental happiness, the destruction of Kali-yuga's sins, the most purifying of all purifying things, the saintly person's food as he

traverses the path to the spiritual world, the pleasure-garden where the voices of the greatest saints, philosophers, and poets play, the life of the righteous, and the seed of the tree of religion, bring transcendental auspiciousness to you all.”

[Padyavali Nama-mahatmya, Text 14]

Just Remember Vrindavana

Volume 3, Chapter 16

May 02, 2001, Perm, Russia.

Today I asked Sri Prahlad to go to the temple and give the Srimad-Bhagavatam class. I remained behind, mainly so I could sit peacefully and chant my rounds. Afterwards, I read from Sivarama Swami’s book, Venu Gita. The book is my constant companion on my travels. Maharaja has expertly assimilated and presented the teachings of our previous acaryas in regards to the Lord’s pastimes in Vrindavan. The Six Goswamis in particular have written extensively on the subject, to the degree that some of their writings are very confidential and not meant for the masses, or even neophyte devotees.

In Venu Gita, Maharaja has selected those teachings and pastimes that are suitable to our ears. Because such information is found in a wide variety of sastras, Venu Gita is certainly the fruit of many years of research. For those of us who don’t have access to the Goswamis’ writings, or the time and qualification to read some of them, Venu Gita is most welcome nectar. I read it daily to be immersed in the mood of Sri Vrindavan Dhama.

“I meditate on Vrindavan, where the cuckoos sing the fifth note, the flute plays splendid melodies, peacocks sing and dance, vines and trees bloom, splendid and charming forests are wonderful with many birds and deer, and there are many splendid lakes, streams and hills.”

[Vrindavan Mahimamrta Sataka 1, Text 7]

After reading Venu Gita, I checked my e-mail mail on my computer. In my inbox there were three days of briefings on world news. I subscribe to an Internet service that daily sends out the top news stories. They are broken down into three categories: World, USA and European news. There are generally about eight news items in each category. In this way I can be in touch with the world, but not have to read newspapers and sift through so much garbage.

This is authorized, as Srila Prabhupada writes:

“One should avoid ordinary topics of novels and fiction, but there is no injunction that one should avoid hearing ordinary news.”

[Teaching of Lord Caitanya, Chapter 12]

A traveling preacher must be aware of what is happening in the world around him. I often use current events as examples in my preaching. They help the audience to understand a philosophical point, eg, the recent earthquake in Gujarat, India, demonstrates the miseries of material existence. However, there is a fine line as to how much of the current world news we need to hear. Because it is all tinged by the modes of passion and ignorance, too much can agitate the mind and distract us from meditation on our services. I sometimes find that even selective reading of the news is too much for my mind. After all, it's all “chewing the chewed” – there's nothing new. It's always “old wine in a new bottle,” another trick of maya to keep us entangled in the material world. It's one of those attachments that may be authorized for service but which in the end we must let go of if we really want to go back home, back to Godhead. I much prefer to read Venu Gita and become enchanted by the eternal news of the spiritual sky.

“Don't even glance at the external things of this world, whether they belong to you or to others, whether they are as splendid as millions of suns and moons, or whether they possess a great flood of good qualities. Renounce them! Give up all conventional peaceful composure and without caring for anything else, always remember Sri Sri Radha-Krsna and reside in Vrindavan.”

[Vrindavan Mahimamrta Sataka 2, Text 7]

As today was Lord Varaha's appearance day, I also remembered Lord Varaha's instructions:

“Lord Varaha tells the men of earth, ‘Any person who becomes attracted to places other than Mathura will certainly be captivated by the illusory energy! ”

[Nectar of Devotion, Chapter 12, "Residing in Mathura"]

Before leaving for the airport to catch our two-hour flight to Moscow, we stopped off at the temple to say goodbye to the devotees. I was surprised to see more than 200 devotees packed into the small temple room waiting to see me off. Because it was a festival day, the Gaura-Nitai Deities had a new outfit. I sat down, led a short kirtan and then spoke. I explained that as fallen souls we must all take shelter of Lord Varaha, as He is capable of uplifting that which has fallen into a filthy place. Currently our consciousness is contaminated by the bodily concept of life, but by His mercy we can be elevated to the transcendental

platform. I also explained that as He is capable of killing the greatest of demons, most notably Hiranyaksa, He can also destroy the most formidable obstacles of lust, anger and greed that are within our hearts.

On the way to the airport, our driver was taking all sorts of turns, going in and out of different sections of the city. A local devotee in the back seat was directing him. As we had a deadline of two hours to reach the airport and didn't seem to be getting anywhere, I inquired if either of them knew where they were going. To my surprise they replied in unison,

“Not really Maharaja!”

One of them humbly explained that neither of them had ever been to the airport. Thinking we might miss our flight I momentarily became angry, but controlled myself by thinking that only people with money can fly. These Siberian devotees don't enjoy the luxuries of someone like myself – if they have to go to Moscow they take the two-day train. Somehow we made it to airport with time to spare, and there I found yet another group of disciples waiting to say goodbye. We had only five minutes before we had to check in and I was quite tired, but I thought,

“Let me give them a few minutes. It will mean a lot to them.”

I know the few moments that Srila Prabhupada gave me personal attention are forever engraved as precious jewels within my heart. In 1971, on my way to preach in Europe, he called me into his room in New York to give me some instructions. Reaching into his dresser he pulled out his own dhoti, and handing it to me said strongly,

“Preach boldly and have faith in the holy names!”

Srila Prabhupada, I'm doing my best, and following in your footsteps I'm trying to inspire my disciples to do the same. May you be pleased with our combined efforts to serve Your Divine Grace.

Allies in Moscow

Volume 3, Chapter 17

June 02, 2001, Moscow, Russia.

The flight to Moscow yesterday afternoon was uneventful. I kept my eye open for something to comment on in the diary, but there's not always material available. After all, this is the material world and things aren't generally very exciting. Krsna consciousness is the only source of interest. I read a statistic recently that said people are happy only five percent of the time, miserable five percent of the time, and bored 90 percent of the time! Srila Prabhupada once said,

"I've been everywhere and seen everything. My advice to you all is take sannyasa."

We were met at Moscow Airport by a group of disciples, including Raja Rama das who came to pick me up in his car. Raja Rama and his wife, Janaka Nandini dasi, are the kind of disciples the spiritual master thinks Krsna has sent to help him. In fact, when I reflect on their service to me I often remember a letter Srila Prabhupada wrote to a god-brother of mine in South Africa, wherein he says that when he remembers that particular disciple's service his "chest swells with pride." I have a number of disciples I think of in that way, and Raja Rama and Janaka Nandini are certainly two of them. Successful in business (in Russia!) they generously support my preaching programs throughout the year. I can honestly say that without their help the Polish tour would not exist. Everyone knows that it's not easy to make money (and even more difficult to give it away), but by their own desire this couple give more to my preaching than they keep for themselves. I have instructed them to maintain a proper standard of life for themselves and to put laksmi aside for their future, but their donations increase because they simply expand their business efforts in order to continue serving their spiritual master's mission.

Their dedication reminds me of the surrender of Srila Bhaktisiddhanta Saraswati's householder disciples. Srila Bhaktisiddhanta Saraswati had a policy that householder couples give ALL their monthly earnings to the temple, and he would return to them whatever they needed to "keep body and soul together." The greater part of their earnings were thus used in his preaching mission. His householder disciples were pleased to serve their spiritual master in this way and play an active role in his preaching. Raja Rama and Janaka Nandini have that kind of dedication because they have faith in the programs we are doing. They also

come to Poland often to participate in the tour. Their faith is fueled by the fact that they regularly hear from their spiritual master. Each day they listen to lectures from my Russian Tape Ministry. I always emphasize to my disciples the importance of hearing from the spiritual master. Hearing is the main connection we have with our guru.

The results can easily be seen in the service of this ideal householder couple, who despite offering so much remain humble in their characters. One reason that Raja Rama is successful in his service is because of his effervescent personality. He's always bright and cheerful. Combined with his happiness as a devotee, he sometimes comes across as almost intoxicated. On the ride from the airport to our apartment, Jananivasa das told me that a few days ago a policeman stopped Raja Rama while he was driving through Moscow. Seeing Raja Rama's big smile, the policeman was convinced that he was under the influence of alcohol. He made him get out of the car and take a breath analyzer test. The policeman was shocked when the result was negative! He stood there dumbfounded as Raja Rama got back in the car and drove away wishing him all happiness, leaving him with a clue to his bliss by shouting:

"Chant the holy names and your life will be sublime!"

Krsna consciousness is not without its serious and sober moods, however. As we neared the apartment, one of the local devotees accompanying us informed me that one of my Russian disciples, Vidya Vilasa dasi, had passed away of cancer a few days before. I didn't know Vidya Vilasa that well. Like many disciples, my association with her was somewhat limited due to my responsibilities in many parts of the world. But in the transcendental sense, that does not affect my concern and love for her as my eternal disciple. Even though I am only one insignificant disciple of Srila Prabhupada, I feel the support and love he gives me, though I have been serving him in separation for 24 years. Actually there is no question of separation from the spiritual master if we are meditating on him constantly by serving his instructions. Srila Prabhupada concludes his commentary on Caitanya-caritamrta by emphasizing this most important point. He says of his own guru maharaja:

"He lives forever by his divine instructions – and the follower lives with him."

When I heard of Vidya Vilasa's departure I felt remorse. I thought to myself that with the departure of any Vaisnava, the world becomes a little less fortunate. Devotees are the only source of auspiciousness in this world of birth and death, and the masses are dependent

upon them for any blessings in life. So as not to let the seriousness of the moment pass, and to fulfill my eternal responsibilities to Vidya Vilasa as her well-wisher and guide, I closed my eyes before getting out of the car and prayed to Srila Prabhupada to take her soul to his lotus feet. That is the best blessing I (myself still a child in spiritual life) can offer my beloved disciples.

After taking a shower this morning, I sat down to read about the glories of Lord Nityananda from Caitanya-caritamṛta. It is His appearance day, and although Sivarama Swami is also visiting Moscow, I was asked to give the morning class. Before leaving for the temple I contacted Maharaja, and offered that he could give the class. That is the proper etiquette, for he is my sannyasa guru. I received the sannyasa mantra from him when the person who originally gave me sannyasa fell away. Maharaja humbly declined, however, and said I should speak. The temple room was packed with hundreds of devotees. In fact, there wasn't a single inch of space in the entire room. Because of the winter cold the windows and doors were all closed, and soon the room became like a sauna. I requested a devotee to open a window, remembering Srila Prabhupada's instruction to us in Geneva, Switzerland, in June 1974. Before a Srimad-Bhagavatam class he looked up and said to us,

“Open a window. Whenever there are a number of men in a room, a window must always be open.”

Such a simple, but practical instruction. If there's not proper ventilation in a room, devotees easily nod off to sleep in class. I began my lecture by describing the glories of the Panca Tattva and Lord Nityananda's role therein. During Kṛṣṇa's pastimes on this earth 5000 years ago, He demonstrated his Vrindavan-līla – but didn't share it with others. Thus Lord Balarama, the embodiment of mercy, didn't have a chance to give it either. But in His incarnation as Caitanya Mahāprabhu, the Lord brought that treasure chest of Vraja-prema, and Lord Balarama, as Nityananda, was the chief distributor of that special love.

After the class I performed another marriage ceremony, this time for five couples including Moscow temple president Syama das and his wife, Gaurangi dasi, both disciples of Radhanath Maharaja. Having performed five such marriages in my travels throughout Russia, I can practically do them with my eyes closed, which is almost what happened this morning because I was so tired! The ceremony went well and was especially auspicious because it was filmed by a national television crew. In Kali-yuga, auspiciousness is judged

by the degree that preaching goes on. Marriages are always a wonderful opportunity for preaching Krsna consciousness to the public, because they are very cultural. We take advantage of this in Poland each year at the Woodstock festival, where we hold a wedding in our big tent hosting more than 10,000 guests.

This afternoon I chanted my rounds, took prasadam, and spent a few precious moments with Sivarama Swami before he left for the airport to catch a plane to India. He told me of his plans to build two major temples in Hungary. He said that during his 50s he wants to construct a temple in Budapest, and another at the New Vraja Dhama community during his 60s. I was impressed by his extended vision and goals. For the second time in a year we discussed bringing the Polish tour to Hungary. The idea is there, if only because such an alliance could prove successful. Under Maharaja's direction, the Hungarian yatra is well structured and developing nicely. However, they have no festival program to promote public relations and make devotees. Although my tour is going well in Poland, it lacks support and we face stiff opposition from the Catholic Church and Polish government. Perhaps an alliance with the Hungarian yatra would prove more beneficial. I can only wait and look for signs from the Lord as to what He desires.

We concluded the auspicious day of Lord Nityananda's appearance with a big festival in a hall in downtown Moscow. Although I gave another talk to the 500 devotees present, I kept it short in order to leave several hours for another of Sri Prahlad's wonderful kirtans. As he'll be leaving with his wife in a few months to reside in Australia, I want to relish every opportunity to chant and dance with him. As Sivarama Swami said upon hearing that Sri Prahlad was moving on,

"It will be the end of an era."

What does the Lord have in store for me in the next era? Where will I be and with whom will I serve? I can only pray that I may always swim in the nectarian ocean of Sri Krsna sankirtan, chanting the holy names in the association of loving devotees.

samsara sarpa darsanam
mucitalam kalau yuge
asadham bhagavan nama
srimad vaisnava sevanam

“In the age of Kali, persons who have been bitten by the serpent of samsara, shall get relief by the medicinal herb of chanting the holy names of the Lord and menial service to the lotus feet of Vaisnavas.”

[Sri Sarvabhauma Battacarya]

New Facade Replaces Communism

Volume 3, Chapter 18

July 02, 2001, Moscow, Russia.

The Moscow temple, located near the center of the city, has served a steadily growing community of devotees since 1991. There are currently more than 1000 initiated devotees in Moscow and probably twice as many aspiring devotees. The temple is the nerve center of ISKCON Russia, brimming with offices housing ISKCON Communications, sankirtan, a big bhakta program, a Vaisnava University, and a Deity department. Well managed by Syama das, it is also the base for Vaidyanath das, the local GBC representative. The temple is always busy, with many devotees coming and going on their various duties. Each week a number of school groups visit the temple room, watch a fire yajna, hear a talk and take prasadam. Recently, however, city officials informed the devotees that they will have to move, because a highway is planned through the area where the temple is situated. At the moment, Vaidyanath and the other leaders are doing their utmost to find another location. It won't be easy.

Moscow is no longer the impoverished capital of communism I first came to in 1989. Although much of Russia is still struggling with the economic reforms initiated by the transition to democracy 10 years ago, Moscow seems to be booming. I can hardly recognize the city, compared with what I saw then. New buildings have sprung up all over the downtown area, with many businesses and organizations within. Men and women in suits and chic clothing walk busily throughout the city. Shops are brimming with clothes, appliances, furniture and food. Billboards advertise everywhere and bright neon signs pulsate from the buildings. But the new buildings and bright lights are only a facade, because behind them all so many sinful activities are going on. With the freedom of democracy have come also the sins of western society and Moscow, like all big cities in Kali Yuga, is now paying a heavy price for the prostitution, drugs, and gambling that goes on. Crime is rampant and corruption is common at the highest levels.

A stranger asked a brahmana, "Tell me, who in this city is great?"

The brahmana replied, "The cluster of thorny palmyra trees are great."

The traveller then asked, "Who is the most charitable person?"

The brahmana answered, "The washerman who takes the clothes in the morning and gives them back in the evening is the most charitable."

He then asked, "Who is the ablest man?"

The brahmana answered, "Everyone is expert in robbing others of their wives and wealth."

The man then asked the brahmana, "How do you manage to live in such a city?"

The brahmana replied, "As a worm survives while even in a filthy place so do I survive here!"

[Canakya Pandit - Niti Sastra Chapter 12, Text 9]

The devotees of the Lord, however, are not averse to living in such conditions. I remember while traveling on sankirtan in my earlier days, whenever we would drive into a big, polluted materialist city for the first time, we would jump with joy. We didn't notice the tall buildings, the shops, the lights and the sinful activities, we only saw thousands of conditioned souls about to get Lord Caitanya's mercy!

prayena deva munayah sva-vimukti kama
maunam caranti vijane na paratha nisthah
naitan vihaya krpanan vimumuksa eko
nanyam tvad asya saranam bhramato 'nupasye

"My dear Lord Nrsimhadeva, I see that there are many saintly persons indeed, but they are interested only in their own deliverance. Not caring for the big cities and towns, they go to the Himalayas or the forest to meditate with vows of silence [mauna-vrata]. They are not interested in delivering others. As for me, however, I do not wish to be liberated alone, leaving aside all these poor fools and rascals. I know that without Krsna consciousness, without taking shelter of Your lotus feet, one cannot be happy. Therefore I wish to bring them back to shelter at Your lotus feet."

Vaidyanath wants to purchase land on which to construct a temple in Moscow. Liaising with the Indian Embassy and the Indian congregation, he's working on the angle of a Center of Indian Culture. Shooting for the rhinoceros, he has met Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee twice – in New York at a United Nations Summit of Religions, and in New Delhi. Under Vaidyanath's direction, Russian devotee Madana Mohan met Russian President Vladimir Putin on his recent visit to New Delhi. Madana Mohan informed him of ISKCON's desire to obtain land in Moscow to build a center in cooperation with the Indian community. Moscow devotees say that President Putin is well informed about our movement. I'm sure there is no reason to doubt that. He was formerly head of the KBG, the Russian Secret Service. Devotees say that he was recently at an important function when someone offered him a glass of champagne. When he refused, the person said,

"Mr President, do you not drink?"

President Putin replied, "Of course not. I'm a Hare Krsna!"

Sri Prahlad gave class at the temple this morning. The devotees were as happy to see him as they are to see me. He spoke nicely and devotees were more than satisfied. This afternoon I went to the temple to address the 20 regional secretaries of ISKCON Russia, who were concluding a four-day meeting. When they asked for advice on leadership, I said the most important quality of a leader is purity. His essential duty is to inspire his followers in Krsna consciousness, and therefore his leadership begins by attending the full morning program. I also quoted Srila Prabhupada's advice to Giriraja Swami. When Srila Prabhupada was departing, he called Giriraja Swami to his side and asked him if he thought the movement would continue in his absence. Giriraja Swami replied with confidence that it would if devotees remained strict in chanting their rounds and following the regulative principles. Srila Prabhupada nodded, and asking Maharaja to come closer whispered in his ear,

"Intelligence and organization."

When I came out of the room one of my disciples approached me and requested I meet his parents, who had just arrived at the temple. I was exhausted from meeting the regional secretaries and I hadn't taken prasadam all day. Trying to get out of it, I suggested I could meet them the next day, but he insisted and I reluctantly agreed. However, instead of doing

the proper thing and sitting with them in the guest room, I said I would meet them on my way to the car. As I neared the shoe room, my disciple's parents came forward and warmly shook my hand, thanking me for all the help I have given their son.

They were nicely dressed and spoke articulately. I immediately realized my mistake, but it was too late to backtrack. I did my best to cover for my foolishness by chatting with them; but the time and place were uncomfortable – we were surrounded by shoes and socks. After a few minutes they graciously went with their son into the guest room. As I proceeded to the car, Syama approached me and asked if I knew who the father of my disciple was. When I said I didn't he replied,

“He's the chief engineer in the biggest nuclear plant in Russia. Even big American scientists come to consult with him.”

Srila Prabhupada, when will this coarse fool ever be the gentleman you wanted me to be?

This evening I met Suddha das and other leaders from southern Russia. We made plans for the big festival we'll be holding in Divnomorsk, near Krasnodar, in May, honoring the appearance of Lord Nrsimhadeva. We expect that more than 2000 devotees will attend. At the meeting, Suddha told me how the Deity of Lord Nrsimhadeva in Krasnodar was recently stolen and eventually rescued. Five years ago the Krasnodar devotees installed a large Nrsimhadeva murti sitting in a lotus posture. Yoga Nrsimha has become well known in the region – even non-devotees come to see His beautiful, but ferocious form. On December 9, an intruder entered the temple unnoticed when most devotees were out on sankirtan. The person grabbed the Deity off the altar and quickly disappeared. When the devotees discovered the theft several hours later they were devastated and heartbroken. They called the police, who said that with no evidence little could be done. Local television, radio and newspapers covered the event, showing pictures of a bare altar. The devotees contacted the local underworld, and several gangsters suggested the culprit could be part of a Russian Mafia which specializes in stealing relics from churches and mosques and then selling them back to the followers. They hinted that the Mafia may approach devotees in another city and try to sell them the Deity. Suddha sent an e-mail warning all Russian temples to be alert for anyone selling the murti. Sure enough, six days later a man approached some devotees in St Petersburg with the Deity of Lord Nrsimhadeva. The devotees had not been informed of Suddha's letter – nor even suspected the Deity might be stolen. With enthusiasm, they collected enough money to purchase the Deity and made the transaction at their apartment.

Just after the man left to catch a train south, the devotees went on COM where they discovered Suddha's e-mail. Though fuming, there was little they could do – the man had disappeared into the night.

Suddenly there was a knock on the door, and when the devotees opened it there stood the man! He explained that he had missed his train and wanted to know if he could stay the night. Keeping their cool, the devotees agreed and made a comfortable arrangement for him. When he was sound asleep, they called the police who immediately came and arrested the man. He faces a minimum five-year prison sentence if convicted. The devotees had a huge festival welcoming the Lord home. Suddha said it was like the residents of Dwarka welcoming Lord Krsna back to His city. When the car carrying the Deity approached the Krasnodar temple, devotees burst into tears and offered obeisances from all directions. As they carried Lord Nrsimhadeva back to His altar, hundreds of devotees clamored to get a view of Him, unable to believe that their ista deva, their worshipful Lord, had actually returned. A big abhiseka ceremony was held and the devotees lovingly bathed the Lord, more with their tears than with water. At the conclusion, the whole temple community chanted and danced in ecstasy in front of the same television, radio and newspaper reporters who had originally covered the theft.

The next day Lord Nrsimhadeva was the talk of Krasnodar. Many people came to see the Lord who was stolen, but in the end Himself stole the hearts of His loving devotees!

ugro 'py anugra evayam
sva-bhaktanam na kesari
kesariva sva potanam
anyesam ugra vikrama

“Although very ferocious, the lioness is very kind to her cubs. Similarly, although very ferocious to non-devotees like Hiranyakasipu, Lord Nrsimhadeva is very, very soft and kind to devotees like Prahlada Maharaja.”

[Srila Sridhara Swami]

Meditation on Narottama Dasa Thakura

Volume 3, Chapter 19

August 02, 2001, Moscow, Russia.

Today was the auspicious celebration of the appearance of Srila Narottama das Thakura. As Narottama das Thakura is one of my favorite acaryas, I rose early to read his biography, compiled by my god-sister Sitala dasi. She spent years researching his life in various sastras and will soon be publishing a book. She gave me the manuscript to edit and I keep it with me at all times.

Being a deeply realized lover of God and stalwart preacher, Narottama das Thakura embodies everything I would like to achieve in devotional service. The many songs he wrote guide us from the beginning stages of devotional service to the higher levels of pure love.

Once Srila Gaura Kishore das Babaji was asked by a follower,

“What is the price one must pay for achieving love of God?”

He replied, “Five paise!”

Taken aback, his surprised follower said,

“Five paise! How is that possible?”

Srila Gaura Kishore das Babaji replied,

“Yes, you can understand everything about achieving love of Krsna by going to the marketplace and purchasing Srila Narottama das Thakura’s two books, Prema Bhakti Candrika and Prathana for five paise!”

At the temple this morning I spoke for over an hour and a half, and covered only half the life of Narottama das Thakura. I concluded by saying that I would continue the narration this evening at our second Moscow temple, located just outside the city. As evening approached we drove the 20km to the center, which is home for about 50 devotees. The complex comprises a large wooden building used for the temple room and four smaller buildings that house devotees. Upon arriving I went into the temple room and found more than 200 devotees eager to hear more about the glories of Srila Narottama das Thakura. I spoke for two hours, and still didn’t complete the narrations of his pastimes! At the end I promised I

would continue “part three” tomorrow morning back at the city temple. Sri Prahlad concluded the program with a rousing kirtan.

On the way back to our apartment in the city, I reflected on the great mercy that I have received in relation to Srila Narottama das Thakura. Last year, in my wanderings through Vrindavan, I chanced upon a somewhat isolated building near the Gopiswara Mahadeva temple. The sign outside read, “Vraja Mohan Temple – Deities of Narottama das Thakura.” Curious, I entered the old temple and came before the altar. Just at that moment, the curtain opened and I beheld the beautiful forms of Srimate Radharani and Vraja Mohan . Vraja Mohan was personally installed by Srila Narottama das Thakura at the first Gaura-purnima festival that he organized in Kethuri (now Bangladesh) some years after the departure of Lord Caitanya Mahaprabhu. Narottama had organized that great event to bring together the many Gaudiya Vaisnavas who were in some ways inactive after the departure of Lord Caitanya. Feeling the pain of separation from the Lord, they could hardly lift the karatalas or drums to spread the chanting of the holy names. Without strong leadership, various apasampradayas had also begun to spring up, deviating from the strict teachings of Srila Rupa Goswami. Narottama wanted to bring the Gaudiya Vaisnava community together in order to inspire them and organize the preaching of Lord Caitanya’s teachings throughout India. Great devotees like Lord Nityananda’s wife, Jahnava mata, attended the grand festival.

Many thousands of devotees came from Vrindavan, Bengal, Puri and Orissa, and everyone relished the kṛṣṇa-katha and the kirtans, especially those of Srila Narottama das Thakura. Narottama installed six Deities of Kṛṣṇa at that historic event, and several years later sent one of those Deities, Vraja Mohan, to Vrindavan, as he had many disciples there who were feeling his separation. Along with the Deity he also sent some of his personal effects. Standing before Radha-Vraja Mohan, I marveled at my good fortune to see the personal Deity of one of my great heroes in Kṛṣṇa consciousness. The next evening I returned to the temple with a large kirtan party. We entered the compound roaring the holy names and dancing in great ecstasy. Before coming, I had narrated to the devotees many of the pastimes of Narottama das Thakur, including his installing Vraja Mohan. So the devotees entered the temple in great expectation. Grateful for such a special darsan, we continued chanting and dancing for hours. Several times we changed from the maha mantra to jaya Narottama, jaya Narottama, jaya Narottama, singing as loud as we could. Because the mood

was so sweet having kirtan in front of such an amazing Deity, we returned each evening for several days. Each time the kirtan was more ecstatic. On the fourth evening at the end of the kirtan, we sat exhausted upon the ground drenched in sweat, but feeling great satisfaction in our hearts. At that moment, the Bengali pujari who had been watching us in amazement those few days came forward, begging if he could give me anything. I had noticed a number of beautiful salagram silas on a cushion on the altar and I said that if he desired, he could give me one of Them.

He smiled and went towards the altar, but instead of taking one of the silas from the cushion he reached towards a special silver bowl, just next to Vraja Mohan's feet, and took out a small govardhan sila. Coming back to me, he placed it in my hand and said softly, "This govardhan sila came with Vraja Mohan from Keturi. He was worshipped by Srila Narottama das Thakura!"

I was stunned, as were the many devotees around me. Everyone became silent as we stared at the govardhan sila in disbelief. Then the pujari returned to the silver bowl and took out a small salagram sila, the same size as the govardhan sila. Returning again to us, he placed that sila in my hand and said,

"He was also worshipped by Narottama!"

Then without pausing, he wheeled around and went back to the silver bowl one last time and brought back a small dwarka sila, the same size as the two previous silas.

"And he was also worshipped by the Thakura!"

All three silas together looked like precious jewels. But in fact, they were infinitely more valuable! Of course, no one can say for sure if those Deities were worshipped by Narottama das Thakura, but considering the prominent position They had on the altar I had no reason to doubt that They were. I took it as mercy which comes of its own accord and paid my full dandavats at the lotus feet of Vraja Mohan.

Because the mood of the pujari was so pure and because he asked for nothing in return, several days later I came back and expressed my desire to do service for Radha-Vraja Mohan. With the help of god-brothers, like Giriraja Maharaja, we are now renovating the old temple, supplying new dresses for the Deities and arranging for the daily bhoga for the Deity.

The mercy of Lord Caitanya and his associates is unlimited and flows like a fast-moving river. Recently, when I visited Vraja Mohan again, my pujari friend called me to a room near the altar, and opening an old trunk with great reverence pulled out an ancient stone plate and metal pot, placing them in my hands with tears in his eyes. He said,

“These items also accompanied Vraja Mohan 450 years ago. This is the very pot that Narottama das Thakura would cook in and this is the plate that he took prasadam from. I’m giving them to you.”

It’s difficult to fathom how such mercy comes our way. We can only wonder at the ways of the Lord and reciprocate as best we can.

Dear Narottama das Thakura, please help me carry on your mission in this world, assisting my spiritual master in delivering the fallen souls, bereft of the mercy of such souls as yourself! May Visvanath Cakravati’s glorification of you be my constant meditation!

sri-krsna-manamrta-varsi-vaktra-
candra-prabha-dhvasta-tamo-bharaya
gaurangadevanucaraya tasmai
namo namah srila-narottamaya

“I offer respectful obeisances to Srila Narottama das Thakura, a sincere follower of Lord Gaurangadeva. Emitting a shower of the nectar of the holy name, with its splendor, the moon of His mouth destroys the darkness of ignorance.”

sankirtanandaja-manda-hasya
danta-dyuti-dyotita-dinmukhaya
svedasru-dhara-snapitaya tasmai
namo namah srila-narottamaya

“I offer my respectful obeisances to Srila Narottama das Thakura. Blissful by singing Krsna’s glories, he would become bathed in streams of perspiration and the splendor of his teeth and gentle smile would illuminate all directions.”

mrdanga-nama-sruti-matra-cancat-
padambuja-dvandva-manoharaya
sadyah samudyat-pulakaya tasmai
namo namah srila-narottamaya

“I offer my respectful obeisances to Srila Narottama das Thakura. Hearing the mrdangas and the sound of the holy name, he would dance, moving his enchanting lotus feet and the hairs of his body erect in ecstasy.”

gandharva-garva-ksapana-svalasya-
vismapitasesa-krti-vrajaya
sva-srsta-gana-prathitaya tasmai
namo namah srila narottamaya

“I offer respectful obeisances to Srila Narottama das Thakura. His dancing dispelled the Gandharvas’ pride. His devotional activities filled everyone with wonder. His songs made him famous.”

ananda-murcchavani-pata-bhata-
dhuli-bharalankrta-vigrahaya
yad-darsanam bhagya-bharena tasmai
namo namah srila narottamaya

“I offer respectful obeisances to Srila Narottama das Thakura. He would sometimes faint in ecstasy and fall to the ground, his body decorated with dust. The very fortunate would see him in that way.”

sthale sthale yasya krpa-prabhabhih
krsnanya-trsna jana-samhatinam
nirmulita eva bhavanti tasmai
namo namah srila narottamaya

“I offer respectful obeisances to Srila Narottama das Thakura. In place after place the splendor of his mercy uprooted the people’s thirst for anything other than Krsna.”

yad-bhakti-nisthopala-rekhikeva
sparsah punah sparsamaniva yasya
pramanyam evam srutivad yadiyam
tasmai namah srila narottamaya

“I offer respectful obeisances to Srila Narottama das Thakura. His firm faith in devotional service to Krsna is like a necklace of precious stones. His touch is like a sparsamani jewel. His words are like the four Vedas.”

murtaiva bhaktih kim ayam kim esa
vairagya-saras tanuman nr-loke
sambhavyate yah krtibhih sadaiva
tasmai namah srila narottamaya

“I offer respectful obeisances to Srila Narottama das Thakura. The devotees always wonder: Is he devotional service personified? Is he the essence of renunciation who has descended to the world of human beings in this form?”

rajan-mrdanga-karatala-kalabhiramam
gauranga-gana-madhu-pana-bharabhiramam
sriman-narottama-padambuja-manju-nrtyam
bhrtiyam krtarthayatu mam phalitesta-krtiyam

“May the dancing of Sri Narottama’s lotus feet, which is graceful with the melodious sounds of karatalas and mrdangas, and which is sweet with the honey of Lord Gauranga, fulfill the spiritual desires of me, his servant.”

[Srila Visvanath Cakravati Thakura - Srila Narottama-prabhor-astaka]

On a Razor’s Edge

Volume 3, Chapter 20

September 02, 2001, Moscow, Russia.

On the way to visit the Moscow gurukula this morning, we received an impassioned call from Sakatara das, who was at the train station purchasing our tickets to St Petersburg. In a distressed voice he said that a powerful bomb had exploded in the station on the level just below him. A number of people appeared to have been killed and many more injured. People were panicking and running everywhere and the police were heading to the scene. We discussed the situation, and I told him to leave immediately. We would fly to St Petersburg rather than take the train. A number of bombs have gone off in Moscow during the past year. Though no one has been arrested, the government blames the Chechen rebels and uses that suspicion to pursue the war in Chechnya. Many people believe, however, that it is the government itself planting the bombs. Some time ago, four KGB agents were found under an apartment complex setting up explosives. When questioned by the police they said they were practicing. Few believe them. The people say that the government plants the bombs and kills its own people, while blaming the Chechen rebels in order to get financial support

for the war. Disgusted with the possibility of such government involvement and fearful for their lives, a number of people have moved out of Moscow.

“One should always deal cautiously with fire, water, women, foolish people, serpents, and members of a royal family, for they may, when the occasion presents itself, at once bring about our death.

[Canakya Pandit - Niti Sastra, Chapter 14, Text 11]

Such unfortunate situations were predicted in the Twelfth Canto of Srimad-Bhagavatam, describing the symptoms of the coming of the age of Kali:

praja hi lubdhai rajanyair
nirghrñair dasyu-dharmabhih
acchinna-dara-dravina
yasyanti giri kananam

“Losing their wives and properties to such avaricious and merciless rulers, who will behave no better than ordinary thieves, the citizens will flee to the mountains and forests.”

[SB 12.2.8]

The people of Russia have a long history of oppression by their rulers. The change to democracy has not really altered things. Actually, the only effective change will come when the leaders are Kṛṣṇa conscious. A Kṛṣṇa conscious leader is satisfied in and of himself, and thus has no reason to exploit others; and the people are happy with him because he knows the art of fulfilling their material and spiritual needs. The fact is, if the leaders encouraged the people to simply chant Hare Kṛṣṇa en mass, the world would quickly become heaven on earth.

saha yajñah prajāḥ sṛstva
purovaca prajāpatih
anena prasaviśyadhvam
esa vo ‘stv ista kama dhuk

“In the beginning of creation, the Lord of all creatures sent forth generations of men and demigods, along with sacrifices for Viṣṇu, and blessed them by saying, ‘Be thou happy by this yajña [sacrifice] because its performance will bestow upon you everything desirable for living happily and achieving liberation.’”

[BG 3.10]

This afternoon we went to the airport to catch our flight to St Petersburg. While waiting in the departure lounge, I spotted a Tibetan Lama, sitting alone, peacefully waiting for the flight. I was attracted to his apparent simplicity and renunciation. He was dressed in traditional Buddhist robes and carried only a small bag. My emotions on seeing him were similar to the first time I ever saw someone in the robes of an Eastern religion. When I was 19, I flew on a plane from Cairo, Egypt, to Beirut, Lebanon. I was on a pilgrim's journey, searching for the goal of life. I had been in Egypt studying the ways of the ancient Pharaohs and was on my way to Lebanon to inquire about the Islamic faith. While I was adjusting my seat belt and readying myself for the flight, I looked up and saw a Caucasian boy about my age coming down the aisle. He had a shaven head and was dressed in light saffron robes. He also carried a small bag, and he had a book in his hand. I was mesmerized by his peaceful countenance and effulgence.

I studied him carefully throughout the flight. The entire time he had his eyes closed in meditation, opening them only as the plane began its descent into Beirut.

I thought to myself, "I want to be like him."

After we landed and passed through immigration I tried to find him to speak to him; but he had already gone. He had no possessions to collect and cleared Customs quicker than I. Years later, I reflected that my not being able to meet him was Krsna's mercy. Most likely he was an impersonalist, and meeting him may well have sent me down the wrong path. But his spirit of renunciation impressed me and stayed with me. Seeing the Tibetan monk again brought forth feelings of admiration. It is not easy to renounce this world in any way, means or manner. But my appreciation was soon mixed with doubt, when I saw a middle-aged woman in a fur coat come to collect him from the departure lounge and take him to the plane. After a few moments, I could understand that she was traveling with him and helping him in various ways. They didn't appear to be transgressing religious principles, but the idea of a woman in a fur coat helping an elderly Tibetan monk didn't sit right in my mind. Once seated on the plane, I was again impressed when he took out his beads and began chanting. A few minutes later, however, I noticed him reading a magazine and studying the advertisements containing women and intoxication. I still feel he was sincere in his own way – but not careful enough about how he carried himself. I thought to myself that I must be more careful in my travels, for I also sometimes pick up a Newsweek magazine and read it in-flight. It's of no benefit to me, and I can only imagine what other passengers must think of the monk in saffron reading the worldly news.

uttisthata jagrata

prapya varan nibodhata

knurasya dhara nisita duratyaya

durgam pathas tat kavayo vadanti

“Please wake up and try to understand the boon that you now have in this human form of life.

The path of spiritual realization is very difficult; it is sharp like a razor’s edge. That is the opinion of learned transcendental scholars.”

[Katha Upanisad 1.3.14]

Close Ties with St. Petersburg Yatra

Volume 3, Chapter 21

October 02 – November 02, 2001, St. Petersburg, Russia.

Last night we had to fly to St Petersburg from Moscow because of the large bomb that exploded in the Moscow train station yesterday. We are four devotees, and the flight was much more expensive, but we didn’t want to risk taking the train. There’s a saying that lightening never strikes the same place twice, at the same day the bomb went off in Moscow I read how the Palestinians detonated two powerful bombs in Israel minutes apart, in the same location.

St Petersburg is the second largest city in Russia and the country’s largest seaport. Construction of the city began in 1703, ordered by Russian Tsar Peter the Great. It is one of those cities that was actually planned, thus unlike many other cities there is order and semblance, at least in the sections that Peter the Great built. Wide avenues crisscross the town and large parks are everywhere. St Petersburg is also known for its many canals. Peter the Great brought in architects, builders and artisans from all over Europe to accomplish his feat of building the city on what was previously a huge swamp. But time, and mainly communism, ruined much of what he did. Most of the beautiful churches and cathedrals he built were torn down by the communists, who used the very same bricks to build factories on the same location. That is why while driving through St Petersburg, one finds huge factories spewing dark smoke right in the center of town. And most of the beautiful buildings, canals and parks have deteriorated due to neglect. Unlike Moscow, where reconstruction is going strong because 90 percent of Russia’s money is invested there, the people of St Petersburg haven’t been able to restore their beautiful city. I remember in 1991 there was a brief effort to

do so by the local city government, but due to corruption the whole thing fell apart. ISKCON also built up an impressive yatra here in the late 1990s, but recent events have also brought the yatra to its knees. The departure of prominent leaders of the highest order have left devotees confused and unorganized. It is something I encounter in other places on my travels, a dark chapter in the history of our movement that I pray will not happen again. The most visual effect of such a problem here is that we lost the large and beautiful temple that we had. In an ironic twist of history, my lecture this morning was held in the very same hall that I spoke in when I first came to St Petersburg in 1989. When we entered the old hall, the devotees were in a very somber mood. The hall itself was unclean and too small for the 50 devotees present. Being there was like *deja vu* for me – the same hall, the same old stage and curtain and the same devotees, the only difference being that 12 years down the road the devotees don't have the same enthusiasm due to the problems in the yatra. Nevertheless, they have remained faithful to Krsna consciousness despite those difficulties, and I felt it my duty to help uplift their spirits and inspire them. So did Sri Prahlad, who taking compassion on the these devotees upon arriving, picked up an old broken drum and led a one-and-a half-hour kirtan that had us transcending all problems. I also gave more time to my lecture and answering the devotees' questions.

During my talk I noticed a girl in her late teens listening attentively. Generally when I lecture, I try to find two or three people in the audience who are keen to hear what I am saying, and I concentrate my talk on them. It's a technique I learned in a public speaking class I took in high school. In any public audience you will find a variety of listeners, from casual to eyes wide open. This particular young lady seemed to be staring ahead, without moving at all. I thought it was unusual, and because she was so fixed she caught my attention and I choose her as the recipient of my talk. After a lecture, it is customary for visiting sannyasis to distribute prasadam to the members of the audience, who eagerly come forward to receive cookies, sweet balls, or even cake. When they approach I sometimes speak briefly with them; inquiring how they are, giving quick advice to their problems, and often giving spiritual names to newborn babies! When the teenage girl who was listening so carefully to my lecture came forward, I was shocked to see that she was blind. With the help of a friend, she held out her hand for prasadam and thanked me for the talk. I inquired how long she had been practicing Krsna consciousness, and she replied six months. Curious about her situation, I asked her to come and see me after the program. During Sri Prahlad's kirtan, I noticed her chanting and dancing enthusiastically, although because she was blind her

dancing was not synchronized with the devotees around her. Holding on to the arm of her friend, she later came to see me, introducing herself as Katya. She told me she had lost her sight several years ago, when doctors had given her the wrong injections for an illness. She came in contact with Krsna consciousness by hearing the kirtans of devotees who moved into the apartment next to her family. Because she had lost her sight, her sense of hearing had become more sensitive and she was immediately attracted to the sound of the holy name, as well as the smell of her new neighbors cooking prasadam. She finally visited the devotees next door, who preached to her and encouraged her in Krsna consciousness.

I was very inspired by her story. For me it once again demonstrated the glories of the holy name to reveal everything to us in spiritual life. As Srila Prabhupada often said, our eyes are limited to what little they can see in this world, but through our ears we can “see” everything of the spiritual world by hearing from a pure devotee of the Lord.

I told Katya the story of the saint Bivalmangal Thakura, who took his own eyesight because he could not refrain from looking at the beauty of the opposite sex. Retiring to Vrindavan, he peacefully practiced Krsna consciousness, eventually becoming a pure devotee of the Lord. As I told the story, Katya was absorbed and listening to every detail. At the end she said,

“Yes, my blindness is a mixed blessing. Had I not lost my eyesight, I may never have developed an interest in spiritual life. After meeting devotees I don’t lament I can’t see this world, because I know one day I’ll see the beauty of the spiritual world.”

vyadhasyacaranam dhruvasya ca vidya gejendrasya ka

kubjayah kim u nama rupam adhikam kim tat sudamno dhanam

bhaktya tusyati kevalam na ca gunair bhakti priyo madhava

“Where were the hunter Dharma’s piety, Dhruva’s maturity, and Gajendra’s knowledge?

Where was Kubja’s beauty? Where was Sudama’s wealth? Where was Vidura’s noble birth?

Where was Ugrasena’s chivalrous strength? Lord Madhava is pleased only by devotional service and not by material qualifications.”

[Rupa Goswami's Padyavali]

This evening I gave another lecture, finishing with an impromptu initiation on the stage. As I won’t be returning here for some time, two aspiring disciples in their late 70s requested I accept them as disciples before going. To one who was bedridden at home, I gave the name Bhakti Priya dasi, and to another who made her vows and accepted her beads before me, I

gave the name Lalita Sakhi dasi. I was surprised when I asked Lalita Sakhi what her service was. She replied that she goes around St Petersburg collecting old clothes from people, which she then repairs and gives to devotees who can't afford to buy such things. When she said that, several devotees smiled and pointed to their coats or sweaters, which although old were in suitable shape to wear, by the loving devotion of Lalita sakhi dasi. I also gave initiation to 17-year-old Vrnda, who became Vrinda rani. She has been sick with tuberculosis for years and missed out on the initiation ceremonies I performed for her gurukula classmates during that time. With that I stood up to leave and begin my long journey back to India, and onwards to South Africa.

Upon walking downstairs, I met six men from Turkmenistan who were waiting in the lobby. Poorly dressed in traditional Muslim attire, they came forward to meet me. I greeted them with an Islamic expression, "Salaam-alekam," and they replied the same. They said they were refugees who had no work or money, and a friend had told them they could meet someone who would help them at the hall this evening. I apologized, saying that I was also visiting Russia and couldn't help them in a practical way. But I offered to pray for their spiritual progress and assured them that Allah would protect them. Being pious men, they were satisfied with that and they all embraced me simultaneously. Speaking in Arabic, they gave me their own blessings for a safe onward journey. I took their blessings to heart and walked out of the building to a rousing kirtan of blissful devotees. Many were crying. We had spent only two days together, but because of the deep bonds created by chanting and dancing together on the transcendental platform, the ties of affection for each other were strong – and so too the feelings of separation. It's always difficult for me to leave devotees after a visit. It's probably the greatest austerity in being a traveling preacher. ISKCON devotees are special souls, serving the mission of Srila Prabhupada and Lord Caitanya Mahaprabhu. I offer them my most respectful obeisances.

yad avadhi hari nama
pradur asit prthivyam
tad avadhi khalu loka
vaisnavah sarvatas te
tilaka vimala mala
nama yuktah pavitrah

hari hari kalin madhye

evam evam babhuva

“From the time that the Holy Name of Hari was manifest on the earth, Vaisnava folk began appearing everywhere, adorned with faultless tilaka and neck beads and equipped with the maha mantra. In the midst of the age of Kali, they purified the atmosphere, chanting ‘Hari! Hari!’ So indeed it came to pass.”

[Sri Gauranga-mahimamṛta - Sarvabhauma Battacarya]

Chapter Seventeen

ALLIES IN MOSCOW

• FEBRUARY 6, 2001 •

THE FLIGHT TO MOSCOW YESTERDAY AFTERNOON WAS UNEVENTFUL. I kept my eyes open for something to comment on in the diary, but it's not always available. After all, this is the material world and things aren't generally exciting. Kṛṣṇa consciousness is the only source of interest. I read a statistic recently that said people are happy only five percent of the time, miserable five percent of the time, and bored ninety percent of the time! Śrīla Prabhupāda once said, "I've been everywhere and seen everything. My advice to you all is to take *sannyāsa*."

We were met at Moscow Airport by a group of disciples, including Rāja Rāma dāsa who came to pick me up in his car. Rāja Rāma and his wife, Janaka Nandinī dāśī, are the kind of disciples the spiritual master thinks Kṛṣṇa has sent to help him. In fact, when I reflect on their service to me I often remember a letter Śrīla Prabhupāda wrote to one of my Godbrothers in South Africa, wherein he says that when he remembers that particular disciple's service, his "chest swells with pride." I have a number of disciples I think of in that way, and Rāja Rāma and Janaka Nandinī are two of them. Successful in business (in Russia!) they generously support my preaching programs throughout the year. I can honestly say that without their help, the Polish tour would not exist. Everyone knows that it's not easy to make money (and even more difficult to give it away), but by their own desire this couple give more to my preaching than they keep for themselves. I have instructed them to maintain a proper



standard of life for themselves and to put *Lakṣmī* aside for their future, but their donations increase because they simply expand their business efforts in order to continue serving their spiritual master's mission.

Their dedication reminds me of the surrender of Śrīla Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī's householder disciples. Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī had a policy that householder couples give all their monthly earnings to the temple, and he would return to them whatever they needed to "keep body and soul together." The greater part of their earnings was thus used in his preaching mission. His householder disciples were pleased to serve their spiritual master in this way and play an active role in his preaching. Rāja Rāma and Janaka Nandinī have that kind of dedication because they have faith in the programs we are doing. They also often come to Poland to participate in the tour.

Their faith is fueled by the fact that they regularly hear from their spiritual master. Each day they listen to lectures from my Russian tape ministry. I always emphasize to my disciples the importance of hearing from the spiritual master. Hearing is the main connection we have with our guru. The results can easily be seen in the service of this ideal householder couple, who despite offering so much remain humble in character.

Another reason that Rāja Rāma is successful in his service is because of his effervescent personality. He's always bright and cheerful. Combined with his happiness as a devotee, he sometimes comes across as almost intoxicated. On the ride from the airport to our apartment in Moscow, Jananivāsa told me that a few days ago a policeman had stopped Rāja Rāma while he was driving through Moscow. Seeing Rāja Rāma's big smile, the policeman was convinced he was under the influence of alcohol. He made him get out of the car and take a breath test. The policeman was shocked when the result was negative! He stood there dumbfounded as Rāja Rāma got back in the car and drove away, wishing him all happiness, leaving him with a clue to his bliss by shouting: "Chant the holy names and your life will be sublime!"

Kṛṣṇa consciousness is not without its serious and sober moods, however. As we neared the apartment, one of the local devotees accompanying us informed me that one of my Russian disciples, Vidyā Vilāsinī dāsī, had passed away of cancer a few days before. I didn't know Vidyā Vilāsinī that well. Like many disciples, my association with her was somewhat limited due to my responsibilities around the world. But in the transcendental sense, that does not affect my concern and love for her as my eternal disciple. Even though I am only one insignificant disciple of Śrīla Prabhupāda, I feel the support and love he gives me, although I have been serving him in separation for twenty-four years. Actually, there is no question of separation from the spiritual master if we are meditating on him constantly by serving his instructions. Śrīla Prabhupāda concludes his commentary on *Śrī Caitanya-caritāmṛta* by emphasizing this



most important point. He says of his own *guru Mahārāja*: “He lives forever by his divine instructions - and the follower lives with him.”

When I heard of Vidyā Vilāsinī’s departure I felt remorse. I thought that with the departure of any Vaiṣṇava, the world becomes a little less fortunate. Devotees are the only source of auspiciousness in this material world, and the masses are dependent upon them for any blessings in life. So as not to let the seriousness of the moment pass, and to fulfill my eternal responsibilities to Vidyā Vilāsinī as her well-wisher and guide, I closed my eyes before getting out of the car and prayed to Śrīla Prabhupāda to take her soul to his lotus feet. That is the best blessing I (still a child in spiritual life) can offer my beloved disciples.

After taking a shower this morning, I sat down to read about the glories of Lord Nityānanda from *Śrī Caitanya-caritāmṛta*. It is His appearance day, and although Śivarāma Swami is also visiting Moscow, I was asked to give the morning class. Before leaving for the temple, I contacted Mahārāja and offered that he give the class. That is the proper etiquette, for he is my *sannyāsa-guru*. I received the *sannyāsa-mantra* from him when the person who originally gave me *sannyāsa* fell away. Mahārāja humbly declined, however, and said I should speak.

The temple room was packed with hundreds of devotees. In fact, there wasn’t a centimeter of space in the entire room. Because of the winter cold, all the windows and doors were closed, and the room soon resembled a sauna. I requested a devotee to open a window, remembering Śrīla Prabhupāda’s instruction to us in Geneva, Switzerland, in June 1974. Before a *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* class, he looked up and said to us, “Open a window. Whenever there are a number of men in a room, a window must always be open.” Such a simple but practical instruction. If there’s no proper ventilation in a room, devotees easily nod off in class.

I began my lecture by describing the glories of the Panca Tattva and Lord Nityānanda’s role among them. During Kṛṣṇa’s pastimes on earth five thousand years ago, He demonstrated his Vṛndāvana-līlā but didn’t share it with others. Thus Lord Balarāma, the embodiment of mercy, didn’t have a chance to distribute it either. But in His incarnation as Caitanya Mahāprabhu, the Lord brought the treasure chest of Vraja-prema, and Lord Balarāma, as Lord Nityānanda, was its chief distributor.

After the class I performed another marriage ceremony, this time for five couples, including Moscow’s temple president Śyāma dāsa and his wife, Gaurāṅgi dāsī, both disciples of Rādhānātha Mahārāja. Having performed five such marriages in my travels through Russia, I can practically do them with my eyes closed, which almost happened this morning because I was so tired! The ceremony went well and was especially auspicious because it was filmed



by a national television crew. In Kali-yuga, auspiciousness is judged by the degree that preaching goes on. Marriages are always a wonderful opportunity for preaching Kṛṣṇa consciousness to the public, because they are cultural. We take advantage of publicizing cultural events in Poland each year at the Woodstock Festival, and hold weddings in our big tent that can host more than 10,000 guests.

This afternoon I chanted my rounds, took *prasādam*, and spent a few precious moments with Śivarāma Swami before he left for the airport to catch his flight to India. He told me of his plans to build two major temples in Hungary. He said that while he's in his fifties he wants to construct a temple in Budapest, and while he's in his sixties, another at the New Vraja-dhāma community. I was impressed by his extended vision and goals. For the second time in a year we discussed bringing the Polish tour to Hungary. The idea is there, if only because such an alliance could prove successful. Under Mahārāja's direction, the Hungarian *yatra* is well structured and developing nicely. However, they have no festival program to promote public relations and make devotees. Although my tour is going well in Poland, it lacks support and we face stiff opposition from both the Catholic Church and Polish government. Perhaps an alliance with the Hungarian *yatra* would prove beneficial. I can only wait and look for signs from the Lord as to what He desires.

We concluded the auspicious day of Lord Nityānanda's appearance with a big festival in a hall in downtown Moscow. Although I gave another talk to the five hundred devotees present, I kept it short in order to leave several hours for another of Śrī Prahlāda's wonderful *kīrtanas*. As he'll be leaving with his wife in a few months to reside in Australia, I want to relish every opportunity to chant and dance with him. As Śivarāma Swami said upon hearing that Śrī Prahlāda was moving on, "It will be the end of an era."

What does the Lord have in store for me during the next era? Where will I be and with whom will I serve? I can only pray that I may always swim in the nectarean ocean of Śrī Kṛṣṇa *saṅkīrtana*, chanting the holy names in the association of loving devotees.

*saṁsāra sarpa darśanam
mucitālaṁ kalau yuge
asadham bhagavan nāma
śrīmad vaiṣṇava sevnam*

In the age of Kali, persons who have been bitten by the serpent of *saṁsāra*, shall get relief by the medicinal herb of chanting the holy names of the Lord and menial service to the lotus feet of Vaiṣṇavas.

—Sarvabhauma Bhaṭṭācārya

Chapter Eighteen

NEW FACADE REPLACES COMMUNISM

• FEBRUARY 7, 2001 •

THE MOSCOW TEMPLE, located near the center of the city, has served a steadily growing community of devotees since 1991. There are currently more than a thousand initiated devotees in Moscow, and probably twice as many aspiring devotees. The temple is the nerve center of ISKCON Russia, brimming with offices housing ISKCON Communications, *sāṅkīrtana*, a big *bhakta* program, a Vaiṣṇava university, and a Deity department. Well managed by Śyāma, it is also the base for Vaidyanātha dāsa, the local Governing Body Commission (GBC) representative. The temple is always busy, with many devotees coming and going on their various duties. Each week a number of school groups visit the temple room, watch a fire *yajña*, hear a talk, and take *prasādam*. Recently, however, city officials informed the devotees that they will have to move, because a highway is planned through the area where the temple is situated. At the moment, Vaidyanātha and the other leaders are doing their utmost to find another location.

It won't be easy. Moscow is no longer the impoverished capital of communism I first came to know in 1989. Although much of Russia is still struggling with the economic reforms initiated by the transition to democracy ten years ago, Moscow seems to be booming. I can hardly recognize the city compared with what it was then. New buildings have sprung up all over the downtown area along with businesses and organizations. Men and women in suits and chic clothing walk busily through the streets. Shops brim with



clothes, appliances, furniture, and food. There are billboards everywhere, and bright neon signs pulse from the buildings.

However, the new buildings and bright lights are only a facade, because behind them there are so many sinful activities going on. With the freedom of democracy has come the sins of Western society, and Moscow, like all big cities in Kali-yuga, is paying a heavy price. Prostitution, drug abuse, and gambling are rampant, and corruption is common at the highest levels.

A stranger asked a *brāhmaṇa*, “Tell me, who in this city is great?”

The *brāhmaṇa* replied, “The cluster of thorny palmyra trees are great.”

The traveler then asked, “Who is the most charitable person?”

The *brāhmaṇa* answered, “The washerman who takes the clothes in the morning and gives them back in the evening is the most charitable.”

The traveler asked, “Who is the ablest man?”

The *brāhmaṇa* answered, “Everyone is expert in robbing others of their wives and wealth.”

The man then asked, “How do you manage to live in such a city?”

The *brāhmaṇa* replied, “As a worm survives while even in a filthy place, so do I survive here!”

—*Niti Śāstra*, Chapter 12, Text 9, Cāṇakya Pandit

The devotees of the Lord, however, are not averse to living in such conditions. I remember while traveling on *saṅkīrtana* in my earlier days, whenever we would drive into a big, polluted, materialistic city for the first time, we would jump with joy. We didn’t notice the tall buildings, the shops, the lights, or the sinful activities; we saw only thousands of conditioned souls about to receive Lord Caitanya’s mercy.

*prāyeṇa deva munayaḥ sva-vimukti-kāmā
maunaṁ caranti vijane na parārtha-niṣṭhāḥ
naitān vihāya kṛpaṇān vimumukṣa eko
nānyaṁ tvad asya śaraṇaṁ bhramato ’nupaśye*

My dear Lord Nṛsiṁhadeva, I see that there are many saintly persons indeed, but they are interested only in their own deliverance. Not caring for the big cities and towns, they go to the Himalayas or the forest to meditate with vows of silence [*mauna-vrata*]. They are not interested in delivering others. As for me, however, I do not wish to be liberated alone, leaving aside all these poor fools and rascals. I know that without Kṛṣṇa consciousness, without taking shelter of Your lotus feet, one cannot be happy. Therefore I wish to bring them back to shelter at Your lotus feet.



—Bhāg. 7.9.49

Vaidyanātha wants to purchase land on which to construct a temple. Liaising with the Indian Embassy and the Indian congregation, he's working on the angle of a Center of Indian Culture. Shooting for the rhinoceros, he has met Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee twice (in New York at a United Nations summit of religions, and in New Delhi). Under Vaidyanātha's direction, Russian devotee Madana Mohana dāsa met Russia's President, Vladimir Putin, on his recent visit to New Delhi. Madana Mohana informed him of ISKCON's desire to obtain land in Moscow to build a center in cooperation with the Indian community.

Moscow devotees say that President Putin is well informed about our movement. I'm sure there is no reason to doubt that. In 1998 he served as head of Russia's Federal Security Service, one of the successors of the dismantled KGB. Devotees say he was recently at an important function when someone offered him a glass of champagne. When he refused, the person said, "Mr. President, do you not drink?"

President Putin replied, "Of course not. I'm a Hare Kṛṣṇa!"

Śrī Prahlāda gave class at the temple this morning. The devotees were as happy to see him as they are to see me. He spoke nicely and the devotees were more than satisfied.

This afternoon I went to the temple to address the twenty regional secretaries of ISKCON Russia, who were concluding a four-day meeting. When they asked for advice on leadership, I said the most important quality of a leader is purity. His essential duty is to inspire his followers in Kṛṣṇa consciousness. Therefore his leadership begins by attending the full morning program. I also quoted Śrīla Prabhupāda's advice to Girirāja Swami. When Śrīla Prabhupāda was departing, he called Girirāja Swami to his side and asked if he thought the movement would continue in his absence. Girirāja Swami replied with confidence that it would if the devotees remained strict in chanting their rounds and following the regulative principles. Śrīla Prabhupāda nodded, and asking Mahārāja to come close, whispered in his ear, "Intelligence and organization."

When I came out of the room, one of my disciples approached me and requested I meet his parents who had just arrived at the temple. I was exhausted from meeting the regional secretaries, and I hadn't taken *prasādam* all day. Trying to get out of it, I suggested I could meet them the next day, but he insisted and I reluctantly agreed. However, instead of doing the proper thing and sitting with them in the guest room, I said I would meet them on my way to the car. As I came to the shoe room, my disciple's parents stepped forward and warmly shook my hand, thanking me for all the help I have given their son. They were nicely dressed and spoke articulately. I immediately



realized my mistake, but it was too late to backtrack. I did my best to cover my foolishness by chatting with them, but the time and place were uncomfortable because we were surrounded by shoes and socks. After a few minutes, they graciously went with their son into the guest room.

As I proceeded to the car, Śyāma approached me and asked if I was aware of the position in Russian society of my disciple's father. When I said I wasn't, he replied, "He's one of the chief engineers in the biggest nuclear plant in the country. Even American scientists come to consult with him."

Śrīla Prabhupāda, when will this coarse fool ever be the gentleman you wanted me to be?

This evening I met Śuddha dāsa and other leaders from southern Russia. We made plans for the festival we'll be holding in Divnomorsk, near Krasnodar, in May, honoring the appearance of Lord Nṛsiṃhadeva. We expect that more than two thousands devotees will attend. At the meeting, Śuddha told me how the Deity of Lord Nṛsiṃhadeva in Krasnodar was recently stolen and later rescued.

Five years ago the Krasnodar devotees installed a large Nṛsiṃhadeva *mūrti* sitting in a lotus posture. Yoga Nṛsiṃha has become well known in the region; even nondevotees come to see His beautiful, ferocious form.

On December 9th last year, an intruder entered the temple unnoticed when most of the devotees were out on *saṅkīrtana*. The person grabbed the Deity from the altar and quickly disappeared. When the devotees discovered the theft several hours later, they were devastated and heartbroken. They called the police, who said that with no evidence, little could be done. Local television, radio, and newspapers covered the event, showing pictures of a bare altar.

The devotees contacted the local underworld, and several gangsters suggested the culprit could be part of a Russian Mafia which specializes in stealing relics from churches and mosques, then selling them back to the followers. They hinted that the Mafia may approach devotees in another city and try to sell them the Deity. Śuddha sent an e-mail warning all Russian temples to be alert for anyone selling the *mūrti*.

Sure enough, six days later a man approached some devotees in St. Petersburg with the Deity of Lord Nṛsiṃhadeva. The devotees had not been informed of Śuddha's letter, nor even suspected the Deity might be stolen. With enthusiasm, they collected enough money to purchase the Deity and made the transaction at their apartment. Just after the man left to catch a train south, the devotees went on COM where they discovered Śuddha's e-mail. Though fuming, there was little they could do—the man had disappeared into the night. Suddenly there was a knock on the door. When the devotees opened it, there stood the thief! He explained that he had missed his train and wanted to know if he could stay the night. Keeping their cool, the devotees agreed and



made a comfortable arrangement for him. When he was sound asleep they called the police, who immediately arrested him. He faces a minimum five-year prison sentence if convicted.

The devotees held a huge festival to welcome the Lord home. Śuddha said it was like the residents of Dvārakā welcoming Lord Kṛṣṇa back to His city. When the car carrying the Deity approached the Krasnodar temple, devotees burst into tears and offered obeisances from all directions. As they carried Lord Nṛsiṃhadeva back to His altar, hundreds of devotees clamored to get a view of Him, unable to believe that their *iṣṭa-deva*, their worshipful Lord, had actually returned. A big *abhiṣeka* ceremony was held and the devotees lovingly bathed the Lord—more with their tears than with water. At the conclusion, the whole temple community chanted and danced in ecstasy, the event being covered by the same television, radio, and newspaper people who had reported on the theft.

The next day, Lord Nṛsiṃhadeva was the talk of Krasnodar. Many people came to see the Lord who was stolen, but who in the end Himself stole the hearts of His loving devotees.

*ugro 'py anugra evāyaṁ
sva-bhaktānāṁ nṛkeśarī
keśarīva svapotānāṁ
anyeṣāṁ ugra-vikramah*

Although very ferocious, the lioness is very kind to her cubs. Similarly, although very ferocious to nondevotees like Hiranyakaśipu, Lord Nṛsiṃhadeva is very, very soft and kind to devotees like Prahlāda Mahārāja.

—Śrīdhara Swami

Chapter Nineteen

MEDITATION ON NAROTTAMA DASA THAKURA

• FEBRUARY 8, 2001 •

TODAY WAS THE AUSPICIOUS CELEBRATION of the appearance of Śrīla Narottama dāsa Ṭhākura. As Narottama dāsa Ṭhākura is one of my favorite ācāryas, I rose early to read his biography, compiled by my Godsister Śītala dāsī. She spent years researching his life in various *śāstras* and will soon be publishing a book. She gave me the manuscript to edit, and I keep it with me at all times. Being a deeply realized lover of God and a stalwart preacher, Narottama dāsa Ṭhākura embodies everything I would like to achieve in devotional service. The many songs he wrote guide us from the beginning stages of devotional service to the higher levels of pure love. Once, Śrīla Gaurakiśora dāsa Bābājī was asked by a follower, “What is the price one must pay for achieving love of God?”

“Five paise!”

Taken aback, his surprised follower said, “Five paise! How is that possible?”

Śrīla Gaurakiśora dāsa Bābājī replied, “Yes, you can understand everything about achieving love of Kṛṣṇa by going to the marketplace and purchasing Narottama dāsa Ṭhākura’s two books, *Prema-bhakti Candrika* and *Prārthanā*, which cost five paise!”

At the temple this morning I spoke for over an hour and a half and covered only half of Narottama dāsa Ṭhākura’s life story. I concluded by saying that I would continue the narration this evening at our second Moscow temple,



located just outside the city.

As evening approached, we drove the 20km to the center, which is home for about fifty devotees. The complex comprises a large wooden building used for the temple room and four smaller buildings that house devotees. Upon arriving, I went into the temple room and found more than two hundred devotees eager to hear more about the glories of Narottama dāsa Ṭhākura. I spoke for two hours and still failed to complete the narration of his pastimes! At the end, I promised I would continue “Part Three” tomorrow morning at the city temple. Śrī Prahlāda concluded the program with a rousing *kīrtana*.

On the way back to our apartment in the city, I reflected on the great mercy that I have received in relation to Narottama dāsa Ṭhākura. Last year, in my wanderings through Vṛndāvana, I chanced upon a somewhat isolated building near the Gopīśvara Mahādeva temple. The sign outside read, “Vraja Mohan Temple—Deities of Narottama dāsa Ṭhākura.” Curious, I entered the old temple and came before the altar. Just at that moment, the curtain opened and I beheld the beautiful forms of Śrīmatī Rādhārāṇī and Vraja Mohan.

Vraja Mohan was personally installed by Narottama dāsa Ṭhākura at the first Gaura-pūrṇimā festival that he organized in Keturi (now Bangladesh) several years after Lord Caitanya Mahāprabhu’s departure. Narottama had organized the festival to bring together the many Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavas who had in some ways become inactive after the Lord’s departure. Feeling the pain of separation from the Lord, they could hardly lift the *karatālas* or drums to spread the chanting of the holy name. Without strong leadership, various *apasampradāyas* began to appear, all of which deviated in some way from the strict teachings of Śrīla Rūpa Goswami. Narottama wanted to bring the Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava community together in order to inspire them and to organize the preaching of Lord Caitanya’s teachings throughout India.

Great devotees such as Lord Nityānanda’s wife, Jāhnavā Mātā, attended the festival. Thousands of devotees came from Vṛndāvana, Bengal, Puri, and Orissa, and everyone relished the *Kṛṣṇa-katha* and the *kīrtanas*, especially those personally offered by Narottama dāsa Ṭhākura.

Narottama installed six Deities of Kṛṣṇa at this historic event. Several years he later sent one of those Deities, Vraja Mohan, to Vṛndāvana, as he had many disciples there who were feeling Narottama’s separation. Along with the Deity, he also sent some of his personal effects.

Standing before Rādhā-Vraja Mohan, I marveled at my good fortune to see the personal Deity of one of my great heroes in Kṛṣṇa consciousness. The next evening I returned to the temple with a large *kīrtana* party. We entered the compound roaring the holy names and dancing in ecstasy. Before coming, I had narrated to the devotees many of Narottama’s pastimes, including the story of Vraja Mohan’s installation, so the devotees entered the temple with



anticipation. Grateful for such a special *darśana*, we continued chanting and dancing for hours. Several times we changed from the *mahā-mantra* to *Jaya Narottama*, *Jaya Narottama*, *Jaya Narottama*, singing as loud as we could.

Because the mood in having *kīrtana* in front of such an amazing Deity was so sweet, we returned each evening for several days. Each time the *kīrtana* was more ecstatic. On the fourth evening, at the end of the *kīrtana* we sat exhausted upon the ground drenched in sweat but feeling great satisfaction in our hearts. At that moment, the Bengali *pūjārī* who had been watching us in amazement those few days came forward, begging me to give me something. I had noticed a number of beautiful *śālagrāma-śilās* on the altar, and I said that if he desired, he could give me one of Them. He smiled and went toward the altar, but instead of taking one of the *śilās* from His cushion, he reached toward a silver bowl next to Vraja Mohan's feet and took out a small Govardhana *śilā*. Returning, he placed the *śilā* in my hand and said softly, "This Govardhana *śilā* came with Vraja Mohana from Keturi. He was worshipped by Śrīla Narottama dāsa Ṭhākura!"

I was stunned, as were the many devotees around me. Everyone became silent as we stared at the Govardhana *śilā* in disbelief. Then the *pūjārī* returned to the silver bowl and took out a small *śālagrāma śilā* the same size as the Govardhan *śilā*. Again he placed that *śilā* in my hand and said, "He was also worshipped by Narottama."

Without pausing he wheeled around and again went back to the silver bowl. This time he brought back a small Dvāraka *śilā* the same size as the other two *śilās*. "And He was also worshipped by the Ṭhākura," he said.

All three *śilās* together looked like precious jewels, but in fact they were infinitely more valuable! Of course, no one can say for sure if those Deities were worshipped by Narottama dāsa Ṭhākura, but considering the prominent position They had on the altar, I had no reason to doubt the *pūjārī*'s words. I accepted these *śilās* as mercy that came of its own accord and offered my full *danḍavats* at the lotus feet of Vraja Mohana.

Because the *pūjārī*'s mood was so pure and because he asked for nothing in return, several days later I came back and expressed my desire to render service to Rādhā-Vraja Mohan. With the help of Godbrothers like Girirāja Mahārāja, we are now renovating the old temple, supplying new dresses for the Deities and arranging for the Deities' daily *bhoga*.

The mercy of Lord Caitanya and His associates is unlimited and flows like a fast-moving river. Recently, when I visited Vraja Mohan again, my *pūjārī* friend called me to a room near the altar, and opening an old trunk, reverently pulled out an ancient stone plate and metal pot. Placing them in my hands, and with tears in his eyes, he said, "These items also accompanied Vraja Mohan 450 years ago. This is the very pot in which Narottama dāsa Ṭhākura would cook,



and this is the plate from which he took *prasādam*. I'm giving them to you."

It's difficult to fathom how such mercy comes our way. We can only wonder at the ways of the Lord and reciprocate as best we can.

Dear Śrīla Narottama dāsa Ṭhākura, please me help carry on your mission in this world, assisting my spiritual master in delivering the fallen souls, bereft of the mercy of such souls as yourself! May Śrīla Viśvanātha Cakravartī's glorification of you be my constant meditation:

*śrī-kṛṣṇa-nāmāmṛta-varṣi-vaktra-
candra-prabhā-dhvasta-tamo-bharayā
gaurāṅgadevānucarāya tasmai
namo namaḥ śrīla-narottamāya*

I offer respectful obeisances to Śrīla Narottama dāsa Ṭhākura, a sincere follower of Lord Gaurāṅgadeva. Emitting a shower of the nectar of the holy name, with its splendor, the moon of His mouth destroys the darkness of ignorance.

*saṅkīrtanānanda-jā-manda-hāsya
danta-dyuti-dyotita-diṇmukhāya
svedāśru-dhara-snapitāya tasmai
namo namaḥ śrīla-narottamāya*

I offer my respectful obeisances to Śrīla Narottama dāsa Ṭhākura. Blissful by singing Kṛṣṇa's glories, he would become bathed in streams of perspiration and the splendor of his teeth and gentle smile would illuminate all directions.

*mṛdāṅga-nāma-śruti-matra-cañcat-
padāmbujā-dvandva-manoharāya
sadyaḥ samudyat-pulakāya tasmai
namo namaḥ śrīla-narottamāya*

I offer my respectful obeisances to Śrīla Narottama dāsa Ṭhākura. Hearing the *mṛdāṅgas* and the sound of the holy name, he would dance, moving his enchanting lotus feet and the hairs of his body erect in ecstasy.

*gandharva-garva-kṣapaṇa-svalasya-
vismāpitāśeṣa-kṛti-vrajāya
sva-sṛṣṭa-gaṇa-prathitāya tasmai
namo namaḥ śrīla-narottamāya*



I offer respectful obeisances to Śrīla Narottama dāsa Ṭhākura. His dancing dispelled the Gandharvas' pride. His devotional activities filled everyone with wonder. His songs made him famous.

*ānanda-mūrcchavaṇi-pāta-bhata-
dhūli-bharālaṅkṛta-vigrahāya
yad-darśanam bhagya-bhāreṇa tasmai
namo namaḥ śrīla-narottamāya*

I offer respectful obeisances to Śrīla Narottama dāsa Ṭhākura. He would sometimes faint in ecstasy and fall to the ground, his body decorated with dust. The very fortunate would see him in that way.

*sthale sthale yasya kṛpa-prabhābhīḥ
kṛṣṇānya-tṛṣṇa-jana-saṁhatinam
nirmulita eva bhavanti tasmai
namo namaḥ śrīla-narottamāya*

I offer respectful obeisances to Śrīla Narottama dāsa Ṭhākura. In place after place the splendor of his mercy uprooted the people's thirst for anything other than Kṛṣṇa.

*yad-bhakti-niṣṭhopala-rekhikeva
sparśaḥ punaḥ sparśamaṇīva yasya
pramānyam evaṁ śrutivād yadiyam
tasmai namaḥ śrīla-narottamāya*

I offer respectful obeisances to Śrīla Narottama dāsa Ṭhākura. His firm faith in devotional service to Kṛṣṇa is like a necklace of precious stones. His touch is like a *sparśamaṇi* jewel. His words are like the four *Vedas*.

*murtaiva bhaktiḥ kim ayam kim eṣa
vairāgya-saras tanumān nṛ-loke
saṁbhāvyate yaḥ kṛtibhiḥ sadaiva
tasmai namaḥ śrīla narottamāya*

I offer respectful obeisances to Śrīla Narottama dāsa Ṭhākura. The devotees always wonder: Is he devotional service personified? Is he the essence of renunciation who has descended to the world of human beings in this form?



*rājan-mṛdāṅga-karatāla-kalābhirāmam
gaurāṅga-gaṇa-madhu-pāna-bharābhirāmam
śrīmān-narottama-padāmbujā-mañju-nṛtyam
bhṛtyam kṛtārthāyatu maṁ phalitesta-kṛtyam*

May the dancing of Śrī Narottama's lotus feet, which is graceful with the melodious sounds of *karatālas* and *mṛdāṅgas*, and which is sweet with the honey of Lord Gaurāṅga, fulfill the spiritual desires of me, his servant.

—Śrīla Narottama-prabhor-aṣṭaka, Visvanātha Cakravartī Ṭhākura

Chapter Twenty

ON A RAZOR'S EDGE

• FEBRUARY 9, 2001 •



ON THE WAY TO VISIT THE MOSCOW *GURUKULA* this morning, we received an impassioned call from Śakaṭar dāsa, who was at the train station purchasing our tickets to St. Petersburg. In a distressed voice he said that a bomb had exploded in the station on the level just below him. A number of people appeared to have been killed and many more injured. People were panicking and the police were heading to the scene. I told him to leave immediately. We would fly to St. Petersburg rather than take the train.

A number of bombs have gone off in Moscow during the past year. Although no one has been arrested, the government blames the Chechen rebels and uses that suspicion to pursue the war in Chechnya. Many people believe, however, that it is the government itself planting the bombs. Some time ago, four Federal Security agents were found under an apartment complex setting up explosives. When questioned by the police they said they were practicing. Few believe them. The people say the government plants the bombs and kills its own people (while blaming the Chechen rebels) in order to get financial support for the war. Disgusted with the possibility of such government involvement and fearful for their lives, a number of people have moved out of Moscow.

One should always deal cautiously with fire, water, women, foolish people, serpents, and members of a royal family, for they may, when the occasion



presents itself, at once bring about our death.

—Nīti Śāstra, Chapter 14, Text 11

Such unfortunate situations were predicted in the Twelfth Canto of *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam*, describing the symptoms of the coming of the age of Kali:

*prajā hi lubdhai rājanyair
nirghṛṇair dasyu-dharmabhiḥ
ācchinna-dāra-draviṇā
yāsyanti giri-kānanam*

Losing their wives and properties to such avaricious and merciless rulers, who will behave no better than ordinary thieves, the citizens will flee to the mountains and forests.

—Bhāg. 12.2.8

The people of Russia have a long history of oppression by their rulers. The change to democracy has not really altered things. Actually, the only effective change will come when the leaders are Kṛṣṇa conscious. A Kṛṣṇa conscious leader is satisfied in and of himself and thus has no reason to exploit others. The people are happy with such a leader because the leader knows the art of fulfilling their material and spiritual needs. The fact is, if the leaders encouraged the people to simply chant Hare Kṛṣṇa *en masse*, the world would quickly become heaven on earth.

*saha-yajñāḥ prajāḥ sṛṣṭvā
purovāca prajāpatiḥ
anena prasaviṣyadhvam
eṣa vo 'stv iṣṭa-kāma-dhuk*

In the beginning of creation, the Lord of all creatures sent forth generations of men and demigods, along with sacrifices for Viṣṇu, and blessed them by saying, “Be thou happy by this *yajña* [sacrifice] because its performance will bestow upon you everything desirable for living happily and achieving liberation.

—Bg. 3.10

This afternoon we went to the airport to catch the flight to St. Petersburg. While waiting in the departure lounge, I spotted a Tibetan lama, sitting alone, peacefully awaiting his flight. I was attracted to his apparent simplicity and renunciation. He was dressed in traditional Buddhist robes and carried only a



small bag.

My emotions upon seeing him were similar to those I felt the first time I saw someone in the robes of an Eastern religion. When I was nineteen years old, I flew from Cairo, Egypt, to Beirut, Lebanon. I was on a pilgrim's journey, searching for the goal of life. I had been in Egypt studying the ways of the ancient pharaohs and was now on my way to Lebanon to inquire about the Islamic faith. While I was adjusting my seatbelt and readying myself for the flight, I looked up and saw a Caucasian boy of about my age coming down the aisle. He had a shaved head and was dressed in light saffron robes. He also carried a small bag, and he had a book in his hand. I was mesmerized by his peaceful and effulgent countenance. I studied him carefully throughout the flight. The entire time he had his eyes closed in meditation, opening them only as the plane began its descent into Beirut. I thought, "I want to be like him."

After we landed and passed through immigration I tried to find him to speak to him, but he had already gone. He had no possessions to collect and cleared customs quicker than I. Years later, I reflected that my not being able to meet him was Kṛṣṇa's mercy. Most likely he was an impersonalist, and meeting him may well have sent me down the wrong path. But his spirit of renunciation impressed and stayed with me.

Seeing the Tibetan monk again gave rise to feelings of admiration. It is not easy to renounce this world in any way, but my appreciation was soon mixed with doubt when I saw a middle-aged woman in a fur coat come to collect him from the departure lounge and take him to the plane. After a few moments, I could understand that she was traveling with him and helping him in various ways. They didn't appear to be transgressing religious principles, but the idea of a woman in a fur coat helping an elderly Tibetan monk didn't sit right in my mind.

Once seated on the plane I was again impressed when he took out his beads and began to chant. A few minutes later, however, I noticed him reading a magazine and studying the advertisements containing women and intoxication. I still feel he was sincere in his own way, but not careful enough about how he carried himself. I thought to myself that I must be more careful in my travels, for I also sometimes pick up a *Newsweek* magazine and read it during a flight. It's of no benefit to me, and I can only imagine what other passengers must think of the monk in saffron reading the worldly news.

uttiṣṭhata jāgrata
prāpya varān nibodhata
kṣurasya dhārā niṣitā duratyayā
durgam pathas tat kavayo vadanti



Please wake up and try to understand the boon that you now have in this human form of life. The path of spiritual realization is very difficult; it is sharp like a razor's edge. That is the opinion of learned transcendental scholars.

—*Kaṭha Upaniṣad* 1.3.14

Chapter Twenty-One
CLOSE TIES WITH ST.
PETERSBURG YATRA
• FEBRUARY 10-11, 2001 •

I was glad I had made the decision to fly to St. Petersburg. We are four devotees, and the flight was much more expensive, but we didn't want to risk taking the train. There's a saying that lightning never strikes the same place twice, but the same day the bomb went off in Moscow I read how the Palestinians had detonated two bombs in Israel minutes apart, in the same location.

St. Petersburg is the second largest city in Russia and the country's largest seaport. Construction of the city began in 1703, ordered by Russian Tsar Peter the Great. It is a planned city, so unlike other cities, bears a semblance of order, at least in the sections that Tsar Peter built. Wide avenues crisscross the old part of town, and there are large parks everywhere. St. Petersburg is also known for its many canals. Tsar Peter brought in architects, builders, and artisans from all over Europe to accomplish the feat of building a city on what was previously a swamp.

However, time and Communism ruined much of Tsar Peter's achievements. The ornate buildings and attractive canals and parks have deteriorated due to neglect, and most of the beautiful churches and cathedrals he built were torn down by the Communists, who used the bricks to build factories on the same locations. Driving through St. Petersburg yesterday, we saw huge factories spewing black smoke right in the city center. Unlike Moscow, where reconstruction is going strong because ninety percent of Russia's capital is



invested there, the people of St. Petersburg haven't been able to restore their city. I remember that in 1991 there was a brief effort to do so by the city council, but due to corruption, the effort fell apart.

ISKCON built an impressive *yatra* here in the late 1990s, but recent events have brought it to its knees. The departure of prominent leaders of the highest order have left devotees confused and disorganized. It is something I have encountered in other places on my travels, a dark chapter in the history of our movement that I pray will not happen again.

The most dramatic effect of the difficulties is that we lost the large and beautiful St. Petersburg temple. In an ironic twist of history, my lecture this morning was held in the very same hall in which I spoke when I came to St. Petersburg the first time in 1989. When we entered the old hall, the devotees were in a somber mood. The hall itself was unclean and too small for the fifty devotees present. Being there was like *deja vu* for me—the same hall, the same old stage and curtain, and the same devotees, only twelve years later. The devotees don't have the same enthusiasm they once had—they have been through too much. Nevertheless, they have remained faithful to Kṛṣṇa consciousness, and I felt it my duty to help lift their spirits and inspire them.

So did Śrī Prahlāda. Taking compassion upon the devotees, he picked up an old, broken drum upon arriving and led a ninety-minute *kīrtana* that soon had us all transcending our problems. I also gave more time to my lecture and the answering of questions.

During my talk I noticed a girl in her late teens listening attentively. Generally when I lecture, I try to find two or three people in the audience who are keen to hear what I'm saying and I concentrate my talk on them. It's a technique I learned in a public speaking class I took in high school. In any public audience you will find a variety of listeners, from casual to eyes wide open. This particular young lady seemed to be staring ahead, without moving. I thought it unusual, and because she was so fixed she caught my attention and I chose her as the recipient of my talk.

After a lecture, it is customary for visiting *sannyāsīs* to distribute *prasādam* to the members of the audience, who eagerly come forward to receive cookies, sweet balls, even cake. When they approach I sometimes speak briefly with them, inquiring how they are, giving quick advice, and often giving spiritual names to newborn babies! When the teenage girl who was listening to my lecture so carefully came forward, I was shocked to see that she was blind. With a friend's help she held out her hand for *prasādam* and thanked me for the talk. I inquired how long she had been practicing Kṛṣṇa consciousness. She replied six months. Curious about her situation, I asked her to come and see me after the program. During Śrī Prahlāda's *kīrtana*, I noticed her enthusiastic chanting and dancing, although her blindness did not allow her dance synchronized



with the devotees around her.

Holding onto her friend's arm, she later came to see me, introducing herself as Katya. She told me she had lost her sight several years ago when doctors had given her the wrong injections for an illness. She came in contact with Kṛṣṇa consciousness by hearing the *kīrtanas* of devotees who had moved into the apartment next to her family's apartment. Because she had lost her sight, her sense of hearing had become more sensitive, and she was immediately attracted to the sound of the holy name as well as the smell of her new neighbors *prasādam*. She finally visited the devotees living next door, who preached and encouraged her in Kṛṣṇa consciousness.

I was inspired by her story. For me, it once again demonstrated that the holy name will reveal everything to us in spiritual life. As Śrīla Prabhupāda often said, our eyes are limited to what little they can see in this world, but through our ears we can “see” everything of the spiritual world by hearing from a pure devotee of the Lord.

I told Katya the story of Bilvamaṅgala Ṭhākura, who destroyed his own eyesight because he could not refrain from looking at the beauty of the opposite sex. Retiring to Vṛndāvana, he practiced Kṛṣṇa consciousness peacefully, eventually becoming a pure devotee of the Lord.

As I told the story, Katya listened to every detail. At the end she said, “Yes, my blindness is a mixed blessing. Had I not lost my eyesight, I may never have developed an interest in spiritual life. After meeting the devotees I don't lament that I can't see this world, because I know one day I'll see the beauty of the spiritual world.”

*vyādhasyācāraṇaṁ dhruvasya ca vayo vidyā gajendrasya ka
kubjāyaḥ kim u nāma rūpaṁ adhikaṁ kiṁ tat sudamno dhanam
vaṁsaḥ ko vidurasya yādava-pater ugrasya kiṁ pauruṣaṁ
bhaktya tuṣyati kevalaṁ na ca guṇair bhakti-priyo mādhabaḥ*

Where were the hunter Dharma's piety, Dhruva's maturity, and Gajendra's knowledge? Where was Kubja's beauty? Where was Sudāmā's wealth? Where was Vidura's noble birth? Where was Ugrasena's chivalrous strength? Lord Mādhava is pleased only by devotional service and not by material qualifications.

—*Padyāvalī*, Text 8

This evening I gave another lecture, finishing with an impromptu initiation on the stage. As I won't be returning here for some time, two aspiring disciples in their late seventies requested I accept them as disciples before I leave. To one who was bedridden at home, I gave the name Bhakti Priya dāsī, and to another



who made her vows and accepted her beads before me, I gave the name Lalitā Sakhi dāśī. I was surprised when I inquired of Lalitā Sakhi as to her service. She replied that she goes around St. Petersburg collecting old clothes from people, which she then repairs and gives to devotees who can't afford to buy such things. When she said that, several devotees smiled and pointed to their coats or sweaters, which although old were in suitable shape to wear, by the loving devotion of Lalitā Sakhi. I also gave initiation to seventeen-year-old Vṛndā, who became Vṛndārāṇī dāśī. She has been sick with tuberculosis for years, and had missed out on initiation ceremonies I had performed for her classmates.

With my visit to St. Petersburg at an end, I stood up to leave and begin my long journey to India and on to South Africa. Downstairs I met six men from Turkmenistan waiting in the lobby. Poorly dressed in traditional Muslim attire, they came forward to meet me. I greeted them with an Islamic expression, “Salaam-alekam,” and they replied the same. They said they were refugees who had no work or money, and a friend had told them they could meet someone at the hall this evening who would help them. I apologized, saying that I was also visiting Russia and couldn't assist them in a practical way, but I offered to pray for their spiritual progress and assured them that Allah would protect them. Being pious men, they were satisfied with that and embraced me simultaneously. Speaking in Arabic, they gave me their own blessings for a safe onward journey. I took their blessings to heart, and walked out of the building to a rousing *kīrtana* of blissful devotees. Many were crying. We had spent only two days together, but because of the deep bonds created through chanting and dancing together on the transcendental platform, the ties of affection for one another were strong, as were the feelings of separation.

It's always difficult for me to leave devotees after a visit. It's probably the greatest austerity in my being a traveling preacher. ISKCON devotees are special souls, serving the mission of Śrīla Prabhupāda and Lord Caitanya Mahāprabhu. I offer them my most respectful obeisances.

*yad avadhi hari nāma
pradur āsīt pṛthivyaṁ
tad avadhi khalu loka
vaiṣṇavaḥ sarvatas te*

*tilaka vimala mālā
nāma yuktaḥ pavitraḥ
hari hari kalin madhye
evam evaṁ babhūva*

From the time that the name of Hari became manifest on the earth, Vaiṣṇava



folk became manifest everywhere, adorned with faultless *tilaka* and neck beads, equipped with the *mahā-mantra*. In the midst of the age of Kali, they purified the atmosphere, chanting “Hari! Hari!” So indeed it came to pass.

—Śrī *Gaurāṅga-mahimāmṛta*, Sarvabhauma Bhaṭṭācārya

Chapter Twenty-Two

TOURISTS RIPE FOR SPIRITUAL AWAKENING

• D A T E •



ON FEBRUARY 13, Śrī Prahlāda, Rukmiṇī Priya and myself arrived in New Delhi from Moscow. I will be spending ten days in India, resting and recuperating from our trip to Russia, before embarking on a preaching tour of Africa.

After spending one precious day in Vṛndāvana, I traveled south to Udaipur to join my son, Gaura Śakti dāsa, and two of his business associates, Mickey and Sherry Goldman, all of whom are on a business and recreation trip in Rajasthan. After meeting Mickey and Sherry, I was a little apprehensive about spending a planned five days with them, as our initial conversations didn't go much beyond the daily news and the weather. Mickey and Sherry are both older than me and come from conservative Jewish backgrounds. I could sense they felt a little uncomfortable around a Hare Kṛṣṇa devotee in saffron robes. However, it appeared that Kṛṣṇa had a plan for them, which gradually unfolded as the days went by.

When Mickey and Sherry inquired from me as to what sites would be interesting to visit in Udaipur, they seemed a little surprised by my detailed reply. I have been interested in Rajasthan for a long time, as much of its history concerns Vṛndāvana Deities, many of whom were moved to Rajasthani locations such as Jaipur and Nathdwār to save Them from the wrath of India's Moghul rulers. Nathdwār, near Udaipur, has thus been home to Mādhavendra Purī's Deity, Śrī Gopāla (Śrī Nāthjī), for more than three centuries.



In his book, *Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan*, an extensive diary written in the early 1800s, British Colonel James Todd describes Udaipur as “the most diversified and romantic spot on the continent of India.” Even today, with its grandiose palaces, hilltop forts and beautiful temples, Udaipur looks as if it has been lifted straight from the pages of a fairy tale book. When I suggested to Mickey and Sherry that they begin by visiting Udaipur Palace, they asked if I would come along. Though the palace is of little spiritual interest, I agreed, hoping to develop a deeper relationship with them in which I might be able to inspire them in Kṛṣṇa consciousness.

At the palace we began making our way through the inner chambers. When Mickey asked why the hallways were so narrow and the entrances to the rooms so low, I explained that they were built like that as a strategy to deal with enemy soldiers attacking the palace. Invading soldiers could advance only one at a time through the narrow hallways, and bowing their heads low upon entering the rooms gave an advantage to the palace soldiers on the other side who would easily behead them.

When we reached the renowned Room of Mirrors, a young American man, seeing my saffron cloth, approached and asked if he could speak with me. Folding his hands and saying “Hari Om,” he asked if I had ever read the *Bhagavad-gītā*. When I replied that I had, a lively conversation began, wherein we debated whether God were a person or an energy. Mickey and Sherry listened intently as I presented arguments for the existence of a personal God. I took advantage of the situation more to preach to them than to my impersonalist acquaintance. Although the young man would not concede defeat, my arguments seemed to impress Mickey and Sherry, who as the day wore on began to ask me questions of a spiritual nature. Last night over dinner we had discussed a number of spiritual topics, and our conversation seemed to make them more relaxed in my presence. In fact, at the end of the evening Mickey concluded by stating that in America it is unfortunate that Kṛṣṇa consciousness is sometimes thought of as a cult when in fact it is an ancient religion. On the way home, I reflected that although I wasn’t giving class to hundreds of devotees as I had been a few days earlier in Russia, at least I was able to convince one gentleman about the authenticity of Kṛṣṇa consciousness. Even small doses of such spiritual welfare are beneficial.

Let not a single day pass without your learning a verse, half a verse, or a fourth of it, or even one letter of it; nor without attending to charity, study and other pious activity.

—*Nīti Śāstra*, Chapter 2, Verse 13

Pleased with our venture to Udaipur Palace, Mickey and Sherry again asked



my advice about where else they should go. I was planning to visit the temple of Śrī Nāthjī in Nathdwar, about 50km south of Udaipur, and I offered to take them along. They were excited about the opportunity, as it was a journey off the general tourist route, but afterwards I wondered if I had made the right decision to invite them along. How would they, as members of the Jewish faith, relate to Deity worship?

I decided to explain the principle of Deity worship to them before we left. As we sat waiting for a car to take us to Nathdwar, I asked them if in the Jewish faith a material object can be accepted as spiritual due to its association with God. I gave the example of the holy cross in the Christian faith, and the wine and wafers given to the faithful in the Catholic Church. Although obviously material by nature, those items are accepted as having taken on a spiritual quality due to their being used in God's service. Mickey and Sherry couldn't think of any such example in their faith, until I suggested the Torah, the sacred book of the Jews. I said it was only paper, but it was revered by the faithful and given a special place in any home or synagogue because of its spiritual content. When they agreed, I explained that in the Vedic tradition, the Deity is carved from stone, marble, or wood, and after installation according to authorized scriptures, is accepted as nondifferent from the Lord.

At first Mickey and Sherry seemed confused. Mickey said, "We were taught that worshipping such statues is idol worship." Then to my surprise, Sherry spoke up and said that because God is present everywhere, there is no reason why He couldn't be in the Deity while at the same time not being limited to that form. Mickey nodded in agreement. Confident that my new friends had made a little progress in Kṛṣṇa consciousness, I opened the taxi door and we began our journey to Nathdwar.

Mickey and Sherry were obviously pleased with Nathdwar's exotic atmosphere, its colorful flags, banners, and *shanaī* bands that welcome thousands of pilgrims. I did note, however, that there were far less pilgrims present than during my last visit three years ago. Obviously the recent earthquake in nearby Gujarat has had an effect on the number of pilgrims visiting Nathdwar. Śrī Nāthjī is the worshipful Deity of most Gujaratis, but with Indian officials putting the earthquake death toll at more than 30,000 (locals say 100,000), many more people homeless, and relief work making travel difficult, most Gujaratis are not making the pilgrimage to Nathdwar at present.

A curious thing happened as we approached the temple. It surprised all of us. As I stopped in a shop to purchase a small silver box for my Deities, a poor *sādhū* approached me and held out his hand for a donation. I don't generally give *Lakṣmī* in such situations, but I relented and decided to give the poor man ten rupees. Not having any small bills with me, I asked the shop owner to



change a large one. To my surprise, he gave the bill to an equally poor woman who happened to come by begging at that same moment. Without a word, she reached into her old cloth and pulled out a wad of bills and a large bag of coins, and right there on the street changed the large bill for the shop owner!

The incident reminded me of Śrīla Prabhupāda's instructions about giving money to beggars in India. When his disciples first came to India, they didn't know how to respond to the repeated requests for *Lakṣmī* from the poor and the *sādhus* on the streets. Śrīla Prabhupāda replied that they could give, but only to *sādhus*, and in particular to those *sādhus* who sat calmly on the ground, as is customary, waiting for mercy from others.

Approaching the Śrī Nāthjī temple we saw many pilgrims waiting for the doors to open. The men were waiting outside one set of doors, the women by another. It is customary at the temple that upon opening the doors the pilgrims charge forward to have the best vantage point for seeing Śrī Nāthjī. The ladies are directed to the front of the temple and the men to the back. I told Mickey and Sherry that it would be "every man for himself," and that they should try their best to get inside the temple and see the Deity. We would meet outside after the thirty-minute *darśana*. There wasn't much else I could do. I knew from past experience that *darśana* of Śrī Nāthjī is like a transcendental football match, with thousands of pilgrims pushing and shoving to see Him in a limited space.

Sure enough, when the conch shell sounded and the doors opened, thousands of men and women surged forward to get Śrī Nāthjī's *darśana*. Sherry's eyes opened widely as she was suddenly swept into the temple with a wave of women. I grabbed Mickey by the arm as the men's group tumbled into the *darśana* hall. As the crowd pushed, Mickey and I were shoved backwards and forwards, while simultaneously being spun around as everyone clamored to see Kṛṣṇa.

Knowing I would have only a few precious moments before Śrī Gopāla (Śrī Nāthjī), I had memorized Mādhavendra Purī's prayer to the Lord that I had read recently in *Śrī Caitanya-caritāmṛta*. Although it is a deep prayer, beyond my realization as an aspiring devotee, Śrīla Rūpa Goswami has stated that if we don't have the desire for pure devotional service, at least we should "desire to desire" to have it. I felt that if I was going to see this special Deity for only a few moments, I might as well pray to Him in the mood of His most beloved servant who is training us to approach Kṛṣṇa without material aspirations. When suddenly I got a glimpse of Śrī Gopāla, I managed to stand still for a few moments and, folding my hands, made my supplication to Him:

*ayi dīna-dayārdra nātha he
mathurā-nātha kadāvalokyase*



*hṛdayam tvad-aloka-kātaram
dayita bhrāmyati kim karomy aham*

O My Lord! O most merciful master! O master of Mathura! When shall I see You again? Because of My not seeing You, My agitated heart has become unsteady. O most beloved one, what shall I do now?

—Śrī Caitanya-caritāmṛta, Madhya 4.197

In this prayer Mādhavendra Purī is praying in the mood of separation, the highest sentiment of love of God. It is rare to attain such love, but it's certainly possible if we strictly follow Śrīla Prabhupāda.

I once asked Śrīla Prabhupāda about the mood of separation. He was visiting our New Māyāpura community in France in 1974 and was giving *darśana* on the lawn outside the Chateau. He was speaking about how the pure devotee sees Kṛṣṇa everywhere because of his deep love for the Lord. When he asked for questions I raised my hand and said, “Śrīla Prabhupāda, if the pure devotee sees Kṛṣṇa everywhere, why does Lord Caitanya, who is in the mood of a devotee, say in His *Śikṣāṣṭakam* prayers that He is feeling so much separation from Kṛṣṇa?”

Śrīla Prabhupāda looked at me for what seemed an eternity, then replied, “That is difficult to know, but someday you will understand.”

Śrīla Prabhupāda, I'm still far from that realization, but I have faith that by menial service to your lotus feet, all these things will be revealed to me in time.

My brief meditation on Śrī Gopāla was broken when the huge crowd, heaving with hundreds of devotees, suddenly spilled Mickey and me out onto the stone steps in front of the temple. We gathered ourselves and I looked anxiously at Mickey, wondering how he had fared with his first *darśana* of the Lord in a temple. Buttoning his shirt and rearranging his disheveled clothes, he looked at me and said with a surprised look, “I made it!” It wasn't exactly the reaction I had hoped for.

A few moments later Sherry emerged with a blissful look on her face. Smiling she said, “Mahārāja, I got some of the sacred water and I also ate the little green leaves the priest gave me!”

As we walked back to the car she excitedly told us how she had been “right in front of the Deity,” and she explained in detail how beautiful He looked. As she described His large eyes, charming smile, and curious form “bent in three places,” I smiled, remembering my apprehension as to how she and her husband would understand the Deity. A few days ago they had come to India as simple tourists, but by the Lord's mercy had already begun to understand some aspects of the Absolute Truth.



*smerām bhaṅgī-traya-paricitām sāci-vistīṛṇa-dṛṣṭīm
vamsī-nyastādhara-kīśalayām ujjaḥvalām candrakena
govindākhyām hari-tanum itaḥ keśi-tīrthopakaṇṭhe
mā prekṣiṣṭhās tava yadi sakhe bandhu-saṅge 'sti raṅgaḥ*

My dear friend, if you are indeed attached to your worldly friends, do not look at the smiling face of Lord Govinda as He stands on the bank of the Yamuna at Kesi-ghata. Casting sidelong glances, He places His flute to His lips, which seem like newly blossomed twigs. His transcendental body, bending in three places, appears very bright in the moonlight.

—Śrī Caitanya-caritāmṛta, Adī 5.224

Chapter Twenty-Three

TREASURES OF JAIPUR

• FEBRUARY 18-19, 2001 •



UR ENTOURAGE OF GAURA ŚAKTI, Mickey and Sherry Goldman, and I reached Jaipur on the morning of February 18. There we were joined by Śrī Prahlāda and Rukmiṇī Priya from Vṛndāvana. Mickey and Sherry were eager to see the sights of the Pink City, constructed by Mahārāja Jai Sing II as a fortress to protect Śrīla Rūpa Goswami's Deities, Śrī Śrī Rādhā-Govindajī, who left Vṛndāvana when the fanatic Moghul Emperor Aurangzeb ordered the destruction of all sacred images and temples in the late 17th century. In time, other important Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava Deities (Rādhā-Dāmodara, Rādhā-Gopinātha, and Rādhā-Vinode, the Deities of Jīva Goswami, Madhu Pandit, and Lokanātha Goswami respectively) came for the same reasons. They have all been worshipped here since. Rādhā-Govinda, being the principal Deities of Jaipur, are worshipped nicely, but not as much attention is given to the other Deities.

Hundreds of years ago the rulers gave prominence to the worship of the Deity, knowing that by doing so there would be good fortune for the people. However, modern rulers ignore the Deities, preferring instead to concentrate on their own endeavors to gain name, fame, and money. As a result, the beautiful city of Jaipur is slowly deteriorating. Also, there has been a severe drought here for more than three years. Water is rationed, most people being supplied for only two hours a day. As a result, crops are affected and the price of food has escalated. No one knows how to solve the problem, but the answer



is clearly given by Śrīla Prabhupāda in the *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* :

When the Hare Kṛṣṇa mantra is chanted by many men together, the chanting is called *saṅkīrtanaa*, and as a result of such a *yajña* there will be clouds in the sky. In these days of drought, people can gain relief from scarcity of rain and food by the simple method of the Hare Kṛṣṇa *yajña*. Indeed, this can relieve all of human society. At present there are droughts throughout Europe and America, and people are suffering, but if people take this Kṛṣṇa consciousness movement seriously, if they stop their sinful activities and chant the Hare Kṛṣṇa *mahā-mantra*, all their problems will be solved without difficulty.

—*Bhāg. 9.1.17*, purport

On top of our list of the many attractions in Jaipur was the Rādhā-Govinda temple. In fact, it was naturally the first place to visit because of its being in the very center of the city. Thousands of people begin their day there by attending *maṅgala-ārati* and greeting the Deities later in the morning. I feel a special attachment to Rādhā-Govinda for several reasons: They are the beloved Deities of our principal teacher in the art of loving Kṛṣṇa, Śrīla Rūpa Goswami; Their history is colorful and intriguing, with Their daring move from Vṛndāvana to Jaipur; Their present worship touches the heart and brings forth spiritual feelings.

I first came to Rādhā-Govinda's temple as a new *sannyāsī* in 1979. I was traveling alone on my way to South India to visit the appearance site of Lord Nṛsiṃha in Ahovalam. When I entered the temple room early one morning, there were thousands of people singing beautiful songs to Govindājī with intense emotion. With their hands together in *namaskāra*, they swayed back and forth, appealing to the Deity with love and devotion. I had been chanting Hare Kṛṣṇa for years, but I had never chanted with so much feeling. The fact that thousands of people were doing so simultaneously had an overwhelming effect on me. I realized that the holy name was the only means of deliverance in this age, and I witnessed that the beauty of Govindājī made those devotees call out to Him with feeling.

Let the twice-born enter the fearless kingdom of yoga, Vedic study, and solitary meditation in the forest. Let them become liberated in that way. As for us, we will spend hundreds of thousands of births chanting the holy name of Lord Kṛṣṇa, whose splendid dark complexion and yellow garments are like a host of blue lotus flowers blooming in a grove of yellow-flower-bearing *kadamba* trees.

—*Padyāvalī*, Introduction, Text 18



As Mickey and Sherry entered the Rādhā-Govinda temple room with me, they appeared relieved that visiting a temple didn't mean going through the pushing and shoving we had experienced with the enthusiastic followers of Śrī Nāthjī in Nathdwar. Although there were thousands of people coming to see Govindajī, the temple room is large and spacious. To my surprise, Mickey and Sherry went straight to the front in order to get a good view of Rādhā-Govinda and study Their transcendental forms. In Nathdwar they had only a glimpse of Śrī Nāthjī; here they wanted to see first-hand who all the commotion was about.

Our discussion about Deity worship had evolved since our initial conversation, when they politely referred to it as “idol worship.” But they had experienced something special at Śrī Nāthjī's temple and were curious to know more. Their attitude reminded me of Śrīla Prabhupāda's words at the installation of the first Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa Deities in Los Angeles: “If you see these Deities as brass, They will remain like that to you forever. But if you approach Them with love and devotion, one day They will speak to you!”

On the way to Jaipur from Udaipur, Mickey and Śrī Prahlāda discussed Deity worship. I was intrigued, because Mickey and his wife are from conservative Jewish families where, of course, “idol worship” is condemned.

Mickey: Does the Deity have to be thousands of years old, or can someone establish a new Deity?

Śrī Prahlāda: New Deities are made according to the directions of scripture. Six types of Deities are described therein: those made from wood, stone, metal, gems, and earth, and those in the mind.

Mickey: I would tend to believe in a Deity in the mind.

Śrī Prahlāda: That's the highest form of worship, but also the most difficult. Therefore, the physical Deities are given to help focus our internal meditation.

Mickey: Is Deity worship like yoga?

Śrī Prahlāda: There are different types of yoga. The process we follow is called *bhakti-yoga*, the yoga of love and devotion. Through Deity worship we practice worshipping God with love.

Mickey: This is all so interesting, so fascinating. I could never have understood it unless I came here and saw it for myself.

Seeing Mickey and Sherry intently studying the forms of Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa, the head *pūjārī* did an amazing thing that only deepened my faith in the power of the Deity to reciprocate with our approaches to Him. He called Mickey and Sherry forward to the front of the altar and had them stand just a meter away from Rādhā-Govinda! Sherry had spontaneously purchased a garland outside the temple, and now that she was in front of the Deity she gathered strength and slowly handed it to the *pūjārī*, indicating that he should give it to Rādhā



and Kṛṣṇa. Understanding the special nature of the moment, the *pūjārī* took the garland and gave it to Rādhārāṇī, then took two garlands from Rādhārāṇī and *tulasī* leaves from Govindajī's feet and presented them to Mickey and Sherry. The many pilgrims present and I watched in amazement.

When Mickey and Sherry came back from the altar, they garlanded themselves, ate the *tulasī* leaves, and folded their hands in *namaskāra*, looking at Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa.

Deciding that from this point on I would have no hesitation in bringing them closer to the Lord, I gave them a number of Govindajī's *mahā-lugloo* sweet balls and said that they should distribute them to the people. As soon as they held the *prasādam* out, they were deluged by pilgrims eager for mercy. Mickey was in bliss and turned to me saying, "It's better to give than to receive."

We left early the next day for Vṛndāvana. Mickey and Sherry were eager to go to Vṛndāvana because I had told them there were five thousand temples there. Mickey asked if there were Deities in every temple, and I said, "Yes, of course."

Then he asked if all the Deities were black. I replied, "Yes, most of Them."

When he asked, "Who is the girl who's always standing next to Kṛṣṇa?" I gave him a brief explanation.

As he started with yet another question, I had to say, "Mickey, let's rest now for a little while. We'll talk about all this in Vṛndāvana. The atmosphere there is conducive for these types of questions."

For a few moments he was silent. Then, like a young boy, he asked, "How long will it take us to get to Vṛndāvana?"

"I don't think it's going to take you very long to get there, Mickey."

"What's that?" he said.

"Nothing. Let's rest."

I couldn't believe the transformation that had taken place in our two guests from rural America. Only days before they had so many doubts about the process of worshipping the Deity of the Lord. Now they were expressing so much eagerness to see Him. Kṛṣṇa is surely the supreme mystic!

I offer my respectful obeisances to wonderful, playful, mischievous Kṛṣṇa of Rādhā-Govinda who, if He desires, can make an ocean dry land, dry land an ocean, a blade of grass a thunderbolt, a thunderbolt an insignificant blade of grass, fire cool, or snow a blazing fire.

—*Padyāvalī*, Introduction, Text 6

Chapter Twenty-Four

EYES TO SEE THE HOLY DHAMA

• FEBRUARY 20-23, 2001 •

May my eyes become overwhelmed with ecstasy by seeing the nectar waves of Vṛndāvana's beauty. May my intelligence drown in the nectar ocean of Vṛndāvana's glories. May my body become agitated by the swiftly moving currents of ecstatic bliss and thus roll about on the ground of Vṛndāvana. Falling down like a stick, may I offer my respectful obeisances to all the residents of Vṛndāvana.

—Vṛndāvana-mahimāmṛta, Introduction, Text 14



OUR SMALL PARTY OF PILGRIMS entered Vṛndāvana early on the morning of February 20. After all I had told them about the holy *dhāma*, Mickey and Sherry were all eyes as the unique scenes unfolded before us. Bullock carts lumbered slowly through the small streets loaded with clay pots, vegetables, hay, and cow patties. *Sādhus*, their faces decorated with *tilaka* of various *sampradāyas*, walked happily on their way to see Kṛṣṇa in any one of Vṛndāvana's five thousand temples. Monkeys scampered here and there, engaged in their eternal mischief. The atmosphere was vibrant with the bright cloth of the markets, the sounds of bells ringing from the temples, and the villagers greeting each other with "Jaya Rādhē!"

No doubt it is a spiritual abode, but I was anxious that Mickey and Sherry would perhaps focus on the thin veil of matter covering the *dhāma* to keep ordinary tourists away. Pigs and dogs were everywhere, overflowing sewers



created a filthy stench, dust covered everyone and everything, and the loud noises of tractors, cars, and three-wheeled scooters competed with the *dhāma*'s sweet, transcendental sounds. Depending upon one's consciousness, one can see either matter or spirit in Vṛndāvana.

One time Śrīla Prabhupāda was walking in Vṛndāvana with his disciples and describing the *dhāma*'s spiritual glories. His description was so detailed, so vivid, that devotees were convinced he was seeing the Lord's pastimes before him. At one point, a disciple politely interrupted and said that despite Śrīla Prabhupāda's wonderful description, he could see only rickshaw drivers, old buildings, sewers, pigs, and dogs. Śrīla Prabhupāda smiled and said that his disciple could not see the spiritual nature of the *dhāma* because there was a "speck" in his eye. The devotee responded by rubbing his eyes, causing Śrīla Prabhupāda to laugh. Śrīla Prabhupāda then said, "No, not like that. The 'speck' is your material desires. When you remove those desires from your heart, then you will see Vṛndāvana as it is."

In a sense, Mickey and Sherry had come to Vṛndāvana as pilgrims. Although they were tourists in India, they were no longer interested in going to the spots tourists generally go. On the way to Vṛndāvana, they had taken a side trip to India's ultimate tourist destination, the Taj Mahal, but upon entering Vṛndāvana, they could immediately perceive the difference. As we neared the Vṛndāvana-Vṛndāvana Trust facility, where they would be staying, Mickey offered his first assessment of Vṛndāvana: "The Taj Mahal was dead compared with Vṛndāvana. There's a special atmosphere here!"

Our first *darśana* was with Śrīla Prabhupāda in his *samādhi*. While they walked around looking at the *samādhi*'s intricate design, I sat before the large brass *mūrti* of my spiritual master, as I always do upon first entering Vṛndāvana, and gave a report of my devotional service since I had last been there. I spoke of my successes and failures in my recent attempts to preach in Russia. I had managed to visit more than twenty temples and had helped to inspire the devotees in their service, but I had once again failed to relinquish the material desires in my heart that keep me from offering pure devotion to the Lord. I revealed my plans for service until next Kārttika, when I would return to Vṛndāvana, and asked for Śrīla Prabhupāda's blessings.

After taking *darśana* of Rādhā-Śyāmasundara, we took rickshaws into town to visit the Rādhā-Dāmodara temple, where I proceeded to tell Mickey and Sherry about Śrīla Prabhupāda's pastime of coming to the West. The story so touched their hearts that when Śrī Prahlāda led *kīrtana* in Śrīla Prabhupāda's room they enthusiastically chanted Hare Kṛṣṇa with us. It was the first time they had chanted, and it seemed to me to be the beginning of the end of their material existence.



O Lord, is Your impersonal spiritual effulgence not always present everywhere? Even so, it has not been able to break even a single small leaf from the tree of repeated birth and death. On the other hand, the moment Your holy name is taken by the tongue it thoroughly shatters the tree of birth and death down to its roots. Of these two [the spiritual effulgence or the holy name], which should be served?

—*Padyāvalī*, Text 28

In the evening we visited the temple of Vraja Mohan, Narottama dāsa Ṭhākura's Deity. After *kīrtana*, Mickey turned to me and said that he had heard that Vraja Mohan was a special Deity for me. I said He was and told him that I was helping to reconstruct the temple. I mentioned that my Russian disciples, eager to help me in my service, had recently donated more than \$1000 to paint the entire temple and make three new outfits for the Lord. I explained to Mickey that this is the real meaning of Deity worship: it allows us to render personal, intimate service to the Lord. Looking at Vraja Mohan, Mickey said, "I think I understand now."

When we left the temple Mickey wasn't around, so I went back inside to find him. From a distance, I saw him with the priest. He was handing him a \$100 bill, pointing to the Deity and indicating that it was for His service.

On February 21, we visited other prominent temples. As we headed into town in the morning I didn't see Sherry and asked Mickey if she would be coming. He smiled and pointed to the group of ladies that were accompanying us. There I saw Sherry in a silk sari with a *bindi* on her forehead. She kept her head covered the whole day and offered her respects to all the Deities in the temples we visited, folding her hands and sometimes praying. I also prayed to those same Deities, amazed by Their potency to transform the hearts of my guests:

pratimā naha tumi—sākṣāt vrajendra-nandana

My dear Lord, You are not a statue; You are directly the son of Mahārāja Nanda.

—Cc. *Madhya* 5.97

February 22 was Lord Siva's appearance day, and I decided to spend the day alone, going on pilgrimage to Govardhana Hill. I was particularly eager to visit Chakalesvara Mahādeva, a Śiva temple on the banks of the Manasi Gaṅga lake. It is one of the five principal Śiva temples in Vṛndāvana. As Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavas we don't worship Lord Śiva in his capacity as a demigod but take shelter of him as the greatest devotee of the Lord. Specifically, we ask him to allow us



entrance into Vṛndāvana, as he is the guardian of that holy place.

When I reached the temple, I found more than a hundred Brijbasis sitting in front of the Śiva-līṅga, absorbed in an enthusiastic *bhajanaa*. One man was singing the glories of Chakaleśvara Mahādeva while playing harmonium, another was wildly beating a *mṛdāṅga*, and many more were playing *karatālas*. They were all dressed in colorful clothing as a way of marking the occasion. The men had on either white or yellow *dhotis*, with wide red, blue, or green sashes around their waists. The ladies wore colorful saris and danced joyfully on the perimeter of the *bhajana*. Upon seeing me, the men beckoned me forward and sat me down in their midst. Although I didn't know any of the *bhajana*'s words, I remained among them for well over an hour, fascinated by the atmosphere and praying to Lord Śiva for mercy.

From the Chakaleśvara Mahādeva temple I proceeded to Uddhava-kunḍa, where Uddhava had prayed to the Lord to take birth as a blade of grass in order to receive the mercy of the Vrajavasis, whose lotus feet traverse that holy place. In Kārttika, the elderly *pūjārī* there, whose heart is pure, had given me an ancient *śālagrāma śilā*, I now brought him a donation for the temple. When he saw me he smiled and called me forward. When I gave him the *Lakṣmī*, he was very surprised and immediately turned to the Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa Deities on the altar and said, “Ṭhākuraṁjī just see what mercy has come! Now You will get some new clothes! This devotee has brought You a donation. Ṭhākuraṁjī, look!”

Watching his personal dealings with the Deity, I hankered to one day have the same relationship with mine.

As he continued to talk to Them, coming up with different ideas how he would use the money in Their service, I quietly offered my obeisances and started to leave. However, when the *pūjārī* saw me going he quickly grabbed my arm and asked me to wait. Going to the altar, he picked up a small Govardhan *śilā* and then returned to put Him in my hand. I politely refused, telling him that I already had a Govardhan *śilā*, but he wouldn't listen. He looked at the Govardhan *śilā* and said, “Can't you see? He *wants* to go with you! He doesn't want to stay here anymore. He wants to go with *you*.”

The truth is, I couldn't see, but I had a strange feeling that the *pūjārī* could. I thought, “This is a special day, a special place, and this *pūjārī* seems to be a special devotee. Perhaps I should accept the *śilā*.” When I looked closely at the Deity I saw that He too was special. He was a dark red-brown color, with an amazing streak of white quartz on His head that formed a perfectly natural crown. He was gorgeous.

The *pūjārī* kept insisting and mildly chastised me, “Prabhuṁjī, He wants to go with you. Are you going to refuse Him?”

Looking at the *pūjārī* I said, “No, Prabhu, I won't refuse. If you say He wants to come with me, then I will accept Him.”



As the “two” of us departed, the *pūjārī* stood up and happily waved goodbye.

What wonderful mercy can be had in the transcendental land of Vṛndāvana! What great fortune I obtained that day in my solitary wanderings at the foot of Govardhana Hill!

O brother, what kinds of enjoyment have you not already experienced in this world of birth and death? What kind of fame and worship have you not already attained in this world by scholarship, charity and sacrifice? For today, O friend, simply accept whatever food comes unsought, look to see the good qualities in others but not their faults, do not put yourself forward, but remain obscure and unknown, and continually wander, without any companion, in this beautiful forest of Vṛndāvana.

—*Vṛndāvana-mahimāmṛta*, Śataka 2, Text 14

I spent the rest of the afternoon at Śrīla Raghunātha dāsa Goswami's *samādhi mandira* chanting and reading. In the evening I returned to Vṛndāvana to make final preparations for my departure to South Africa the next morning. When I arrived, Mickey and Sherry came to see me. When they asked where I had been all day, I told them I had gone to Govardhana Hill and Rādhā-kuṇḍa. Apparently, some devotees had told them about the glories of those places, and they lamented that they wouldn't have a chance to see them before leaving India. Upon hearing their enthusiasm, and considering that such a visit would be the crowning glory of their trip to India, we decided to go to Rādhā-kuṇḍa on our way to Delhi to catch our flights.

Rising early the next day, Gaura Sakti, Mickey, Sherry, and I packed our belongings into the Tata Sumo van that would be taking us to the airport. I was already feeling separation from Vṛndāvana.

To drink: the freely flowing streams are filled with clear sweet water as nectar. To eat: the dried leaves from the trees are foods as palatable as one could desire. The warm breezes are just as one would have them. To reside: there are clean mountain caves and other suitable residences. Alas! Alas! How unfortunate I would be if I wished to leave Vṛndāvana!

—*Vṛndāvana-mahimāmṛta*, Śataka 1, Text 15

Actually, there is only one reason to leave Vṛndāvana, and that is to preach Kṛṣṇa consciousness in foreign countries. And by that preaching, one becomes qualified to actually live in, and one day see, the real glories of Vṛndāvana-dhāma.



Now that Lord Caitanya, His heart filled with mercy, has descended to this world, those living entities who had formerly never practiced yoga, meditated, chanted mantras, performed austerities, followed various Vedic restrictions, studied the *Vedas*, performed spiritual activities, or refrained from sins, have become able to easily plunder the crest jewel of all goals of life.

Now that wonderfully powerful Lord Caitanya has descended to this world, the materialists, who had fallen into the raging river of fruitive deeds, have been rescued and are situated on firm ground, even the great boulders have melted, and even those whose hearts were fixed in non-devotional yoga are dancing in the ecstasy of love of Kṛṣṇa.

The whole world is now suddenly flooded by the nectar waters of the ocean of pure love for Kṛṣṇa. Now there is suddenly a great wonder of symptoms of ecstatic love never seen or heard of before. All this has suddenly appeared now that Lord Kṛṣṇa has descended in a form as splendid as gold.

—*Caintanya-candrāmṛta*, Chapter 12, Prabodhānanda Sarasvatī

We were running late, but Mickey and Sherry were determined to see Govardhana Hill and Rādhā-kuṇḍa. After a quick *darśana* of Lord Girirāja, we proceeded to Rādhā-kuṇḍa, the most sacred of all holy places. Situated in a small rural village, Rādhā-kuṇḍa can be truly appreciated only by those advanced souls whose eyes are anointed with the salve of love of God. Beginners can have some appreciation of this place by studying *śāstra*, but nondevotees can only be bewildered as to why someone would be eager to visit two small ponds at the foot of Govardhana Hill.

But I could see that I didn't have to worry about Mickey and Sherry. They were eager to see Rādhā-kuṇḍa and appreciated that it was special mercy for them to go there. They had been groomed for this moment by the devotees and no doubt by the Lord Himself. What tourists ever get *darśana* of Śrī Nāthji in Nathdwār, Śrī Śrī Rādhā-Govinda in Jaipur, and Śrī Śrī Rādhā-Śyāmasundara in Vṛndāvana? What tourists live for ten days on the Lord's *mahā-prasādam*? What tourists get the opportunity to give their hard-earned money to Vraja Mohan, Narottama dāsa Ṭhākura's beloved Deity? The cumulative effect of all that mercy was seen in the awe and reverence Mickey and Sherry displayed when they approached Rādhā-kuṇḍa and placed Her sacred waters upon their heads.

On the way back to the van, Mickey said, "Mahārāja, you've been so kind to us these ten days here in India. In particular, you and Śrī Prahlaḍa have answered each and every one of our questions to our full satisfaction. But I



have one question left, and this time I'm afraid that neither of you will be able to answer it!"

Thinking that a doubt lingered in Mickey's mind despite the mercy he had received, I said, "What's that question, Mickey?"

"How will I be able to explain all of this to my friends back home? How does one put into words the wonders of what we've seen and done? How do you explain Vṛndāvana to those who've never met devotees like yourselves?"

"It's not easy, Mickey, but devotees of the Lord carry Vṛndāvana in their hearts, and wherever they go they share that mercy with others. My spiritual master in particular took Vṛndāvana to the West. If people read his books, they'll get an idea of the special mercy that is available here."

As we got into the van, everyone felt the emptiness caused by our departure. All of us felt we were leaving our real home. As we drove down the road and out of Vraja, both Mickey and Sherry looked back. From the look in their eyes, I knew they'd return.

I am not strong enough to go to the far shore of the great nectar ocean of Vṛndāvana's glories. Who can go there? However, because I love Vṛndāvana I will now dip into that ocean. I pray that this endeavor may become successful and bring an auspicious result.

Day and night I glorify Vṛndāvana, which is filled with the wonder of Śrī Śrī Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa's pastimes, the wonder of the greatest sweetness, the ultimate nectar of Lord Hari, the sweetest, most beautiful auspiciousness and a flood of virtues Ananta-śeṣa, Śiva, and a host of others cannot cross.

Think of Vṛndāvana with love. Roll in its dust. Love it ardently. Please its moving and non-moving residents. Worship Śrī Rādhā's birthplace. With all your heart take shelter of Śrī Vṛndāvana, the best of all holy places.

—*Vṛndāvana-mahimāmṛta*, Śataka 1, Text 5-7

Chapter Twenty-Five

FUND RAISING IN SOUTH AFRICA

• FEBRUARY 25-28, 2001 •

I ARRIVED IN CAPE TOWN, SOUTH AFRICA, after an exhausting thirty-three-hour journey from India. After a few hours' rest, the devotees whisked me away to a Sunday Feast program in a large auditorium near the temple. Somehow I delivered a lecture to the mainly Indian audience, emphasizing that they should not give up their original Vedic philosophy for Western culture. The devotees presented a nice play afterwards, but halfway through I was so tired that I fell asleep. The devotees then took me back to the temple. Certainly such marathon schedules take their toll on my health.

Constant travel brings old age upon a man, a horse becomes old by being tied up, lack of attention from her husband brings old age upon a woman, and garments become old by being left in the sun.

—*Niti Śāstra*, Chapter 4, Text 12

No doubt, thirty-one years of traveling and preaching have made an indelible mark on my body, but the rewards of preaching far outweigh any damage I've done. In 1973, Śrīla Prabhupāda wrote a letter to my Godbrother Prabhaviṣṇu Mahārāja which has been my constant companion for many years. It is the Magna Carta of my service to the Lord:

My dear Prabhaviṣṇu,



Please accept my blessings. I beg to acknowledge receipt of your letter dated January 1, 1973, and I am very glad to hear from you about your wonderful traveling party in England.

Simply go on in this way, stopping in every village and city of England and Scotland and remaining without anxiety for destination and comfortable situations. Always rely on the mercy of Kṛṣṇa for your plan, and go on preaching His message and selling His books wherever there is interest.

I can understand that it is not an easy matter to travel extensively over long periods of time without proper food and rest, and sometimes it must be very cold there also! But still, because you are getting so much enjoyment, spiritual enjoyment, from it, it seems like play to you. That is advanced stage of spiritual life, never attained by even the greatest yogis and so-called *jyanis*! Let any man see our devotees working so hard for Kṛṣṇa and say that they are not better than millions of so-called yogis and transcendentalists. That is my challenge! Because you are rightly understanding through your personal realization this philosophy of Kṛṣṇa consciousness, in such a short time you have surpassed all the stages of yoga processes to come to the highest point of surrendering to Kṛṣṇa. That I can very much appreciate, thank you very much for helping me in this way.

Your ever well-wisher,
A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami.

I always enjoy visiting the Cape Town temple. It is a small temple by ISKCON's standards, but under the direction of Śikhi Māhiti dāsa, a disciple of Girirāja Swami, the twenty-one devotees living here produce big preaching results. They came second in worldwide book distribution during the Christmas Marathon, and they run a successful *bhakti-yoga* club at the University of Cape Town, participate regularly in city festivals with *prasādam* distribution, *kīrtana*, and plays, and hold weekly chanting parties on the street. The temple is situated in a nice neighborhood near the university. Because the main emphasis is on preaching, the temple has an upbeat atmosphere about it.

My main purpose in coming to South Africa is to raise funds for my festival program in Poland. Because I have been preaching in South Africa since 1984, I have friends and well-wishers willing to support my projects even if they are located in another country. The day after I arrived, a close friend, Bipen Prag, came to take me to visit my Cape Town donors. Just as we were about to leave, however, Śikhi Māhiti asked if I would give a lecture to students at the temple's *bhakti-yoga* club. Unable to resist, I told Bipen to reschedule any appointments we had and headed to the university.



There were more than three hundred students waiting for us on campus. As the school year had just begun, this was only the club's third meeting. The devotee who organizes it, Nanda Kumāra dāsa, suggested I speak about how I became a devotee. His idea was to gradually introduce Kṛṣṇa consciousness to the students over several weeks. However, when I sat down in front of the eager students, I couldn't resist giving them straight Kṛṣṇa consciousness. Thus I spoke on *Bhagavad-gītā* and our general way of life. Speaking in such forums is one of my favorite services in Kṛṣṇa consciousness.

As I began my talk, most of the students, who were sitting on the floor, moved forward. As I spoke, I noticed many were transfixed by the *Bhagavad-gītā*'s timeless wisdom. How it must have differed from what they hear daily from their professors.

I remember before I joined the Kṛṣṇa consciousness movement attending a lecture by a senior devotee at Ohio State University. I was mesmerized by his presentation. Halfway through his talk, he noticed that my mouth had dropped open, so he paused and said, "Is everything all right?"

Coming out of my trance, I replied, "Yes! Yes, I'm OK. Please keep speaking!"

My talk was supposed to last twenty minutes, but after an hour not a single student had left the room. When I asked for questions, many excited hands were raised, and we continued for another half an hour. Then we had a nice *kīrtana*. The students chanted cautiously at first, experimenting with the chanting, but after some time the blissful effect of the *mahā-mantra* touched their hearts and they surrendered to chanting with enthusiasm.

I often reflect that if there is anything that has convinced me of the process of Kṛṣṇa consciousness it is the chanting of the holy name. Chanted properly, the holy name has the ability to immediately transport the chanter to the transcendental platform. How rare it is to find happiness in this world—but how quickly we taste it in the chanting! Our only problem, as Lord Caitanya states, is that despite the magical effects of the chanting we have little attraction for it. Watching the students chant refreshed my conviction in the holy name's power.

O Supreme Personality of Godhead, when someone desires to chant Your holy name, sins tremble in fear, the glory of material illusion faints unconscious, Yamarāja's scribe Citragupta becomes happy and gazes at the chanter's toenails with awe and reverence, and Lord Brahmā prepares *madhu-parka* to worship him. O Lord, what more can we say than this?

—*Padyāvalī*, Introduction, Text 20

After *prasādam*, the students left for their classes. A number of them



approached and thanked me for the lecture and *kirtana*. To my surprise, one young woman said that the program was “a turning point in her life.” A few students expressed an interest to know more and asked how to get to the local temple. I was in bliss.

By then it was already late afternoon and there were just a few hours left for donation-collecting. Bipen and I jumped in the car and headed straight for our first appointment. As we drove through the streets, I meditated on the beauty of the city and the surrounding hills and plains.

The Cape of Good Hope was the name given to the southern tip of Africa by Portuguese navigator Bartolomeu Dias while negotiating the treacherous passage between the Atlantic and Indian Oceans in 1488. The area is infamous for its stormy weather, which made sailing around the cape in the days of wooden vessels extremely risky. The first settlement of what later became Cape Town was founded by the Dutch East India Company in 1652. Since then Cape Town has grown into one of the most beautiful and prosperous cities in South Africa.

However, the country has been suffering a major recession over the past few years, and this has resulted in forty-eight percent of the population becoming unemployed. As a result, crime is rampant. I had personal experience of this last year when I was collecting in the Cape Town industrial area. Just as I drove into the parking lot of a small factory, a car raced out of the lot, paused for a moment next to my car, then roared away. When I went into the office, I was shocked to see all the employees either tied up on the floor or with their hands up against a wall. They all had their eyes closed, and most of the women were crying.

I had walked straight into the aftermath of a robbery. The car that sped out as I drove in was full of gang members who had just stolen a large sum of money from the office. When the boss of the factory saw me, he put his hands down, then commented that I was lucky to be alive. He said he had pushed the button to alert the Rapid Response Unit, and the thieves could have easily mistaken my car for the police and shot me as they passed by.

As Bipen and I proceeded through the same industrial area, I noticed that at least fifty percent of the factories had shut down since last year. I began to wonder if I'd come to the right place to collect, but Kṛṣṇa's grace was with us and we were thankful for what we received by the end of the day.

For the next two days we continued going factory to factory, office to office, and door to door, soliciting donations for a Festival of India program in a foreign country. Sometimes people would ask why they should help the people of Poland when they themselves have so many problems. I welcomed such questions because they gave me a chance to preach. My simple answer was always that regardless of our nationality, we are all part of one spiritual family



and dependent one another for our spiritual welfare.

On February 28 I left for Port Elizabeth, farther up the coast, where I was joined by my old friend Puruṣottama Kṛṣṇa dāsa. He then took me to visit prospective donors. Unfortunately, we encountered similar problems to those I had met in Cape Town because this area too was affected by the recession. Whatever disappointments we met in collecting were made up by the happiness we experienced preaching to the people we encountered. In fact, I met so many interested people and spent so much time with them that for all practical purposes I was doing door-to-door preaching. Collecting was almost a side issue.

In one office I met a gentleman named Paul Robinson. A business executive in a suit and tie, he surprised me when he said that he firmly believed he was “not the body but the soul inside the body.” When I asked him how he had come to such a realization, he replied that when his father died recently and he was carrying the body to his car, he realized that he was carrying a lifeless frame and that his father was no longer present. Paul was grieving his father’s death and wanted to learn to strengthen his mind so he could better tolerate the suffering. A friend told him about yoga, which he described as a process to control the mind and senses. Having no idea how to practice yoga, Paul went through the local phone directory looking for a yoga club or organization that could help him. He came across a group of Tamil Indian priests who practice the art of Kaavetri, or walking on fire—literally walking on red-hot coals. To my astonishment, Paul described how he had spent months learning to do this and had completed his first “fire walk” the day before. He proudly stated that he had walked on 20m of red-hot coals without a single burn on his feet.

When he asked what I thought about his accomplishment, I smiled and told him that there are easier and more effective means of yoga to control the mind and deal with stress. He seemed surprised, and asked what I meant. I proceeded to explain the glories of chanting Hare Kṛṣṇa. We talked for some time, and when he realized the practicality of chanting over fire-walking I could see he was disappointed that he had gone to such efforts. He promised to try chanting Hare Kṛṣṇa, and I assured him that he would be pleased with the results.

In another place I met a well-to-do lady named Heather. She was the managing director of a large company, and upon learning that I was a monk practicing an Eastern religion, she agreed to see me at her home. That evening as we sat in her living room, she told me that her thirty-eight-year-old son was dying of cancer. She was struggling to understand why such a thing was happening. She admitted that her own religion was unable to answer her questions, and she was looking for knowledge in other spiritual traditions. I spent a couple of hours with her discussing karma, reincarnation, death, and the soul. At the end, she said she was peaceful and able to deal with the crisis as



a result of the knowledge she had heard. As Puruṣottama Kṛṣṇa and I left, she took my hand and said that God had sent us at the right time.

As we drove away, I reflected that although my purpose in coming to South Africa was to collect money, Kṛṣṇa had other things in store for me as well. Surely from the perspective of the university students, Paul, and Heather, my unsolicited visit had been a welcome surprise that had meant much in their lives. How wonderful it is to have this knowledge and be part of Kṛṣṇa's plan to share it with others.

*svasty astu viśvasya khalah prasīdatām
dhyāyantu bhūtāni śivam mitho dhiyā
manaś ca bhadram bhajatād adhokṣaje
āveśyatām no matir apy ahaitukī*

May there be good fortune throughout the universe, and may all envious persons be pacified. May all living entities become calm by practicing *bhakti-yoga*, for by accepting devotional service they will think of each other's welfare. Therefore let us all engage in the service of the supreme transcendence, Lord Śrī Kṛṣṇa, and always remain absorbed in thought of Him.

—Bhāg 5.18.9

Chapter Twenty-Six

PROFESSORS BOW TO SASTRA

• MARCH 1-3, 2001 •



ON MARCH 1 I AWOKE WITH MY LEFT EYE QUIVERING. I remembered reading somewhere in Śrīla Prabhupāda’s books that such quivering is either an auspicious or inauspicious omen. I wanted to check the books to find out which, but by the time I had finished my rounds and done my *pūjā* it was time to go on *saṅkīrtana*. Maheśvara dāsa, a disciple of Bhakti Caru Mahārāja, picked me up at 9:00 A.M. and we left for our appointments.

Our first stop was a printing office, where a gentleman named Peter greeted us warmly. Peter has been a donor of mine for many years, and I keep in regular touch with him. A pious man, he believes in God but sometimes complains that He is “a little late in answering my prayers,” or “sometimes doesn’t reply at all!” We sat chatting about the recent earthquake in Gujarat, and I explained the law of karma. Years ago he wouldn’t have been interested in such philosophy, but our friendship has made him receptive and he listened carefully, considering all the points. Later, as he wrote out a check to help my Festival of India in Poland, I noticed a large frame on the wall behind his desk. It contained a quote written in an old-style English font describing the glory of a printing house. I thought that with a few small adjustments it nicely described the purpose of our Bhaktivedanta Book Trust publishing house:

This is a printing office



Crossroads of civilization
Refuge of all the arts
Against the ravages of time
Armory of fearless truth
Against whispering rumor
Incessant trumpet of trade
From this place words may fly abroad
Not to perish on the waves of sound
Not to vary with the writer's hand
But fixed in time, having been verified in proof
Friend, you are standing on sacred ground
This is a BBT (*sic*) printing office!

As we drove around Port Elizabeth looking for a bank where we could cash the check, I became nervous. We were driving through several native townships or ghettos. Most of the black and colored people of South Africa still live in impoverished conditions, despite the ending of apartheid several years ago. As a result, a significant number of them resort to crime to survive. Maheśvara was telling me that a number of his friends had been recent victims of burglary, car theft, or mugging. He said the police are often slow to respond to crimes because the local gangs have more sophisticated weapons than they have. The police even hire well-armed security guards to protect their stations!

Recently, the secretary of one of Maheśvara's close relatives was kidnapped along with her car by a man at a red-light traffic signal in downtown Port Elizabeth. She survived only when the kidnapper stopped at the next signal and opened his door to shout to a friend, at which point the young lady gave him such a kick that he literally fell out of the vehicle. She jumped into the driver's seat and sped away.

The other evening Maheśvara himself was driving home from work when suddenly he saw a row of bricks across the road in front of him. Knowing it was a trap he accelerated over the barricade, blowing his two front tires as he got away. In his rear-view mirror he saw the men who wanted to accost him run out from the bushes cursing.

After hearing all this I wondered again if I had come to the right place to collect funds. I thought, "What I go through for the people of Poland!"

When we finally found the right bank to cash the check, I entered the building and waited in line. I had a strange feeling that something was wrong. As the lady in front of me cashed her own check and put what appeared to be a large sum of money into her purse, I looked around nervously. Walking past me and through the door, she was suddenly attacked by thieves who grabbed her bag and ran. As she screamed and people panicked, the security guards



drew their guns but didn't fire because of the large crowd. As they chased the thieves, I took my money from the cashier and quickly left the scene.

Ten minutes later, as we turned a corner on the way to our next appointment, two men, fighting brutally, spilled onto the road. Both of them were bleeding profusely, lunging at one another with knives. A large crowd gathered to watch. Swerving to avoid the men, we drove off quickly.

As if that wasn't enough, 2km down the road we witnessed a terrible car accident. Figuring that the stars weren't with us that day, I concluded that the best thing to do was go home and chant, so Maheśvara drove me back to the temple. That afternoon, out of curiosity I looked up references to omens in Śrīla Prabhupāda's books and concluded I would have been better off to have done so that morning!

atha vraje mahotpātās
tri-vidhā hy ati-dāruṇāḥ
utpetur bhuvi divy ātmany
āsanna-bhaya-śaṁsinaḥ

In the Vṛndāvana area there then arose all three types of fearful omens—those on the earth, those in the sky and those in the bodies of living creatures—which announced imminent danger.

Purport: According to Śrīla Śrīdhara Swami, the omens were as follows: on the earth there were disturbing tremors, in the sky there were meteors falling, and in the bodies of creatures there was shivering, as well as quivering of the left eye and other parts of the body. These omens announce imminent danger.

—*Bhāg.* 10.16.12

I didn't go out the rest of the day but chanted and daydreamed that perhaps one day Kṛṣṇa would send a generous sponsor my way who would support my preaching. Recently, a devotee wrote me that she didn't feel it appropriate for *sannyāsīs* to collect money. I replied that I fully agreed with her but that currently I had no choice. I told her that last year more than 750,000 people walked through the gates of our Polish festival. That's no ordinary Sunday Feast program! Big preaching requires sufficient funds. Śrīla Prabhupāda writes, "Every endeavor requires land, capital, organization and labor. Just as in business one requires a place to stay, some capital to use, some labor and some organization to expand, so the same is required in the service of Kṛṣṇa. The only difference is that in materialism one works for sense gratification." (Bg. 12.11, purport)

I concluded my letter by saying that when Kṛṣṇa sent me a patrol like King



Aśoka, who financially supported the spread of Buddhism all over India in the second century, to support my preaching, then I would sit happily all afternoon with people like Peter the printer and teach them how to practice Kṛṣṇa consciousness.

Later in the afternoon, Puruṣottama Kṛṣṇa came home and asked me to participate in a meeting at the University of Port Elizabeth that concerned his daughter, Josila. A first-year student at the university, she had objected to an assignment her professor in Business Management had assigned. The assignment asked the students to develop a marketing strategy for a theoretical meat-packing company that was falling behind in sales. Josila had protested, first to the professor and then to the university administration, that writing such a paper conflicted with her religious beliefs as a member of the Hare Kṛṣṇa movement. Meat-eating was sinful, she said, as it involved the cruelty of killing innocent animals. In her heart she simply couldn't write a paper promoting such an evil act. Over several weeks she rallied the support of many students and even lobbied a number of professors. Her challenge became the talk of the campus.

As a result, the university called for what it described as an Extraordinary Meeting of the Forum for the Promotion of Equality. The meeting, consisting of senior faculty members to consider both sides of the issue, was to gather evidence to present to a committee that addresses students' grievances and attempts to find solutions. Puruṣottama Kṛṣṇa wanted me to represent his daughter, as I think he was little awed by the august assembly of professors.

We arrived just as the meeting was about to begin. When I walked in with my bright saffron cloth and *daṇḍa*, most of the professors stared in disbelief. One of them muttered, "My God, what is this?"

I took my seat at the table along with Puruṣottama Kṛṣṇa, but the chairman asked Josila to wait outside for the duration of the meeting. He then briefly introduced the purpose of the meeting and asked each member to introduce themselves. One by one the professors announced who they were. When it was my turn, I identified myself as a student of India's greatest spiritual emissary to the Western world, His Divine Grace A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami. I explained that I was a *sannyāsī*, a monk, visiting their country to introduce the teachings of India's great spiritual classic, the *Bhagavad-gītā*. I spoke briefly about Śrīla Prabhupāda's contribution in the field of literature, and concluded by saying that I was honored to be present at this meeting. I actually surprised myself with how articulate my introduction came out, and I felt at ease when I saw several professors nod their heads in acknowledgment of my short presentation.

Then the debate began as to whether Josila had the right to refuse an assignment based on her religious convictions. Her business lecturer, Professor Boshoff, was obviously disturbed that a young student had challenged him and



made such a fuss all over campus. He argued that the subject of promoting meat sales was nothing to get in an uproar about. “After all, the meat-packing industry is one of the most important and respected businesses in the world.”

At that point, Professor Naidoo, the head of the Pharmacy Department, said he felt the whole issue could be avoided simply by changing the subject matter of the assignment from meat sales to clothing sales. Professor Boshoff wouldn’t accept that solution. Then the chairman turned to me and asked if I would explain why Josila was so disturbed about writing an assignment on the promotion of meat.

Relishing the opportunity to address so many learned men and women, I stood up and spoke slowly, choosing each word. Using śāstric quotes and analogies, I explained the difference between the body and the soul and elaborated on the theory of reincarnation. I went on to explain how there is a soul in every living creature. Killing animals, I said, is tantamount to murder. Noting that the professors were coming from diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds (Christian, Muslim, and Hindu), I concluded my talk with a punch: asking Josila to write about promoting the sale of meat was like asking a Christian to write about promoting the devil, a Jew to promote the Holocaust, and a Muslim to promote Mohammed as an ordinary man.

A long silence followed my presentation. Finally, the chairman asked if anyone had any questions for me. When a few professors spoke in support of what I had said, Professor Boshoff walked out in a huff. The chairman then closed the session, saying the committee would meet privately the next day to form a resolution. He thanked Puruṣottama Kṛṣṇa and me for participating, and we left.

The next morning I received a call from the chairman. He thanked me for participating in the discussion. He said my presentation had been the deciding factor in the committee’s resolutions, which he would have delivered to Puruṣottam Kṛṣṇa’s house later in the day. That afternoon, a university car delivered the following paper to our door:

Resolutions of the Extraordinary Meeting of the Forum for Promotion of Equality:

1. The Department of Business Management be requested to find, in this case, an alternative assignment subject that is acceptable to the Kṛṣṇa faith, but that is comparable, in all ways, to the current topic.
2. That from this point on, academics be asked to provide alternative topics for assignments where there is a possibility that the given subject may be offensive to minority groups.



3. Academics be asked to provide alternative questions in exam papers, where there is the possibility that the given subject may offend members of minority groups, such as the Kṛṣṇa faith.

That evening Puruṣottama Kṛṣṇa, Josila, and I had a small celebration. We had challenged a respectable academic institution's dealings with us, a religious minority, and had won. The professors involved had made their decision based on the teachings of His Divine Grace A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupāda. It was a small but clear victory for Lord Caitanya's *saṅkīrtana* movement. We hanker for more such opportunities in the service of His Divine Grace.

*ceto-darpaṇa-mārjanam bhava-mahā-dāvāgni-nirvāpaṇam
śreyāḥ-kairava-candrikā-vitaraṇam vidyā-vadhū-jīvanam
ānandāmbudhi-varḍhanam prati-padam pūrṇāmṛtāsvādanam
sarvātma-snāpanam param vijayate śrī-kṛṣṇa-saṅkīrtanam*

Let there be all victory for the chanting of the holy name of Lord Kṛṣṇa, which can cleanse the mirror of the heart and stop the miseries of the blazing fire of material existence. That chanting is the waxing moon that spreads the white lotus of good fortune for all living entities. It is the life and soul of all education. The chanting of the holy name of Kṛṣṇa expands the blissful ocean of transcendental life. It gives a cooling effect to everyone and enables one to taste full nectar at every step.

—Śikṣāṣṭakam, Text 1

Chapter Twenty-Seven

NO TIME TO LOSE

• MARCH 7-14, 2001 •



ON MARCH 7 I FLEW FROM SOUTH AFRICA TO LONDON, where I took a day of rest before traveling on to San Francisco to begin a five-week tour of our ISKCON temples in America. In London, I took a hotel room near the airport in order to get sufficient rest before my flight the next day. I was joined by my disciple, Śrī Ṭhākura Mahāśaya dāsa, who kindly assisted me during the layover.

Before I left South Africa, one devotee had mistakenly dyed my only two sets of cloth a dark red. Poor Śrī Ṭhākura Mahāśaya spent most of our short stay in the hotel repeatedly washing the clothes in the bathtub to try to soften the color. However, when he brought the clothes to me just before I left for my flight, I saw to my horror that they had turned bright pink! Even the hotel employees couldn't keep from smiling when they saw me.

Unfortunately the light mood didn't last long. The phone rang just as we were leaving the hotel room. It was a devotee calling to inform me that my Godbrother, Tribuvanātha Prabhu, from London, had just been diagnosed with stomach cancer and been given only six weeks to live. The news shocked me. Tribuvanātha, who came to Kṛṣṇa consciousness in the late 1960s, has been a *brahmacārī* most of his ISKCON life. He has always been one of my favorite devotees. Although our association has been limited through the years, I have always admired his bright face, blissful smile, and taste for the holy name. Like myself, he has focused on organizing big festivals throughout Europe and



Africa for much of his devotional career.

Hearing of his imminent departure made me realize that if he can die, I can too. The fact is, we never expect we're going to die. If we did, we would take full advantage of each and every minute in devotional service. I thought, "When will I actually become serious about Kṛṣṇa consciousness and deal with the lust, anger, and greed in my heart? When will that day come when I will chant the holy name with genuine feeling? When will my compassion for all living entities manifest, and with a lowly heart will I go out to preach the divine command?" I pray that Tribuvanātha's condition will be the catalyst that finally manifests these changes within my heart. Time is short. As Śrīla Prabhupāda said to the disciples who surrounded his bed during his last days, "Don't think this won't happen to you!"

Friend, when will you die? Do you know? Do not even infants sometimes die unexpectedly? With clear intelligence, without attachment to the body and senses, and without stopping to think, run to Vṛndāvana!

—*Vṛndāvana-mahimāmṛta*, Introduction, Text 78

Śrī Prahlāda and Rukmīṇī Priya joined me at Heathrow Airport for the flight to America. Because I had gone alone to South Africa, we had been separated for ten days. I was overjoyed to see them again. It's not easy to travel alone. Cāṇakya Pandit recommends that one travel with others:

Religious austerities should be practiced alone, study by two, and singing by three. A journey should be undertaken by four, agriculture by five, and war by many together.

—*Nīti Śāstra*, Chapter 4, Text 12

From a mundane point of view I was flying home. I was born and raised in San Francisco, but there's nothing left there for me now. Both my parents have passed away, and my siblings are scattered all over the country. Nevertheless, as I looked out the plane window, memories of my childhood came to mind, bringing with them sentiments not worthy of my attention. I quickly caught myself and came back to reality, remembering the written words of my spiritual master—reflections on his own family members with the passing of time:

Where have my affectionate
Father and mother gone now?
And where are all my elders and other relatives,
Who were my own folk?



Who will give me news of them now?
I ask you—tell me who?
All that is left of this so-called family
Is a list of their names.

As the froth upon the sea water
Arises for a moment and then subsides,
The play of *māyā*'s worldly illusion
Is exactly like that.

No one is actually a mother or father,
A family member or relative.
Everyone is just like foam on the sea water,
Remaining in view for only a few moments.

But all of us are actually relatives,
O brothers, on the platform of pure spirit soul.
These eternal relationships are not tinged
With the temporary delusions of *māyā*.

The Supreme Lord is Himself
The ultimate soul of everyone.
In their eternal relationship to Him,
Everyone in the universe is equal.

—Śrīla Prabhupāda's "Vṛndāvana Bhajana," written about 1958

Śrīla Prabhupāda writes that no one is our "mother or father," but rather "everyone in the universe is equal." In other words, all of us are equal as brothers and sisters because we share God as a common father. A devotee of the Lord takes every opportunity to remind all conditioned souls of this fact. Therefore, although a devotee may renounce the idea that he is part of a particular family, society, or nation, he is not at all averse to helping even his own "mother and father" in Kṛṣṇa consciousness. In fact, simply having a devotee in one's family benefits that family immensely. Śrīla Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī once said, "When a great saint, a pure devotee, appears in a family, then his ancestors and descendants for a hundred generations each are elevated. When a devotee of middle stature (*madhyama-bhāgavata*) appears in a family, then his ancestors and descendants for fourteen generations each are elevated. When a neophyte devotee appears in a family, then his ancestors and descendants for three generations each are elevated." (Śrīla Prabhupāder *Upadeśāmṛta*)



Personally, I tried my best to help my mother in spiritual life. Unfortunately, she was an intellectual, and throughout her life never showed the slightest interest in religion. I once asked her if she believed in God and she replied, “Something may be out there.” Whenever I visited her we would debate the existence of the soul, life after death, karma, etc., and over the years I continued to cultivate that little “something” in her heart by sending her Śrīla Prabhupāda’s books, which invariably ended up in a pile at the back of her garage collecting grease and dust.

A few years ago she telephoned me late one night. It was an unusual hour to call, and I was surprised to hear from her. She began the conversation by asking if I would take her to Vṛndāvana. I was shocked! “Mother wants to go to Vṛndāvana, to the land of Kṛṣṇa’s birth?! What is this? How does she even know what Vṛndāvana is?” But she insisted and wanted to know when we could go. Although I was intrigued at the prospect of taking my mother to Vṛndāvana, because it was late (and I was tired), I told her I’d call her back early the next morning and we could discuss the matter in detail. I woke up refreshed the next day, and after my shower excitedly dialed her number. My brother answered.

I said, “Pete, can I speak to Mom?”

There was a prolonged silence. Something was wrong. Finally, he replied with his voice choked with emotion, “Mom passed away last night.”

I couldn’t believe it. Once again the reality of death was staring me in the face. “What happened? I talked to Mom only last night!”

“I know. She’s been battling cancer for six months. She didn’t want to tell you.”

Collecting myself, I said, “Cancer! Did she say anything at the end?”

“Yes, she did. She said, ‘Don’t lament for me! I’m not this body. I’m eternal spirit soul. I’ll never die. I’m going to Kṛṣṇa!’ With those words on her lips, she passed away.”

I was stunned. My mother, the intellectual who never went to church, who never inquired about God, who debated His very existence, was “going to Kṛṣṇa”. I couldn’t believe she had said such a thing.

“But how is it possible that Mom said those things at death?”

“When Mom learned she had cancer and was going to die, a strange transformation came over her. She became restless and unsettled. She began asking about you, wanting to know where you were and what you were doing. She had an intense desire to meet with you, to speak with you. But when I suggested calling you she’d always say, ‘No, don’t bother him now. We’ll contact him later.’

“One morning I went out to the garage to empty the garbage and I found her going through all those books you had sent her. She looked up at me and asked



me to carry them into the house. That afternoon she carefully dusted them off. For the last five months she sat in her rocking chair and read those books. Sometimes she'd underline certain passages or quotes that had particular relevance for her. She also contacted your tape ministry in London and ordered all your lecture tapes. She'd listen to them on her headphones, rocking back and forth in her armchair, looking at your picture which she kept on the table nearby. She must have listened to at least three a day.

“Gradually her condition deteriorated, but she wasn't afraid. I think there was something in those books that made her fearless. Then last night she sensed she was going to die. She told me to call you. Her last request was that you take her to a place called Vṛndāvana.”

When I put the phone down I cried—not out of mundane sentiment or attachment but in appreciation that my spiritual master, Śrīla Prabhupāda, had extended his mercy to my mother and delivered her from material existence.

I went home for the memorial service and arranged her estate. Just before I was leaving to return to Europe, my brother and sister approached me and asked what they should do with her ashes. Remembering my last conversation with her, I smiled and took the ashes with me. Several weeks later, one of my disciples placed them in the sacred waters of the Yamunā River in Vṛndāvana. I had fulfilled my mother's last request to me, a request I pray will also be on my lips the day I leave this mortal frame.

May the land of Śrī Vṛndāvana where Subāla and the other wonderful cowherd boys, who are all dear friends of Śrī Kṛṣṇa, play, where Lalitā and the other splendidly beautiful young *gopīs*, who are all filled with love for Śrīmatī Rādhārāṇī, enjoy transcendental bliss, and where Śrī Śrī Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa thirst to enjoy wonderful transcendental amorous pastimes day and night, become manifest in my heart.

—Vṛndāvana-mahimāmṛta, Introduction, Text 15

Chapter Twenty-Eight

AFFLUENCE AT A PRICE

• MARCH 14-21, 2001 •

RALTHOUGH I HAVE PASSED THROUGH AMERICA briefly on two or three occasions, for all practical purposes I haven't been here for thirty years—more than a quarter of a century. As a result I feel almost like an immigrant entering a foreign country. Upon arriving in San Francisco I even behaved like one! After passing through customs and immigration I went to make a phone a call but discovered I had no change. Looking closely at the telephone, I saw to my surprise that one could make calls using a credit card. I pulled out the one my son had sent me to use “in case of emergency,” and put it into the appropriate slot in the telephone. But as it started going in, I quickly pulled it out, afraid that it might disappear. I did this several times, unaware that the card was meant to stop three-quarters of the way in. The man standing behind me, waiting to use the phone, looked on in disbelief. He finally spoke up.

“What on earth are you doing?”

Looking at him sheepishly I replied, “I’m afraid the phone will eat my credit card.”

Dumbfounded, he said, “Where in heck are you from?”

Trying to avoid the embarrassing situation, I replied with a slightly French accent, “I’m from Paris, France.”

Taking pity on me, he reached over and pushed my credit card firmly into the slot (it didn’t disappear) and said, “Just dial the number you want. Your



card will be OK.”

We were picked up at the airport by Kṛṣṇa Karuṇa dāsa, a disciple of Rādhānātha Mahārāja, who drove us south to San Jose where we were to observe Gaura-Pūrṇimā the next day. I was stupefied as we drove through the cities of Palo Alto and San Mateo. This is the famous Silicon Valley of California, which produces much of the world’s computer software. Everything was so opulent—the highways, the cars, the buildings, the shopping centers. Compared with my bases in Eastern Europe and Russia, where I’ve served for the past sixteen years, everything seemed so clean, well organized, and efficient.

Śrīla Prabhupāda writes in his books that while traveling in this world, one can see both heaven and hell. No doubt! Recent travels have taken me through the most hellish conditions in Russia and Africa, and now I was seeing “heaven on earth” in America. On the flight from London, I read a report that America has generated more wealth during the past ten years than has been available to the human race in the entire history of known civilization. America is presently producing thirty-three percent of the world’s wealth, and as I would soon experience in walking through many American towns, you can get whatever you want whenever you want it, anywhere.

But the opulence seemed strangely out of balance. As I looked out the window of the car, every second building seemed to be a fast food restaurant—a MacDonald’s, a Denny’s, a Wendy’s, or a Presto Pasta. Fancy. There were also expensive restaurants here and there. From that I could conclude that although Americans are enjoying the greatest opulence of all time, they are paying a heavy price for it. “There is no gathering the rose without being pricked by the thorn.” (*Fables of Bidpai*)

They work so hard that they have little if any time to cook their own meals. The limitless fast food chains and restaurants in most towns indicate they prefer to grab a bite at Wendy’s or MacDonald’s. (The truth of this became apparent to me a few weeks later on a flight from Arizona to New York. A smiling airline stewardess handed me a polystyrene box that read, “Real Fast Food—a tasty little snack served at jet speed.”)

Whatever fascination America held for this self-styled immigrant quickly faded as I realized the heaven of California was simply the other side of the counterfeit coin of material existence. Being fixed in Kṛṣṇa consciousness and having experienced the higher taste of devotional service to the Lord, a devotee is not attracted to living in heaven, nor is he repulsed by having to go to hell to serve his spiritual master.

nārāyaṇa-parāḥ sarve
na kutaścana bibhyati
svargāpavarga-narakeṣv



api tulyārtha-darsinaḥ

Devotees solely engaged in the devotional service of the Supreme Personality of Godhead, Nārāyaṇa, never fear any condition of life. For them the heavenly planets, liberation and the hellish planets are all the same, for such devotees are interested only in the service of the Lord.

—*Bhāg.* 6.17.28

Gaura-Pūrṇimā in San Jose was simple but sweet. About forty devotees attended the festivities, including my wonderful Godbrother, Vaiṣeṣika Prabhu. I had heard of Vaiṣeṣika as early as 1974. A tall, handsome devotee with a friendly smile, he was famous as a steady and determined book distributor. He was also well known as an avid reader and scholar of Śrīla Prabhupāda's books. I have never had the opportunity to sit down and get to know him (mainly because I have been based in Europe and he was in America), but I have sometimes used him in my classes as an example of an ideal *sādhaka*. He has always succeeded in distributing Śrīla Prabhupāda's books because he knew their content. Having heard nothing of him for a number of years, I assumed that like many devotees with various responsibilities, he had given up *saṅkīrtana* and taken a regular job. I was therefore stunned to discover that Vaiṣeṣika has continued to distribute books almost every day. Although he does work to maintain himself and his good wife, Nirākula devī dāsī, he can still be seen, standing tall with his broad smile, every morning at the San Francisco airport, with his "Excuse me sir, have you seen these books?" as people deplane. I offer my obeisances to such a sincere Godbrother and pray that I may imbibe his dedication in serving our spiritual master.

*brahmaṇyaḥ śīla-sampannaḥ
satya-sandho jitendriyaḥ
ātmavat sarva-bhūtānām
eka-priya-suhṛttamaḥ*

. . . [Mahārāja Prahāda] was completely cultured as a qualified *brāhmaṇa*, having very good character and being determined to understand the Absolute Truth. He had full control of his senses and mind. . . and he considered his teachers, spiritual masters and older Godbrothers to be as good as the Supreme Personality of Godhead.

—*Bhāg.* 7.4.31

If someone asked me what was the greatest benefit in being a traveling preacher, I would reply that it is the opportunity to meet sincere devotees



throughout the world. Śrīla Prabhupāda once said that Lord Caitanya has placed His devotees in different parts of the world for the purpose of spreading His *saṅkīrtana* mission.

After Gaura-Pūrṇimā we traveled to Southern California, where I was fortunate to get the brief association of another Godbrother, Svavāsa Prabhu. He is another devotee who has earned my constant admiration for his dedication to Śrīla Prabhupāda. He has served as temple president of the Los Angeles temple for many years. Although I have heard that some temples in America are struggling, under Svavāsa's guidance the Los Angeles temple has continued to grow steadily. Book distribution has never stopped, devotees continue to join, and the temple is maintained in part by a thriving gift shop situated within the temple complex. Devotees told me that numerous Hollywood movie stars shop there.

I noticed that Indian culture and philosophy seem popular in America. Yoga, meditation, and vegetarianism are practiced widely, and stores are full of books with spiritual messages. As a result, Kṛṣṇa consciousness no longer carries a cult image in much of America. Times have changed. I even saw several billboards containing spiritual messages. Alluding to the temporary nature of life, one billboard in Northern California read, "He who dies with the most toys is still dead." Another in Southern California said, "Life is a game that can only be played—but never won."

It seems America is ripe for what our movement has to offer. When I first became a devotee, parts of the American public were skeptical about Kṛṣṇa consciousness. One older lady, the mother of a devotee, recently told me that she once asked Śrīla Prabhupāda why he didn't come to America earlier than 1965. He smiled and replied, "Because you weren't ready."

Now America seems more ready than ever. Unfortunately, it appears that our movement has not developed enough through the years to meet that need. I suppose there are a number of reasons for this, but it seems other spiritual movements have taken advantage of ISKCON's pioneer work in introducing Vedic culture in America and are thriving. Buddhism is especially popular, although Buddhism is nothing more than covered atheism.

We spent several days at the Laguna Beach temple. The temple president, Tukarāma Prabhu, has been instrumental in organizing my American tour. Knowing the potential for preaching in America and wanting to help the temples here, Tukaram has been inviting *sannyāsīs* like myself to come to America for years. In Laguna Beach I also had the opportunity to associate with a dear Godbrother, Adya Prabhu. Enlivened by reports of the success of our festival program in Poland, he gave generously to help support it.

The *prasādam* in Laguna Beach was especially wonderful, but after I left I decided I had better follow the Bengali proverb and maintain my health: "A



young man cannot eat too much nor an old man too little.”

Inviting a devotee to take *prasādam* in one’s house and accepting such invitations are two of the six exchanges of love described in *Upadeśāmṛta*. A traveling preacher must be careful, however. He often does three preaching programs a day. That means he will be offered three big meals a day. I have recently been employing Queen Elizabeth II’s reported technique, which is to eat a full meal at the beginning of the day, before the programs, then simply take a few bites at any engagements during the day.

Our trip through California was hectic, and by the time we reached our next destination, Arizona, I was exhausted. When I asked Śrī Prahlāda why he thought I was so tired, he looked at me incredulously and replied, “Because you’ve been on the road for thirty-one years!”

The morning after our arrival in Phoenix I was unable to get up for *maṅgala-ārati*. In fact, I lay in bed until well after 7 A.M. Finally I pulled myself out of my sleeping bag, reflecting on Śrīla Prabhupāda’s statement to Girirāja Mahārāja, “If the Supreme Lord Nārāyaṇa got up late and didn’t wash his mouth in the morning, even Lakṣmī would leave him!”

Arizona showed me another interesting face of America. A desert region, it is the fourth most popular state for tourism. Phoenix is the second fastest-growing city in the country. I found this surprising; I couldn’t imagine what in the world would attract someone to move to a desert. I was about to find out!

My Godbrother Daśarathāa Prabhu and his good wife Sandamaṇi dāsī have built impressive temples in Phoenix and Tucson. In Phoenix they purchased a large building that is now home to beautiful Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa Deities named Rādhā-Mādhava Hari. The mainly Indian congregation numbers in the thousands, and the devotees are well known throughout the city.

In Tucson, 160km south, they have a world-class Govinda’s vegetarian restaurant on the temple property. The restaurant serves more than thirty thousand people a year. In its October 30, 1998, edition, the prominent national and globally read newspaper, *USA Today*, reviewed Govinda’s in their entertainment section. Appearing as one of six restaurants described as top picks of the country, Govinda’s was chosen as “the most unique eatery in Tucson.” Complete with a large, beautiful outdoor patio that seats many guests, the feature of the restaurant is its excellent food and exotic ambiance.

Seeing that I was completely exhausted that morning, Daśarathāa suggested taking me into the desert to “refresh my soul.” At first I hesitated, wondering what business a *sannyāsī* had taking time off for a jaunt into the desert. But at dawn, while chanting my rounds outside, I had noticed the unique beauty of the desert. Coincidentally, that morning I had been reading the First Canto of *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* where Nārada Muni describes how he became free from the fatigue of traveling by taking shelter of nature’s beauty:



I took this as the special mercy of the Lord, who always desires benediction for His devotees, and so thinking, I started for the north. After my departure, I passed through many flourishing metropolises, towns, villages, animal farms, mines, agricultural lands, valleys, flower gardens, nursery gardens and natural forests. I passed through hills and mountains full of reservoirs of various minerals like gold, silver and copper, and through tracts of land with reservoirs of water filled with beautiful lotus flowers, fit for the denizens of heaven, decorated with bewildered bees and singing birds. Thus traveling, I felt tired, both bodily and mentally, and I was both thirsty and hungry. So I took a bath in a river lake and also drank water. By contacting water, I got relief from my exhaustion.

—*Bhāg.* 1.6.10-12,14

Although I couldn't imagine a "river lake" in the desert to relieve my fatigue, the natural beauty and absolute quiet seemed to beckon me for a brief respite. I agreed to go. Śrī Prahlāda and Rukmiṇī Priya accompanied us.

On the way to a nearby canyon we passed a large Navajo Indian reservation. Daśaratha explained that the Native Americans keep mostly to themselves on the reservation, watching television and drinking liquor. Recently, by building large casinos on their reservations, they have attracted tourists and made a lot of money. I asked if any Navajo Indians had ever become devotees, and he replied that to his knowledge only one Native American had ever joined ISKCON. A young lady with a bad drinking habit, she had had a hard time refraining from liquor. The devotees tried to supplement her habit with large quantities of *gulabjamun* juice, but eventually she gave in to her old ways and returned to the reservation.

We drove several kilometers into the desert and eventually came to the entrance of a deep canyon. As we drove into the canyon, it was as if we were entering another world. A small river cascaded down unusual rock formations that appeared similar to a scene from the moon. Huge cacti grew everywhere, some of them 10m high. Daśaratha said that this particular species grows only in this region of the world. The big ones can weigh as much as seven tons and live as long as 150 years. Dry and barren except for the cacti, the area seemed uninhabitable, but Daśaratha explained that there was indeed much wildlife in the canyon, including mountain lions, black bear, and big-horn sheep. Animals like coyotes, tortoises, and snakes come out only at night. I noticed beautiful desert flowers blooming in isolated patches. The entire atmosphere was tranquil. In fact, there was a stillness in that canyon that I had never experienced anywhere else. It was almost mystical and surprisingly therapeutic. As we proceeded further, I chanted softly on my beads. Time went by, and chanting in such an environment gave me a sense of peace I hadn't felt



in a long time. As we were leaving, I felt drawn back to the quiet of the desert and resolved that I would come again. My brief encounter with the solitude and calmness of this part of Kṛṣṇa's creation had an amazing effect on me.

At the same time I knew that because of my many services and responsibilities I probably wouldn't be back. Deep inside, I know that I will enjoy real peace and full satisfaction only when my service to Śrīla Prabhupāda's mission has been perfected. That is my duty as his disciple. "The only peace, the only security, is in fulfillment." (Henry Miller)

And it's true: I find the greatest peace and happiness while pursuing the greater challenges in service to my spiritual master. A well-known writer once observed that peace is not the absence of conflict but the presence of God, no matter what the conflict. I feel closest to Kṛṣṇa while preaching especially during the Polish festival tour. I can honestly say that my greatest satisfaction in life comes when after days of advertising and setting up our program in a town, thousands of people stream through the festival gates. Although I may be exhausted, I often stand on the main stage and watch the people, eager to experience the wonderful world of Hare Kṛṣṇa, pour in. I think of Śrīla Prabhupāda and how happy he must be, looking down benevolently from his transcendental position in the spiritual sky. Those are the moments I feel closest to him, and those are those moments I feel the greatest peace and joy within my heart. Coming out of the mystical desert canyon, I feel refreshed and ready to travel on. How happy I am to be like this—always preaching and moving on!

Dearest Srila Prabhupada,

This year, in the wake of a disaster that claimed a friend
 And brought the walls crumbling down,
 I took up my staff and looked to the road,
 Hoping to find you again.

To gain your favor I gave up all that I owned
 And tried to renounce my pride,
 And ever more cautious of women and fame,
 I traveled far and wide.

Moving once in the north and twice in the south
 And east and west in turn,
 I learned firsthand of God's creation
 And your kind mercy as well.



Soon austerity came, claiming all of my wealth,
But remained a welcome friend,
And strength I gained, and detachment too,
While traveling through foreign lands.

With no place to live, or a home of my own,
I learned to take shelter in you,
And the constant vision of birth and death
Kept me learned and true to my vows.

In forests and cities, villages and towns,
Repeating your words I roamed,
Witnessing your mercy, as kind as you are,
In delivering the fallen and poor.

Disease came in summer and near death in the fall,
In a jungle far to the south.
But your saving grace and Narasimha's mace
Kept me safe and protected through all.

Oh, how happy I am to serve you like this,
Always preaching and traveling on!
As a flowing river remains always clean,
I pray to remain always pure.

In happiness and distress, in heat and cold
I want to keep fighting on,
Delivering your message, as you asked me to,
While I'm enthusiastic, youthful, and strong.

But Prabhupada, the road is long,
And there are many dangers in between
Where I pause now . . .
And you rest safely on the other shore.

So on this day, so full of grace,
Please hear my fervent prayer:
Within my heart, beyond what's dark
There's a shining love for you.

So guide me right, keep me in the fight,



And away from *maya*'s glare,
And when all is done, and the battle's won,
Take me home to be with you again!

Your eternal servant,
Indradyumna Swami.

[Vyāsa-pūjā offering to Śrīla Prabhupāda, 1988]

Chapter Twenty-Nine

HOLY TIRTHA ON THE LOWER EAST SIDE

• MARCH 22-29, 2001 •



ON MARCH 27, Śrī Prahlāda, Rukmiṇī Priya, Daujī Kṛṣṇa dāśī (my sixteen-year-old disciple from Vṛndāvana, who has now joined us), and I arrived in New York after a six-hour flight from Phoenix, Arizona. It was cold and raining, and the bleak New York skyline offered a sharp contrast to the beauty and simplicity of the Arizona desert. Bhakta Pankaj, an Indian devotee who lives with the *brahmacārīs* running the original ISKCON storefront, “Matchless Gifts,” at 26 Second Avenue, picked us up at the airport.

As we drove into the city we got stuck in traffic and had time to study the thousands of pedestrians on the busy streets, the towering skyscrapers, and the other sights and sounds that make New York the unique place that it is. Dwarfed as we were by so many massive buildings, my impression was that the city had developed sporadically into a congested concrete jungle. Milan Kuṇḍaera wrote, “The beauty of New York is unintentional; it arose independent of human design, like a stalagmite cavern.”

Despite its overbearing appearance, New York effectively serves as the great capital of business, entertainment, and fashion for America. It is also the port of entry for most immigrants, beckoned by the Statue of Liberty (representing liberty as a woman with a torch upraised in one hand and a book in the other arm) who stands on Liberty Island in New York Harbor. The inscription on the statue reads:



Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore,
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me:
I lift my lamp beside the golden door.

—*The New Colossus*, Emma Lazarus

One person who took advantage of her invitation was His Divine Grace, A. C. Bhaktivedānta Swami Prabhupāda. However, he didn't come to America in 1965 a tired and homeless beggar, seeking shelter in the "land of the free." Rather, he came to give the people of America the benediction of achieving the ultimate goal of life. In a newspaper interview in the 1970s, a reporter asked Śrīla Prabhupāda why he came to the United States. Śrīla Prabhupāda replied boldly, "To remind you of what you have forgotten: God."

Despite being the materialistic place that it is, New York holds a special charm for ISKCON devotees around the world because it is the place where Śrīla Prabhupāda began his Western world preaching. Śrīla Prabhupāda himself had affection for New York. In a letter to a disciple written in 1970 he stated, "New York is very much attractive for me because New York is the starting place of my activities in your country."

The devotees know of many holy pilgrimage places in New York: "Matchless Gifts," where ISKCON started in 1966, Tompkins Square Park, where Śrīla Prabhupāda introduced the public chanting of the holy name, Washington Square Park, where he sat on the grass to preach, and the Bowery loft where he once lived.

Arriving at the devotees' apartment a few blocks from Second Avenue, we settled in and met our hosts. Yajña Puruṣa dāsa, a disciple of Nirañjana Swami, has a crew of four *brahmacārīs* who do regular *harināma* on the Lower East Side, hold home programs, and give classes at "Matchless Gifts." Hearing of their preaching from that historic base made me eager to join in. Just as the places of Kṛṣṇa's pastimes are considered sacred, so the places where pure devotees like Śrīla Prabhupāda preach also become sanctified:

*bhavad-vidhā bhāgavatās
tīrtha-bhūtāḥ svayaṁ vibho
tīrthi-kurvanti tīrthāni
svāntaḥ-sthena gadābhṛtā*

My lord, devotees like your good self are verily holy places personified. Because you carry the Personality of Godhead within your heart, you turn all places into places of pilgrimage.



—*Bhāg.* 1.13.10

On Friday afternoon we assembled in front of “Matchless Gifts” for a *harināma*. As we chanted through the Lower East Side, I could see that not much had changed since the time Śrīla Prabhupāda lived there in the mid-60s. The district is still a haven for young people living alternative lifestyles. Most were dressed in unusual clothes, many of the girls had dyed their hair bright colors, many of the boys wore oversized jeans and rings in their ears, and people congregated everywhere, talking or drinking coffee and tea in small cafes. There was a relaxed mood on the street, and I could smell marijuana in the air as we passed underground bookstores and music shops.

But by far, the most “far out” people with the “coolest” music were the devotees as we chanted and danced in ecstasy through the colorful, upbeat neighborhood. Everyone enjoyed the *kīrtana*, and on several occasions young people followed us, chanting with us as we wove in and out of the crowds. Others waved or gave thumbs-up signs as we passed. The more “enlightened” people called out, “Hare Kṛṣṇa!” We chanted for several hours, and knowing that all of New York was as congested as this one area, I quickly concluded that the city was undoubtedly the *harināma* capital of the world. In my mind I tried to figure out how to organize my yearly schedule to include a month-long *harināma* program on the Lower East Side with devotees from around the world. I told Yajña Puruṣa, “If we could have a large, well-organized, colorful, blissful *harināma* here on a regular basis, we’d take over the city. At least we’d touch the hearts of millions of New Yorkers!” Of course, I knew it was unlikely that I could arrange such a thing given my present responsibilities, but I plan to keep it as an alternative should things ever drastically change for me in Eastern Europe and Russia. Who knows what the future holds?

On Saturday we drove to New Jersey and held an evening program at my Godbrother, Śamika Rṣi’s house. More than three hundred devotees from the Indian community participated, and the atmosphere was electric. I wanted to reciprocate with the devotees’ enthusiasm, so I led a big *kīrtana* and gave a long class full of transcendental stories. Afterwards, Daujī Kṛṣṇa performed a beautiful Oriyan dance for the devotees and guests. She touched their hearts by introducing the dance in fluent Hindi. When she danced, everyone was amazed at the professionalism of her performance. Śrī Pahlāda concluded the evening with a rousing *kīrtana* for *ārati*, which left everyone exhausted on the floor.

This was a normal program for Śrī Pahlāda and me, but it seemed out of the ordinary for the New Jersey congregation. Afterwards, a devotee thanked me for “the most ecstatic program of my life.” He said he had heard so much about me and had been praying to Kṛṣṇa to have the opportunity to meet me one day. As he spoke, I experienced a moment of pride. Quickly coming to my senses



I realized that his words, although spoken with good intention, had become like poison in my heart. Embarrassed that I had momentarily taken credit for something that was only my spiritual master's causeless mercy, I softly recited Śrīla Raghunātha dāsa Goswami's prayer to purify my mind:

*pratiṣṭhāṣa dhr̥ṣṭa śvapaca ramaṇi me hṛdi na tet
kathaṁ sādhu prema spr̥ṣati sucir etan nanu manaḥ
sadā tvaṁ sevasva prabhu dayita samantam atulaṁ
yathā taṁ niṣkasya tvaritam iha taṁ veṣayati saḥ*

As long as the impudent untouchable woman of the desire for fame dances in my heart, why should pure love for Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa touch me? O mind, continuously serve my spiritual master, the leader of those who are dear to the Lord. Then my master will quickly kick out that harridan and allow that pure love to enter.

—*Manaḥ Śikṣa*, Verse 7

Śrīla Prabhupāda, please never allow me to take credit for what is yours. May I always remember that whatever success I have in devotional service is simply your mercy somehow coming through such a fallen soul as myself.

The next day I had a few hours free, so I asked Bhakta Pankaj to take me into town to purchase a few things I needed. It wasn't so much that I wanted to do the shopping myself, but I wanted to see the city and meet the people. As we walked around, I was struck by the relative tranquility of the city streets. Generally big cities mean big crime, and the air of fear is easily sensed in places like Moscow, Warsaw, and Johannesburg. However, Bhakta Pankaj told me that the Mayor of New York, Rudolph Giuliani, has worked hard to curb the city's criminal elements. The police are famous (or infamous) for their efforts in this regard. Although it was a mundane observation, it is a Vedic principle that governments rule in such a way that the citizens do not have to fear criminals. Śrīla Prabhupāda touched on this in a lecture he gave in 1976: "A *kṣatriya*'s duty is to give protection from injury to the citizens. The citizens should feel so safe, that they think: 'We have such a nice king that we have no danger at all. Not being injured, nor our property being stolen nor any injustice given.' That is the real government—when the citizens feel completely safe."

Because ISKCON began here, and because devotees have been active on the streets with *harināma*, *prasādam*, and book distribution for years, our movement has been accepted by the people as part of the New York scene. Śrīla Prabhupāda once said that you can judge a pot of rice by testing one grain. In the same way, the effect of Kṛṣṇa consciousness on New York throughout the years became apparent as we encountered the people. As we walked, some



people greeted us with a “Hare Kṛṣṇa!” An older man approached me and said, “Do you have any of those sweet balls you used to give out in the 1970s. I loved those things!”

Passing by a marketplace an Afro-American man selling fruit called me over. He said, “You tell me what Kṛṣṇa means, OK?”

Thinking him to be simple, I replied, “Kṛṣṇa is a name for the Supreme Lord.”

Not satisfied he said, “No, sir! Kṛṣṇa is a Sanskrit word! What is the actual meaning?”

Taken aback I replied, “Kṛṣṇa means that God is all-attractive.”

“You’re close! Actually, the literal meaning of Kṛṣṇa is ‘black.’ And black is beautiful. Therefore, Kṛṣṇa is beautiful!”

A few minutes later we took a taxi to a destination in the heart of the city. A short way into the ride, the driver looked back and said, “Is the Rāthā-yatra parade coming soon?”

Bhakta Pankaj said, “It will take place sometime in late June.”

“I want to know the exact date,” he retorted.

Bhakta Pankaj said, “Well, I’m not sure of the exact date. Are you going to come and watch and take some of the food we distribute?”

The driver replied, “No. I just come for the music. Only the music. I love the music at that parade, and how those boys and girls dance so nicely for hours down Fifth Avenue. Here’s my card. Contact me when you know the date. I want to hear that music again!”

On Tuesday evening I felt honored to sit and give a lecture next to the dais from which Śrīla Prabhupāda had spoken in the 1960s. The storefront is not large, but somehow more than one hundred devotees and guests managed to squeeze in. Upon arriving I had not yet decided exactly what I would say, but when I sat down in that holy *tīrtha* it became clear to me that I should speak of my association with Śrīla Prabhupāda. It wasn’t the first time I had recounted my memories of Śrīla Prabhupāda, but because the atmosphere was surcharged with his presence, I was particularly inspired to do so. At times I struggled with the emotions that surfaced when I remembered Śrīla Prabhupāda’s mercy on me. In fact, after describing the most significant and memorable moment in my entire existence in the material world, I concluded my talk. It is a memory I treasure daily and which gives me strength and inspiration, even in the midst of great difficulties. Here it is:

In 1971, I flew with Śrīla Prabhupāda and several Godbrothers from New York to London. As our plane descended into Heathrow Airport, I was looking forward to seeing the ISKCON temple at 7 Bury Place and participating in the devotees’ reception for Śrīla Prabhupāda. However, when we arrived at the airport, one of Śrīla Prabhupāda’s suitcases was missing. It was the suitcase



that contained his books of commentaries by the previous *ācāryas*, and he used those books in his translation work. I was devastated when Śyāmasundara Prabhu asked me to remain behind to wait for the suitcase and bring it to the temple. As the reception party escorted Śrīla Prabhupāda to his car, I sat dejected on a bench, waiting for the suitcase to show up.

Two hours later it was located and I caught a taxi into London. It was raining as we drove into the city, and by the time we reached the temple it was evening and dark outside. Dragging the heavy suitcase into the temple, I found a number of devotees sitting on the floor finishing the feast. When I asked for *prasādam*, they sheepishly replied that there was nothing left. When I asked for help to take Śrīla Prabhupāda's suitcase up to his room, they declined, saying that they were too full from the feast. Tired and hungry, I made an effort to pull the suitcase up the stairs to Śrīla Prabhupāda's room. Dazed from the exertion, I didn't think to knock on Prabhupāda's door but simply opened it and proceeded to pull the suitcase into the room backwards.

Suddenly, Śrīla Prabhupāda's secretary, Nanda Kumāra Prabhu, called out, "Watch out, you're about to bump into Śrīla Prabhupāda!"

Whirling around, I found myself face to face with His Divine Grace. I fell at his lotus feet and offered my obeisances. While reciting my prayers, I suddenly felt a strong slap on my back and heard Śrīla Prabhupāda say a few words. After a few moments, Śrīla Prabhupāda walked away to his bathroom and I cautiously got up. I found Nanda Kumāra looking at me, his mouth open.

"Boy, did you get some mercy. Śrīla Prabhupāda slapped you on the back. I never saw him do that before."

I was amazed—and blissful. "What did he say?"

"He told you, 'So much endeavor in this material world, but when I take you home, back to Godhead, everything will be easy and sublime.'"

Those words remain forever within my heart, and each time I recount the story I appreciate them more. They took on a special meaning that evening at "Matchless Gifts." Speaking of Śrīla Prabhupāda in that sacred place of ISKCON's beginning, I didn't feel I was in New York but in the spiritual sky. This is His Divine Grace's mercy—that wherever we go in his service we may remain in Kṛṣṇa consciousness, untouched by the modes of nature. No doubt New York remains one of the concrete bastions of Kali-yuga, fraught with quarrel and hypocrisy like any other place in the world, but those devotees who serve Śrīla Prabhupāda here live not in New York but in the spiritual sky. Śrīla Prabhupāda explained this when answering a disciple's question during a lecture in 1968:

Jaya Gopāla : I heard it said that you are in this world without being a part of it, like the lotus flower which floats on the water.



Śrīla Prabhupāda: Yes, that is the understanding. I am in America [but] I am not adopting the way of life as Americans do. So I am not in America. Not only myself, but all my disciples who are following me, they are also not Americans. They're different. I am in Vṛndāvana because wherever I go, in my apartment or in my temple, I live with Kṛṣṇa, in Kṛṣṇa consciousness. And I teach my disciples to do that also.

Chapter Thirty

FAMILY MOOD AT PHILADELPHIA TEMPLE

• MARCH 29-31, 2001 •



ON MARCH 29, Dvijamaṇi dāsa, a disciple of Ravindra Svarūpa Prabhu, picked up our party in New York and drove us to Philadelphia. Dvijamaṇi knows Sanskrit and is well versed in many Vedic scriptures. As we began the three-hour journey, I noticed that while driving he was trying to memorize *Bhagavad-gītā* verses he had written on index cards. He had five or six cards scattered across his lap and was frequently looking down at them, taking his eyes off the road. I became nervous that he wasn't paying enough attention to his driving, and when he had to brake suddenly because a car slowed down in front of us, I asked him to put the cards away and give his full attention to the road.

It is one of the austerities of being a traveling preacher that one has to depend upon the service of others who may not be properly experienced or qualified in activities like driving, cooking, organizing an itinerary, etc. I can tolerate discrepancies in most of these things, but I always speak up when a driver is not doing his service properly. I find that devotees in general drive too fast and too recklessly—often driving after too little sleep. This is a formula for disaster. It seems we naturally become more cautious with age. Theodore Roosevelt once said, "Nine tenths of wisdom consists in being wise in time." My adherence to the rules of safe driving have come in part because I have been involved in several serious accidents throughout the years. The unexpected shock of being hit by another vehicle, the resultant flying glass, the sound of



crunching metal, and the screams of the injured do much to sober one. As the saying goes, “Once bitten, twice shy.” Personal experience is usually a wise teacher.

*śrutiḥ pratyakṣam aitihiyam
anumānam catuṣṭayam
pramāṇeṣv anavasthānād
vikalpāt sa virajyate*

From the four types of evidence—Vedic knowledge, direct experience, traditional wisdom and logical induction—one can understand the temporary, insubstantial situation of the material world, by which one becomes detached from the duality of this world.

—*Bhāg.* 11.19.17

Dvijamaṇi drove properly the rest of the way and we arrived safely at the Philadelphia temple in the late afternoon. The temple itself is actually two old buildings joined together by a breezeway. One of the buildings once served as a hunting lodge, and was built in 1850 on the outskirts of the then much smaller city of Philadelphia. As the city expanded, a hotel was built near the lodge in 1910, and later the two were joined by a breezeway, constructed by the family who purchased the buildings to make them into a single home. The joined building was ideal for devotees, who purchased it in 1977. Currently, however, the facility is not being used to its full capacity, as there are approximately only twenty devotees living there. Due to a shortage of funds, much of the building is in need of repair.

However, as we soon discovered, there is a pleasant and loving family mood among the devotees under the fatherly care of temple president Ravindra Svarūpa Prabhu (although he is often away performing his GBC responsibilities in various parts of the world). Shortly after our arrival we took *darśana* of the Deities, Gaura-Nitāi, Jagannātha, Subhadrā, and Balarāma, and Rādhā-Saradbiḥārī.

Earlier, as we were driving into Philadelphia, Śrī Pahlāda told me of a renowned collection of old Rajasthani paintings on exhibit in the city museum. The theme of the show was the pastimes of Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa. He suggested we visit the exhibition, if we found the time. After unpacking, I approached a senior devotee and asked if he could make arrangements for us to visit the museum. But I saw immediately that he was uncomfortable with the idea; he obviously had other more important services to which to attend. A traveling preacher must be mindful of his hosts’ commitments and humbly accept whatever is provided, learning not to put unnecessary demands on those who



are caring for him. Nevertheless, despite the inconvenience, the devotee kindly went out of his way to arrange for us to visit the museum the next day.

That evening on our way to a home program, I noted that Philadelphia is a city rich in American history. We passed several places I had studied in school, among them Valley Forge, where George Washington and his troops camped in the winter of 1777 during the American Revolution. Such places cause the chest of most Americans to swell with pride. With that in mind, I based my lecture on becoming free from the bodily concept of life, explaining how strongly the conditioned soul identifies with his body, family, and land of birth. I used myself as an example. When I was young, my parents instilled in me a strong mood of patriotism. When I mentioned to the guests that one of my ancestors was a signatory to the Declaration of Independence, a few eyebrows were raised.

On Friday, a devotee drove us to the museum to see the Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa exhibit. It consisted of many old paintings of Their Lordships, as well as some ancient pots, rugs, and other items. The show was well presented, with a general atmosphere that reminded me (perhaps too much) of Vṛndāvana. In fact, after a few minutes I felt homesick for the holy *dhāma* and left the exhibit to sit outside and chant my rounds.

In the afternoon we all went to a memorial service for a devotee named Siddha-Rūpa dāsa at ISKCON's downtown restaurant and cultural center. Siddha-Rūpa had passed away three days earlier. There was *kīrtana* and a feast, and that evening I spoke about the departure of a Vaiṣṇava at the temple program.

I suppose Kṛṣṇa was preparing me. After the program, when I went to my room to rest, I received a call from Jananivāsa in Russia informing me that my own disciple, Gītāñjali dāśī, had recently passed away. Her death was caused by cancer. In fact, Jananivāsa told me that she had departed the very day after I had come to see her in Ekaterinburg in February. To my dismay, no details of her departure were given. It is important how one actually leaves this world. In one sense, a devotee's whole life is in preparation for that one moment. The consciousness at death determines one's next destination. There is a Bengali proverb: *bhajana kara sādhana kara—murte janle hoy*, "Whatever *bhajana* and *sādhana* one has performed throughout his life will be tested at the moment of death."

But what happens if a devotee cannot fix his mind on Kṛṣṇa at the moment of death? A doctor recently told me that eighty percent of people are actually unconscious at the moment of death! The body naturally goes into a state of shock before the traumatic moment when the soul leaves. Perhaps it is for this reason that the devotee prays in *Śrī Īsopaniṣad*, "Let this temporary body be burnt to ashes, and let the air of life be merged with the totality of air. Now, O



my Lord, please remember all my sacrifices, and because You are the ultimate beneficiary, please remember all that I have done for You.”

Once Rāmāṇujācārya, after the death of Yamunācārya, was pensive. He then asked the servant of Lord Varadarāja (Kṛṣṇa), Kāñcīpura, to ask the Lord some questions on his behalf. One of the questions was, “What happens if a devotee dies suddenly and is unable to think of You at the time of death?”

Lord Varadarāja replied, “Then I will think of My devotee.”

My dear Lord, I know that my *bhakti* is not anywhere near the level that would merit Your attention, but as Gītāñjali’s spiritual master it is my duty to appeal to You. Please take her to Your lotus feet. Please take her home to Śrī Vṛndāvana-dhāma.

“Today or tomorrow this worthless material body will leave me and all the material happiness connected with it will also leave. Because material happiness is temporary, it should be understood to be only a mirage of the real happiness. O my mind, please abandon this false happiness and enjoy the real, eternal happiness of devotional service within the land of Vṛndāvana.”

—Vṛndāvana-mahimāmṛta, Śataka 1, Text 24

Chapter Thirty-One

THE KRSNAS IN TEXAS

• APRIL 1-6, 2001 •

500

WHILE FLYING FROM PHILADELPHIA TO OUR NEXT DESTINATION, Houston, Texas, I sat next to a gentleman who told me that Texans are “fiercely independent.” In a long, southern drawl he said, “We’re Texans first—before anything else.” He said that when Texas became an American state in 1845, it made a clause in its constitution that it could secede from the union whenever it chose. That clause remains part of the Texas State Constitution to this day.

Upon arriving in Houston, I witnessed first-hand that independent spirit as I saw the Texas State flag with its “lone star” flying alongside every single American flag we passed—and there were many. Several billboards on the way to the temple also reflected the local mentality: “A man is only as rich as the beer he drinks,” “Boot Camp: survival is for sissies,” and a picture of the local football team with its coach in front read, “I’ve put the players on a diet—dirt and turf.”

The flags and advertisements failed to arouse any patriotic fervor in me. Rather, they made me reflect on the predictions about Kali-yuga given in *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* 12.1.40:

*asaṁskṛtāḥ kriyā-hīnā
rajasā tamasāvṛtāḥ
prajāś te bhakṣayiṣyanti*



mlecchā rājanya-rūpiṇaḥ

... not purified by any Vedic rituals and lacking in the practice of regulative principles, they will be completely covered by the modes of passion and ignorance.

Our driver, Kṛṣṇa Kṛpā dāsa, told me that few Texans have joined the Kṛṣṇa consciousness movement since its inception in 1966. Nevertheless, many Texans have come to appreciate Kṛṣṇa consciousness over the years, due in part to my Godbrother Tamāla Kṛṣṇa Mahārāja's preaching in the higher circles of Texan society. For example, Mahārāja has several times addressed the Dallas City Council—at its invitation—and during his studies at Southern Methodist University he won the admiration of many students and professors. ISKCON's Kalachandjī's Restaurant in Dallas has received numerous awards and maintained a steady flow of customers through the years. Southerners are known for their hospitality, and in most cases devotees are respected whenever they interact with the local society.

It was not an easy task for the devotees to cultivate the Texans' respect if only because Texas is right in the middle of the Bible Belt, those areas of America's South and Midwest where Christian Protestant fundamentalism is deeply rooted and faithfully practiced. Nowhere else in the country have I seen so many varieties of churches. As we drove to our temple, I saw a church on practically every street corner. I noted the Christ World Family Church, the Abundant Life Church, the Holy Gospel Center, God's Prayer House, and the Southern Baptist Church, to name only a few.

Arriving at the Houston temple, I was surprised to see that there were even four or five churches in our own neighborhood, including the Living Faith Church directly across the street. The large signs on this church's lawn advertised "lively gospel singing three days a week." Of course, there is certainly no harm in living close to our Christian brothers (if the world needs anything, it is more spirituality), but I wondered if a temple and church so near to one another might be "too close for comfort" for some. When I inquired about this from Kṛṣṇa Kṛpā he smiled and pointed to the pastor of the Living Faith Church sitting in a chair outside the church door. As we drove by he waved to us. Kṛṣṇa Kṛpā said, "He's been sitting there every day for years. He used to curse us, but after so many years he said he has come to understand that our people are even busier in the work of God than his congregation. He saw devotees coming and going day and night in their services, and finally concluded that we must be sincere. His realization was that when we get to heaven and see God, we'll find Jesus at His right side. In his mind, that will be the moment of our redemption, because Jesus will save us and make us good



Christians.”

Having been shown to our rooms at the temple, I took a walk and chanted my rounds in a nearby park. A number of people nodded their heads in greeting, and one elderly lady stopped me and asked if I had any questions about the beautiful park I was strolling through. I chatted with her for a few moments, hoping I could leave her with a small drop of Kṛṣṇa consciousness. I casually mentioned the frequent changes of temperature we were experiencing, from hot to cold and back to hot all in the same day. She smiled and said, “We have a saying here in Texas: ‘If you don’t like the weather, just wait a minute longer!’ ”

When I commented on the beautiful flower gardens, she paused, then said they were the only beauty left in life for her. Trying to comfort her, I replied, “Then God is with you. My spiritual master once said that flowers are God’s smile.”

She responded by questioning the existence of God, saying that she had experienced much suffering in life and didn’t know whether He existed. I explained the law of karma and how suffering can ultimately be an impetus to take shelter of the Lord. She listened carefully, and when I finished thanked me. Reflecting on my words she concluded, “I suppose God gave weeds in the garden of life so we would better appreciate the flowers.”

Our party spent two days at the Houston temple, including the celebration of Rāma-navamī, the appearance day of Lord Rāmacandra. On April 4 we drove north to Dallas, where we were nicely received by the temple president, Nityānanda dāsa, one of Tamāla Kṛṣṇa Mahārāja’s senior Indian disciples. A qualified devotee with a degree in law, Nityānanda has served faithfully in a number of ISKCON temples. As we sat down for lunch, I was intrigued with his story of how he came to Kṛṣṇa consciousness.

In 1978, he was a practicing lawyer living with his family in Lautoka, Fiji. One day the devotees moved in to the house next door. They promptly put large speakers on all four outside corners of their new temple and broadcast all seven *āratis*. Their intention was to cause the neighbors to move away so that they could rent their houses. But Nityānanda, who had not met the devotees before, became defiant and decided to take them to court. His relationship with his new neighbors worsened as the volume of the broadcasts increased.

By the time the case went to court, his brother, who had connections with the opposition party in the Fijian Parliament, was becoming impatient. One day he said he could easily arrange to have the devotees’ house blown up. Nityānanda disagreed. He also wanted revenge, but felt the problem could be resolved legally. He told his brother not to worry; they had a solid case against the devotees and would surely win.

Meanwhile, Nityānanda was constantly praying to his worshipful Deity,



Lord Śiva, to help them defeat the ISKCON devotees. He was a staunch devotee of Lord Śiva and often read the *Śiva Purāṇa* for strength and inspiration. One day while reading that *śāstra*, he found several verses stating that one should seriously search out a bona fide spiritual master. The verses stated that if one didn't find such a guru, he would have to wander for ten thousand births in the material world before getting the chance again. Nityānanda resolved that despite his responsibilities, including the legal battle with the devotees, he would try his best to find a spiritual master. Continuing to read, he was surprised when Lord Śiva said that such a guru may appear as older or younger than the seeker. Such a guru may appear as a friend or an enemy. The *Śiva Purāṇa* said that if one is sincere, the Lord will reveal his spiritual teacher to him.

The next day, after a grueling session in court fighting the case against the devotees, Nityānanda went home. A close friend was waiting for him there and requested he come to a public program that evening to meet a genuine spiritual master. When his friend told him the speaker would be Tamāla Kṛṣṇa Mahārāja from the Hare Kṛṣṇa movement, Nityānanda couldn't believe it. His friend wanted him to go to a lecture given by his bitterest opponent! He adamantly refused, but later reflected on Lord Śiva's statement in the *Śiva Purāṇa* that one might even find his guru in his supposed enemy. He decided to go to the program.

When he and his friend arrived at the hall, the devotees surrounded them, thinking they had come to harm Tamāla Kṛṣṇa Mahārāja. Nityānanda humbly insisted that they had come only to hear from him. He and his friend sat at the back of the hall and listened attentively to Mahārāja's discourse. He was impressed with Mahārāja's skillful and devotional presentation of spiritual knowledge, but he didn't keep his animosity toward the devotees a secret when his friend later asked him how he liked the lecture. He replied, "He spoke well, but let us remember that we are at war with these people!"

That night an amazing thing happened to Nityānanda. He dreamt that Lord Śiva appeared before him and told him that the speaker that evening was, in fact, his spiritual master. Nityānanda awoke in a sweat, dumbfounded by his dream. "A guru in the Hare Kṛṣṇa movement is my spiritual master? How could that be?!" But being a true and loyal devotee of Lord Śiva, he took the dream to heart. "It may have simply been a dream," he thought, "but it was no ordinary dream. Lord Śiva has kindly given me direction in my spiritual life."

He contacted the devotees and asked if he could meet Tamāla Kṛṣṇa Mahārāja personally. A meeting was arranged, at which Mahārāja continued to impress Nityānanda. Mahārāja concluded the meeting by offering Nityānanda a challenge. He should seriously try chanting Hare Kṛṣṇa and study Śrīla Prabhupāda's books for three months. If at the end of that period he had not



developed a serious attraction for Kṛṣṇa consciousness, he could give it up. However, if he did develop an attraction, he had to put an advertisement in the paper stating that he had dropped all litigation against ISKCON and become a devotee of Kṛṣṇa, the Supreme Personality of Godhead.

It didn't take three months for the holy name to melt Nityānanda's heart. Within a month he had tasted the nectar of chanting Hare Kṛṣṇa and surrendered to Tamāla Kṛṣṇa Mahārāja. As requested by Mahārāja, he dropped the litigation and became a regular visitor to the temple next door. After some time, he took initiation and became an active member of our ISKCON movement in Fiji.

*madhura madhūrām etan maṅgalaṁ maṅgalānām
sakala nigama valli phalaṁ cit svarūpam
sakṛd api parigītām śraddhayā helayā vā
bhṛgu vara nara matraṁ tarayet kṛṣṇa nāma*

Kṛṣṇa's name is the sweetest of sweet things, the most auspicious of auspicious things, the transcendental fruit of the vine of all Vedic literature. O best of the Bhṛgus, chanted even once, either with faith or contempt, it delivers the chanter.

—*Padyāvalī*, Text 16

Chapter Thirty-Two

MOTOR CITY A PLACE OF PILGRIMAGE

• APRIL 7-11, 2001 •



IN APRIL 7 OUR TRAVELING PARTY ARRIVED IN DETROIT, Michigan. Several weeks ago while visiting San Francisco where I was raised, I experienced a few moments of nostalgia, seeing the places where I had grown up. I controlled myself by reflecting that since being in the material world, I have called so many places home and adored millions of parents. However, this current life is certainly the most important for me, because it was in this life that I met my spiritual master, my eternal father, who is directing me back to the spiritual world. In a lecture in Tehran in 1976, Śrīla Prabhupāda said:

*janame janame saba pitā-mātā pāya,
kṛṣṇa guru nahe mile bhaja hari ei*

Birth after birth one receives a mother and father, but if one gets the benediction of guru and Kṛṣṇa, he conquers the material energy and returns back to Godhead by worship of the Lord.

As we entered Detroit I was overcome by another wave of nostalgia, this time because it was in the original Detroit temple that I had met Śrīla Prabhupāda. Driving past that old building at 8311 East Jefferson Street brought forth emotions I didn't restrain. For me, the temple was a place of pilgrimage, having



been blessed by the lotus feet of a pure devotee. Śrīla Bhaktivinoda Ṭhākura writes in his *Śaraṇāgati*:

*gaura āmāra, ye saba sthāne,
karala bhramaṇa raṅge
se-saba sthāna, heriba āmi,
praṇayi-bhakata-saṅge*

May I visit all the holy places associated with the *līlās* of Lord Caitanya and His devotees.

Śrīla Prabhupāda comments, “A devotee should make a point of visiting all the places where Śrī Caitanya Mahāprabhu performed His pastimes. Indeed, pure devotees of Śrī Caitanya Mahāprabhu even want to see the places He simply visited for only hours or minutes.” (Cc. *Antya* 4.211, purport)

After getting settled at a devotee’s home, we visited the present Detroit temple. The historic mansion was constructed in 1928 by Lawrence P. Fisher, the then general manager of Cadillac Motors. It cost more than two million dollars to build. In 1976, on Śrīla Prabhupāda’s request, two of his disciples, Ambarīṣa dāsa and Lekhaśravanti dāsī, purchased the dilapidated estate for \$300,000. Śrīla Prabhupāda asked them to restore it to its original splendor, open it to the public for tours, and develop it into a Vedic cultural center. At first the devotees were apprehensive. Although the building had originally been located in a wealthy and prestigious area of Detroit, the neighborhood had since become a crime-ridden slum. Śrīla Prabhupāda told the devotees not to worry. In the future, he said, the area would again become prestigious, because the Supreme Lord in His temple would now be present.

As we drove up to the temple, I saw that Śrīla Prabhupāda’s perfect vision had indeed come true. Through the years, the area has been cleaned up and a number of housing projects and condominiums are under construction only 100m from the temple.

True to its fame, the ornate building is spacious by any standard, but like many temples in the U.S., it is populated by only a few sincere devotees. I have often reflected in my travels in America that our movement needs to rethink its preaching strategy and to find novel ways of preaching without compromising our tradition. Otherwise, we don’t seem to be effective in spreading the Vedic teachings. Many temples, it seems, exist in a 1970s time warp.

Our basic formula will always be the same—chanting the holy name, distributing books and *prasādam*, and opening temples and farms where people can appreciate the ancient Vedic culture—but there must surely be novel ways of marketing these things that are in tune with modern society.



Śrīla Prabhupāda himself was novel in his presentation of Kṛṣṇa consciousness in the 1960s and 1970s, and he hinted to us that we should do the same when he said, “Tax your brains how to spread this movement.” The art of preaching is to present “old wine in new bottles” without watering down the tradition.

Devotee: There was a poster on the wall saying they are opening a big exhibition of Russian books in Punjab.

Śrīla Prabhupāda: So why don’t you exhibit our books too? Let them come to a competition.

Devotee: They say that this philosophy is very old.

Śrīla Prabhupāda: Yes. We are giving old wine in new bottle. It is old [but] the Western boys are taking.

—Morning walk conversation, 1975

While in Detroit we held a big *harināma* at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor. The students were holding a rally to protest laws forbidding the use of marijuana. When we arrived, several thousand students were demonstrating on the campus’ main plaza, many of them holding placards, shouting slogans, or taunting the police who had come to keep the peace. The air was tense, but the police were restrained. They occasionally arrested students who got out of hand.

We set up our instruments not far from the large stage where the main speakers were addressing the crowd. As soon as we began to chant, the atmosphere changed. The *kīrtana* created a festive mood, and a number of students wandered over to chant with us. After a while, we began to lead our *kīrtana* around the plaza, weaving in and out of the crowd. People began to relax. I was amazed at the potency of the holy name. The tension cleared almost immediately. In Kali-yuga the atmosphere is surcharged with quarrel and hypocrisy. One time Śrīla Prabhupāda went to a Calcutta court to sign a document. While in the courtroom he turned to one of his disciples and, pointing upwards, said that the ether in that place was contaminated by the lies of so many lawyers. He asked the devotees to chant Hare Kṛṣṇa, and after a short time said, “All right, everything has become purified.”

On Sunday afternoon a most wonderful thing happened. I had just finished giving a Sunday Feast lecture to three hundred guests in the temple room and we had all moved outside to the lawn to respect *prasādam*. A few devotees stayed in the temple room to finish their rounds, when suddenly a middle-aged man wandered in and approached Śrīla Prabhupāda’s *vyāsāsana*. He stood respectfully before the *mūrti* for several minutes, speaking softly to him. After a while, he realized he was standing before a diorama and began to cry. A devotee approached him and asked if anything were the matter.



“He’s not here, is he?”

“You mean Śrīla Prabhupāda?”

“Yes, the Swami.”

“No. He passed away in 1977.”

More tears welled up in the man’s eyes as he said, “He showed me real love.”

Feeling compassion for the man, the devotee asked him to come outside and meet me. I was sitting on the front lawn with a few guests when the two of them sat down in front of me. I could see the man had been crying. The devotee told me how the man had attempted to speak to Śrīla Prabhupāda in the temple. I asked, “Did you know Śrīla Prabhupāda?”

“Yes,” he said. “I met him when I was fifteen years old. One day I was walking through the Lower East Side of New York City when I saw him sitting and singing with some of his followers in Tompkins Square Park. I walked over and the Swami invited me to sit down next to him. I sat there for a long time. There was something special about the way he sang. Although his voice was soft, you could hear him from quite a distance. He was singing for God. At one point he asked me my name, and judging from my intoxicated appearance, he said I was on the wrong path in life. He asked me to visit his center.”

“Did you go?”

“Yes, I went a number of times. It was a storefront called ‘Matchless Gifts.’ It was easy to find, because you could smell the incense a block away. Swami gave class there every evening. Many people often attended, but even if there were only two people, he still spoke. I remember one time no one came. There were a number of drunks loitering in front of the storefront, so Swami told his followers to go out on the street and bring them in for the lecture. A boy named Keith told the Swami that the drunks wouldn’t be able to understand anything, but the Swami said that the soul would hear. His boys went outside and brought in six or seven of these men. A couple of them were so intoxicated that as soon as they sat down in the center they fell unconscious. The Swami’s followers assembled and the Swami gave a lecture. Afterwards, the boys took the drunks outside. They hardly knew what had happened, but we all knew they had been blessed.

“Sometimes the Swami personally cooked and served the food. There was something special about his cooking. When he cooked many people would come. He was popular in that neighborhood. There were a number of so-called gurus from India in New York, but everyone on the Lower East Side knew that the Swami was genuine because he wasn’t into money or fame. Everyone knew that God took care of him because he had so little money. Sometimes Allen Ginsburg would drop by the storefront and give him a big donation.

“I had a number of exchanges with the Swami. Once I was helping in the



kitchen and he showed me how to make the flat bread they make in India. Another time he showed me how to play the hand cymbals. Sometimes I would ask questions after his classes, and one day he asked to meet my mother. But she wouldn't come to the Lower East Side.

"I was there when Keith shaved his head, and afterwards I watched the Swami put clay markings on his body, explaining how the body was a temple of God. The thing about the Swami was that you could always approach him. His door was always open. Because I was new, I was a little nervous to go upstairs to his apartment. But I liked to sit in the little courtyard below his room and listen to his typing. Can you believe that? I loved to hear him type. There was something mystical about his typing. My mother was a secretary and would often bring her typing home. It used to drive me crazy. But when the Swami typed I was captivated. I think it's because he was typing for God.

"He did *everything* for God. In fact, as long as he lived at 'Matchless Gifts' the whole Lower East Side was talking about God. But when he left the atmosphere changed and people reverted to their old ways.

"But I didn't forget. Although I was young and naive, he cared for me. He showed me real love. In fact, I've been searching for that love my whole life. I haven't been able to find it anywhere, in my family, my relatives, my friends. Recently I lost my wife, then my job and home, everything. So I've been praying to God to lead me back to the Swami. It's quite amazing. I knew him for only a short time, but as I look back I can see he was the most important person in my life.

"This morning, I went into a used bookstore. I had fifty cents in my pocket. I asked the man behind the counter if he had any books for that amount and he pointed to a shelf. I picked one book out called *Only He Could Lead Them*. I walked outside to read it on the curb. Boy, was I surprised when I saw that it was about the Swami! I felt that God had answered my prayers.

"I found the address of your temple on a card in the book. It took me all day to get here. When I walked in the door I asked after the Swami. They said he had just finished giving a lecture in the temple room. So I ran inside and there he was, sitting on that big seat. I was so happy! I went up and thanked him for everything he'd done for me, but when I asked him if he remembered me, he didn't reply. When I looked closer I saw there was only a statue there. Then your friend said that the Swami had passed away. I don't know what to do now."

I was speechless. After a few moments I said that he could find that love he was searching for by associating with Śrīla Prabhupāda's followers.

"Yes, I'm sure that's true," he said. Then his eyes filled with tears again and he said, "but how to live without him?" He then got up and walked slowly toward the front gate. Turning back, he looked at us a last time and then was



gone.

*tulayāma lavenāpi
na svargaṁ nāpunar-bhavam
bhagavat-saṅgi-saṅgasya
martyānām kim utāśiṣaḥ*

The value of a moment's association with the devotee of the Lord cannot even be compared to the attainment of heavenly planets or liberation from matter, and what to speak of worldly benedictions in the form of material prosperity, which are for those who are meant for death.

—*Bhāg.* 1.18.13

Chapter Thirty-Three

DEVOTEES NEED PROTECTION

• APRIL 12-23, 2001 •



ON APRIL 12 OUR PARTY LEFT DETROIT for the New Ramaṇa Reti community in Alachua, Florida. On the way I visited my sister Anne, who lives in Chattanooga, Tennessee. We had last seen each other five years earlier at our mother's funeral in California. Mother's passing away was especially difficult for my sister, and at that time we talked a lot about death, the soul, and God. As a result we had kept in touch, and her faith in Kṛṣṇa consciousness had deepened. We spent the day in Chattanooga continuing our discussions, and at one point I asked her what she saw as her ultimate goal in life. She surprised me when she replied, "To remember Kṛṣṇa at the moment of death."

As we were saying goodbye, she handed me an old piece of paper that had become yellowed with time. "I thought you might be interested to see this. I was going through Mom's things the other day and found it in her papers. It's a school assignment you wrote when you were nine years old. Mother always said you were different."

November 10, 1958

Orinda Elementary School

Fruits and Vegetables for Thanksgiving Holiday



Once there was a family named Wiggins. Thanksgiving was coming up, but the stores were out of turkeys. So the father went to the woods to shoot one, but he missed every time and returned empty-handed.

Two weeks before Thanksgiving a man in a truck came by and said, "Package for the Wiggins!" Mr. Wiggins took the box into the house. The whole family came to see what it was. To their amazement there was a turkey inside, and he was as hungry as a bear! The father said to the two boys, "Make a cage for this bird and feed it so we can have a nice fat turkey for Thanksgiving."

Every day the boys fed the turkey and played with him. Then one day Mr. Wiggins came out of the house with an ax. He went over to the cage where the turkey was. The boys saw him and said, "No, Father! Please don't kill him! Please!"

The father replied, "Well then, what will we eat for Thanksgiving?"

The boys said, "Fruits and vegetables! They're good enough."

The father agreed, and the Wiggins had fruits and vegetables for Thanksgiving. They all thought it was just fine.

In Alachua we stayed with Dharmātma Prabhu and his good wife Divyapriya dāsī. Along with their three teenage boys, Dhruva, Devala, and Raktaka, they were the perfect hosts, providing everything we needed for our four-day visit. The New Ramaṇa Reti community is made up mostly of families who have personal businesses or who work in the local towns. With such responsibilities, there weren't a lot of devotees at the morning programs in the temple, but the evening sessions were packed and we enjoyed some of the best *kīrtanas* of our American tour. The youth of the community were especially eager to chant and dance—so much so that several times I called out, "All glories to the kids!" during the *prema-dhvani* prayers.

On our final day in Alachua, Dharmātma suggested we float down a nearby river to relax. When I brought up the point that there were a lot of alligators and water moccasin snakes in the rivers and swamps of Florida, Dharmātma laughed. "There may be a few water moccasins in that river, but I've never seen a gator." Off we went.

It was nice floating down the picturesque river. I lay on my back in the water and let the current gradually take me downstream. Many people passed us by in small boats and canoes. The water was as clear as a bell. I did relax—a little bit. I must admit I was nervous. I just couldn't understand how alligators were everywhere in Florida, but not in that river! Halfway down, I asked Dharmatma again, "Are you sure there are no alligators here?"

"I'd be real surprised if I saw one."

"So would I. *Real* surprised!"



Two hours later, we got out of the river and climbed up a small wooden platform with a couple of boats tied to it. A big sign hung on the front of the platform. We read it as we dried off. I don't know who was more surprised by what it said, me or Dharmātma:

Beware! Swim with Caution!

Alligators live in most of Florida's waterways, typically eating fish, turtles, and other small animals. Large alligators, however, attack bigger animals, such as deer, and may sometimes attack humans. Therefore follow these rules:

Swim only in designated areas
Be watchful for alligators
Never feed the alligators
Report all alligators to a park ranger.

I'm always one for following rules. Next time I'll take a boat!

As we were leaving New Ramaṇa Reti, Dharmātma's eldest son, Dhruva dāsa, presented me with a wonderful gift of an ancient Tibetan *kavaca*, It is to be worn on the arm. Dhruva had recently come back from a pilgrimage to more than eighty-five Nṛsimha temples in South India, including Ahovalam, the appearance site of Lord Nṛsimha, and Rakta-kunḍa, where Lord Nṛsimha washed His hands of Hiranyaśipu's blood after killing him. At every temple he had requested sandalwood paste and *tulasī* leaves from the feet of the Nṛsimha Deity, and each time had put a little in the *kavaca*. He also took a small red stone from Rakta-kunḍa and placed it inside the *kavaca*. *Rakta* means "red" and *kunḍa* means "pond." The stones in Rakta-kunḍa are dark red because of the *daitya*'s blood. One might find it surprising that a devotee would decorate his body with the blood of an *asura*, but *śāstra* says that Hiranyaśipu's body became purified by the touch of the Lord's hand.

*om am hrīm kṣraum om phat tattaka hataka keśāgra jvalat paduka
locana bhadṛādika nakha sparśa divya-simha namo 'stu te*

O my Lord, O transcendental lion, I offer my obeisances unto You along with Mother Lakṣmī. Sometimes flying in the sky, sometimes moving on foot, Your mane hairs blaze with a golden brilliance. Your glance and the touch of Your nails are the source of all auspiciousness.

—Source unknown



I visited Ahovalam and Rakta-kunḍa in 1979, just after taking *sannyāsa* at the Māyāpura festival. The priest acting as my guide to the nine Nṛsimha temples told me that by bathing in the sacred, blood-red water of Rakta-kunḍa, my body would become invincible. Remembering Siegfried, the hero of the medieval German epic *Nibelungenlied*, who gained invulnerability by smearing his body with the blood of a dragon he had killed, I plunged into the *kunḍa*. *Nibelungenlied* was fiction, of course, but Lord Nṛsimhadeva's pastimes are authentic. I hoped that by bathing in the sanctified waters of Rakta-kunḍa I would be protected in my service to the Lord.

Devotees require protection because this is the world of inimical souls. From Brahmā down to the insignificant ant, everyone maintains a spirit of independence from the Lord. Preaching Kṛṣṇa consciousness is therefore never easy. Once after returning from a *harināma* in Paris, Śrīla Prabhupāda called all of us into his room and asked how our street chanting had gone. I told him of a lady who had come in front of the *kīrtana* party and purposefully blocked her ears with her fingers. Śrīla Prabhupāda asked me what I had done about it. I hadn't done anything. He smiled and said that I should have taken her fingers out and loudly chanted the holy name. When I mentioned that *saṅkīrtana* that day had been somewhat difficult, Śrīla Prabhupāda leaned over his desk and said in a serious tone, "When did I ever say that preaching was easy?"

A preacher naturally has to face opposition. A devotee recently remarked to me, "If there is no opposition, that means there is no preaching."

To protect His devotees from opposition, Kṛṣṇa appears as Lord Nṛsimhadeva, the half-man, half-lion incarnation. In 1983 I was fortunate to receive Lord Nṛsimhadeva's mercy in yet another way. I was at the Māyāpura festival when a devotee approached me saying that a Gauḍīya *sannyāsī*, Śrīla Bhakti Pramoda Purī Mahārāja, felt he was going to pass away soon and wanted to give the Nṛsimha mantra to a *sannyāsī* before he left. Purī Mahārāja had inquired of that devotee if he knew any ISKCON *sannyāsī* who would be willing to accept it. I was definitely interested, and after getting permission from several GBC men, went to Mahārāja's āśrama and inquired about the nature of the mantra. Purī Mahārāja told me a story. He said that Śrīla Bhaktivinoda Ṭhākura had once been experiencing opposition to his preaching in Bengal. One night, Lord Nṛsimhadeva appeared to him in a dream and gave him the Nṛsimha-mantra. Years later, Bhaktivinoda Ṭhākura gave that mantra to his son, Bimala Prasada, who later became Śrīla Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī Ṭhākura. Śrīla Bhaktisiddhānta subsequently gave the mantra to ten of his most prominent *sannyāsīs*. By the time I met Purī Mahārāja, he was the only *sannyāsī* of the ten still living.

I begged him to give me the mantra, and after a small ceremony he whispered it into my right ear. When I inquired about the benefit of chanting



it, he replied, “It will protect you from death itself!”

When I asked Purī Mahārāja if I could ever give the mantra to someone else, he mildly chastised me by saying, “Yes, but don’t think you are special!”

I chant the mantra daily, but I have called upon it on only three occasions. In April 1996, just after the war in Bosnia had ended, a large group of us were chanting on the streets of Sarajevo. The area was littered with the debris from recent bombings, and the people were still in a state of shock from years of fighting. In retrospect, it wasn’t the proper time to go out singing and dancing. Also, in our naivety, we chanted as we passed the city’s largest mosque on a Friday afternoon, the Muslim day of worship. Almost immediately, an angry group of freshly returned servicemen burst out of the mosque and attacked us. As I saw the soldiers coming I calmly chanted the Nṛsimha-mantra, and although we fought hard and many devotees were hurt (three seriously cut with knives), I escaped injury.

A couple of years later, I was swimming in the ocean at Split, Croatia. Suddenly a huge storm appeared, whipping the water into a fury. As I was being swept out to sea by the strong current, I chanted the Nṛsimha-mantra. Slowly but surely, I felt myself drifting to the side of the current, and I was eventually able to swim back to the beach.

The third time I called on the mantra was two years ago when our Polish festival tour was attacked by skinheads. Standing on a small ridge next to our festival site, they threw Molotov cocktails (incendiary devices consisting of a corked bottle filled with gasoline and a piece of rag to serve as a wick). As the bottles exploded, I again called upon the Nṛsimha-mantra. Immediately, the skinheads ran away. By Lord Nṛsimha’s mercy, no one was hurt and the damage to our festival paraphernalia was minimal.

*etad vapus te bhagavan
dhyāyataḥ paramātmānaḥ
sarvato goptṛ santrāsān
mṛtyor api jighāmsataḥ*

My dear Lord, O Supreme Personality of Godhead, You are the Supreme Soul. If one meditates upon Your transcendental body, You naturally protect him from all sources of fear, even the imminent danger of death.

Purport: Everyone is sure to die, for no one is excused from the hands of death, which is but a feature of the Supreme Personality of Godhead. When one becomes a devotee, however, he is not destined to die according to a limited duration of life. . . . a devotee’s lifetime can be extended by the mercy of the Supreme Lord, who is able to nullify the results of one’s karma. . . .



even a devotee's scheduled death can be avoided by the causeless mercy of the Supreme Lord.

—*Bhāg.* 7.10.29

Now with the added protection of Dhruva's Tibetan *kavaca*, I wondered what might be in store for me in the future. I reflected that I was in America to preach and raise funds for our festival tour in Poland. The collection was going well, and I was enjoying the association of so many wonderful devotees, but was this the “calm before the storm”?

As fate would have it, that evening, upon arriving at Prabhupāda Village in North Carolina, the final stop on our American tour, I received a call from Nandinī and Rādhā Sakhī Vṇḍā with an update on their efforts to organize this year's Polish tour. They explained that they were meeting stiff resistance on several fronts: the region near the city of Lodz, southwest of Warsaw, where we plan to do the spring tour, the Baltic Sea coast, where we'll hold the summer tour, and the town of Zary near the site of August's Woodstock Festival.

Under pressure from the Catholic Church, many town councils in the vicinity of Lodz are debating whether to grant us permission to hold festivals in their towns, while on the coast Nandinī and Rādhā Sakhī Vṇḍā are still struggling to find schools which will allow us to use their premises as a base, as we have done every other year. In Zary, where we entertain many of the 300,000 Woodstock participants with our Festival of India program each year (and distribute more than 80,000 plates of *prasādam*), clerics have been waging a campaign of misinformation about us and warning the local people not to cooperate with us during the festival period. In previous years the locals have helped us in many ways by bringing in equipment to make ditches for water and sanitation at the site, digging holes for electrical poles, transporting the twenty-two tons of *bhoga* we prepare, and regularly emptying the one hundred garbage bins. With this new development, I requested Nandinī to go to the local army base. The army has also been instrumental in helping us at previous Woodstocks. However, Nandinī surprised me when she said that the devotees had approached the commander of the base that morning and he had already told them that his orders were to not cooperate with us during the festival.

I looked out the window and thought, “With that option gone, it looks as if we'll have to do it alone this year.”

Or will we?

*yatra yogeśvaraḥ kṛṣṇo
yatra pāṛtho dhanur-dharaḥ
tatra śrīr vijayo bhūtir
dhruvā nītir matir mama*



Wherever there is Kṛṣṇa, the master of all mystics, and wherever there is Arjuna, the supreme archer, there will also certainly be opulence, victory, extraordinary power and morality. That is my opinion.

—Bg. 18.78

Chapter Thirty-Four

POLISH CAMPAIGN GETS UNDER WAY

• APRIL 23 - MAY 12, 2001 •



IN THE FLIGHT FROM NEW YORK TO LONDON on April 23, I had mixed feelings. I was happy, because my tour of American temples had gone well and a number of devotees had expressed gratitude that I had taken the time and energy to visit them. But I knew it wasn't just me—it was me and Śrī Prahlāda. The trip was successful because we did together what we've done for the past ten years: we shared the entire effort—the classes, *kirtanas*, and interactions with the devotees. Therefore I was sad because I knew that the trip to America was our last combined effort to enliven and associate with devotees in different parts of the world. In autumn, after this year's Polish tour, Śrī Prahlāda and Rukmiṇī Priya plan to settle in Australia. Each time I think of their departure, I feel an emptiness in the pit of my stomach. Śrī Prahlāda is more than a simple servant or assistant; after many years of service, his friendship is my most valued possession. As I thought of all we'd done in America, the hope of somehow staying together once again entered my mind, as it had a thousand times since he announced his imminent departure, because "grief can take care of itself, but to get the full value of joy you must have somebody to divide it with." (Mark Twain)

As our flight touched down in London, I turned to Śrī Prahlāda and suggested that rather than separate completely, we should try to find a means to serve together which would satisfy his needs as a *grhastha* and mine as a



traveling preacher. Even as I said it I knew such a proposal was fraught with complications. A householder means just that—owning an immovable house where one serves the Lord with wife and children. A *sannyāsī* means being always on the move, with no home and few possessions. Later we spoke for hours, but with no solution. As a last resort, we decided to seek the advice of Tamāla Kṛṣṇa Mahārāja, who was in Cambridge at the time. To my amazement, Mahārāja suggested a plan that satisfied everyone’s needs: Śrī Prahlāda and Rukmiṇī Priya will live in Māyāpura for six months of the year, September through February, where they’ll assist Bhakti Vidyā Pūrṇa Mahārāja in his development of a new school for higher education, in March–April Śrī Prahlāda and I will travel and preach, and in India’s hot and monsoon seasons (May–August), Śrī Prahlāda and Rukmiṇī Priya will join the Polish festival tour. We all agreed on the plan and left feeling indebted to Tamāla Kṛṣṇa Mahārāja.

Today a man discovered gold and fame
Another flew the stormy seas;
Another set an unarmed world aflame,
One found the germ of a disease.
But what high fates my path attend . . .
For I—today—I found a friend.

—Helen Barker Parker

After a three-day rest in England, Śrī Prahlāda and I flew to Divnomorsk in southern Russia to participate in a grand festival honoring the appearance of Lord Nṛsimhadeva. More than two thousand devotees from all over Russia attended the celebration, which was highlighted by the visits of Nirañjana Mahārāja and Prabhaviṣṇu Swami. The festival was simply one *kīrtana* after another for three days straight.

On May 7 we flew to Warsaw to prepare for the spring festival tour. As our plane circled the city waiting for clearance to land, my thoughts focused on the campaign. Although during the past eight months I had traveled far and wide in my preaching, the 2001 tour in Poland had always been the focus of my meditation. Just as a paramour thinks of her lover in a distant place while performing her daily affairs, my mind was always meditating on the unparalleled preaching opportunity ahead. Last year more than 750,000 people had walked through the gates of our festival program and participated in one way or another in spiritual activities. No wonder the Catholic Church in Poland is so worried about our activities and so intent on stopping us. Of course, the honorable thing would be to accept us as brothers in God’s service, but with few exceptions history has shown that religion is often the most dividing factor in human society. As our plane descended on to the runway, I



braced myself both for the landing and the struggle ahead.

When I emerged from customs, my apprehensions were confirmed. I Nandinī and Rādhā Sakhī Vṛndā met me, and on the way to the car I asked Nandinī to give me a briefing on the efforts to organize the festival programs. She replied, “Śrīla Gurudeva, do you want the good news or the bad news first?”

“OK, give me the bad news first.”

“The anti-cult groups, under the auspices of the Church, are beginning their annual spring media campaign against us. They know we’ll soon be starting our spring tour in Lodz and will be along the Baltic Sea coast in the summer. A barrage of negative newspaper articles about us are coming out, as well as several horrific television broadcasts, all filled with false propaganda.

“A booklet warning of the dangers of cults has been distributed to every teacher in every school in the country. We are the main focus. They accuse us of mind control, breaking families, and a number of criminal activities.

“As a result of the constant barrage of misinformation, a recent survey revealed that sixty-five percent of the population favor closing down the ‘cults’ in Poland. We’re number one on the list.”

“But how can they say we are a cult? We’ve been registered as an official religion in this country since 1991.”

Nandinī replied with the infamous quote, “If you tell the people a lie for long enough, they’ll eventually believe it.”

“OK, now give me the good news.”

Rādhā Sakhī Vṛndā said: “A lot people like us. Wherever we go, we meet people who’ve been to one or two of our festivals since 1990. They’re always willing to help.

“Our preaching is having its effect. In another survey, fifty-two percent of Polish people say they believe in reincarnation. We feel that all the book distribution, festivals, and media programs we’ve done have contributed to that belief.

“Our supporter, the Mayor of Zary, has just been added to a group of advisors to the Polish President. The President’s personal secretary (also Poland’s Minister of Home Affairs) spoke at the opening of ISKCON’s exhibition on Vedic Culture at the Warsaw Museum.

“Plans for the Woodstock Festival are continuing without opposition. Jurek Owsiak (the primary organizer) told us he is counting on the Hare Kṛṣṇa Village of Peace being there. He said to tell you he wants our presence to be even bigger and more colorful than last time.”

“How is that possible?” I said. “The tent we rented from Germany was bigger than an American football field. It held ten thousand kids for four days!”

We discussed further details when we arrived at the temple. The office



looked like the headquarters of a military operation. There were several devotees poring over maps, considering when and where we would hold festivals in the area we had chosen for the spring tour. Phones were ringing and faxes were coming in and going out. The room buzzed with information about where we would purchase the twenty-two tons of food we needed for distribution at Woodstock, details of the arrival of 130 devotees from Eastern Europe and Russia, details of the rent contract for the three buses we'll be using for the next three months, insurance policies for devotees and guests, security requirements at the festivals, and so on.

I met briefly with our public relations group, ICP, and asked if they had any information as to what steps the anti-cult groups would take. (The Duke of Wellington said, "The whole art of war consists of guessing at what is on the other side of the hill.")

To my surprise, the devotees told me that ICP's Acintya dāśī had recently gone to a meeting of some of the biggest anti-cult groups in Poland. More than one hundred people were present. There were the usual speeches about the dangers of cults, and our movement was mentioned several times. One speaker warned that the Hare Kṛṣṇa movement has made inroads into the public schools. To the audience's horror, she told the story of a schoolteacher who mentioned to her students in class that the Hare Kṛṣṇa movement is actually not a cult but an ancient spiritual tradition that has been practiced in India for thousands of years. One of her students spoke against her and an argument ensued during which the teacher defeated the student. When the other students applauded the teacher, the student who had objected walked out in frustration.

As more speakers vilified the Kṛṣṇa consciousness movement in particular, Acintya gathered her courage, stood up, and boldly identified herself as a devotee. Immediately there was silence, and all eyes were upon her. With such a captive audience, she defeated each of the accusations that had been made against ISKCON. At the end of her presentation she fielded questions for two hours, the meeting finishing only when the main organizer realized that his objective of scandalizing our movement had been unsuccessful.

I gave class at the Warsaw temple the following morning. I had just begun my lecture and was going deeply into the philosophy of *acintya-bhedābheda-tattva*, the inconceivable and simultaneous oneness and difference between God and the living entity, when a well-dressed woman entered the temple room and sat down at the back, unnoticed by all the devotees except the temple president, Kaśī Mīśra Prabhu. He leaned forward and said to me, "She's a well-known reporter from a big newspaper. It's only her second time here."

Seeing it as an opportunity to gain the favor of an important and influential person, I switched from my topic to the ABCs of "we are not the body." The



journalist's eyes lit up as I went point by point through my explanation. The devotees were confused. Not knowing that the reporter was present, they couldn't understand why I had suddenly switched topics. I wound up my lecture with a short explanation of the *mahā-mantra* and the four regulative principles. The reporter was as stunned as the devotees. After the class, she journalist thanked me for the talk, saying it was one of the most interesting things she had ever heard. She also asked if we had any books for sale.

The next day I left for our spring tour base, 150km southwest of Warsaw. When I arrived, seventy-five devotees greeted me with a small reception. I thanked them, then spoke on the importance of the work we had ahead of us. I mentioned that in the next three months we would do fifty major festivals, not including Woodstock, the biggest of all, at the end. I explained how our opposition was making plans against us, but that we should take courage. After all, we had the blessings of many great devotees and Nārada Muni in particular. That morning I had been reading the *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam Mahātmya* and had concluded that Nārada Muni is the patron saint of our festival program. The *Mahātmya* describes that once Nārada Muni was traversing the earth at the beginning of Kali-yuga when he came upon Bhakti Devī, devotion to the Lord personified. She was lamenting that her two sons, Jñāna (knowledge) and Vairāgya (renunciation) were lying powerless on the ground because of the evil influence of the age of Kali. Approaching her, Nārada offered words of hope and inspiration:

O beautiful-faced one, there is no other age like Kali-yuga, because you will be established in every house as well as in the heart of every person. Hear my vow. If I do not preach your message, subdue all materialistic religions, and make devotional festivals predominant, then I shall not be considered the servant of Lord Hari.

—*Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam Mahātmya* 1.5-6

I pray that by Nārada Muni's grace our attempts to preach Kṛṣṇa consciousness through the medium of colorful festivals in the next three months will be successful and that the people of Poland will get a little taste of the spiritual world, where all walking is dancing, all talking song, and there's a festival every day!

Chapter Thirty-Five

UNCERTAINTY FUELS CONCERN

• MAY 13-23, 2001 •

AS WE WERE PREPARING FOR THIS YEAR'S SPRING FESTIVALS, I found a major Polish newspaper in the reception room of our building containing an article expressing America's concern about the growing discrimination against religious minorities in Europe.

Under the headline, "Anti-cult Law in France: Washington Concerned," the article said, "Leading American official Michael Parmly expressed his concern Tuesday to a U.S. Senate hearing about a French bill which would threaten freedom of religion in France. 'We are worried by the language, which is dangerously ambiguous and could be used against justifiable religious associations.' More widely, Mr. Parmly worried about a growing religious discrimination in Western Europe and questioned 'practices targeting religious sects' in Austria and Belgium as well as France which could spread in other European countries—most notably in Eastern Europe."

Knowing the devotees were already nervous about the recent publicity against our movement in the Polish media, I tried to keep the newspaper article from them, but somehow word of the article spread and I found devotees discussing the matter in small groups. In a morning class, therefore, I discussed the subject openly. This controversy is neither new nor unhealthy. I mentioned that there was no opposition in Vṛndāvana until Lord Kṛṣṇa made His descent there five thousand years ago. When He appeared, demoniac personalities such as Pūtanā, Aghāsura, and Tṛṇāvarta also came. As the



Lord's appearance was the catalyst that caused demoniac persons to oppose Him, so the discrimination we are experiencing in Poland should be taken as a sign that our preaching is successful. After all, we are presenting Kṛṣṇa, the Supreme Personality of Godhead, in myriad ways throughout the country. His holy names, *prasādam*, Vedic scriptures, and temples are becoming distributed everywhere in Poland.

Still, it is never pleasant to deal with discrimination. Word seems to be out along Poland's borders that immigration officials should make it difficult for foreign members of our movement to enter the country. Of the seventy Russian devotees who have attempted to come for the tour, more than thirty were initially turned back. After being refused entry, they had to travel long distances to another border crossing to try again. If any received three refusal stamps in their passports, entry into Poland was beyond consideration. Subuddhi Rāya from Ekaterinburg, who is directing our new theater group, was refused entry three times. As a result he had to get a new passport. The problem was complicated by the fact that it takes three months to get a Russian passport. However, by Kṛṣṇa's mercy we made a contact in the Passport Office who, for a price, arranged a new passport for Subuddhi Rāya within twenty-four hours. Because it was such an exceptional arrangement, it required thirty-two signatures of authorization from Federal Security Service officials.

We also encountered problems getting entry for three Indian ladies and one Indian man from South Africa who had come to perform Kathak dance at our festivals. When they arrived at the Warsaw airport, they were questioned and the man was sent back to South Africa. Immigration officers found his dance costumes in his suitcase and accused him of coming to Poland to perform. When Nandinī and Rādhā Sakhī Vṛndā protested, they were told the real reason the dancer was turned back was that "the man had dark skin and was a Hindu."

Midweek I announced that on Saturday we would hold our first *harināma* party to begin advertising the festivals. I immediately sensed that due to the negative publicity, devotees were apprehensive about going out on *sāṅkīrtana*. Sure enough, when Saturday rolled around I found that only a few devotees had signed up for the *kīrtana* party. In class that morning I told devotees they should have courage, and cited Bhakti Tīrtha Swami's *Spiritual Warrior* saying that devotees are fearless, knowing they can always depend on the Lord. I also quoted Confucius: "To see what is right and not do it is want of courage."

I also told the devotees that Śrīla Prabhupāda had said that most people are innocent and that whenever we come to town with our beautiful chanting parties, all their misgivings disappear. I laughed and said that they should be as brave as the Gurkhas. A devotee raised his hand and asked, "What's a Gurkha?" I explained that they are members of the *kṣatriya* class in Nepal



who form regiments in the British Army and are renowned for their bravery in battle. I told the true story how during the Falklands War in 1982, a British commander approached a Gurkha unit and asked for volunteers to be transported by plane and jump from 3000m behind enemy lines. When only eighty percent of the men raised their hands, the commander was surprised and said, “I thought you men were brave warriors!”

One of the Gurkhas put up his hand and said, “Sir, some of us don’t think we could survive a fall of 3000m.”

The commander was stunned. He replied, “I don’t mean jump in the literal sense. You will use parachutes to jump from the aircraft!”

Upon hearing that, all the Gurkhas volunteered.

Despite the hesitancy to go on *saṅkīrtana*, when word got around that Tribhuvaneśvara Prabhu, one of our leading *kīrtana* singers, had agreed to come, the bus was full by the time we left. I was looking forward to a blissful day of *saṅkīrtana* when a few kilometers down the road I saw a sign that made me nervous: “Lublin, 200km.”

Lublin is the undeclared seat of Catholic religious fervor in Poland. Several years ago we were invited to participate in a Festival of India in Swidnik, a town just 10km from Lublin. Each year the Swidnik Office of Cultural Affairs organizes a festival centered around the theme of a particular country. The year before we came they had a Japanese festival. At a loss as to how to present India’s culture, they had contacted us and asked for our participation. After meeting us and realizing how much we had to offer, they more or less gave us full control of the four-day festival. They even asked us to organize the reception for the festival’s special guest, the Indian Ambassador, at the mayor’s office. That evening we received the ambassador and many city officials with a small program of Indian dance and delicious *prasādam*. The mayor took pride in posing for photos with us and the Indian Ambassador.

Confident that one of the best preaching opportunities ever was ahead for us during the next few days, we went out on *harināma* the morning of the first festival. Then disaster struck. The leader of the local anti-cult group met us on the street and became enraged. Ranting, she promptly went to the local priest, who went to the mayor’s office and demanded that the entire festival be canceled because of our presence. The mayor was incredulous. “Close down the entire festival? We’ve been advertising for four months and we’re expecting fifty thousand people.”

“Close the festival, or lose your job,” the priest insisted. The mayor ordered the festival closed.

We were setting up our stage and tents in the main park in town when the order came through from the police. We were also told that we had forty-five minutes to leave town. We called Cultural Affairs, but they were as shocked as



we were. A large contingent of policemen stood 100m from our half-prepared festival program, awaiting orders to move us out if we didn't agree to go. I sent a message to the police chief that we had no intention of moving, and if they wanted us to go they'd have to personally remove us. The devotees continued setting up the festival. Seeing our determination, the police backed off. Later, the police chief told a Swidnik citizen that although he had had orders from the mayor to physically remove us, he didn't follow them because he didn't agree with the injunction. He liked us, because he saw that we were "peaceful people."

That afternoon, I went with a group of devotees to appeal the mayor's decision. He wouldn't hear of changing his order. He now saw us as a "dangerous cult" that had somehow infiltrated his town, and for the safety of his citizens he wanted us out immediately. As we were discussing the situation with him, however, word of the cancellation spread throughout the town and several hundred citizens began a demonstration outside the Town Hall. A number of them had met devotees during the two days we had been there and had a different opinion as to who we were. They liked us and liked what we had to present: the ancient spiritual culture of India.

The angry crowd began chanting, "We want the festival! We want the festival!" At one point, the mayor got up and went to his window to investigate the commotion. When he returned to his desk he relented: we could at least hold a one-day festival. Hearing the crowd's protest, I thought of Lord Caitanya and His followers challenging the Kazi when he ordered the chanting of Hare Kṛṣṇa to stop. The Lord and His devotees had made what Śrīla Prabhupāda called "the first act of civil disobedience" by holding a loud *kīrtana* outside the Kazi's residence.

When the devotees told the Swidnik crowd the good news, a huge roar of approval went up. That night, more than four thousand people attended the festival. At one point, a local member of the Polish parliamentary opposition party jumped onto the stage and told the crowd the full story of how the local priest had ordered the mayor to cancel the entire event because "Hare Kṛṣṇas are dangerous." He told the crowd that we had now been granted permission to hold the festival for only one night. At that, thousands of people began chanting, "Hare Kṛṣṇa! Hare Kṛṣṇa! Hare Kṛṣṇa!" When the politician asked everyone to again march on the Town Hall, the crowd turned and marched in that direction, continuing to chant, "Hare Kṛṣṇa! Hare Kṛṣṇa!"

When the crowd arrived at the Town Hall (which happened to be across from the park), the State Governor was just leaving the building. He had been called to Swidnik to make a final decision on the festival and to bid farewell to the Indian Ambassador. Newspaper reporters and TV film crews were everywhere—it was a hot story. The crowd blocked the Governor's path to his



car and demanded an explanation as to why the festival had been canceled. He replied that it was for “technical reasons.” When he said that, the crowd booed and began chanting, “We want the festival! We want the festival!” When the police arrived to restore order, there was a brief moment of silence as the Governor walked to his car.

Just then, a seven-year-old girl spoke up, touching the hearts of everyone and captivating the attention of all those watching on the national television news. In a soft, concerned voice she said, “Mr. Governor, is there going to be a festival?” The Governor looked at her for a moment, then without speaking got into his car, which sped away with a police escort.

The festival continued late into the night, but the next morning we were told in no uncertain terms that we had to leave. By the Governor’s decree we were not allowed to hold the festival for the second day. I decided that “discretion was the better part of valor,” and we started packing our things to go. By the time we were ready to leave, a thousand sympathetic citizens had gathered to see us off. Some were crying because of the scandal and vowed to impeach the mayor. I had mixed feelings. On the one hand, three days of festival had been canceled; on the other hand the whole country was reading and watching reports of the injustice.

Weeks later I went to India to discuss the issue with Indian politicians. We were in the process of gathering support for a formal protest to the Polish government when we received an invitation from the Polish Ambassador in Delhi to meet him. At the meeting he asked us to stop our campaign, offering to send a favorable report about our movement to Warsaw. At one point he looked at me and said, “Mahārāja, politics means to cool things down, not heat them up.” Figuring we had taken the whole thing far enough, we decided to stop our campaign. In retrospect, the whole affair was probably one of the biggest preaching opportunities for our movement in Poland. Now seeing the sign for Lublin on the way to *harināma* made me apprehensive.

As our bus entered Tomaszow Mazowiecka, the first town of our spring tour, a silence fell over the devotees. Two days earlier we had sent a group of men to put up hundreds of colorful posters all over town. As we drove through the streets we saw that each and every poster had been covered by large white strips of paper. In drippy, black and red ink, the white strips read, “Attention—Sect! Festival officially canceled!” I called officials at the Town Hall, and they said that they had not canceled the program. In fact, they were looking forward to it. They suggested that the posters had probably been defaced by the Catholic Church.

When our bus pulled up to the curb, the devotees did not move. I had to order them out onto the street. Passersby were already looking at us suspiciously. To add insult to injury, when the first devotee got out of the bus



he tripped on his *dhoti* and dropped his *mṛdāṅga* on the street. It bounced a few times on the pavement, making a loud noise. Other devotees got out speaking loudly in Russian, Serb, and Croat, which drew even more attention.

Sensing the awkwardness of the moment, I asked Tribhuvaneśvara to start the *kīrtana*. An expert musician with a melodious voice, his *kīrtana* quickly melted the hearts of the devotees and, lo and behold, many of the passersby. The small crowd looking at us with suspicion were overtaken by a larger crowd of inquisitive and smiling people. A few minutes later we were dancing and singing down the street with great happiness. Devotees felt the power of the holy name and many of the townspeople were pleasantly surprised with the blissful scene. As the holy name permeated each and every shop and office, people stuck their heads out of doors and windows, smiling and waving. Almost everyone accepted our colorful invitations. I watched a number of people fold them carefully and place them in their pockets. I did not see invitations littering the ground.

Three hours later, after distributing five thousand invitations, the devotees again assembled at the bus. The town had been inundated with the holy name. Thousands of people had heard the chanting, and a good number of them would come to the festival. It was a small victory, but a victory nonetheless, and the only weapon we used was the holy name's sweetness. The chanting had given the devotees the faith that whatever obstacles lay ahead of us over the next three months would be overcome by the holy name's mercy.

*aṁhaḥ saṁharad akhilaṁ sakṛd
udayād eva sakala-lokasya
taraṇir iva timira-jaladhiṁ
jayati jagan-maṅgalaṁ harer nāma*

As the rising sun immediately dissipates all the world's darkness, which is deep like an ocean, so the holy name of the Lord, if chanted once without offenses, can dissipate all the reactions of a living being's sinful life. All glories to that holy name of the Lord, which is auspicious for the entire world!

—*Padyāvalī*, quoting Śrī Lakṣmīdhara]

Chapter Thirty-Six

THE DAY OF RECKONING

• MAY 27, 2001 •

I WOKE UP YESTERDAY PREPARED FOR AN EXCITING DAY, but I had no idea that before the next twenty-four hours had passed I would be forced to make two of the most difficult decisions I could have imagined.

As I rose from bed, my mind was racing with the final arrangements for our first festival program of the year. I looked out my window as dawn revealed a beautiful, clear sky, one of the most important factors for a successful outdoor event. Since 1997, all our festivals have been outside, and during that time we have been rained out only four or five times. It must be that the demigods are eager to see the Lord's holy name broadcast loudly throughout this part of Poland.

Śrīla Prabhupāda has stated that there is an intimate connection between mankind, demigods, and the Supreme Personality of Godhead. The demigods are the Lord's agents, and if the Lord requests, they can make conditions favorable for the devotees' service on earth. Further inspection of the bright spring morning revealed that even Vāyu (the god of air) was bestowing his blessings upon us by holding back his gusty forces so that our many tents would not have to battle the wind.

When I went downstairs, devotees were already busy loading our twenty-four tons of festival paraphernalia into our three large trucks. This included the huge sound system (capable of addressing over 100,000 people), our fifteen large tents with displays on various aspects of Vedic culture, and our large



restaurant, equipped to serve quality *prasādam* to large quantities of people throughout the entire five-hour program.

There was an air of excitement as our 140 devotees concluded their duties before boarding the three buses to the festival site. Last-minute touches were being made on the twenty exquisitely beautiful large puppets for our new theater production, *Kṛṣṇa in Vṛndāvana*. Devotees were busy rehearsing *bhajan*s for the stage show. Our lady performers from South Africa were assembling ankle bells and dance outfits for their premiere performance with us.

Everyone was again looking forward to a season of fifty consecutive festivals. This an intense service (a festival practically every day for three months), but it's like drinking hot sugar juice—it's so hot it burns the lips but so sweet you can't stop drinking it. What in this world can compare with the happiness of seeing thousands of conditioned souls at practically each and every festival enchanted by the spiritual atmosphere of Kṛṣṇa's Village of Peace and the variety of spiritual entertainment presented there?

*akasmād evāvirbhavati bhagavān nāma laharī
paritānām pāpair api purubhir eṣaṁ tanu bhṛtam
aho vraja prayam hṛd api nava nityatam abhūn
nṛṇām loke yasminn avatarati gauro mama gaṭiḥ*

Now that Lord Gaura has descended to this world, the waves of the holy names of Lord Kṛṣṇa are suddenly flooding this planet, and the hearts of the sinful conditioned souls, which are as hard as thunderbolts, have become as soft as butter. Let me take shelter of that Lord Gaura.

—Śrī Caitanya-candrāmṛta

By 9:00 A.M. our caravan of assorted trucks, buses, and cars was rumbling down the road to the festival site in Tomaszow, 35km away. We planned a short *harināma* before setting up at the site, so when we arrived in town we stopped the buses and alighted to perform a *mahā-harināma*. We were more than a hundred devotees strong, and the combined effect of our enthusiastic street chanting on the occasion of our first festival would be most auspicious. In Vedic culture one would often consider the auspicious and inauspicious moments to begin an important event, but the chanting of the Lord's holy name makes any moment—even in the sinful age of Kali—all-auspicious. As we danced and chanted through the streets, people once again graciously accepted our invitations by the thousands and promised to attend our festival. I was feeling the greatest happiness at the possibility of sharing with the people the wonderful world of Kṛṣṇa consciousness.

However, not all was well. After many years of being on the streets chanting



the holy name, one learns to become attentive to signs of inauspiciousness. It appeared that a number of people in Tomaszow were particularly disturbed by our chanting. It is not everyone who appreciates the chanting of the Lord's holy name.

*arjuna uvāca
sthāne hṛṣīkeśa tava prakīrtyā
jagat prahṛṣyaty anurajyate ca
rakṣāṁsi bhītāni diśo dravanti
sarve namasyanti ca siddha-saṅghāḥ*

Arjuna said: O master of the senses, the world becomes joyful upon hearing Your name, and thus everyone becomes attached to You. Although the perfected beings offer You their respectful homage, the demons are afraid, and they flee here and there. All this is rightly done.

—Bg. 11.36

As we chanted through the town's streets, a few antagonistic young men shouted obscenities. Others simply stood still as we passed, their angry eyes riveted on our *kīrtana* party. On top of that, I noticed that all the posters we had put up the night before (to cover those defaced earlier in the week) were again covered with bright stickers. The stickers read, "Attention! Sect! Festival canceled!" It seemed that a concerted effort was being made to stop our festival, and I sensed that the angry young men we encountered were somehow connected.

After the *harināma*, we proceeded to the festival site and worked hard for the next five hours setting up our spiritual village. Our semi-trailer truck, once unloaded, folds out into a professional stage, complete with a set of thirty-six bright lights. Our tents include displays on vegetarianism, reincarnation, Vedic art, spiritual science, and even a tent exhibiting spiritual fashions where young girls and ladies may choose a sari to wear for the duration of the festival. With the help of our ladies, the entire 250 saris are usually adorning festival participants only two hours into the festival. Others patiently wait in line for them to be returned so that they can have a turn at wearing them.

Because this was our first festival of the year, the setup went slowly, as we carefully pieced together a replica of the spiritual world. The festival was scheduled to begin at 5:00 P.M., but by 4:00 P.M. there were already several hundred guests milling through our shops and eating in our restaurant. We officially opened the festival with a *kīrtana* and short introduction, which included a message of appreciation to all the mothers present (it was Mother's Day). Then our South African Indian dancers bedazzled the crowd with a



spectacular Kathak dance. As it was their first performance for us, I stood among the crowd to watch. Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed some of the same angry young men I had seen when we were on *saṅkirtana*. One doesn't easily forget a face full of envy and hate. As I studied them, I noticed that they weren't at all interested in the entertainment but seemed to be checking things out and making calculations. I called our security boys over and asked them to keep an eye on what appeared to be unwanted guests.

The stage performances went smoothly one after another. People seemed to love our new puppet show, which was especially designed for children. Subuddhi Rāya and his troupe put together this excellent, one-hour drama, and it touched the hearts of all the children present—and because the children were enjoying themselves, the hearts of their parents.

Several times I walked around the festival site visiting booths. One area was so crowded I could hardly move. The local police later told Nandinī that they estimated attendance at more than four thousand people. Everywhere people could be seen wearing *bindis* and beautiful *gopī* dots, painted on their faces by our ladies at the *gopī* dot booth. Many people approached me to sign their copies of *Bhagavad-gītā* and the other books they were purchasing in our bookshops.

Later, I gave a lecture. I remarked that the festival atmosphere was special, and many people smiled and nodded their heads in agreement. When I pointed out that thousands of people were enjoying themselves despite the fact that we served no alcohol at the site, everyone laughed.

As evening fell, many of the families began to go home and the festival crowd changed to young people eager to hear our reggae band, Village of Peace. The band is well known, partly because the devotees in it play to 300,000 kids at Woodstock every summer. By the time night fell, the band was halfway through its repertoire. The kids were loving it. Śrī Prahlāda and the musicians were in top form. Hundreds of youngsters were chanting and dancing, and many of us were thinking it was one of the band's best concerts ever.

Then just as they were beginning their last song, chaos erupted. I was standing beside the sound tent when I saw a large canister sail over the heads of the audience and land in the middle of the crowd standing in front of the stage. It exploded when it hit the ground, releasing a cloud of pepper gas. The kids started gagging. Within seconds, a group of twenty young men dressed in black, with big boots, and wearing bandannas over their faces, attacked the crowd. Swinging baseball bats, iron bars, and chains, they began to beat devotees and guests indiscriminately. The first person hit was a 12-year-old girl, who fell to the ground, her head bleeding.

Before our security could respond, the neo-Nazi skinheads had injured several people. Premharināma dāsa, one of my disciples from Bosnia, was



among the first to go down. He sustained a heavy blow to the forehead. Ekanātha dāsa was struck with a baseball bat in the face, and when he fell, the skinheads pummeled him into the ground. Guests were falling left and right as the skinheads, screaming Right-wing slogans, viciously beat them. Vaikuṇṭhapati, Rakṣana, and Śrī Bhāṣya, three members of our security force, descended on the attackers with a fury. Vara-nayaka Prabhu and a number of guests fought the skinheads with chairs and tables. In the midst of it all, male devotees were screaming to our *mātājīs* to run to the bus parked nearby. Outside the melee, people called the police on cell phones. As more people joined the fight, the skinheads retreated only to reassemble and attack again. One of them jumped into our gift shop, where Mother Taralakṣi smashed him with a chair. Then as suddenly as they appeared, they dispersed.

There was blood everywhere. Five devotees were injured, as well as a number of guests. Ten minutes later an ambulance arrived and took the most seriously injured to the hospital. A long twenty minutes later the police finally arrived. They had only been two blocks away, but somehow did not arrive in time to help the situation. Similarly, they were not interested in making a report on the attack, and informed us that they couldn't offer us any protection for the rest of the night as they had "only three men on duty" in the entire town. We realized, of course, that the police were connected with the attackers. We even suspected that the local Church might be involved. All day people had been telling us that the local priests had been calling them, warning them not to attend the festival.

To my surprise, people continued to mill around the festival site after the attack. They were angry that such a peaceful event had been so brutally disrupted. I heard people discussing religious intolerance and discrimination, a common enough topic in Poland. I appreciated their support, but I was nervous that so many people had remained behind. What if the skinheads returned to finish the job? Vara-nāyaka, who was himself slightly injured in the fight, ordered all the trucks, cars, tents, and paraphernalia to be brought into the center of the field so we could protect everything more efficiently.

After some deliberation, we decided to dismantle the festival and pack up. It was too risky to remain, as our security force was not prepared to deal with so many well-armed men. It had taken the help of our guests to repulse the attackers. For the same reason, we decided to cancel the second day of the festival. This was the first of the two difficult decisions I had to make.

Nandinī and Rādhā Sakhī Vṛndā went to the hospital to check on the injured devotees. Their wounds required stitches, but fortunately none of their injuries were serious. We sent the other ladies back to our base in the bus, with all the men staying behind to protect the crew who were dismantling the festival. Several carloads of skinheads arrived two hours later, but we made a show of



force and they retreated. We arrived back at our base at 4:00 A.M.

Later in the morning, our management team met to discuss strategies for dealing with such attacks. We decided to prepare a report for the media, as our opposition could easily turn the issue to their favor by saying that our presence provoked the incident. Most importantly, we concluded that our security would be unable to deal with such a scene again. We decided to employ a professional security group to protect our festivals from now on. We can pay for a security team's service for the next two weeks, but our budget will not accommodate the estimated \$25,000 it will cost to provide security for the devotees and guests for the next forty-nine festivals and Woodstock in August. We'll have to find the funds somewhere. Should we fail, we realized that we would have to cancel the rest of the three-month tour.

This conclusion brought me to the second difficult decision: to turn to you, the readers of this diary, to help us. My intention in writing this diary has always been to raise preaching awareness, not to solicit funds. Now determined enemies are close to stopping one of ISKCON's most successful preaching programs. The devotees here are bearing insult and injury to spread the chanting of the holy name, but I am not prepared to allow them to take foolish risks.

My request to all my readers at this moment of crisis is to send a donation so that these festivals may continue. I'm begging your mercy, so that our festival program may continue to give mercy.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

ANXIETY TAKES OVER

• MAY 28-30, 2001 •

THE DAY AFTER THE ATTACK WAS A SUNDAY. That morning we started our morning program a little late. I wanted to give the devotees a chance to rest. Many had been shaken by the events of the previous night. Devotees had not seen our injured men, most of whom had returned late from the hospital, and as each of them entered the temple room covered in bandages and in some cases bare stitches, it was obvious that our people had suffered. A number of men had black eyes and bruised knuckles. My heart went out to them. These devotees are front-line soldiers, risking their lives to spread Lord Caitanya's message. They mean more to me now than they ever did.

We few, we happy few, we band of brothers;
For he today that sheds his blood with me;
Shall be my brother.

—Henry V, William Shakespeare

I could only imagine the karmic reactions awaiting those who attacked these devotees of the Lord. There's a German proverb: "In time of war, the devil makes more room in hell."

If someone asked me what was the best day in my life, I'd have to say it took place two years ago. On that day, I stood on the main stage at Woodstock



and watched 250,000 young people chant Hare Kṛṣṇa and dance in ecstasy as Village of Peace played on the main stage. If I were asked about the saddest day of my life, I would have to say it was the Sunday morning a small group of us returned to the Tomaszow festival site to inform the public that we had decided to cancel the second day of our festival due to inadequate security. As we stood in the empty field where we had entertained huge crowds only the day before, I watched in sorrow as thousands of people poured into the festival grounds expecting to participate in another day of festivities with us. With each look of disappointment as we informed people we were canceling, I felt my own sadness deepen until finally I was unable bear it any longer. As devotees continued to approach groups of people to inform them of the situation, I returned to my car. Even there, people I could see passing by on their way to the festival grounds. It was too much for me, and at one point I broke down and cried out of frustration and anger. The only solace I had was that we were on our way to hold a festival in another town the next day.

Early Monday morning we were off to Ozorkow, the second town on our spring tour. The devotees were nervous with the attack still fresh in their minds. I tried to encourage them while we rode the bus. I reminded them that we would have a professional security group at the Ozorkow festival.

But it wasn't just the attack that disturbed them; they were now aware that there was an organized effort to stop our festival programs in this part of Poland.

It was difficult not knowing when and how the opposition would attack next. Such opposition is always evasive—they have to be, because they know that they can do nothing legal to stop us. We have been a registered religion in Poland since 1991, and we work closely with Poland's Department of Religious Affairs. Whenever anyone has been foolish enough to accuse us directly of criminal activity, we have always defeated them in court. Therefore, the opposition's tactics have had to change. Now they spread false propaganda about us through the media without identifying themselves as the source of the information. When they see that their tactics are not having much effect and do not really discourage attendance at our festivals, they revert to the tactics the Nazis used on the Polish Jews after the German occupation in 1939—they beat us with iron bars and chains to drive us out of their towns.

But who *are* these people? And *where* are they? In Vedic culture, opponents fought on equal terms, face to face. Our opposition is invisible. It is difficult to defeat an invisible opponent. As Sun Tzu says, "If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the results of a hundred battles."

Any apprehension we had about the Ozorkow festival, however, was dissipated when we began to set up our site. The city council had given us the main square, and setting up there was, in effect, big advertising. Crowds



of curious people passed through the square all day long, guaranteeing a substantial attendance that evening. As soon as our hired security team arrived (huge men dressed in uniforms and armed with sticks), the devotees relaxed.

Unfortunately, as the day wore on, the sky filled with big black clouds. It began to rain an hour before the program was to begin. This appeared to be yet another reversal in our plans. But amazingly, people began to arrive, despite the rain, carrying colorful umbrellas. By the time the show began, the square was a sea of umbrellas.

One hour into the program I went to my van to make arrangements for the next festival, scheduled for Wednesday and Thursday, in Zgierz. Suddenly the phone rang. It was Nandinī with bad news. The Zgierz authorities had canceled the festival after a telephone call from their counterparts in Tomaszow. They were told that our festival was terrible, that we were a band of gypsies with nothing to offer, and that we had been caught selling drugs behind our tents. Nandinī immediately telephoned the councilors in Tomaszow and inquired if they had, in fact, made such a call. They replied that they had not and that, to the contrary, they had loved our festival. It was obvious that our invisible enemy had made the call to Zgierz. Although the councilors in Tomaszow phoned the Zgierz authorities to clear the misunderstanding, the Zgierz council remained skeptical and refused to permit the festival.

The rain continued to fall on the sea of umbrellas before our stage in Ozorkow, but the people remained undaunted. They were mesmerized by the expert dancing of our artists from South Africa, the professionalism of the puppet theater (which caused some kids to laugh so hard they fell over), and the *kīrtanas* (which made even the elderly dance). The rain and cool weather gave people an appetite, and the restaurant was packed throughout the festival.

As usual, I made my rounds through the tents, shops, and exhibits to ensure that everything was going well. A number of people stood before the displays on vegetarianism and reincarnation thoughtfully pondering the philosophy. Others browsed through the gift shops, often staring in amazement at the exotic items on sale, many of which they had never seen before.

At one point I felt that someone was following me. When I looked behind me, I saw a man dressed in black. When I looked at him, he looked away quickly. Seeing my concern, one of the devotees approached and said, “Mahārāja, that man has been following you for some time. I’ve been watching him. He’s been taking photographs of you from all angles.”

I decided to question the man, but as soon as I started toward him he disappeared. Devotees stayed near me for the duration of the festival. I also dug through the trunk of my car and found of a big stick and a canister of CS tear gas. I used to carry such things in the early years of our festival tour.



Toward the end of the evening as our reggae band was performing, the rain subsided and hundreds of people gathered before the stage. Our professional security team took up positions in front of the stage, a move that raised a few eyebrows among the mellow teenagers ready to dance, but which was much appreciated by the devotees.

The evening ended peacefully at 10:00 P.M. Our hired security left, and our own boys would stay to guard the festival. Just as the rest of us were about to leave, Nandinī received a call from a member of the city council in Zgierz. To her surprise the councilors had changed their minds. They had called back to give us permission to hold our festival. When Nandinī inquired what had made them change their minds, the man laughed and said they had sent a member of the council to the festival in Ozorkow that evening to see what it was actually like. He had phoned back with a glowing report. Could that have been the man who had been photographing me?

The next day we chanted and distributed invitations in Opoczno, where we plan to hold the festival on Friday and Saturday. As usual, we distributed more than five thousand invitations and looked forward to yet another blissful program. On *harināma*, a drunkard approached me, wanting to talk. He was wild and talking so loudly our security boys tried to restrain him. Still, he was determined to speak to me. As he became more insistent, they finally dragged him away. Somehow he escaped them and returned. When the security caught him again, I decided to defuse the situation by asking him what he wanted. I was amazed when I heard what he wanted to say. Pulling out my *Chant! Chant! Chant! bhajana* tape, he said he wanted to thank me for making “such a beautiful cassette.” Apparently he had purchased it at the Tomaszow festival, and he had known it was my tape because the label has my picture on it. Then he really took me by surprise by saying that he was enjoying reading *Bhagavad-gītā*, which he had also purchased at the festival. Then he bowed respectfully and walked off, smirking at the security boys.

Now that Lord Caitanya, His heart filled with mercy, has descended to this world, those living entities who had formerly never practiced yoga, meditated, chanted mantras, performed austerities, followed various Vedic restrictions, studied the *Vedas*, performed spiritual activities, or refrained from sins, have become able to easily plunder the crest jewel of all goals of life.

—Śrī Caitanya-candrāmṛta, Chapter 10

On Tuesday morning on the way to the second day of the Ozorkow festival, Nandinī received a call from Opoczno, where we had performed *harināma* the day before. It was the town secretary, and she called to tell us that the



mayor had just canceled the event. Nandinī was shocked and asked for an explanation. The secretary said that if Nandinī wanted, she could come and speak to the mayor herself. Nandinī and Rādhā Sakhī Vṛndā immediately drove to Opoczno and confronted the mayor in his office. He was pleasant but firm: there would be no festival. When asked why, he said, “Because we are having problems with the site.”

Nandinī and Rādhā Sakhī Vṛndā asked the mayor if there was a more specific reason for the cancellation. He paused, then opened our festival brochure and pointed to my name. “You can’t have your festival because of him,” he said. “The festival is led by this person, who is a world preacher and guru in the Hare Kṛṣṇa movement. The higher authorities in our town [the Church] will not allow him to come here.”

And that was that. The festival was canceled.

On their way back to Ozorkow, Nandinī and Rādhā Sakhī Vṛndā decided to pass through Tomaszow to officially thank the authorities for allowing us to hold our festival there and to apologize for the attack on the guests and devotees. The Tomaszow officials in turn apologized for the incident, which they said investigations had revealed had been perpetrated by a nationalist group of young men under the direction of “higher authorities.” The town secretary said that we should be extremely careful, because the group was targeting us in this area and could again become violent. They told Nandinī that only that afternoon the group had managed to convince the regional television network via another false telephone call that all the Festival of India programs scheduled in the area for the next month had been canceled. The information was broadcast on all the news programs that day. Nandinī was stunned. All her work preparing festivals in the region had just been destroyed, and she and Rādhā Sakhī Vṛndā would have to begin again.

Now we must take even more precautions. If it wasn’t for the fact that we are getting such an overwhelming response to our festivals (averaging three thousand attendees a day), I might consider moving them elsewhere. But we’ll depend on Kṛṣṇa and go on as planned. I know it won’t be easy. We’re the underdog here, with fewer resources than our opposition. Material calculations would indicate that we cannot win. As Jean-Paul Sartre stated, “When the rich wage war, it’s the poor who die.”

But spiritual calculations indicate that if we remain faithful to the Lord and take shelter of His lotus feet, we might triumph.

May the wide-eyed and auspicious nails of the lion-faced Lord, Nṛsiṃha, who is in the company of His consort Lakṣmī, protect us. His nails are like thunderbolts in tearing asunder the lofty mountainlike heads of the herds of strong and intoxicated elephants in the forms of demons, the foes of Indra.



O consort of Lakṣmī! Although I have made an all-around study of the *śāstra*, I don't find anything superior to You, my master. There is nothing superior to You. Brahmā, Śiva, Indra, and their hosts are reduced to ashes by the sparks of fire resembling sparkling glowworms issuing from the curved edge of Your right eye filled with masses of wrath.

—Śrī Nṛsimha Naka Stuti, Madhvācārya

Chapter Thirty-Eight

UNDER LAKSMI-NṚSĪMHA'S PROTECTION

• MAY 31-JUNE 3, 2001 •



Due to my busy schedule, my disciples have been worshipping my Lakṣmī-Nṛsiṃha Deity for months. Here while on tour they have placed Them on the altar in our temple room. When I do my private morning *pūjā*, I worship my *śilās*. But last night I had a dream, so I decided to bring Their Lordships back to my room.

I hesitate to share this dream, because Śrīla Prabhupāda has warned that only very advanced devotees can take instructions from the Lord in dreams: “. . . one must be a very elevated devotee in order to be able to speak with the Supreme Lord. Sometimes the Lord informs the devotee through dreams. These exchanges between the Deity and the devotee are not understandable by atheists, but actually the devotee enjoys them. (*Teachings of Lord Caitanya*) However, in a letter to a young disciple, Śrīla Prabhupāda states that the Lord may sometimes appear in dreams even to one not so advanced, such as myself. “So far your dreams are concerned, it is very nice that you are thinking about Kṛṣṇa consciousness even while sleeping. Kṛṣṇa is so nice that we want to remember Him even more than twenty-four hours daily . . . Lord Jagannātha is very kind, and He can also appear in mind in His own form, so why not in your dream?” (Letter to Bhaktin Linda, 1970)

That understood, here is my dream:

I dreamt that I was chanting my rounds in a small house in Vṛndāvana when a devotee excitedly approached me with a letter. Not wanting to be distracted



by something that was probably not urgent, I asked him who the letter was from. Smiling, he said, "It's from Lakṣmī-Nṛsimha!"

I immediately took the letter and gazed at the beautiful, Sanskritlike handwriting on the envelope: "To Indradyumna Swami." On the back, in the same ornate hand, was written, "From Lakṣmī-Nṛsimha." I thought, "My gosh, my Deities have written me a letter!"

With great care I tried to open the envelope, but I couldn't. Bhakti Bhr̥ṅga Govinda Mahārāja was with me then. He said, "You'll have to take it to a *sādhū* who can help you."

I walked into the Vṛndāvana forest. Several *sādhūs* were sitting nearby, so I respectfully asked one of them to help me open the letter. He took the envelope soberly and easily opened it. I was less patient: "Your Holiness, what does it say?"

"They want you to worship Them."

The devotees on the tour are grateful that Lakṣmī-Nṛsimha protected them from serious injury the night our festival was attacked. They are also grateful to the many devotees around the world who responded to our plea for funds to hire the professional security team. We have already raised half the amount required to keep the security team with us until mid-August, when Woodstock will signal the end of our summer festival season. Yesterday at an *iṣṭa-goṣṭhi* when I informed the tour devotees how help is pouring in, one boy, his head still swathed in bandages, raised his hand and said with appreciation, "Now I know what Śrīla Prabhupāda meant when he said, 'Your love for me will be tested by how you cooperate among yourselves.'"

Yesterday, the biggest newspaper in the region ran a front-page article on the attack with a picture of the twelve-year-old girl who was injured. In big, bold letters it said, "DISGRACE!" and described the incident as religious intolerance. As a result, public response has been extremely favorable. Everywhere we go, people come forward to offer sympathy. Yesterday during our *harināma* in Lodz, a motorcycle gang slowed down as they approached us on the road. I thought, "Oh no, here we go again." Suddenly, all the gang members simultaneously gave us the thumbs-up sign and yelled, "Bravo Kṛṣṇa! Bravo Kṛṣṇa!"

Time has moved quickly over these last ten days. It's been intense. As I sat chanting my rounds yesterday morning, I realized that despite my full-time engagement in devotional service, I had not been remembering the Lord constantly. I feel far from the goal of being able to remember Kṛṣṇa constantly.

*sa hānis tan mahac chidraṁ
sa mohaḥ sa ca vibhramah*



*yan-muhūrtam kṣaṇam vāpi
vāsudevaṁ na cintayet*

If even a moment's remembrance of Vāsudeva is missed, that is the greatest loss, that is the greatest illusion, and that is the greatest anomaly.

—*Viṣṇu Purāṇa*

I pray to come to the stage of being able to remember Kṛṣṇa at every step in life, whether in happiness or distress. As if in response to this prayer, I received a message over the Internet containing the poem of a young girl dying of cancer in a New York hospital. The essence of her poem is that we should take time to be conscious of the nice things around us and not be oblivious to them; our lives are racing by. Although her sentiments deal with the material world, I read into her poem my own desire to remember the Lord and become fully conscious of Him at every moment.

Slow Dance

Have you ever watched kids
On a merry-go-round?
Or listened to the rain
Slapping on the ground?
Ever followed a butterfly's erratic flight?
Or gazed at the sun into the fading night?
You'd better slow down.
Don't dance so fast.
Time is short.
The music won't last.

Do you run through each day
On the fly?
When you ask, "How are you?"
Do you hear the reply?
When the day is done
Do you lie in your bed
With the next hundred chores
Running through your head?
You'd better slow down.
Don't dance so fast.
Time is short.
The music won't last.



Ever told your child,
“We’ll do it tomorrow”
And in your haste
Not seen his sorrow?
Ever lost touch
Let a good friendship die,
‘Cause you never had time
To call and say, “Hi”?
You’d better slow down.
Don’t dance so fast.
Time is short.
The music won’t last.

When you run so fast to get somewhere
You miss half the fun of getting there.
When you worry and hurry through your day
It is like an unopened gift . . .
Thrown away.
Life is not a race.
Do take it slower.
Hear the music
Before the song is over.

For devotees of the Lord, the “music” is contained in the enlightening words of great saints like Śrīla Narottama dāsa Ṭhākura: “O Lord Hari! I have spent my life uselessly. Although I have obtained a rare human birth, I have refused to worship Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa, and in this way I have knowingly drunk poison.” (*Prārthanā*)

After discovering the girl’s poem, I chanced upon my own notes from my stay in Vṛndāvana last Kārttika. In those pages I was appreciating the calm and peaceful atmosphere of the holy *dhāma*, so conducive to study and learning. There I wrote of Vṛndāvana’s temples, *sādhus*, and sacred cows. How far away that all seems from the battlefield on which I now find myself, but I know that desiring to live in Vṛndāvana and preaching in the terrible cities of Kali-yuga are intricately connected. To attain eternal residence in Śrī Vṛndāvana-dhāma one has to receive the Lord’s blessings. Preaching, as difficult and dangerous as it can be, is an important way to attain those blessings.

Śrīla Prabhupāda writes in his purport to *Bhagavad-gītā* 11.55, “. . . There are many examples in history of devotees of the Lord who risked their lives for the spreading of God consciousness. . . . Why such risk? Because they wanted to spread Kṛṣṇa consciousness, and it is difficult. . . . Now, we can imagine how



merciful Kṛṣṇa is to those engaged in His service, risking everything for Him. Therefore it is certain that such persons must reach the supreme planet after leaving the body.”

Surely despite all opposition, if we continue to preach, our budding desire to one day reside in Vṛndāvana will mature, and by Lord Caitanya’s mercy we will gradually become qualified to enter the eternal abode.

*yathā yathā gaura padāravinde
vindeta bhaktim kṛta punya rāsiḥ
tathā tathotsarpati hṛdy akasmād
rādhā padāmbhoja sudhambu rāsiḥ*

To the degree that we surrender to Lord Caitanya’s service, to that degree we acquire qualification for the service to Rādhārāṇī’s lotus feet in Vṛndāvana.

—Prabodhānanda Sarasvatī

Chapter Thirty-Nine

SUNLIGHT THROUGH THE CLOUDS

• JUNE 4-10, 2001 •

SWHILE PLANNING OUR FESTIVAL IN LODZ (the second largest city in Poland), we received a call from town council officials in Gorzow Wielkopolski, the capital of northwest Poland and the site of our final program last autumn. They desperately wanted us to participate in their forthcoming annual city festivities. We explained that we were in the middle of a tour in the center of Poland and that it would be difficult to move the show north. The town secretary said, “Your program last autumn was the biggest festival we’ve had in years (eight thousand people attended), and without your presence at our annual event we’re afraid we’ll get a poor turnout.”

I argued that we’d have to take a financial loss if we dismantled our festival and drove north. The secretary said, “You name the price, we’re willing to pay.” We told him the cost, and after some negotiation he agreed on a price which included transportation and lodging for one hundred devotees. So the next day we set off for Gorzow Wielkopolski, leaving a small team of devotees to prepare the Lodz program.

Traveling northwest, devotees felt Kṛṣṇa was giving us a chance to recuperate from the difficulties we had faced in the Lodz region. In a recent meeting with our professional security team, the firm’s manager asked, “Do you know that in choosing Lodz for your festivals this spring, you picked one of the most dangerous areas of the country?”



But another ray of sunlight appeared when we received a call from the *Gazeta Lubuska*, Poland's most widely read newspaper. Word had already spread about our participation in the Gorzow Wielkopolski festival, and the newspaper wanted information. Because time was short, the reporter asked us to write the story and they would print it. That was a first for us with such a prestigious newspaper!

Upon arrival in Gorzow Wielkopolski, we were escorted to a hotel not far from the festival site and introduced to the head of the Cultural Affairs Department. She showed us the poster the council was putting up all over town. It listed both our hour-by-hour stage program and named the festival's sponsors: the European Union, Polish National Television, Polish National Communications, and several national banks. Devotees smiled upon seeing the poster. We were being treated like celebrities. When we asked the woman for permission to perform *harināma* the next day, she said, "You don't even have to ask. In fact, if you don't chant on the streets we'll never invite you back to our town!"

So we went out on *harināma*. Śrī Prahlāda was distributing invitations when he was approached by a man who presented him with his card. It read, "Town Secretary—Gorzow Wielkopolski." The official said, "Can you tell me how to get in touch with the Hare Kṛṣṇa reggae band, Village of Peace? We're planning a big concert here in a month and want them to play." He added, "Personally they're one of my favorite bands in Poland."

The man was surprised when Śrī Prahlāda replied, "Yes, of course I can help you—I'm the band's lead singer."

Our participation during the five days of festivities in Gorzow Wielkopolski, delighted the crowds. During that time, Nandinī and Rādhā Sakhī Vṛndā traveled north to the Baltic Sea coast to make arrangements for our summer festivals in that region. Their first stop was Trzebiatow, a town of 15,000 people. Because it is near the base where we start our summer tours, we have begun our summer festivals there for the past eleven years. Our festival has therefore become a town tradition, and each year every man, woman, and child attends. They know many of our *bhajan*s, songs, and plays by heart, and most teenagers know the words (in English) to the Village of Peace songs. Before going to the town hall in Trzebiatow, Nandinī and Rādhā Sakhī Vṛndā first ran an errand to the post office. They were wearing nondevotional clothing, but as soon as they approached the counter the attendant called out, "The Hare Kṛṣṇas are here!" The other postal workers crowded around to ask the dates of the festival. "Will there be a *Ramāyana* play again? Who are the special guests this year?"

Nandinī and Rādhā Sakhī Vṛndā politely answered their questions, then hurried off to meet the head of Trzebiatow's Cultural Affairs, Mrs. Novak.



Arriving a few minutes before the office closed, the secretary (who didn't bother looking up from her computer) told them that Mrs. Novak had already left work for the day. As the devotees turned to leave, the secretary looked up, and realizing who they were called out, "Oh, wait a minute! Are you from the Hare Kṛṣṇa festival?"

Nandinī turned. "Yes, we are."

"Then please come back. Mrs. Novak will see you now."

Mrs. Novak welcomed them into the office, saying, "We were wondering when you would come. You know the Hare Kṛṣṇa festival is the biggest annual event in our town."

After leaving Trzebiatow, Nandinī and Rādhā Sakhī Vṛndā visited Kolobrzeg, one of the largest and most prestigious resorts on the coast. Unfortunately, because of opposition in the town council, we usually struggle each year to secure a site for our program. Undaunted, the devotees approached the town hall and were surprised to meet the newly elected deputy mayor, who turned out to be quite friendly.

"Of course you must do your festival again this year," he said. "I was a reporter for a local magazine a few years ago, and I attended one of your festivals. It was wonderful! You pick the spot you want and we won't charge you anything."

Nandinī said, "Some influential people in your town are opposed to our festival. Aren't you afraid they might try to stop you from helping us?"

The deputy mayor replied, "You know that politicians always grant each other favors. I have a few favors coming my way in this town, and I'll use them for your festival. Don't worry. You just tell me where you want to do the program."

The pair looked at each other and smiled. Nandinī said, "We want to do our festival on the boardwalk, next to the main beach entrance, on July 21 and 22."

The deputy mayor gasped—these are two of the most important days of the summer along the coast—then collected himself. He smiled, "Anything for my friends."

Things didn't appear so easy at their next stop, Swinoujscie, another of the largest towns on the coast. There the council was not interested in hosting cultural activities for the summer; they were interested only in making money. Nandinī and Rādhā Sakhī Vṛndā were shocked to learn that the council had rented the entire boardwalk (part of which we rent every year for our festival) to two businessmen who planned to sell beer and rent the space for small business enterprises. When they asked the council secretary if they could have the businessmen's phone numbers, he laughed and said, "They wouldn't be interested in talking to you."



Disappointed, the ladies went to the boardwalk to speak to the local people. Perhaps there was a private place left they could rent. They were given the same news: two businessmen had rented the entire boardwalk for the summer. No one else could get even a centimeter of that land.

Feeling hopeless, the devotees entered a cafe to make a phone call. While waiting in line for the phone they overheard two men boasting nearby. “We got the whole boardwalk! Can you believe it? We’re going to make a fortune!”

Realizing that a golden opportunity was at hand, Nandinī walked over to their table and asked, “Excuse me gentlemen, are you the businessmen who have rented the boardwalk for the summer?”

“Yes, we are,” one of them replied.

“We were praying we’d meet you. We’d like to rent part of the boardwalk for a couple of days this summer.”

“I’m sorry, but we’ve already rented the area for the entire summer. What did you want to sell, beer?”

“No,” Nandinī replied, “we’re from the Hare Kṛṣṇa festival.”

When she said that, both men’s eyes lit up and they exclaimed simultaneously, “The Hare Kṛṣṇa festival!”

The man who had been speaking said, “I’ve been to three of your festivals. In fact, every summer my little girl looks for you everywhere on the beach. She loves going to your festivals and dressing in a sari.”

The other man said, “We’ll find a space for the Hare Kṛṣṇa festival. Just name the location you want.”

Glancing at Rādhā Sakhī Vṛndā, Nandinī thought she may as well aim for two more of the biggest days of the summer. “We would like to do our festival on the main boardwalk near the beach on July 14 and 16.”

One of businessmen smiled, “We’ll give you that space only if you do a four-day festival. If you’re going to do it, do it big. Those will be the four biggest days of the summer in Swinoujście, as we’ll be organizing little events along the boardwalk. We’ll charge you only for the electricity you use.”

The other businessman said, “I have another proposal. I’ve watched you singing and dancing in the streets every summer for years and figured out that that’s the secret of your success. There’s something special about your singing. That’s why thousands of people attend your festivals. Instead of singing to advertise your festival, can I hire you to sing and market my products? I’m sure I’ll become a millionaire!”

Nandinī laughed. “The chanting works because it glorifies Kṛṣṇa. He’s the success behind our festivals. He makes all the arrangements because He wants these festivals to go to every town and village. Rādhā Sakhī Vṛndā and I have personal experience of this!”



Although numberless incarnations of the Lord are described in the *śruti* and other Vedic literature, who except for the Lord Himself has the power to describe the glories and opulence of Lord Gaura? How many times have the devotees personally seen that their beloved Lord Gaura is the Supreme Personality of Godhead, Lord Hari? Alas! Alas! Still the fools refuse to believe that Lord Gaura is the Supreme!

—*Śrī Caitanya-candrāmṛta*, Chapter 5

Chapter Forty

HOLY NAMES BRING CHANGE OF HEART

• JUNE 12-18, 2001 •



ON JUNE 12, we packed up the festival program in Gorzow Wielkopolski and headed back toward Lodz to begin final preparations for our festival there. Gorzow Wielkopolski had been a picnic for the devotees—we had been special guests in the city and the authorities had made all the arrangements for our festival program. Devotees had had time to relax, and had enjoyed the preaching. The light mood gradually changed as we drove south. The attack on our festival in Tomaszow was still fresh in our minds, and word had spread among them that our hired security felt that Lodz was the most dangerous city in Poland. Although the *harināma* parades held in Lodz before leaving for Gorzow Wielkopolski had been well received, the writing was “on the wall” in Lodz. Literally. The all-pervading graffiti in the city revealed the hate mentality of many of the young people there. Slogans such as, “Poland for Poles,” “Death to Jews,” and “Nazis Rule Here” were common.

Lodz is an industrial town with many factories, but still a good number of people are out of work. Boredom and frustration give rise to xenophobia (extreme nationalism), and such feelings cause people to attack events like our festival in Tomaszow.

The further south we drove the worse the weather became. Black clouds hovered overhead as we passed Lodz and neared our base.

After looking out the window, one devotee turned to me. “Mahārāja, some



devotees feel we're asking for trouble by doing a festival in Lodz. They say the same people who attacked us in Tomaszow may come back."

I replied, "We shouldn't worry. Devotees are not afraid to defend themselves if necessary." I quoted Śrīla Prabhupāda: "... Vaiṣṇavas do not simply chant Hare Kṛṣṇa. If there is need, they can fight under the guidance of Viṣṇu and become victorious ... Generally, a Vaiṣṇava is nonviolent [however] if Kṛṣṇa wants we shall be prepared to become violent also." (Lecture, London, 1973)

I added, "But if there's trouble we won't have to do the fighting ourselves. We will be well protected by our hired security team for the entire three-day festival. Don't worry. Their presence will act as a deterrent to anyone who would want to harm us. We must go ahead with the festival. Many people are expressing a desire to attend. All the big local newspapers have written articles about the festival. If there's anything we should worry about it's those dark clouds. They're our most formidable enemy right now."

Not wanting to worry the devotee, I didn't share with him the advice our security firm's manager gave at a recent meeting: "Despite all the security we're offering you, there remains one way your enemies can stop this festival for good."

"What's that?" I said.

Looking at me intently, he said, "Take you out."

Coming closer, he continued, "You have to take precautions from now on. From the attack in Tomaszow, it's obvious that some people will go to any extreme to try to stop your festival. Here's a brochure describing different types of bulletproof vests. You'd be wise to place an order."

I was taken aback. "Wear a bulletproof vest? What would the *sannyāsī* of yore think of that? They carried water pots and staffs, and here I'll be wearing a bulletproof vest and carrying a can of CS tear gas, a fighting stick tucked into my *dhoti*!"

I was going to tell him that Kṛṣṇa protects His devotees, but I realized that Kṛṣṇa expects His devotees to use their intelligence as well. The story of Nārada Muni initiating a cobra flashed through my mind. Nārada had accepted the cobra as a disciple, and at his initiation ceremony the snake had promised to follow the four regulative principles. But Nārada Muni requested one more discipline of him: "Don't bite anyone."

Having heard that the snake had been told not to bite, children started throwing sticks and stones at it. The snake returned to Nārada Muni's *āśrama* that evening and complained about being taunted by the children. Nārada Muni chastised his unique disciple, saying, "I instructed you not to bite, but I didn't tell you to give up your intelligence! If the children come near you again, simply show your hood as if you are going to bite. Then they'll run away!"

The security team manager added, "It's your decision, of course, but don't



underestimate your enemies.”

I pushed the brochure back across the table and he pushed it back again. “We’re not playing games here,” he said. “Give me your measurements.”

Back at the spring tour base we received a letter from the police in Tomaszow informing us that they had discovered that on the day of our program a priest had rented a van in Czestochowa, 50km south of Tomaszow. That van had transported fifteen, tough-looking boys to a parking lot not far from the festival site. Witnesses had seen the boys hurrying to the site near the end of our program and twenty minutes later running back to the van, which then sped off. Further evidence indicates that these boys may have been responsible for the havoc that night. The investigation is continuing and legal action is to be taken at its completion.

The night before the first day of the Lodz festival I tossed and turned in bed, unable to sleep. I was anxious about the event. I knew this could turn out to be a wonderful festival with a huge attendance if only because we had done more advertising for it than for any festival before. We had distributed almost 50,000 invitations, put up more than a thousand posters, and been featured throughout the media. The stage was set. But two things weighed on my mind: the frustrated youth of Lodz and the rain clouds continuing to hang over the city. Finally, I fell asleep.

When I awoke, the first thing I did was look out the window. The clouds were darker than ever, and I could feel the air thick with moisture. I asked a devotee to buy a newspaper, and when it came my fears were confirmed: rain was predicted.

But my eye caught another concern which hadn’t been brought to my attention. Not far from our festival and scheduled simultaneously was to be a major soccer match, a sure sign of trouble. I offered *pūjā* to my Lakṣmī-Nṛsiṃhadeva with all the devotion I could muster, then attended the morning program with the devotees. After *prasādam*, we boarded the buses to the festival site.

We worked under the ominous clouds for hours setting everything up. At 4:30 P.M. we opened the festival to a small crowd. An hour later, the crowd had grown to only two thousand people. Of course, many *yatras* would consider such a crowd a success, but our problem is never getting too few people—it’s how to deal with the huge crowds we often get of ten thousand or more. I attributed the poor attendance to the possibility of rain. But the rain held off. Things were going smoothly, but the fifteen men on the security team appeared nervous. They understood the nature of the youth in Lodz and that any trouble at the nearby soccer match could easily spill into our festival. Personally, I couldn’t see how these men had anything to worry about. Each of them was over 200cm tall and built like a fighting machine—huge muscles, fierce eyes,



and angry scowls! All of them were dressed in black and well armed.

Finally, I approached the man in charge of security and asked him if everything was all right. He said he had no worries but that he did want to speak to me about something. “Mahārāja, I don’t want my men eating your food anymore. During the festivals your devotees have been giving them all kinds of things to eat from your restaurant.”

“Are you worried there may be drugs in the food?”

“No, I know your pure standards. The problem is that your food has a special effect on my men. It makes them like everyone.”

“What do you mean?”

“It makes them smile all the time. It makes them soft and loving and compassionate. These men have to be tough to do this job. Your food is turning my lions into lambs! Just look over there.”

I glanced toward the restaurant and saw two of his men eating *samosas* and laughing and joking with the devotees.

“They were never like that before,” he said. “It’s the food, the singing, and the whole atmosphere!”

“OK,” I consented, “when the festival season is over we’ll give them *prasādam* to take home.”

I wandered over to the stage just as Śrī Prahāda and Village of Peace began to play. Darkness was falling, but I could still see the security men in black guarding the stage. As Śrī Prahāda and the band broke into a number in which they chant Hare Kṛṣṇa, I looked closely at the security men and saw the truth of their chief’s words: the men were swaying back and forth, chanting the holy name! I left it to the chief to tell them not to sing on the job; for me it was once again confirmation of the power of the holy name to turn hearts of steel into hearts of butter. “As the rising sun immediately dissipates all the world’s darkness, which is deep like an ocean, so the holy name of the Lord, if chanted once without offenses, can dissipate all the reactions of a living being’s sinful life. All glories to that holy name of the Lord, which is auspicious for the entire world!” (*Padyāvalī*, Text 16)

I felt myself relax. After days of worrying about the festival, nothing had happened and I could see the fruits of the preaching. Then suddenly I saw them coming. A gang of youths appeared on the field out of nowhere. I recognized them as skinheads by their attire. Dressed in black boots, tight Levi’s, and T-shirts, they moved slowly toward the crowd. They were as angry and hateful as the skinheads who had attacked us previously and as the youth I had seen on the street. I remembered the devotee’s query on the bus, “Mahārāja, some devotees feel we’re asking for trouble by doing a festival in Lodz. They say the same people who attacked us in Tomaszow may come back.”

I saw our security men move in closer, bracing themselves for trouble. The



skinheads wandered slowly through the festival area, keeping in a big group as they always do. As people saw them, they backed away, and I even saw some leave, fearing violence. I looked again toward the security men and saw them hastily planning a strategy if a fight broke out. The situation was tense and my adrenaline was flowing. I touched my jacket to make sure that my tear gas and fighting stick were still there, and then it happened.

The skinheads moved quickly into the crowd of dancing young people and stood there for a moment, as if waiting for a signal. The security men moved toward them. Śrī Prahlāda and the band, oblivious to the danger, were singing another song which contained the *mahā-mantra* and the drummer played a driving beat. I jumped onstage—it would be a good vantage point if there was a fight—when to my amazement, I saw some of the skinheads begin to tap their big black boots to the music. Then, as our powerful sound system carried the *mahā-mantra* far and wide, some of the skinheads stood there as if dazed, then slowly but surely repeated the words of the mantra. After a few minutes all of them were chanting and swaying back and forth—a little self-consciously at first. As soon as the kids saw them chanting, they grabbed them and pulled them into the *kīrtana* where they too started dancing wildly! Eventually they were absorbed in *kīrtana*, chanting Hare Kṛṣṇa at the top of their lungs and twirling and dancing with abandon. I sat down at the front of the stage in astonishment. As I did so, I saw the security men back off to their original positions, smiling to themselves.

I said to myself, “What is happening here? How is it that these boys who came here to fight are now laughing and dancing with the devotees? How has this sudden change of heart come over them?”

I looked at Śrī Prahlāda. He was perspiring as he chanted the holy names with his deep faith from the stage. He leapt and twirled through the air. I looked at the audience and saw skinheads, teenagers, children, and adults holding hands and dancing in a circle. The lights from the stage illuminated them and made them appear like a firebrand being twirled around. As the *kīrtana* went on I sat there in amazement. At one point I thought, “My God, this is what it must have been like during Lord Caitanya’s *kīrtana*—the gentle and the ruffians all chanting the holy name together in ecstasy by His unfathomable mercy.”

Knowing it to be one of those rare occasions we experience only once in a great while in Kṛṣṇa consciousness, I decided to simply relish it. Then suddenly the band stopped and the *kīrtana* was over. The skinheads, still laughing, turned around and began to walk out of the festival grounds. In a moment they were gone, although we could hear them in the distance singing Hare Kṛṣṇa. I immediately thought of the pastime of Haridāsa Ṭhākura living in a cave with a dangerous snake. People hesitated to come to see him, so one day the snake (being inspired by the Supersoul within his heart) slithered away. It seemed to



me that these hooligans had been directed by the Lord within their hearts to chant Hare Kṛṣṇa. Then the Lord sent them away.

All glories to the holy name! All glories to our most merciful master, Lord Caitanya Mahāprabhu, who is the shelter for the whole cosmic manifestation and the actual protector of His devotees!

Chanting the Hare Kṛṣṇa *mahā-mantra*, His own holy names which bring auspiciousness to the world, His hand trembling with love as He touches the knotted string about His waist to count the number of names, His face bathed in tears as He comes and goes, eager to see His own form of Lord Jagannātha, and bringing great delight to the eyes of all, may the golden form of the Lord protect you all!

—Śrī Caitanya-candrāmṛta

Chapter Forty-One

UPBEAT END TO SPRING

• JUNE 20-JULY 1, 2001 •

THE FINAL FESTIVAL OF OUR SPRING TOUR WAS THE BEST OF ALL. After Lodz, we had planned to move north to our summer base, but at the last minute we decided to do one more town just forty-five minutes away. Konskie is in another state, with a way of life unique to the region. Situated at the foot of the southern mountains, the people there are often referred to as mountain folk. Simple in their ways and rooted in tradition, they are often made fun of by Poles in other regions.

The first day we went on *saṅkīrtana* in Konskie people stared at us in disbelief. As we chanted through the streets, some people shut their doors and pulled the curtains across their windows. The second time around, however, we managed to break the ice and we saw people smiling and accepting our festival invitations.

The festival site was in a small park in the center of town. I was confident we'd get a good crowd, and sure enough, by the time the festival opened there were thousands of curious people ready to attend. The mood in the beginning was reserved, as the simple people gazed at the exotic exhibits, tents, and devotees. After a lively *bhājana* by the devotees on stage, however, they seemed to relax and began to enjoy themselves.

A few minutes into the festival, Vara-nāyaka directed my attention to the security group we had hired for the festival. I was a bit surprised. Instead of the tough young men in black uniforms we had been used to seeing, these



gentlemen were all in their mid-forties, dressed in light blue uniforms with ties. Most had pot bellies and sported handlebar mustaches. I asked Varanāyaka, “Those are our security men?” They looked more like the Keystone Cops out of a 1930’s movie!

But his reply made sense: “We were obliged to hire a security group from this area. A condition in the contract with the town council was that we employ these men because they the know the mentality and language of the local people.”

More than seven thousand people attended the two-day festival. Although the devotees had endured many austerities during the spring tour, they seemed to forget them during the relaxed and festive atmosphere in Konskie. As Shakespeare writes, “All’s well that ends well.”

Immediately after the attack in Tomaszow, I wondered whether the devotees, many of whom are young and new to Kṛṣṇa consciousness, could persevere. But they did, and in looking back I see that the most significant factor behind their determination was the support of a worldwide community of Vaiṣṇavas. We received either letters of encouragement or donations toward the cost of security almost every day, and we were regularly announcing whatever help had come in to the assembled devotees. Doing this reminded me of “mail call” when I was in the military. Every day we’d stand at attention while our platoon leader, holding a pile of letters, called out the names of the soldiers who had received mail. Upon hearing his name, a soldier would call out loudly, “Sir! Yes, Sir!” and run forward to receive his letter. It meant a lot to get a message from home, and even the toughest men’s eyes would well up with tears when they didn’t receive a letter. Similarly, we would read letters that came in daily from devotees around the world to Lord Caitanya’s soldiers on the tour. At “mail call,” they listened with fixed attention, sometimes nodding when the writer stressed the importance of preaching and often bowing their heads when glorified. It is the show of support from devotees around the world that keeps these men and women going despite the constant threat of aggression. I offer my respects to all the Vaiṣṇavas who encouraged these devotees from afar. By their mercy I have finally come to realize a verse I had been repeating for years, simply out of habit:

*tādera caraṇa-sebī-bhakta-sane bās
janame janame hoy ei abhilāṣ*

This is my desire, that birth after birth I may live with those devotees who serve the lotus feet of the Six Goswamis.

—Narottama dāsa Ṭhākura: *San̥kīrtana*, Text 7



One letter in particular amazed us all. It was from the head priest of the Śrī Rangam temple in South India. He is descended from the family in which Śrīla Gopāla Baṭṭa Goswami and Śrīla Prabodhānanda Sarasvatī took birth. Although it was directed to me, I took it that those glorious saints were sending their *abhaya mudras* (blessings of fearlessness) to all the tour members. Here is the letter:

Namaskram!

The holy *Diary of a Traveling Preacher* distributed by you is very great. It makes us to pray always for the author when we read the thrilling experiences and the Himalayan difficulties he is facing with the anti-cult groups.

Lord Śrī Kṛṣṇa will always be with him for his determination. I sincerely pray to the Divine Couple of Śrī Rangam to give him enough strength, courage, and everything he needs to fulfill his ambition.

Dasan,
Murali Battar.

As our trucks, buses, and cars headed north to the coast for the summer tour, I sensed that the devotees' faith and dependence on the Lord had deepened significantly because of the events of the spring tour. That was evident in the mood of devotion in which they chanted the Nṛsiṃha prayers as we drove off: from the heart, with feeling. I was reminded of Queen Kuntī's supplication to the Lord:

*vipadaḥ santu tāḥ śaśvat
tatra tatra jagad-guro
bhavato darśanam yat syād
apunar bhava-darśanam*

I wish that all those calamities would happen again and again so that we could see You again and again, for seeing You means that we will no longer see repeated births and deaths.

—*Bhāg.* 1.8.25

As we approached our summer base in Swierzno, 30km from the seaside, I called Nandinī and inquired about the mood in Trzebiatow, where we would be holding our ninth annual summer program in two days. Nandinī simply laughed and said,. "They're waiting for you."



“Waiting for us?” I said.

“Yes,” she replied. “They all know what happened in Tomaszow. Word of the attack spread throughout the country. They seem eager to receive us here.”

I thought, “That probably means they’ll send a representative from the town council to the festival.” What I never expected was the “homecoming” we received from these kind people.

The following morning we went on *harināma* in Trzebiatow. To the amazement of all the devotees, as we drove into town we passed under a bright orange and green banner proudly advertising the Festival of India. As we descended from the bus into the center of town, several office windows opened and we heard one lady call out to her fellow workers, “They’re here!”

As we started chanting down the street, children suddenly began appearing from everywhere, running toward us from all directions and calling out, “Hare Kṛṣṇa! Hare Kṛṣṇa!” Young girls joined the ladies’ part of the *harināma* and quickly and easily took up the synchronized dance steps they had learned during the past nine years of festivals. At one point they even took over and led a dance step that the devotee ladies had forgotten!

Young boys grabbed *karatālas* from the *brahmacārīs*’ hands, and twisting the *karatāla* strings around their fingers like veterans, played in perfect tempo with the *kīrtana*. I saw one new *brahmacārī* hand a group of boys an invitation with the *mahā-mantra* written on it as an encouragement for them to chant with us. The boys laughed and without looking at the card loudly chanted the entire *mahā-mantra* in unison, much to the *brahmacārī*’s amazement.

As we wound our way down the streets, shopkeepers and their customers greeted us. Waving and smiling they shouted, “Bravo! Bravo!” On one street, every single shop had a little cluster of people cheering us on. From the apartments above the shops, windows opened and parents and kids smiled at us as we went by. As we paused at one apartment a lady tossed flowers over us.

At one intersection I nodded to an elderly man drinking beer at a sidewalk cafe. In acknowledgment, he stood up and tipped his hat to me in respect. At one point we took a detour through an apartment complex. There was a lawn in a square surrounded by four tall buildings, and we stopped there and held a rousing *kīrtana*. The holy names echoing off the buildings created a tumultuous noise. I thought that it might be too loud, but its effect drew even more kids out of the apartments. Soon we had sixty children dancing in a circle with us, all holding hands and singing Hare Kṛṣṇa. Each and every one of them knew the *mahā-mantra*. One girl came running up to the *kīrtana* party and asked after two *mātājīs* who had led the ladies dancing on *harināma* in previous years. “Where is Śyāmalaki? Where is Śrī Rādhika?”



Absorbed in the blissful scene, I jumped when a chorus of young voices behind me called out, “Mahārāja! Welcome back!” I turned and saw seven eight-year-old girls, all smiles, with their hands behind their backs. One by one they came forward and gave me presents in old cardboard boxes with used ribbon around them. One box contained Mickey Mouse, another Goofy, and in another I found Pluto. I also received two lions, one rabbit with a carrot, and a black dog that barked when squeezed. The girls then jumped into the *kīrtana* and began to dance. A devotee offered to take the toys from me and dispose of them, and was a bit taken aback when I responded by saying I was going to keep them.

“What are you going to do with them?” he said.

“I’ll put them on the dashboard of my van. Śrīla Prabhupāda once said that a gift from a Vaiṣṇava is a special thing. It’s an expression of love.”

“Vaiṣṇavas?” he said with an astonished look. “They’re just *karmi* kids!”

“They’re not *karmis* anymore,” I smiled. “For one who chants the holy names even once becomes qualified for liberation.”

*sakṛd uccāritam yena
harir ity akṣara-dvayam
baddha-parikaras tena
mokṣāya gamanam prati*

A person who chants the holy name of the Lord, consisting of the two syllables ha-ri, even once, guarantees his path to liberation.

—*Skanda Purāṇa*

By the time we took our *kīrtana* party back into the center of town we had an army of kids with us. I was nervous for their safety, as we were going down narrow pathways and crossing intersections. I asked two devotees to monitor them. Enlivened by the response to our *kīrtana*, devotees chanted with great enthusiasm. At one point, when we stopped to chant on a street corner, I crossed to the other side to watch the amazing scene from a distance. A group of drivers waiting at the intersection’s red light honked their horns in appreciation of the *kīrtana*. When the light turned green they remained stationary, enjoying the blissful scene.

People continued shouting and waving from their windows, and the kids in the *kīrtana* party, chanting and dancing so jubilantly, seemed intoxicated with the holy name. I sat down on a bench with some elderly people who were clapping along with the *kīrtana*. Watching the devotees chanting and the people of Trzebiatow reciprocating in so many ways, I thought, “You boys and girls have merited this ‘homecoming.’ You’re fighting the real war against the



material energy and the forces of Kali-yuga. You've borne insult and injury to spread Lord Caitanya's message, and you deserve every gesture of affection from these people. Just see! Not only have devotees from around the world shown you support, the ordinary folk of Trzebiatow are now treating you as hometown heroes. I take the dust of your lotus feet upon my head. All glories to your service!"

Let renunciation be multiplied millions of times! Let millions of virtues, beginning with peacefulness, sense control, tolerance, and friendliness be multiplied millions of times! Let there be millions of meditations on the words *tat tvam asi*! Let there be devotion to Lord Viṣṇu multiplied millions of times! All this taken together does not equal even one millionth part of the multitude of perfect transcendental qualities possessed by the great souls who find transcendental bliss in the splendor of the toenails of the dear devotees of Śrīmān Caitanyacandra.

—Śrī Caitanya-candrāmṛta, Chapter 26

Chapter Forty-Two

HARE KRSNAS MAKE IT BIG TIME

• JULY 2-11, 2001 •

Kolobrzeg is one of the principal beach resorts along the Baltic Sea coast. Its fine, white, sandy beaches and quaint port attract hundreds of thousands of Polish tourists each summer. Many German tourists also come to Kolobrzeg, partly because vacations are cheaper there than in Germany, and partly because many German families trace their history back to the region. Kolobrzeg was a German city before World War II (it was called Kolen then). There are many beautiful German buildings from the 19th century in the town and surrounding area.

I have always had my eye on Kolobrzeg as an ideal place for our festival because it attracts the Polish upper class. Numerous wealthy, famous, and important people take their vacations there, and the resort is the site of many big events during the summer. But it has always been difficult for us to get the town council's cooperation for our festivals. Ten years ago, when we rented indoor halls and held small programs consisting of *bhajan*s, lectures, and short plays, the Kolobrzeg officials would give us an obscure hall on the edge of town.

Once another devotee and I were exploring the idea of doing an outdoor festival there. We went to the boardwalk that ran along the main beach and found a beautiful plaza with thousands of people milling about, enjoying the cafes and restaurants. As we stood appreciating how the plaza, the very heart of Kolobrzeg, would be the perfect place for our Festival of India, two policemen



approached us and asked what we were doing. When we told them we were thinking about doing our festival program on the plaza, they laughed. One of them said, “You’ll never get permission to do a festival here. Stop dreaming and move on.”

In 1995, when we started doing big outdoor festivals along the coast, the authorities in Kolobrzeg gave us a small outdoor amphitheater, far from the beach area and the tourists. The next year they refused to give us any facility at all. Last year they gave us an abandoned parking lot. Each summer on *harināma* we’d pass through that plaza on the boardwalk and I would think, “This is the place I want.” Then I would remember the policeman’s words: “Stop dreaming and move on.”

This year, however, Kṛṣṇa had a different plan for Kolobrzeg. While traveling on the coast organizing the summer festivals, Nandinī and Rādhā Sakhī Vṛndā had persuaded the newly elected Deputy Mayor of Kolobrzeg to allow us to do the festival on the plaza twice in July, and to provide us with all necessary facilities. When Nandinī phoned me from his office and told me the incredible news, I couldn’t believe my ears. My dream had finally come true. I took it as a small miracle.

Last week, a gentleman who has recently taken an interest in Kṛṣṇa consciousness and is reading my diary wrote to say that he’s amazed how our festival tour is always full of “miraculous events.” He humbly inquired how this was possible, because nothing noteworthy had ever happened to him. I wrote back that if he remains faithful to the process of Kṛṣṇa consciousness, many amazing things would unfold before his eyes, especially if he shares the process with others. I ended my letter by quoting a pious scientist: “There are two ways to live your life. One is as though nothing is a miracle. The other is as though everything is a miracle.” (Albert Einstein)

We held the first of the two festivals in Kolobrzeg on July 1, the beginning of the summer holidays. Early in the morning, as thousands of cars poured into the city for vacation, we were busy setting up our festival on the plaza. One of the devotees and I were actually on the plaza at 5:00 A.M., well before anyone else had arrived—even our own festival devotees! We wanted to make sure that nothing went wrong. As we stood there in the dark, protecting our spot, we were startled when we saw two big trucks approach the plaza. The deputy mayor had warned us that beer companies often set up on the plaza at night and sell beer to people in the morning before being removed by the police. As the trucks came closer we saw them more clearly and laughed at ourselves. They were only garbage trucks coming to collect the bins on the square. “In the night, imagining some fear, How easy is a bush suppos’d a bear!” (*A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, William Shakespeare)

By mid-morning, our large stage was up and our twenty colorful tents spread



throughout the square and on the nearby sand. As thousands of people arrived at the beach, they were pleasantly surprised by the exotic array of culture displayed, and began to browse through the shops and visiting the restaurant. The stage program was scheduled for 4:00 P.M., and as the *harināma* party went out to chant and distribute invitations along the 2km beach, I simply couldn't pull myself away from my spot on the plaza. I had waited years for this opportunity and wanted to ensure that everything went smoothly. Throughout the day people came and inquired about the program. By 4:00 P.M. the plaza was packed. Many of the people in attendance had left the beach early and gone home to change in time for the festival.

I sat riveted, watching each and every soul as they came on to the plaza to receive Lord Caitanya's mercy. My bliss knew no bounds when one man, not noticing me sitting with another devotee, passed, and seeing the grand festival stopped and exclaimed, "So the Hare Kṛṣṇas finally made it big time!"

When the opening dance began, the crowd surged forward to see the twelve young Indian dancers from South Africa. Dressed in colorful outfits, they mesmerized their audience with their beautiful performance. They received long applause as they left the stage.

As I walked around the festival grounds making sure that everything was going well, a mother and her teenage daughter approached me. I felt uncomfortable as the young girl stared at me as if I were a demigod. She said, "Mahārāja, do you remember me?"

"I'm sorry, no, but I hope you'll understand; I meet so many people every day."

With my reply, she became upset and turned to her mother, who said, "This is my daughter, Premānandī. She came to your festival ten years ago when she was nine, and you told her friends and her stories about Kṛṣṇa. When they asked for spiritual names, you gave my daughter the name Premānandī, which she has called herself since. She's been chanting Hare Kṛṣṇa every day since she met you, and in the past two years has read all the books of your movement. She owes her good fortune to you and was hoping so much you would remember her."

"After hearing what you have told me, there's no way I can forget you now. Let's go to the restaurant and talk some more about Kṛṣṇa."

As the afternoon went on, I kept my eye on the program, knowing that at such big events with so many people attending, anything can go wrong at any moment. When things go well at our festivals, most of our devotees relax, but I often remember Napoleon's words after returning to France from his invasion of Russia. Alone on a dog sled, his army defeated, he said: "From the sublime to the ridiculous in one moment."

A small incident did happen, but by Kṛṣṇa's mercy nothing came of it. As



it was getting dark, I went behind the stage to check on the generator that was powering our sound system. I went behind the stage quickly, and my bodyguard, Vaikuṇṭhapati dāsa, didn't see me go. As I was alone checking the controls, I noticed a large man watching me. As I saw that he was smiling, I didn't think anything of it, but as minutes went by and he didn't move, I became uneasy and turned around. No longer smiling but looking grim, he walked up to me and said in slow English, "You're American, aren't you?"

Becoming suspicious, I stepped back without replying.

"We know who you are. You're the guru, and you have come to steal our children. You're a very bad man and we will kill you."

Stepping even further back, I quickly checked to see if he was carrying a weapon. He made a gesture like a rope being tied around his neck and said, "And when we get you, we will hang you by the neck until you are dead!"

Unknown to either of us, my servant, Dhruva dāsa, was only meters away filming the incident from the back of the stage. Seeing what was happening he managed to alert Vaikuṇṭhapati while continuing to operate the camera. When the man suddenly looked around and saw Dhruva filming and Vaikuṇṭhapati coming around the corner, he ran away.

"Who was he, Mahārāja?" Vaikuṇṭhapati said.

"I'm not sure," I said, "but he threatened to kill me."

"What should we do?" Vaikuṇṭhapati was concerned.

"What *can* we do?" I asked. Looking out at the crowd, I continued, "There are many people who love us here and some who hate us. Sometimes it's hard to know who's who. We have to depend on Kṛṣṇa. *rakhe kṛṣṇa mare ke / mare kṛṣṇa rakhe ke*: 'If Lord Kṛṣṇa protects a person, who can kill him? And if Kṛṣṇa desires to kill someone, who can protect him?'"

Later that evening, when Dhruva replayed the video, the man's threats to me were audible. I told Dhruva to keep the tape as possible evidence should the man ever try to make good his threat. I suppose if that happened, this diary would come to its natural conclusion—the final chapter an epitaph written by a loving disciple or well-wishing friend.

Later in the evening, I led the last *kīrtana* on stage with forty devotees just before Śrī Prahlāda and his Village of Peace band appeared. It's always my favorite moment of the festival, as it's the time that the crowd is usually at its biggest. I sometimes tell the sound technician to turn the volume up that so the holy name will penetrate the hearts of all the fortunate souls before the stage, and before we begin I always mention to the children that I will give my flower garland to the child who dances the nicest during the *kīrtana*. Each time this inspires a large group of children to dance excitedly in front of the stage to compete for the garland. That evening, there must have been more than fifty children dancing, some of them chanting too. As the *kīrtana* went on, they



would look up at me with pleading smiles, begging for the garland.

Because the crowd was so large, I kept the *kīrtana* going for forty-five minutes. When it finished, all the children rushed forward, hoping to be the one to receive the garland. I had noticed a number of enthusiastic kids, but one 14-year-old boy in particular caught my attention. He was mentally retarded, apparently having Down's syndrome. Actually, I had been watching him throughout the festival. He was always in front of the stage and he appeared to be enjoying everything, especially the chanting and dancing. Because of his mental handicap, the other children shied away from him, but this did not seem to deter him from enjoying Lord Caitanya's mercy. Therefore, I chose him to receive the garland on stage.

When he first appeared, a hush came over the audience, but he was so thrilled he could hardly contain himself. He waved to the crowd, and the crowd gave him a huge round of applause. When he blew them kisses, the applause increased. As I thanked him publicly for his enthusiasm, his chest swelled, and when I gave him the garland, he beamed. As he started to leave, I put out my hand to thank him and he gave me a big hug. Looking toward the audience, I could see people crying. Afterwards, many people approached me and thanked me for encouraging the boy. One man said, "I used to think you people were a dangerous sect, but the kindness you showed that retarded boy convinced me otherwise."

Śrīla Prabhupāda, I pray that you will forever engage me in this service of helping you deliver the fallen conditioned souls. I cannot imagine life without these festivals of love and bliss. Should the festivals ever stop, my life will cease with them, for life without experiencing and sharing the mercy of Lord Caitanya would not be worth living. Having experienced the association of Lord Caitanya through these festivals, separation from Him would be unbearable.

The fortunate town of Navadvīp remains on the earth. The seashore at Jagannātha Puri remains. The holy names of Lord Kṛṣṇa remain. But, alas! Alas! I do not see anywhere the same kind of festival of pure love for Lord Hari as before. O Lord Caitanya, O Ocean of mercy, will I ever see Your transcendental glory again?

—Śrī Caitanya-candrāmṛta, Text 140

Chapter Forty-Three

CRY FOR HELP UNHEARD

• JULY 11-22, 2001 •

MIEDZYZDROJE IS ANOTHER POPULAR RESORT on the coast that attracts the Polish elite. In particular, it is the favorite place for Polish filmmakers and movie stars, whose bronze handprints decorate the most prestigious part of the boardwalk along the main beach. Unfortunately, it is another of the places where certain members of the town council don't like us. When Nandinī and Rādhā Sakhī Vṛndā approached them last winter to reserve a spot for our summer festival, they were given the cold shoulder, especially by the head of the Cultural Affairs Department. However, by Kṛṣṇa's mercy, the owner of a large amphitheater on the boardwalk became sympathetic to them and gave us permission to use his place, which we did two weeks ago. After a couple of days of advertising with *harināma*, we managed to fill the two thousand-seat amphitheater to capacity and hold a wonderful program.

Because every two weeks a new crowd of tourists replaces the previous crowd, we decided to try to get permission to hold another program in Miedzyzdroje. Fearing the town council would reject us, and knowing that the amphitheater was booked for the rest of the summer, Nandinī approached the manager of a large hotel to request the use of the hotel's parking lot off another part of the boardwalk. It turned out that he had been to the previous festival and had enjoyed it very much. He immediately agreed to our proposal. As soon as word reached the council, however, he received a telephone call forbidding



him to allow us to use the space. “Parking lots are for cars. They are not places where sects can propagate their doctrines,” the councilors said.

Kṛṣṇa decided to intervene. Our friend with the amphitheater called to tell us that due to a cancellation, he could allow us to use the amphitheater for two days later in the week. Accepting “mercy which comes of its own accord,” we immediately signed the contract. When the town council heard about our securing the amphitheater, they called to tell us that permission to hold *harināma* would be withheld. *Harināma* is method of advertising our festivals, so this caused a dilemma. Hearing of our dilemma and taking our side, we took the advice of the man who ran the parking lot: “Call the chief of the City Guards, a special police force that patrols the streets. Don’t tell them you’re from Hare Kṛṣṇa, just say you want to advertise the Festival of India.”

When Nandinī called the chief and introduced herself as representing the Festival of India, he replied, “Oh, you’re from Hare Kṛṣṇa! I know you are an authentic religion. I was at your last festival and I appreciate you people very much. How can I help you?”

Nandinī explained that we wanted to advertise our festival, but that the council (and one woman in particular) would not grant permission. The chief became furious. He asked Nandinī to hold the line. By Kṛṣṇa’s arrangement he happened to be at the Town Hall, so he walked straight upstairs to the office of the woman opposing the *harināma*. Bursting in, he chastised her loudly—Nandinī could hear all this while she waited on the other end of the phone—demanding how this woman could possibly want to stop us. “Do you know how much our citizens enjoy their festivals? They’re bringing real culture to our town! You may order that they can’t sing in the streets, but my men will not take any steps to stop them.” With that, he stormed out of her office, slamming the door behind him.

The next day I sent out an especially large *harināma* party on the streets of Miedzydroje, complete with drums, *karatālas*, accordion, trumpets, and a saxophone. But by far, the most popular member on the *harināma* team was Raju, the gigantic ox who pulls our *padayatra* procession cart through the streets each day, advertising our festival in his own unique way. Peaceful and accommodating, Raju is the talk of the town wherever we go. Leaving his cart behind, we even take him on the beach when we go on *harināma* there. It is quite a sight—Raju bedecked with beautiful cloth and ornaments leading seventy-five chanting, dancing devotees down the crowded beaches. Every 50m we stop and give a short talk, inviting people to the festival. People always crowd around us to hear the chanting and hear our talk, but Raju always steals the show as he poses peacefully for unlimited photographs with the children.

It rained so heavily on the first day of the Miedzydroje festival that I almost cancelled it, but when people arrived carrying umbrellas, I told Vara-nāyaka



to let them in. I told him to let the attendees know that I had been about to cancel, but their show of umbrellas convinced me otherwise. Within minutes the amphitheater was packed with seven hundred umbrellas, all tilted slightly upwards so that the people underneath could see the show taking place on stage. The people stayed for five hours in the rain, watching with pleasure each item of the stage program.

On the second day in Miedzyzdroje, the skies cleared and we had one of the best programs of the tour. But it was marred by an incident (known only to me) caused by an impurity in my heart. An older gentleman approached me at the beginning of the festival, just as I was making the final preparations for the stage program. As I was busily writing the schedule on my clipboard, he said, "I'm a homeless person."

Not wanting to be distracted from my work, I looked up at him briefly and, seeing his disheveled clothes and unshaven face, concluded that he must be a down-and-out looking for a meal. I pointed in the direction where the devotees were just finishing their *prasādam* and said, "If you're hungry, you can eat over there."

"That's not why I've approached you. I know my appearance is not good, but believe me when I say I'm an educated man. It's just that fate has not treated me well."

Not paying much attention because our stage show was about to begin, I said without looking up this time, "I'm sorry. I hope things work out for you."

He paused for a moment, then said, "I've been to three of your festivals. I walk from town to town to get to them. My main attraction is your lectures. I've never heard anyone speak like you before."

I was barely listening as I called out orders to various devotees during the final seconds before the first *bhajana*. Devotees were late and I was becoming upset, as a large crowd stood waiting for the festival to open. When I looked up again, the man had a gentle smile on his face. He said, "Please help me to correct my ways and approach God. You're a learned man and I know you can help me. Please, sir, I beg you."

The stage was only half full of devotees, and I was becoming impatient. I turned around and called out to Vara-nāyaka to get the *mṛdāṅga* player and the flute player onstage in sixty seconds. As the two last devotees reached the stage and the *bhajana* began, I relaxed a little. Then the man's words hit me. I realized he was genuinely calling out for help and that I was ignoring him. I whirled around, but he was gone.

I felt terrible! I sat on one of the benches and chastised myself for my insensitivity. It takes the conditioned soul millions of lifetimes to call out to the Lord for help. Like all preachers in Kṛṣṇa consciousness, I am supposed to be the Lord's representative. How could I have acted so callously? I felt fallen



and useless, having ignored that man's genuine plea for Kṛṣṇa's mercy. As I remembered his words, I thought of Śrīla Rūpa Goswami's prayer to the Lord in the same mood of appealing for mercy:

*vivṛta vividhā bādhe bhrānti vegād agādhe
balavatī bhava pure majjato me vidure
aśaraṇa gaṇa bandho ha kṛpā kaumudindo
sakṛd akṛta vilambam dehi hastāvalambam*

I am drowning in the painful, fathomless whirlpool of repeated birth and death. O Lord, O friend of the shelterless, O effulgent moon of mercy, please, just this one time, quickly extend Your hand to save me!

--Padyāvalī, Text 61

I spent the next two hours looking for that gentleman. I even neglected my duties at the festival, and several times devotees came to me confused about the schedule. But I had to find him and rectify my offense. I searched our tents and displays. I carefully looked at the people sitting on benches. I even walked outside the amphitheater and checked the cafes and shops in the area. I searched the crowds, but I did not find that man anywhere—that man whose fate I could have changed if I had only been being more attentive to my real duty.

O Śrīla Prabhupāda, please forgive me. I failed as your representative. To not show compassion to the fallen conditioned souls at that rarest of moments, when after millions of years they call out for Kṛṣṇa's mercy, is the greatest sin. Please be merciful and give me the chance to rectify myself by meeting that *jīva* again, help him “correct his ways,” and approach the Lord. I beg you to help me imbibe the real mood of *sannyāsa* so that I will never again make the mistake of ignoring such a plea. Please help me to understand my duty. In the words of Śrīla Bhaktivinoda Ṭhākura, “When will my compassion for all fallen souls manifest and with a lowly heart I will go out to preach the divine command?” (*Śaraṇāgati*)

Chapter Forty-Four

FESTIVALS IGNITE

BALTIC RESORTS

• JULY 23-AUGUST 3, 2001 •

THE SUMMER IS FLYING BY as we are literally doing a festival every day. Pobierowo, Mrzezyno, Mielno and many other towns come and go, and in my mind's eye I am left with only an impression of an ocean of people before our stage in each place we visit. All 160 devotees on the tour are working hard, and no one has a spare moment. In class the other day I thanked the devotees for their endeavor, teamwork, and cooperation. I explained that this was the mood the devotees had when Śrīla Prabhupāda was present many years ago. We all worked hard to help establish the *saṅkīrtana* movement. By such endeavor, we can achieve Śrīla Prabhupāda's mercy and go back to Godhead in this lifetime, as demonstrated by my dear Godbrother, Jayānanda Prabhu. Śrīla Prabhupāda so much appreciated Jayānanda's hard work and dedicated service that in a posthumous letter to him he wrote, "As you were hearing *Kṛṣṇa-kīrtana*, I am sure that you were directly promoted to *Kṛṣṇa-loka*."

In my attempt to encourage these devotees to continue working hard for the pleasure of the spiritual master, I recounted Śrīla Prabhupāda's arrival address in Paris in 1973. We had been working hard to prepare for his arrival, and taking note of that as he surveyed the new decorations in the temple room he said, "I thank you so much for all the inconvenience you have undergone on my behalf." He then paused a moment and added, "Actually, it is not inconvenience—it is all mercy." I understood his words to mean that it was



mercy to be intensely engaged in Kṛṣṇa's service, which quickly purifies our hearts and helps us to awaken our love for the Lord.

By far the best of all the summer festivals was the second festival we held in Kolobrzeg. After our first festival there several weeks earlier, the deputy mayor went out of his way to arrange everything for another one. He gave us the choicest spot on the boardwalk, a small park near a well-known lighthouse, and he personally contacted all the important media people so they would advertise the festival.

With the summer at its peak, the Kolobrzeg beach was packed with people, and during our *harināmas* we led Raju carefully through the crowds on the sand. At one point, a group of five lifeguards approached us and said we had to remove Raju from the beach because he posed a health hazard. I asked what they meant. One of them replied, "He'll relieve himself on the beach." When I told them we had a solution to that problem, he looked at me incredulously and said, "What possible solution could you have to an ox passing dung on our beach?"

As if on cue, Raju raised his tail before everyone and began to answer nature's call. Simultaneously, Bhakta Swavek, a twelve-year-old boy who accompanies Raju on the *padayatras* team, lunged forward with a bucket and caught everything before it hit the ground. As the lifeguards stood, their mouths open, I said, "Actions speak louder than words," and we happily continued down the beach, Raju leading the procession.

Just before we finished the *harināma* that afternoon, we passed a man fishing off a small pier on the beach. Several devotee children walked up to him, curious to see what he was doing. Suddenly he caught a fish and began to reel it in. With a smile he lifted the fish out of the water and placed it by his side while he looked for his knife. Ten-year-old Rasa Lilā dāsī quickly ran forward, and in a moment had taken the hook out of the fish's mouth. She lifted the fish, ready to throw it back into the water. Seeing his catch about to be liberated, the man lunged forward to grab the fish, screaming, "What are you doing?!"

Rasa Lilā deftly stepped to the side and threw the fish back into the sea. Reproaching her, the man said, "Do you know what you have done?"

"Yes, sir. I saved the fish from dying and you from going to hell."

The man was speechless as the children ran to catch up with the *harināma*.

The media aired a television program about the previous festival in Kolobrzeg four times. The show concluded with an advertisement for the next festival in Kolobrzeg and a mention of the wedding we were planning. As a result, wherever we went in Kolobrzeg people approached us to ask about the wedding. Excited about the festival, the deputy mayor called us to his office on two occasions, giving advice on how to better promote it. He asked for 50,000



invitations to be distributed by the crews of the excursion boats that tour Kolobrzeg harbor, and ordered a gigantic banner to fly from the lighthouse that read, “Festival of India—Kolobrzeg, July 23.”

At the end of the second meeting he revealed his plan to have us base our festival program in his city. He said, “You people are bringing culture and life to our city. I can see that year after year, although you are basically presenting the same things—singing, dancing, and food—that no one tires of your festivals. In fact, they become bigger each year. I don’t know what it is about your programs, but they seem charmed! As a result, I want to donate a building or property to you from which you can conduct your activities.”

For me this was a gift from heaven, but we didn’t have time to work out the details for such an ambitious idea at that moment. Instead, we told him we would consider his proposal and meet again on August 18. He told us to “come prepared. I want to introduce this idea to the town council before autumn.”

It rained for days before the festival, but on the morning we were to open our gates, the sky cleared and the sun came out. We moved our trucks to the festival site at 2:00 A.M., as it would be impossible to approach the festival site by truck later in the morning due to the heavy summer traffic. We worked all day to set up the site, finishing only an hour before the festival was due to open. Although there has never been a festival in eleven years to which people haven’t come, (and in large numbers), I’m always anxious about how many will attend. As the devotees made the final stage preparations, I sat at the entrance to the festival with my eyes riveted on the small path that entered the park. Then I relaxed as the first people began to arrive. I imagined I was offering each new arrival to Śrīla Prabhupāda’s lotus feet. Soon the trickle of guests turned into a steady flow, and within half an hour we were inundated by thousands of guests. Quickly offering the hordes to Śrīla Prabhupāda, I hurried back to my services.

My dear Śrīla Prabhupāda, may you be pleased with such offerings to your lotus feet! My only request is that you allow me to swim in this nectarean ocean of Śrī Kṛṣṇa-*saṅkīrtana* life after life until your mission in this material world is fulfilled.

O my most merciful Lord Caitanya, may the nectarean Ganges water of your transcendental activities flow on the surface of my desertlike tongue. Beautifying these waters are the lotus flowers of singing, dancing and the loud chanting of Lord Kṛṣṇa’s holy names, which are the pleasure abodes of unalloyed devotees. Such devotees are compared to swans, ducks and bees, and the river’s flowing produces a melodious sound that gladdens their ears.

--Cc. *Adi* 2.2



By 5:00 P.M. the festival site was so packed that it was difficult to walk through the grounds. Those who had come early were obliged to stand exactly where they had situated themselves at the beginning of the program. The same local television crew that had covered the previous Kolobrzeg festival arrived, and with great difficulty, made their way through the crowd to find Nandini and Rādhā Sakhī Vṛndā for an interview. Unable to find them, they inquired from devotees if there was someone else they could meet. Suddenly, to their delight, they saw the deputy mayor sitting among the crowd, laughing as he watched the puppet show on the main stage. They approached him and he agreed to be interviewed.

Their first question was about his impression of the Festival of India and what contribution it made to the summer season in Kolobrzeg. With a smile on his face, he described how Kolobrzeg is quickly becoming recognized as a town with cultural ties to many places in the world. The Festival of India, which brings so much happiness to the town, was a demonstration of this fact. Then to the amazement of the devotees watching the interview, he revealed his plans to facilitate a base for the Festival of India in the town. “We’re looking for a building for them where they can continue with their activities throughout the year. In the future, we may even give them land where they can begin a community to demonstrate their culture in a practical way.”

Throughout the festival, people continuously approached me to sign books they had bought at the bookshop. One man came forward proudly with a copy of *Bhagavad-gītā*. He said that he had been coming to our festivals every year, and each year he purchases one book. “After eleven years, I am finally ready for *Bhagavad-gītā*.”

I wrote in his book, in English, “May the Supreme Lord Śrī Kṛṣṇa guide you step by step back to the spiritual world, where all walking is dancing, all talking is singing, and there’s a festival every day.”

He turned to Rasamayi dāsī and, handing her a pen, asked her to translate my dedication into Polish on the next page. He then had me sign it again!

Soon after my lecture on stage, another man approached me with a huge pile of books. He smiled and said, “It was very convincing what you said. Therefore, I have bought every single book you have. My request is that you write a dedication and sign each one.”

I gladly sat with him and spent an hour fulfilling his request. Later, when I was in the Questions and Answers tent, a lady came in and Pracarānanda Prabhu, the speaker, asked her if she had any specific questions. She replied, “Yes, I do. I bought a *Bhagavad-gītā* at the last festival in Kolobrzeg, and after reading it wrote down my questions. Do you have time to answer all of them?”

“Yes, of course,” Pracarānanda replied. “How many questions do you



have?”

She reached into her purse and pulled out twenty typed pages stapled together. To his astonishment she announced, “I have sixty-two questions.”

When I performed *kīrtana* with devotees onstage, hundreds of children danced in front, all veterans from the last festival here. They knew that whoever danced the best during the *kīrtana* would be called to the stage to be awarded my large flower garland. During the *kīrtana* I noticed one young girl, her face painted with *gopī* dots and wearing a sari from our Spiritual Fashions booth, dancing with great enthusiasm. She spun and twirled as she chanted the holy name. Every so often she would look up at me and smiled. My heart went out to her, and at the end of the *kīrtana* I chose her to come on stage. Unlike other children who are often nervous when coming on stage before many thousands of people, this girl was all smiles and waves. Her parents were thrilled and stood before the stage, camera in hand, ready to film her receiving the garland. I then ran through the typical questions that I ask children on stage. Handing her a second microphone I asked: “What is your name?”

“Agneiszka.”

“How old are you?”

“I’m nine years old.”

“Very nice. And have you ever been to one of our festivals?”

“Oh yes. Five years ago, when I was four years old—here in Kolobrzeg.”

“Very good. And what did you like the most about that festival?”

“I liked the big garland you gave me on stage for being the best dancer!”

As I stood dumbfounded by the double mercy she had received, the crowd roared its approval and applauded loudly as I placed the garland around her neck. As she left the stage and joined her parents, the audience continued applauding her as if she had won an Olympic medal. Actually, her dancing was greater than any Olympic champion, for those few minutes she was leaping and twirling in the *saṅkīrtana* party of Lord Caitanya Mahāprabhu guaranteed her future liberation and love of God.

Now that wonderfully powerful Lord Caitanya has descended to this world, the materialists, who have fallen into the raging river of fruitive deeds, have been rescued and situated on firm ground. Even great boulders have melted and even those whose hearts were fixed in nondevotional yoga are dancing in love of Kṛṣṇa.

--Śrī Caitanya-candrāmṛta, Text 112

The Vedic wedding of Rāja Rāma dāsa, from the Czech Republic, and his Russian wife, Bhumi dāsī, performed onstage captured everyone’s hearts. The crowd stood transfixed as I carefully explained each part of the marriage



ceremony. The audience became sober when I emphasized the importance of marriage in attaining life's ultimate goal, love of God, and they all laughed when I tied the knot of the couple's *cadar* and sari tighter and said, "And in this way there is no possibility of divorce in Vedic culture."

People were mesmerized by the fire *yajña* and Vedic mantras, and some of them repeated the mantras along with the devotees in response to the head priest's recitations. Word had spread throughout the town to bring fruit and flowers for the newlyweds, and when the ceremony finished and Rāja Rāma and Bhumi descended from the stage, they were inundated with fields of flowers and orchards of fruit.

The next day we took all the devotees to a forest park for a break. The Woodstock Festival is just around the corner, and we need to be in good shape for it. It will be the greatest preaching opportunity our festival program has ever had. We calculated that since May, more than two hundred thousand people have come through our festival gates. Woodstock attracts four hundred thousand young people at least. Woodstock's organizers have again given us a large piece of land not far from the main stage for our Kṛṣṇa's Village of Peace tent. There we will erect the largest tent ever put up on Polish soil. Measuring 100m by 32m, it can accommodate more than fifteen thousand people. Now I'm wondering whether it will be big enough. Riding the crest of so many successful festivals this summer, it seems to me that Lord Caitanya's mercy has no limitations. With my own eyes I have seen mayors preach the glories of *saṅkīrtana*, innocent children dance in ecstasy, and dumb oxen engage in the Lord's service. What good fortune awaits the people at Woodstock?

Some, headed by Uddhava, have attained the Lord's service, others have achieved a glorious position like that of Śrīdama, others have become lotus-eyed girls in Vraja and other very fortunate and intelligent persons have attained the lotus feet of Śrī Rādhā. By the mercy of Śrī Caitanya Mahāprabhu what good fortune has this world not attained?

--Śrī Caitanya-candrāmṛta, Text 123

Chapter Forty-Five

VILLAGE OF PEACE RULES

• AUGUST 2-15, 2001 •



ON AUGUST 2, a disciple (Jayatām dāsa) and I left our festival tour on the coast and headed south toward the town of Zary, the site of the Polish Woodstock Festival. I knew the road to Zary well. We have participated in four other Woodstocks. It was hard to leave our summer tour, but I was eager to get to Zary to begin preparations for our involvement there. Woodstock is scheduled for August 10-11.

Woodstock organizer Jurek Owsiak puts on the event every year in appreciation of the many young people who help him raise money for Poland's underprivileged children. By means of a telethon each January, he raises more than \$7,000,000 a year. Apart from the small salary he receives, the entire amount is spent on disabled children. As a result the people of Poland love and respect him. Because the Catholic Church also prides itself on humanitarian work, they are envious toward him, which they manifest by placing strict government controls over the festival. Everyone knows that the controls are ultimately meant to suppress the festival, and last year the State Governor actually succeeded in canceling the event. As a result, Jurek and his staff were more determined than ever to put it on this year. However, it won't be easy. Our participation was one of the main complaints the Church had about the event. Jurek told me a few weeks ago: "Their main opposition to the Woodstock Festival is that Hare Kṛṣṇa will be there. But I can promise you, I wouldn't do this festival without you."



Jurek has told me on numerous occasions that he wants us at Woodstock to share our philosophy and way of life with the kids. He also wants us to keep the kids engaged and peaceful. He doesn't want violence. In fact, the theme of Woodstock is always "No Violence—No Drugs." In line with that mood we set up our Kṛṣṇa's Village of Peace tent each year on a hectare of land not far from the main stage. This year I ordered several large tents for our village. It would take the tent company five days to erect them, with large cranes to lift them into place and a team of thirty-five men working around the clock. I wanted to be the first person at the Woodstock field to see that the task went efficiently.

Arriving on the evening of August 3, I didn't see a single soul present on the vast expanse of land designated for the festival. I saw only a sea of grass blowing in the wind. I stood on a small ridge overlooking the site and surveyed the area carefully. Jurek had shown me on a map where everything would be located, and I visualized everything in perspective to our own location. Kṛṣṇa had favored us, and I saw that our situation couldn't be better: we were 75m from the main stage and only 60m from the principal festival entrance. My heart pounded in anticipation of the huge *yajña* about to take place. Of course, it wouldn't be a *yajña* as in days of yore, with purified *brāhmaṇas* chanting mantras around a sacred fire while kings in royal dress and pious men looked on. Rather, it would consist of the loud chanting of Kṛṣṇa's holy names in an assembly of wild, intoxicated youth, and mass distribution of *prasādam* to multitudes of people ignorant about the existence of the soul. Nevertheless, the great *yajña* on the plains of Zary would be no less significant and purifying than those performed in ancient times.

*kṛte yad dhyāyato viṣṇum
tretāyām yajato makhaiḥ
dvāpare paricaryāyām
kalau tad dhari-kīrtanāt*

Whatever result was obtained in Satya-yuga by meditating on Viṣṇu, in Treta-yuga by performing sacrifices and in Dvapara-yuga by serving the Lord's lotus feet can be obtained in Kali-yuga simply by chanting the Hare Kṛṣṇa *mahā-mantra*.

--Bhāg. 12.3.52

Just before leaving the ridge, I noticed a single tractor enter the field and turn on its lights as dusk descended on the scene. It was beginning the arduous job of cutting the huge field's grass, a task that no doubt would take days. The tractor was starting work on the spot our village would be located, so I drove onto the field to meet the driver. As I approached, the tractor stopped and a



man who was obviously eager to see me jumped out.

“Hare Kṛṣṇa,” he called out. “You’re back! The whole town of Zary is waiting for you.”

“Thank you,” I replied. “We’re happy to be here.”

“Woodstock wouldn’t be the same without you people,” he said. “But with all the controversy about Hare Kṛṣṇa coming again to the festival, they told me not to bother cutting the grass where you always set up your village. But I knew by God’s grace you’d come, so I thought I would start here first.” With that he got back into his tractor and continued his work.

Early the next morning, as I sat on the cut grass waiting for the trucks carrying our tents to arrive, I heard a loud rumbling sound on the western side of the field. To my surprise, I saw seven semi-trailer trucks and a bus moving across the field, each raising a cloud of dust as they approached our site. As I looked closer, I saw that they were carrying our tents and the team of workers that would put them up. Within an hour, the main team had begun construction on the large tent, and a smaller group of men had begun to erect twelve 20m by 10m tents. As the tents went up, I was surprised to see how large they really were. I had ordered them over the Internet and had no idea how they would appear once they were erected. I joked with Jayatam, “It will look more like Kṛṣṇa’s City of Peace than Kṛṣṇa’s Village of Peace.”

Apparently I wasn’t the only one who noticed their size. That afternoon an official car from Zary pulled up and a representative of the town council, designated to oversee the festival, approached me. He said, “Excuse me, sir. Who is a part of this festival? Are you a part of the Woodstock Festival, or is it a part of your event? These tents are too big!”

“Actually, sir, they’re too small for what we really want to do. They look so large only because nothing else is on the field. When the main stage is erected our village won’t look so large anymore.”

“I’m sorry,” he said, “but they are too large. You’ll have to move 50m back. That’s an order.”

Defending our precious position on the field, I continued to argue as to why we weren’t going to move. In the end, however, he simply repeated his instruction, “It’s an order.” That was that.

The men spent the rest of the day dismantling the tents they’d begun to erect, and the next morning we began setting them up 50m back. Although I was initially upset, days later when the festival was in progress, I realized that this was Kṛṣṇa’s plan. Our area was actually more secure than it would have been, and the extra 50m didn’t stop people from coming to our site. In fact, because we created such a peaceful atmosphere in our village, many kids told me that once they came, they never returned to the mayhem at the main stage.



Five days later, the tent company finished the construction. Many of the tents were over 10m high, and the Food Distribution tent stood out among the others with its huge banner reading: “Hare Kṛṣṇa Food for Peace.” Besides our main tent it would be the busiest of all the tents, as we planned to distribute *prasādam* for only a small donation to cover our costs. We had collected thirty-five tons of *bhoga*, including seven tons of vegetables, five tons of rice, three tons of semolina, two tons of sugar and two tons of butter. Eighty devotees would be cooking around the clock in three different local school kitchens to provide *prasādam* for the kids.

Just as we began to put up the decorations in the tents, I saw a police van approach. “Oh no, more problems!”

As the van got closer I sent a devotee out to greet the police. The van drove past him without acknowledging him. Stopping in front of me, I passed a tense moment. Then suddenly the door opened and a police officer leapt out with a smile on his face. Shaking my hand, he said, “Mahārāja, welcome back to Zary!”

I was taken aback, because police officers don’t usually approach one in such an amicable fashion, but I smiled and said, “Thank you, officer.”

“Your festival in Meilno on the coast this summer was great! My whole family enjoyed the stage program, and my three daughters especially liked the designs your ladies painted on their faces. They wouldn’t wash their faces for days! I thought your lecture was especially nice. Do you remember how we talked afterwards?”

“Um, of course I remember. It’s so nice to meet you here in Zary. Where will you be stationed during the festival? I know security will be tight.”

“I won’t be working during the festival,” he said. “I’ve taken three days off so my family and I can spend the whole time with all of you here in Kṛṣṇa’s Village of Peace.”

Later that day, the devotees from our regular festival program arrived from the coast, and by the time Woodstock began, we numbered over four hundred devotees, many of us from different parts of the world. Special guests from America like Candramauli Mahārāja, Dharmātma Prabhu and his wife, Divyapriya dāsī, and Tejiyas Prabhu joined our ranks for the special event in the annals of Lord Caitanya’s *saṅkīrtana* movement.

Traditionally, our village opens one day before Woodstock officially begins, so on August 9, as tens of thousands of young people converged on the Woodstock site and began setting up their tents on the field, we began our cultural stage show in our large tent. As nothing else was happening on the field, we drew an enormous crowd, and by the time our three bands began to play that evening, our tent was filled to capacity. Fifteen thousand people attended the show, most of them intoxicated and some who had not bathed in



days. Śrī Prahlāda's band, Village of Peace, played first. Then, just as Spain's Undrop was about to play, Jurek Owsiak arrived and officially opened Kṛṣṇa's Village of Peace. When the kids saw him on our stage, they went mad and danced wildly throughout Undrop's set. Finally, the American band Shelter performed and brought the house down. Outside the main tent, thousands of people were swarming through our site on a scale I had never seen before. The Food Distribution tent alone handed out fifteen thousand plates of *prasādam*.

The next day, the first official day of Woodstock, Jurek invited a few of us to the main stage to open the festival, along with dignitaries such as the Mayor of Zary, the local police, firefighters and well-known musicians. Two hundred thousand young people stood before the stage. After Jurek spoke to them and officially opened the festival, he handed me the microphone and said, "Greet them!"

As I stepped forward, I laughed, remembering that when I first joined the Kṛṣṇa consciousness movement thirty-one years ago, I was nervous to speak before a group of ten devotees. Now here I was about to address two hundred thousand young people who would be listening to my every word. I thought, "Make it short, sweet, and to the point."

"Hare Kṛṣṇa!" I began. "Woodstock is a great opportunity for all of us to come together and have a good time. But let us do so according to the theme this great festival represents: 'No Violence—No Drugs.' In Kṛṣṇa's Village of Peace, just to the left of this stage, there will be no violence, because as devotees of Kṛṣṇa we're taught to respect each person as part and parcel of God. Therefore, we love you all."

At that, a roar of approval went up from the audience.

I continued, "And we don't use drugs in Kṛṣṇa's village, because we're happy chanting Hare Kṛṣṇa and eating delicious vegetarian food offered to the Lord. When you have something nice and you have a lot of it, you want to share it with others. Please visit us often during the next two days. We have enough food to feed eighty thousand people over the next forty-eight hours."

Again the crowd applauded, as many chanted in unison, "Hare Kṛṣṇa! Hare Kṛṣṇa! Hare Kṛṣṇa!"

As I stepped back, Jurek came forward and embraced me, confirming in the minds of those hundreds of thousands of youths that Hare Kṛṣṇas were once again playing an important part in Poland's biggest event of the year.

Throughout the day our village continued to be the place where young people found relief from chaos. At any time, hundreds of kids could be seen relaxing on the grass at our site, discussing with devotees or simply reading books they had bought in our Book tent. Rāmabhadra Prabhu and his team made it a point to keep our festival site always clean, with no litter, in contrast to the rest of the festival, which quickly became an ocean of garbage. As the



evening wore on, Zary's local people also began to come to our village, making the area even more crowded. Our security team estimated that up to twenty thousand people were walking around our village at any one time, enjoying a variety of spiritual activities. While that gave me pleasure, it was naturally a cause of concern to their team of sixty men who were keeping a watchful eye on everyone.

At 8:00 P.M. the cultural side of our stage show (comprising *bhajan*s, theater, discourses, and the dazzling performances of our twenty Indian dancers from South Africa) ended, and the numbers in the crowd swelled in anticipation of the three bands that would play on our stage. Word had spread quickly that Shelter was at Woodstock, and when the lead singer, Raghunātha dāsa, began his set, the crowd went wild. Fortunately, we had put up a large steel barricade in front of the stage to keep the crowd under control, but that didn't stop Raghunātha at one point from diving into the audience and being carried away on their outstretched arms. When they brought him back and lifted him over the barricade to finish his song, the security grabbed him and placed him back onstage.

We finished our program at 1:30 A.M., and all the devotees boarded our buses to return to our base for a few hours of sleep. Just as Śrī Prahlāda and I were about to fall asleep, we received a report that we had distributed twenty-six thousand plates of *prasādam*. Exhausted from weeks of work and hardly able to acknowledge the good news, Śrī Prahlāda fell asleep with a smile on his face. What news could give greater joy to the devotees than the fact that tens of thousands of Kali-yuga souls had received the causeless mercy of Lord Caitanya Mahāprabhu?

I pray that the splendid moonlight of Lord Caitanyacandra, which violently uproots the darkness in the hearts of the entire world, which brings limitless tidal waves to the nectar ocean of pure love for Kṛṣṇa, and which cools the universe burning day and night in the threefold miseries of material existence, may shine in your hearts.

--Śrī Caitanya-candrāmṛta, Text 75

The next and final day of the festival was the best of all. Visitors packed every tent throughout the day. Even the face-painting tent was packed as thirty-five devotee ladies painted *gopī* dots on guests from 10:00 A.M. until 1:00 A.M. the next morning. Hundreds of kids sat and asked questions in the Questions and Answers tent, and at one point, Jayapātāka Swami made a surprise visit and stayed for several hours. The real guests of honor that day, however, were the large marble Deities of Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa we had brought from Warsaw. Ordered in 1994 for the Warsaw temple, Śrī Śrī Rādhā-Govinda



have been waiting in storage all these years for the temple to reach the proper standard for Them to be installed. Temple president Kaśi Miśra agreed that we could use Them at Woodstock to celebrate Kṛṣṇa Janmāṣṭamī with the kids. Thousands of spectators stood mesmerized as the devotees conducted a bathing ceremony and, after dressing the Deities, a full *ārati* on our stage. Hundreds of people joined in as the devotees threw rose petals during a *puṣpāñjali* ceremony. Kṛṣṇa's Village of Peace became even more sanctified as the Supreme Personality of Godhead appeared in His most merciful Deity form. Many kids said to me afterwards, "Now I understand who Kṛṣṇa is."

Given the prime spot that evening in the schedule of fifty-four bands on the main Woodstock stage, Shelter played to an estimated crowd of 320,000. Just before they began, a security guard approached me on the main stage with a message from the head of the entire Woodstock security force. The message read that the police had intercepted several telephone calls throughout the day indicating that a group of men, aligned with the Church, were planning to start a riot in the crowd during Shelter's performance. The police were taking the plot so seriously that every security man at the festival had been placed on "red alert" and police backup forces notified. As I looked to the far end of the festival grounds, I saw (unknown to the kids) police in riot gear. They had moved from their concealed positions in the adjoining forests to the festival's perimeter. I sent a message by cell phone to our own security men at Kṛṣṇa's Village of Peace to brace themselves for possible trouble, and instructed them that should anything happen, all devotees should gather on our own stage where our security could protect them. I then received another message from the security control center that the most likely place for the riot to begin would be Kṛṣṇa's Village of Peace. I wanted to go back to our village, but by that time the gates to the main stage were closed. Shelter's concert had just begun. Throughout their performance I kept my eyes fixed on our Village, clearly in view from the main stage. The only time I smiled was when Raghunātha dāsa paused after a song and said to the kids, "The next song is dedicated to Kṛṣṇa's Village of Peace. Hare Kṛṣṇa!"

When Shelter's concert finished at 1:30 A.M., the security men breathed a sigh of relief. There had been no trouble. I watched the riot police disappear silently back into the forests. At that point, Jurek approached me and said that Shelter was by far the best band at Woodstock. He invited them to return the next year.

Returning to our village, I found that all the devotees had returned to our base. I made a final check of all the tents before returning to the base myself. I was surprised to discover fifty-four pots of hot *prasādam* that had arrived an hour earlier from our kitchens. I managed to find four devotees (including Śānti Parāyaṇa dāsa from Australia) lingering at the festival site. Together we



opened the sides of the tent and continued to distribute *prasādam* throughout the night. In fact, we distributed *prasādam* until the last person left at 4:00 the next afternoon. That evening we calculated the number of plates distributed. Although it fell short of our goal, the figure of 73,230 plates nevertheless satisfied the hearts of all the devotees.

The next day, along with the crew from the tent company, the devotees began to dismantle our festival site. Nandinī and Rādhā Sakhī Vṛndā went off to thank the various people in Zary who had helped us in so many ways. They visited the police department, the fire department, the garbage department, and the health services, all of which had gone out of their way to make Kṛṣṇa's Village of Peace successful. Wherever they went, they were greeted with, "Hare Kṛṣṇa!" and "Haribol!"

The result of any *yajña* can be seen by the effect it produces. The effect of the constant chanting of Kṛṣṇa's holy name and the distribution of thousands of plates of *prasādam* during Woodstock was evident in the Mayor of Zary's departing words to us in his office. A member of the President of Poland's personal advisory board, and en route to becoming a member of Parliament in the forthcoming elections, he told me: "Thank you once again for coming to Woodstock. I'll soon be leaving here as mayor, but you can be certain that after all you've done for us in Zary, you'll have a real friend in the government in Warsaw. I look forward to helping you in the future."

As we drove out of Zary we passed the field where Woodstock was held. There was nothing left on the site. It looked much as it did when I had first arrived two weeks earlier. I thought, "I was the first to come here and I'm the last to leave. Everything went smoothly by the plan of the Lord."

Suddenly, a police car pulled up behind us and turned on its flashing lights. "Well, almost smoothly."

I pulled over and rolled down the window as a policeman approached our car. I tried to figure out what I might have done. Had I been speeding? The officer came to the window and, breaking into a grin said, "Can I have your address? I'd like to keep in touch with you. My wife and I would like to travel with the Hare Kṛṣṇa festival for a few weeks next summer. Do you allow police officers to join your festival tour?"

Feeling joy and relief, I replied, "Of course, officer. No one is exempt from Lord Caitanya's mercy. Here's our telephone number. We'll be waiting for you."

As we drove away I chanted Hare Kṛṣṇa at the top of my lungs. I felt fortunate to have once again witnessed the great mercy available in Lord Caitanya's *saṅkīrtana* movement. My earnest prayer is that I may have the strength to swim in this nectarean ocean of love for as many years as there are left in my life.




O Lord Caitanya, O merciful one, O supremely generous one, O Lord who fills the hearts of the living entities with the different mellows of devotional love, O wonderfully splendid Lord, O golden-complexioned Lord, O ocean of transcendental virtues, O personified nectar of devotional love, O Lord who is fond of chanting His own holy names, I pray that without ever becoming fatigued I may pass my life always chanting Your holy names in this way!

--Śrī Caitanya-candrāmṛta, Text 67

Chapter Forty-Six

REPAIR TO THE TIGER'S DEN

• AUGUST 17-30, 2001 •

INCE BEGINNING OUR FESTIVAL TOUR IN MAY, we have completed forty-four major festivals. The Woodstock Festival in particular required a gigantic effort on the devotees' part, and when it was over, the devotees were completely exhausted. Personally, I lay on the floor of my room for three days straight, rising only to shower, chant my rounds, and take *prasādam*.

Finally, our management team met to decide if we were able to do another month-long festival tour. Our finances were limited, but I called several well-wishing Godbrothers, who promised to contribute the necessary funds to keep the festival going. I asked Nandinī and Rādhā Sakhī Vṛndā to find a facility somewhere in the country that could accommodate us on a tight budget. They inquired for days, and finally came up with a single proposal. Anxious to get the festival rolling again, I said, "So what part of the country will get Mahāprabhu's mercy next?"

Nandinī hesitated. "Guru Mahārāja, you may be a little surprised with our proposal, but it's really the only place we can afford at the moment. It's a tourist bungalow, which is offering a good deal to accommodate our 120 devotees."

Handing me a map, she pointed to the proposed place, and my eyes widened as I saw that the town she proposed. Sulejow is only 50km from Tomaszow, the town where we had been attacked during our spring festival tour!

"Nandinī, are you proposing we go back to the same area where we



experienced so much opposition?”

“And so much success, as well. The opposition to our movement there is in direct proportion to the success of our many festivals. Don’t you remember how many nice programs we had there? And really, that tourist bungalow is the only place we can afford. We have to return to that area.”

I thought for several minutes, then said, “OK, let’s go. As the Japanese say, ‘Unless you enter the tiger’s den, you can’t take the cubs.’”

The next day we held an *iṣṭa-goṣṭhi* with the tour devotees. After our victory at Woodstock and a good rest, they were in high spirits. All of them were eager to begin the festival tour again. They had been waiting for days for me to make a decision about another tour, and word had spread that the possibilities looked good. As I entered the room one devotee called out, “Śrī Kṛṣṇa *saṅkīrtana yajña, ki jaya*,” and the devotees cheered.

Coming before the assembly of devotees, I said, “*Prabhu*, it appears that we can do another tour. Several Godbrothers, such as Praghoṣa Prabhu and Dharmātmā Prabhu, are sending donations so we can continue.”

Another huge roar went up from the devotees.

“But the budget will be tight, and as a result we’re restricted. Where can we go?”

Not paying much attention to such details, the devotees were smiling and conversing with one another about the reality of another festival tour.

I continued, “Practically speaking, we’ve found only one hotel in the entire country that we can afford.” I paused for moment to get everyone’s full attention, then said, “And that hotel is in the area where we had our spring tour. It’s only 50km from Tomaszow, where we were attacked by the skinheads.”

A hush came over the devotees. No one moved; no one spoke.

“I know it’s a tough area, and I know it’s dangerous,” I continued, “but it’s the only choice we have. We won’t take any unnecessary risks, and we’ll have a security team with us, just as we did after the attack in Tomaszow. Remember, most of the programs we did in that area were very successful. I’d like a show of hands of those prepared to come with us.”

Premaharināma, a large pink scar just above his right eye from the fight in Tomaszow, was the first to raise his hand. He’d been through worse situations, having lost many friends in the war in Bosnia five years earlier. Our troubles in Tomaszow were like kids’ stuff for him. Seeing his hand go up, others slowly raised theirs. But not all hands went up. By the time we departed for Sulejow two days later, our ranks had depleted. Some devotees left saying they were tired, others that they had services in their home temples, and some had to get ready for school. More than likely, most of them knew the risks involved. Who could blame them? “A war regarded as inevitable or even probable, and therefore much prepared for, has a very good chance of eventually being



fought.” (Arthur Koestler)

On August 20, our trucks and buses arrived at the tourist bungalow in Sulejow. Large and spacious, it was situated in a small forest with a nearby lake. With summer temperatures reaching 40°C, the devotees looked forward to swimming in the lake in their spare time. But Nandinī and Rādhā Sakhī Vṛndā had no time for such luxury. They went out immediately to begin organizing the festival.

As expected, they immediately met resistance. That very morning the Deputy Mayor of Piotrkow Trybunalski, just 10km from our base, said to them, “We’re not interested in your religion. Poland is a Catholic country and we want to keep it that way. You are not welcome in our town.”

In Orocno, when the mayor’s secretary saw them coming toward the administrative offices, she locked the door and wouldn’t allow them in.

In Radomsko, the council said they could apply for permission to hold the festival in the spring of 2007.

Undaunted, they kept going and finally, just as the day was coming to an end, received permission to hold a festival in Lask, a small industrial town of 15,000 people.

I was elated when I received their phone call, but realized we had only one day to advertise the event. I also reminded them that we required a good security team to protect us so that there wouldn’t be a repeat of the attack in Tomaszow.

Confident that such security could be arranged quickly, Nandinī began calling security companies the following morning. To her surprise, upon learning that we wanted security for our festival programs, all the companies refused to help us, saying the risks were too high. The owner of one company said, “Give me one month to find fifty men. Then and only then will I agree to guard your event.”

The next day, after I had led the devotees through the morning program, we left our base for *harināma* in Lask. We arrived at 10:30 A.M. only to find the streets empty. I asked a local man, “Where is everyone?”

Looking around slowly, he said, “Well, over there Piotri the grocer just opened his shop, and down the street Marek the barber has got a couple of customers. And the bakery should be open by 11:00 A.M. Things don’t move quickly around here, especially in summer.”

I thought, “How in the world are we going to advertise for a festival here tomorrow afternoon?”

Gradually, as the day wore on, people began appearing as we repeatedly chanted up and down the only shopping street in town. At lunchtime we walked over to some apartment blocks and soon had hundreds of kids following us throughout the complex. Desperate to get our invitations out, I gathered all



the children I could find and gave them instructions to go to every nook and cranny in town to give out the invitations. Smiling and laughing, they ran off in little groups, not knowing that their newfound enthusiasm amounted to *ajñāta sukr̥ti*, unknowing devotional service and a possible future birth in Lord Caitanya's *sankīrtana* party.

nehābhikrama-nāśo 'sti
pratyavāyo na vidyate
sv-āpam apy asya dharmasya
trāyate mahato bhayāt

In this endeavor there is no loss or diminution, and a little advancement on this path can protect one from the most dangerous type of fear.

--Bg. 2.40

By the time we finished *harināma* that evening we had given out seven thousand invitations in a town of fifteen thousand people. This time I felt confident many people would come.

Early the next day, as we set up the festival in a small park in Lask, I talked with our security boys. I told them that there wasn't a security company within 200km that wanted the job of protecting us, and that it was now their full responsibility. They smiled slightly, looking at one another with satisfaction. If there was anyone who wanted to avenge the attack in Tomaszow, it was these boys. But I cautioned them that they must conduct themselves as gentlemen and react only in a worst-case scenario. I told them the story of how martial arts students in ancient China were trained to be ready for action at a moment's notice. At night while they were asleep, their teacher would approach their beds with a bamboo cane. Raising the cane above their heads, he would bring it down swiftly upon a student. The students were so well trained that just by hearing the noise of the cane swishing through the air in their sleep, they would wake up and roll over in time to avoid the blow. In the same way, our security boys had to be prepared for action. Later that afternoon I saw them meeting, preparing a strategy for the festival, and sparring to keep in shape.

As the hour for the festival approached, the same local gentleman I had spoken to on the previous day walked by. Smiling, he said, "You can expect a big crowd. The whole town is talking about your festival. In a small town like this word travels fast!"

Sure enough, by 4:30 P.M., a half-hour before the festival was to begin, thousands of people began to stream into the park. By 5:00 P.M. there was no room to move, and it remained that crowded until 10:00 P.M. Later, an elderly woman, her head covered by a scarf, approached me. "You're the guru, aren't



you?”

Surprised that she even knew the word “guru,” I replied, “Well, yes, I am.”

“Well, young man [I’m 52], I want you to know that this was the best festival we’ve ever had in this town. I’ve lived here for eighty-one years, and I’ve never seen a festival gather so many of the townspeople. Congratulations!”

The next day we advertised our second festival in Pabjanice, a town close to Lodz. While we had been doing the festival in Lask the previous day, Nandinī and Rādhā Sakhī Vṛndā had managed to convince the Pabjanice town secretary to give us permission for a festival there in two days. As our *harināma* party chanted through the busy streets, the invitations flowed out to the people. A number of them called out, “Hare Kṛṣṇa,” and a few stopped to talk to us, saying how much they had enjoyed our programs on the coast this summer. I had the feeling that, like Lask, it was going to be a good program.

However, as we chanted past a large, ornate building in the center of town, I noticed a number of people on one floor looking out the windows with angry faces. I asked Gaurāṅgi dāśī what the building was, and she said it was the town’s administrative offices. Inquiring further from a local student, I learned the angry people were members of the town council. With that news I became apprehensive.

My apprehensions were confirmed early the next morning, just as we were preparing to go to Pabjanice to set up the festival. Rādhā Sakhī Vṛndā approached me in the parking lot at our base and said, “Guru Mahārāja, something extremely terrible has happened.”

The words “extremely terrible” sent chills up my spine, causing me to think that a devotee had met with a bad accident. I braced myself for the worst. “What is it?” I said. “Has there been a car accident?”

“No,” she replied, “The Mayor of Pabjanice has canceled the festival.”

When she saw that I was more relieved than dismayed, she said, “Did you hear what I said?”

“Yes, I heard you. It’s certainly bad news, but the words ‘extremely terrible’ carry a much stronger meaning. Next time, choose your words and present them carefully. When Hanumān came back from Lanka to inform Lord Rāmacandra about Sītā, he phrased his words carefully so as not to cause Rāma undue anxiety. Instead of saying, ‘Sītā has been found,’ he said, ‘Found has been Sita!’ The first phrase would have caused Rāma anxiety, because Sītā’s name would have been mentioned first, leaving Rāma a few anxious seconds to ponder Her fate. By saying, ‘Found has been Sītā,’ Rāma immediately knew Sītā was still living and that there was hope.”

Then I let the weight of her actual message sink in and I became angry. We had distributed six thousand invitations, and our posters were all over town. I told Nandinī and Rādhā Sakhī Vṛndā to drive to Pabjanice and speak to the



authorities. When they arrived, the town council was in session and they were invited to address it. No matter what arguments they presented in favor of the festival continuing, however, the council would not change its decision. As far as the councilors were concerned, we were in town “to kidnap children, deal drugs, and convert people to Hinduism.” Only two council members were favorable, and they later informed Nandinī that the order to stop the festival had not actually come from the mayor but from the priest of the local church. Adding insult to injury, the priest had also ordered the mayor to fire the head of Cultural Affairs, who had initially agreed to host the festival. This woman had lost a job she had held for eight years.

Not wasting time, Nandinī and Rādhā Sakhī Vṛndā quickly drove to another town to try to arrange a festival for the next day. Arriving in Belchatow, a town of seventy thousand, they went straight to the man in charge of Cultural Affairs. As they waited outside his office, they prayed to Kṛṣṇa that we could hold a festival there over the weekend. After a short wait they were politely invited in, and with high hopes and smiles greeted the official. But they were completely unprepared for his reaction. As they stepped into his office he looked up from his desk, and seeing them screamed, “O my God! Not you people! Don’t tell me you’ve come to do a festival in our town! We were hoping you’d never set foot here!”

Having moved back a few steps by the force of his words, they stood against the wall waiting for him to finish his tirade.

He continued, “This summer I went to the coast on vacation. One evening I was in Kolobrzeg walking down the street with my daughter, and what did I see? You people singing and dancing, advertising your silly Festival of India! I swore I wouldn’t go.”

Calming down, he paused, then continued, his voice much softer than before. “But later that evening I saw thousands of people heading in the direction of your festival. I tried walking the other way, but I became irresistibly drawn to follow the crowd. I overheard several people say how it would be the fourth or fifth time they had attended your event over the years.”

To the devotees’ amazement, he continued glorifying the festival. “Upon arriving, my first impression was how well organized and professional your festival was. You even had your own source of electricity—a huge generator. And the stage show! What entertainment you provided the people! And how happy they all were, singing and dancing. And the food . . .”

When he had finished, there was a moment of silence. Nandinī and Rādhā Sakhī Vṛndā slowly approached his desk. Finally, Nandinī said cautiously, “Does all this mean that we can we have a festival here in Belchatow?”

“Yes, of course,” he said. “It would be our great pleasure to host you.”

When they inquired where to hold the festival, he made an interesting



proposal that had never occurred to them. He suggested the parking lot of the grand *hypermarche* (shopping mall) 1km outside of town. When they got back to me with the idea, I hesitated. “Put our festival up in the midst of thousands of cars?” But after careful consideration, we decided to go ahead and experiment. We approached the owner of the mall, who liked the idea.

Later that morning when the mall owner called the local newspaper to advertise the event for the next day, he was told that it would take three weeks of advertising to encourage even four hundred people to attend any event in town. He called us back and said that if we wanted we could go ahead with the festival, but we shouldn’t be disappointed if no one came. Nandinī looked at him. “We won’t be disappointed. Neither will you.”

In two short days we had experienced defeat and victory, causing my mind to whirl at the turn of events. Now the pressure was on again to advertise a festival on short notice. That evening I assembled all the devotees, and 110 of us went on a *mahā-harināma* through the town’s apartment blocks. We stayed out until 10:00 P.M., chanting and dancing in ecstasy in the dark around the apartment complexes, announcing the festival.

The next morning, as the tent crew put up our stage and tents in the *hypermarche* parking lot, a group of us chanted in the local market and the apartment blocks again. Over the two *harināmas* we somehow managed to distribute fourteen thousand invitations. Then we waited at the *hypermarche*.

I was nervous as the time of the festival approached, wondering if we’d made a mistake doing our festival in a parking lot so far from the town center. Then minutes before the festival was to begin, I looked and saw in the distance a huge crowd and a long line of cars heading in our direction. The *hypermarche* director came out, and seeing the huge flow of people and cars approaching the mall said, “I never would have believed it. What have you people done?”

“We sang the holy names of Kṛṣṇa.”

“I know that,” he said. “I saw you singing around the apartment blocks. But my question is, what did you do to get all these people to come here?”

“We sang the holy names of Kṛṣṇa.”

He looked incredulous, then said, “And you think that’s what inspired all these people to come here?”

“Essentially, yes.”

The police report said that more than eight thousand people came for the two-day event. The warm, late summer temperatures and the festive mood kept people at the festival each night until well after 10:00 P.M. The second day of the festival was Rādhāṣṭamī, and Tribhuvaneśvara, as master of ceremonies, spoke briefly to the crowd about Her divine personality. Then to the surprise of all the devotees, he asked the crowd to sing the Polish song of birthday congratulations to Śrīmatī Rādhārāṇī. We all watched in amazement as five



hundred people chanted with great feeling birthday greetings to Lord Kṛṣṇa's eternal consort.

A lot of mercy was flowing that day, and no one wanted to leave at the end of the festival. As I said goodbye to everyone, the crowd roared in Polish, "We want more! We want more! We want more!" The police had to move through the crowd, convincing people to go home. Sitting on the empty stage, I watched the people slowly leave the parking lot until the last one was gone at 11:00 P.M.

Two days later, I returned with Nandinī and Rādhā Sakhī Vṛndā to thank the owner of the *hypermarche*. He was so pleased with the festival that he offered to put us in touch with other shopping complexes around the country. As we left his office he said, "My parking lot will never be the same. People are already referring to it as the parking lot where the great festival took place!"

The splendid path of pure devotional service, which bewildered the great sages of the past, which material intelligence has no power to enter, which Śukadeva Goswami was not able to understand, and which merciful Lord Kṛṣṇa never revealed even to His closest friend, is the place where the dear devotees of Lord Gaura happily enjoy pastimes.

--Śrī Caitanya-candrāmṛta, Text 18

Early the next day, I asked all the devotees if they wanted to take a break or to continue doing festivals. They said they were tired, but no one wanted to stop. So off went Nandinī and Rādhā Sakhī Vṛndā to approach the town secretary of yet another nearby town, Koluszki. Having been to the festival in nearby Lodz in the spring, she was delighted with the idea and said, "Why only two days? We should have your festival in our town for three days!"

Taking one hundred posters to put up around town, the secretary called the mayor, but he wasn't in his office. "Don't worry, he'll love the idea," she said.

Although devotees were still tired from the weekend festival in Belchatow, we had a huge *harināma* through the streets of Koluszki. It wasn't a big town, but I was confident that one *harināma* would be enough to inform everyone about the festival the next day. Sure enough it did, including the mayor.

The next morning, Rādhā Sakhī Vṛndā again approached me in the parking lot of our tourist bungalow. "Guru Mahārāja," she said carefully, remembering Hanumān's words to Rāma, "canceled is the festival."

"What? Again?" I said.

"Yes," she said. "The mayor of Koluszki canceled the festival and will not agree even to a meeting to discuss the matter."

"But we've advertised and the whole town will be coming," I said. "We have no time to inform them the event is canceled. You have to try to meet him."



Once again, in an attempt to save a festival, the two ladies got into their car and drove to Koluszki. I ordered all the devotees to proceed to Koluszki with our trucks, buses, and cars, and we waited outside the town in a long caravan for a call from Nandinī, in the hope that she and Rādhā Sakhī Vṛndā could change the mayor's mind.

When they arrived at Koluszki Town Hall, the town secretary was devastated. She said, "Our mayor is so closed-minded! He refuses to discuss the matter with any of us. I don't see how you're going to get a chance to meet him."

Determined, Nandinī and Rādhā Sakhī Vṛndā sat on the bench outside his office, telling the secretary that only the police could remove them. The secretary got on the phone and exchanged some serious words with someone. Two minutes later, the mayor opened his office door and, without a word, went back and sat at his desk. Accepting the rather cold invitation, they sat before him in his office. They said, "Why are you not allowing our festival in your town? Have you heard crazy rumors about us? I know some people say we deal in weapons and drugs? Is that why you're so afraid of us?"

"No," he said slowly. "There is something more dangerous about you than weapons and drugs. It's your ideology. Ideology has killed more people in this world than weapons. I'm a devout Christian, and for me your beliefs are the greatest evil."

Standing up to him, Nandinī replied, "Your own ideology has caused much suffering in this world. What about the infamous Inquisition?"

Leaning over his desk the mayor said, "I'm proud of the Inquisition, because it rid the world of people like you!"

Realizing what they were up against, but ever more determined to be victorious, Nandinī and Rādhā Sakhī Vṛndā got up from their seats to leave. As they walked from the mayor's office he said, "Where the devil can't go, he sends a woman."

Outside his office they appealed to the town secretary. "The mayor has no right to treat us like this," they said.

"Yes, it's true," she said.

After making some quick telephone calls, she stormed into the mayor's office. Raising her voice she said, "These are lovely people. I've been to their festival in the summer. You can't stop them from having one here. You have to abide by the will of the citizens."

At that his phone started ringing, and a number of the town secretary's friends began calling, chastising the mayor and demanding that the festival continue. With elections imminent, he finally bowed to the pressure and said to Nandinī, "I won't give you permission for your festival, but neither will I stop it. Now leave my office."



We'd been waiting for three hours in the hot sun in our convoy outside of town, and as soon as Nandinī called me we started our vehicles and rolled into town within twenty minutes. It was 2:00 P.M. by the time we reached the festival site, and the festival was supposed to start in three hours. It usually takes five hours to set up the festival, so I spoke with our crew of forty men and women and told them that they had to perform a small miracle and set the festival up in three hours. The rest of us went out on *harināma* to advertise. Much to my amazement, when we returned at 4:45 P.M., the entire festival was ready and crowds were assembling in front of the stage. A little reserved at first, they warmed up as the program went on, and by the last *kīrtana* hundreds of people were chanting and dancing in great happiness.

However, just as we were leaving, Caitanya dāsa, who helps in one of the festival shops, told me he had overheard a group of boys lamenting that they didn't have time to put their plan into action that evening. The next day they planned to throw ten Molotov cocktails from the bushes next to the festival at 8:00 P.M. and escape by different routes.

Meeting our security team, I alerted them to the danger and told them to have all the fire extinguishers ready. I also told them to purchase fire blankets before the festival. However, because we knew exactly what to prepare for, I wasn't worried. The following night we had extra men secure the area near the bushes, thwarting the gang's plan.

But more problems came from the mayor. Wanting to exact revenge, he came to the festival with members of the town council and demanded that we pay a \$4000 fine for holding an illegal event that wasn't sanctioned. We politely reminded him that although the festival wasn't granted official permission, he himself had said he wouldn't stop it. In essence it was neither sanctioned nor not sanctioned, and it would be difficult to have us fined in a court of law. Backing down, he walked away, but the next day he passed a special law banning Hare Kṛṣṇa from Koluszki indefinitely. One may question if we achieved much by winning a battle but possibly losing a war. That question may best be answered by the town secretary, who phoned us as we left that night.

"Please don't take offense at what happened here. The citizens of our town loved your event. We are waiting for you to return. Most of us are not proud of our mayor's actions, and the elections may well result in the law he passed against you being reversed."

Early this morning we set off again for yet another festival event. I'm not sure that with the constant changing of events here on the field of preaching whether we'll meet victory or defeat, but one thing is for sure: although it sometimes burns the lips, the sweetness of *Kṛṣṇa-saṅkīrtana* is much too blissful to stop drinking. "If one's heart is set on crossing beyond the ocean of repeated birth and death, if one's mind relishes the sweet nectar of *Kṛṣṇa-*



saṅkīrtana, and if one's heart yearns to swim and sport in the ocean of pure love of Kṛṣṇa, then one should take shelter of Lord Gauracandra's feet." (Śrī Caitanya-candrāmṛta, Text 93)

Chapter Forty-Seven

RECRIMINATIONS RIFE

• AUGUST 31-SEPTEMBER 4, 2001 •

THE DAY AFTER OUR FESTIVAL IN KOLUSZKI, Nandinī and Rādhā Sakhī Vṛndā approached the town secretary in Brzeziny, just 7km away, with a proposal to do a festival there. He was delighted with the idea. Not wanting there to be any surprises later, they forewarned him that we had been experiencing a lot of opposition in the area and several of our festivals had been canceled. He laughed and said such intolerance would never happen in Brzeziny. He even signed a contract with them, authorizing the festival to take place the next day.

On the way back to our base, Nandinī and Rādhā Sakhī Vṛndā received a call on their cell phone from the police in Koluszki, demanding that they come immediately to an emergency town council meeting. They arrived just as the meeting started. As they walked in, council members screamed abuse at them. When things quieted down, the mayor said the council wanted compensation for the damage we had done to the park during our festival. When the ladies asked them to specify the damage, one council member made up a story about injured trees and shrubs, destroyed flower gardens, and broken fences. Although the whole story was an obvious lie, the council demanded \$3000 in compensation.

Ignoring the false accusations, Nandinī and Rādhā Sakhī Vṛndā simply began preaching Kṛṣṇa conscious philosophy. They explained how our movement is part of an ancient spiritual tradition, and elaborated on how our beliefs and



practices are beneficial for modern society. After emphasizing that we had not come to Koluszki to proselytize the citizens or make money but to share a wonderful culture, they concluded by saying that the council had no right to extort money from us by falsely accusing us of damaging town property.

When the ladies finished, there was a moment of silence. Then a council member stood up and said that behind their eloquent words was the fact that we were a dangerous cult. Our presence had discredited the town. At that point, the mayor, who had been listening carefully to their presentation, stood up and instructed everyone but Nandinī and Rādhā Sakhī Vṛndā to leave the room. Astonished, the councilors got up one by one and walked out, the last one slamming the door behind him.

The ladies sat there for a few tense moments, waiting for the mayor to speak. During their first conversation with him, he had spoken strong words, accusing them of being part of a dangerous cult and collaborating with the devil. Now he spoke softly: “What you said was true. I cannot ignore what you said. You should also know that I came to your festival the other day and saw for myself that you are not bad people. Your program was well organized and peaceful. The citizens enjoyed the cultural presentation you made. Although I don’t share your ideology, I’m ready to respect you. I apologize for the way I spoke to you the first time we met.”

Nandinī and Rādhā Sakhī Vṛndā couldn’t believe what they were hearing. Here was a man who had insulted them in his office a few days earlier, but who was now humbly apologizing. He continued, “Tell me more about your philosophy. I am especially interested in the chanting. I saw how it affected the townspeople. They became so happy.”

While the entire town council cooled their heels outside the room, Nandinī and Rādhā Sakhī Vṛndā began explaining the glories of chanting Hare Kṛṣṇa. The mayor listened carefully. After an hour, he rose and opened the door to let in the council members. Just before he did so he turned to the ladies and said, “I know you’re planning a festival tomorrow in Brzeziny. Don’t expect that it will be easy. Be prepared for the worst. The mayor called me just before you arrived here and said he will be canceling the event.”

As he turned the door handle he added, “Why do you take so many risks? What is your motivation?” Then, answering the question himself, he said, “I know. It’s because you want to help people.”

When the door opened, the council members swarmed in like a nest of enraged hornets. Thirty minutes later they concluded that we were guilty of the damages to the park and fined our festival \$3000. Nandinī and Rādhā Sakhī Vṛndā knew that they would not be able to get out of it, and as a council member brought them the terms of payment for the fine, the mayor said to the councilors, “I’ll take care of this. You’re all excused.”



At that, the council members rose and left the room, satisfied with their victory. When the door closed, the mayor said, “I can’t dismiss the fine altogether. The town council is powerful, and there are higher-ups who are behind it. But I’ll reduce it to \$1000. You can pay over time. I’m sorry.”

Upon leaving Koluszki Town Hall, Nandinī and Rādhā Sakhī Vṛndā received an urgent call from the town secretary in Brzeziny. He sounded a lot less confident than he had that morning when they had discussed doing a festival in his town. He said, “You must come immediately. Our mayor wants to speak to you. It’s urgent”

Remembering the Mayor of Koluszki’s warning, Nandinī thought carefully before replying. She knew it wouldn’t be easy for the mayor to cancel the festival, because the town secretary had signed an official contract authorizing the event. She thought, “If we meet him, he may confiscate the contract and say it never existed. If we tell him we’re far from Brzeziny and cannot come to see him for three days, by which time the event will be over, there’s not much he can do.”

She politely replied to the town secretary that they were too far away and it was impossible to come that day, but they would surely visit the mayor after the festival was over. There was silence at the other end of the line—then the town secretary hung up the phone. Her strategy had worked.

Meanwhile, I was in Brzeziny with Śrī Prahlāda as he led a huge *harināma* party of fifty devotees chanting and dancing through the town center. People were friendly and responded nicely to the *kīrtana*. Some of them wrapped coins in little bags and threw them to us from their windows. One bag even hit me on the head, raising a lump. I grimaced and, smiling through the pain, waved to the lady who had thrown the money.

As we came close to one apartment block, some of the kids who were following us dropped out of the *kīrtana* and started back in the opposite direction. Wary, I asked one of the Polish devotees to find out why they were leaving. A couple of the children told him that Lucas, the head of the local hooligans, hung out around the corner and that they were all afraid of him. Sure enough, just as we came around the corner, there was Lucas standing in the doorway of an apartment building, drinking beer. When the rest of the kids saw him, they scattered.

Hoping to defuse any potential problems at our festival, I approached Lucas. As I came closer, I noticed that his right hand was wrapped in bandages, more than likely the result of a recent disagreement with someone. Hoping he would be open to a gesture of friendship, I put out my right hand to shake his. As he studied me carefully, his buddies came out of the nearby shadows and stood behind him. They all had the same stonelike expression on their faces as they waited to take their cue from Lucas. After a few seconds, Lucas smiled and



put out his bandaged hand to shake mine. As we shook hands, I felt moisture and saw blood on my hand from his bandages. Seeing my surprise, Lucas said coolly, “*Teraz laczy nas wiez krwi*—now we’re blood brothers.”

“My pleasure,” I said. After a moment’s search for the appropriate words to start a conversation, I continued, “Lucas, it’s nice to meet you.”

“Forget the pleasantries,” he said. “You guys are welcome in this town. In fact, my boys and I plan to come to your event. With us there, you won’t have anything to worry about. We’re happy you brought some life to this dull place.”

With that his smile disappeared and, turning around, he said to his boys, “Hare Kṛṣṇas are OK. Let them do their thing here.” Then they all walked away.

The next day the weather was perfect. The town secretary had given us a little park by a small lake to set up our festival. My only anxiety was that it was almost 2km from town. Nevertheless, most of the townspeople made the long hike out to the festival grounds, and by evening the site was so packed no one could move left or right. At one point, our security boys came to me and pointed out a group of boys standing on the perimeter of the festival. Looking closely, I saw that it was Lucas and his friends. When Lucas saw me he winked, confirming his promise that with them there we had nothing to worry about.

“Who are they?” our security man asked.

“It’s OK,” I said. “Consider them extra security. As long as they’re around we have nothing to worry about.”

During the festival I had noticed two elderly ladies, probably in their eighties, whom I had seen at the previous festival in Koluszki. I was surprised to see them again, and inquired if they were enjoying themselves. “Oh yes,” they replied. “We love everything here.”

After the festival, we were driving back to our base when I saw the pair walking back to Koluszki in the dark. We stopped and asked them if they wanted a ride home. “Oh no,” they chirped, “it’s not far. We’ll make it back all right.”

“No,” I said. “It’s 7km to Koluszki. Let us take you.”

With that they got in and we drove them home. When they got out, one of them said, “We’ll be back tomorrow. We haven’t had so much fun for years.”

It rained hard on the second day of the festival, and only a few souls braved the weather. On the third and final day, the weather cleared and quite a large crowd turned out. Several people told me that they had invited their relatives from distant towns. We also had an unexpected visit by a VIP—the mayor. He appeared briefly with his wife and walked around the festival grounds. He had a smile on his face, but before we could approach him he left.

I met a teenage girl, Monika, from Lask. She had come to thank Rāmabhadra



for convincing her mother about the merits of being vegetarian. For years she had wanted to give up eating meat, but her mother forbade it. When Monika heard that the Hare Kṛṣṇas were coming to Lask, she asked her mother to come to the festival. Monika had heard from friends that Hare Kṛṣṇas were vegetarians, and she hoped the devotees could convince her mother to allow her to become one as well. As soon as they had arrived, mother and daughter were immediately swept up in the ecstasy of the Lask festival. Monika put on a sari, and both of them had *gopī* dots painted on their faces. During *kīrtana* Monika danced in bliss while her mother appreciated the scene from the audience. Afterwards they went for a bite to eat at our restaurant, and that was it—Monika’s mother fell in love with *prasādam*. Monika saw it as the perfect moment, and grabbed the first devotee who walked by.

“Tell my mother why it’s bad to kill animals and why we should be vegetarian,” she had asked Rāmabhadra.

As he began to explain the value of a vegetarian diet, Monika’s mother listened carefully and was convinced. She immediately went to our bookshop and bought a cookbook.

Monika told me that after reading the cookbook her mother had herself become a vegetarian, and is even talking about “offering the food to Kṛṣṇa.”

As darkness settled in, Śrī Prahlāda began the final *bhajana* on stage. I sat next to him, surveying the crowd, because dusk is always a likely time for problems. I was relieved when I saw a group of boys appear at the perimeter, thinking it was Lucas and his friends coming to provide security, but when I looked closer I saw that it was a different group, all of them drunk and rowdy. I got up slowly, walked offstage, and approached a group of young people. “Do any of you know Lucas?” I said.

One boy replied, “Of course, everyone knows Lucas.”

“Do you know where he is at the moment?” I said.

“He’s not here tonight,” said the boy. “He got beat up by a gang from out of town at the football match this afternoon.” Pointing at the group of drunken boys I had seen from the stage, he continued, “That’s them over there.”

“Thanks,” I replied, and immediately went over to the closest security boy and warned him of potential trouble.

Śrī Prahlāda’s sweet *kīrtana* now had many people chanting and dancing before the stage. Most of them were children, who went round and round in a circle holding hands with the devotees as their parents watched from the benches and clapped in time. By now Śrī Prahlāda had also noticed the drunken boys, and he directed my attention to a few of them moving on to the festival grounds. Then very conscientiously, as I have seen him do many times when danger threatens, he focused on the *kīrtana* of the holy names.



*jīvana anitya jānaha sār,
tāhe nānā-vidha vipada-bhār,
nāmāśraya kori' jatane tumi,
thākaha āpana kāje*

You should understand this essential fact: life is temporary and filled with various kinds of dangers. Therefore carefully take shelter of the holy names, remaining always a humble servant of the Lord.

--*Arunodaya-kīrtana Gītāvali*, Bhaktivinoda Ṭhākura

As the drunken boys moved toward the stage, the crowd noticed them too, and fearing violence, some parents quickly grabbed their children and left. Others, caught between the ecstasy of the *kīrtana* and the uncertainty of the moment, hesitated, not knowing what to do. As our security boys braced for trouble, I prayed to Lord Nṛsimhadeva, feeling the situation was once again serious enough to ask Him to intervene.

At that moment, the leader of the boys approached Dvārakānātha dāsa, our security man guarding the left side of the stage, and exchanged strong words with him. Although most of the dancing children were oblivious to the danger, the eyes of all the other guests were riveted on Dvārakānātha and the boy. Suddenly the boy threw a punch at Dvārakānātha but missed. Dvārakānātha, a big man, pushed him backwards and he fell to the ground.

Although a fight seemed certain, most people couldn't pull themselves away from the festival because of the *kīrtana*. The holy names saturated the entire festival grounds, somehow giving a sense of calm and security despite the imminent danger. As the boy and his friends took off their shirts, baring their chests to fight, Dvārakānātha displayed his courage and intelligence. Taking the leader by the arm he challenged him to fight alone with him in the tent closest to the stage. As they closed the sides and prepared to exchange blows inside, Vara-nāyaka, thinking quickly and hoping to diffuse the situation, ran into the tent.

"Why do you have so much anger?" Vara-nāyaka asked the boy.

Calming down for a moment, the boy replied, "My girl friend left me the other day."

Vara-nāyaka said, "Is that why you hate the whole world?"

"Yes," he replied.

"Do you think hurting others will solve your problems?" Vara-nāyaka said.

The boy paused and said, "Well, no, I guess not."

"That's right," Vara-nāyaka said. "You won't solve your problems by fighting. So let's be friends, OK?"

The boy hesitated for a moment, then put out his hand, accepting Vara-



nāyaka's words and agreeing to call off the fight. He also shook hands with Dvārakānātha and, swallowing his pride, walked out of the tent with him. It was the last thing anyone expected to see, but it diffused the crowd's tension immediately.

Relaxing, parents turned to watch their children dance and twirl in the ecstasy of the *kīrtana*, which hadn't missed a beat and was still going strong. Others went back to their tables to finish their *prasādam* or browse through the displays and shops.

Breathing a sigh of relief, I returned to play *mṛdāṅga* onstage. Once again, it seemed to me the Lord had intervened to protect His great festival of the holy names. With such mercy becoming an almost daily occurrence on the tour, our faith in the Lord increases with each rising and setting of the sun.

*prahlāda śoka vinivarana bhadra simha
naktan carendra mada khaṇḍaṇa vīra simha
indra adi deva jana saṅgnuta pada padma
śrī narasimha paripālaya maṁ ca bhaktam*

My Lord! You are the auspicious lion that dispersed the grief of Prahhlāda Mahārāja. O You who tears everything apart in an intoxicating mood! You are the Lord of the ferocious predators of the dark night. Your lotus feet are surrounded by all divine and pious personalities, beginning with Lord Indra. O Nṛsimha! Please protect us too, for we are also trying to become Your devotees.

--Śrī Nṛsimha Aṣṭakam, Verse 7

Chapter Forty-Eight

ATROCITIES PUT AUTUMN TOUR TO REST

• SEPTEMBER 4-15, 2001 •

THE DAY AFTER OUR SUCCESSFUL BUT TENSE FESTIVAL IN BRZEZINY, I woke up early and took a walk alone in a nearby forest. The peace and quiet were in direct contrast to the life I had been living for the past five months on our festival tour. The strain of constant opposition from the Church and Polish government officials, direct attacks on our festivals and the physical exertion required to push on for so many months, had left me exhausted. Of course, it is a most welcome exhaustion, as every gram of my energy has been used in the service of guru and Gaurāṅga. But for the first time on the tour I looked at my pocket calendar to see how many days were left. Seeing that only one week remained, my mind drifted momentarily to Vṛndāvana and the many holy places there that I longed to see—I hope even more so with the purification that comes from preaching. I wish I were more advanced and could stay on the front lines indefinitely as Śrīla Prabhupāda did when he was with us. Śrīla Prabhupāda traveled incessantly during the eleven years he was with us, circling the earth twelve times, preaching the glories of the Lord. But he also spent a “lifetime in preparation,” as his biography states, a good portion of that in Vṛndāvana where he chanted the holy names, wrote his *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* purports, and imbibed the mood of our previous *ācāryas*.

I have also seen that the preaching success of Godbrothers like Śivārāma Mahārāja and Bhakti Bhṛṅga Govinda Swami has been in direct proportion to the time they spend in *bhajana*, hearing and chanting the glories of the Lord. I



considered that going to Vṛndāvana was the natural step to take after the tour was over, not simply to recuperate my strength but to purify my heart and deepen my realizations of the Lord's glories for future preaching.

A sudden cold breeze, followed by a number of falling leaves, further indicated that our festival tour would soon be coming to a close. The cold air woke me from my daydream in the forest. I hurried back to our base to plan the last remaining festivals. When I arrived, devotees had already finished breakfast, and Nandinī and Rādhā Sakhī Vṛndā approached me to report about possible towns where we could hold our final programs. As we sat down to discuss it, however, it soon became apparent that the struggles we'd had for months would continue to the end.

Nandinī said, "Guru Mahārāja, we're not having any success in arranging festivals. Everywhere we go, mayors and their councils have been forewarned not to cooperate with us. In many cases they are fearful to even meet us. Obviously something is going on behind the scenes. After the last festival in Brzeziny, there appears to be a well-organized campaign to ensure that we don't have any more festivals in this region."

It was clear that for the time being we had to change our strategy. We convened our festival council and spent the entire day discussing how to continue our preaching for the remaining seven days. Finally we decided to go to the nearest town, Piotrkow Trybunalski, approach the owner of the *hypermarche* there, and ask if we could hold a festival in his parking lot. The festival we had held in Belchatow's mall parking lot had been one of our most successful on the autumn tour. But the Piotrkow Trybunalski town council was one of those that had most recently refused us permission to put on a festival. In fact, the council wouldn't even consider giving us permission to hold a simple *harināma* in the town. There was even an article in the town newspaper in which the local priest was quoted as saying that if anyone in Piotrkow Trybunalski attended one of our festivals in the region and happened to touch Raju, our *padayatra* ox, he or she would immediately go to hell.

Our strategy for trying to do a festival at the Piotrkow Trybunalski *hypermarche* was that it is private property and not under the jurisdiction of the council. The only problem was that we wouldn't be able to advertise by distributing invitations on *harināma*. But we decided that if the owner of the complex agreed to the festival, we would send devotees out individually on the streets to hand out invitations. It seemed unlikely that the council would forbid that.

As soon as we approached the owner of the *hypermarche*, he agreed to the proposal. He said he had heard how successful our festival had been in Belchatow, and then—with a smile on his face—related how it had simultaneously increased business in the shopping complex. He said we



should make it a three-day event, and that we could distribute invitations at all the mall entrances. I was elated, remembering how hard it had been to get permission to distribute books at shopping malls during the years I did book distribution in France.

Knowing that it was going to be the last festival of our tour, devotees worked around the clock, distributing invitations at the *hypermarche*, on the city streets, at apartment blocks, and at busy intersections. The authorities quickly got wind of the festival, and numerous threats were made to the *hypermarche* owner, but he didn't back down.

As we prepared for the festival, I noticed that all the devotees seemed as exhausted as I felt, but we all continued to work hard, wanting to finish the tour on a high note. In five days we distributed close to fifty thousand invitations, and on the morning of the festival we drove to the *hypermarche* parking lot. As the day wore on, however, our hopes for a successful event were dampened by rain. Just two hours before we were to begin, storm clouds appeared in the sky, and just as the festival opened rain poured forth in torrents. Nevertheless, although it showered off and on throughout the festival, several hundred people came and we considered the first day to be relatively successful. Little did we know that it would be the last festival day of the year.

When we arrived back at our base, several devotees who had stayed to clean the kitchen ran to inform us about the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in New York City and the Pentagon in Arlington, Virginia. The viciousness of the attacks and the extent of the destruction stunned the devotees. Along with the rest of the world, we watched the reports on CNN in the hotel lounge that night, and the next morning I gave an impromptu class about how we should understand the tragedy.

I explained that devotees are not callous in the face of such suffering, and that our condolences go out to the dead and injured and their families. I also predicted that the attack on the heart of America would have many ramifications, including a protracted war on terrorism and a likely recession. We should not be shocked by such events. Devotees are familiar with Kṛṣṇa's wisdom in *Bhagavad-gītā*—that this material world is first and foremost *duḥkhālayam aśāśvatam*, a temporary place full of misery. For a devotee, the material world is always in a state of tragedy, but he remains equipoised.

*yam hi na vyathayanty ete
puruṣaṁ puruṣarṣabha
sama-duḥkha-sukhaṁ dhīraṁ
so 'mṛtatvāya kalpate*

O best among men (Arjuna), the person who is not disturbed by happiness



and distress and is steady in both is certainly eligible for liberation.

--Bg. 2.15

I told the devotees that although they were not forbidden to follow the events, which would surely dominate the news for weeks or months to come, we should not become preoccupied with them. Our main meditation, as always, should be our devotional service. I especially requested them not to allow the news to become the only talk of the tour during the remaining few days. I didn't want to see them huddling in small groups discussing terrorism and watching the news. The terrorist attack was a catastrophe, and it would surely bring major changes to the world, but Lord Caitanya's *saṅkīrtana* movement is no less significant and much more auspicious. Whereas catastrophes take lives in great numbers, the chanting of the holy names saves lives in unlimited numbers. It is the panacea for all problems.

I concluded by saying that we were fortunate to have yet another chance to share this chanting with people during the remaining festival days when Nandinī came in announced that to show sympathy for the people of America, the President of Poland had declared the next two days official days of mourning in Poland. All public events were canceled. The room fell silent as the devotees realized that our five-month tour had just come to an unceremonious end.

Three days later, after cleaning and packing our entire five tons of festival paraphernalia, we had a final festival only for devotees to honor their services during the past months. After some emotional farewells, everyone left in buses to return to their respective homes and temples. As I got into my van, my driver, Rādhē Śyāma dāsa, looked at me and said, "Guru Mahārāja, you've been so busy that you haven't told me where you're going! In which direction should I start driving?"

I paused, then replied, "I suppose you can begin heading east toward Vṛndāvana."

Laughing, he said, "All right, I guess that means first of all heading north toward Warsaw."

As we drove off, I was caught between the pain of realizing that the tour was over and the ecstasy of going to the holy *dhāma*. Trying to focus on Vṛndāvana I closed my eyes and thought of what I would say to Śrīla Prabhupāda when I got there. Each year upon arriving in Vṛndāvana, I go first to Śrīla Prabhupāda's Samādhi and report the results of my year's preaching efforts. I decided I would simply repeat the words he used when he learned that the land at Juhu Beach in Mumbai was won after a great struggle: "It was a good fight."

Śrīla Prabhupāda, it was a good fight, and for the greater part we were victorious. In five months, literally hundreds of thousands of people attended our festivals. All of them heard the holy name, many took books, and many



more enjoyed *prasādam*. By the causeless mercy of Lord Caitanya, even our staunch opponents benefited by “unfavorably” uttering Lord Kṛṣṇa’s holy names! We offer all the results to your lotus feet and we pray for similar service in years to come. The recent tragic events in America will soon give rise to preaching opportunities, and as devotees of the Lord we must be prepared to meet the great challenge that lies ahead in this regard. Now more than ever people are aware of the temporary and miserable nature of this world. It is up to us, your followers, Śrīla Prabhupāda, to enlighten them about the actual solutions to such problems.

... by [the devotees] broadcasting the holy name and fame of the Supreme Lord, the polluted atmosphere of the world will change, and as a result of propagating transcendental literatures like *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam*, people will become sane in their transactions.” (*Bhāg.* 1.5.11, purport)