

DIARY OF A
TRAVELING
PREACHER

VOLUME 9

INDRADYUMNA SWAMI



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shifting the paradigm

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For information contact the Publisher



PO Box 52, Badger, CA 93603
Phone (559) 337-2200 • Fax: (559) 337-2354
torchlightpublishing@yahoo.com • www.torchlight.com

DEDICATION

To the homeless man in Mrzezyno
who, when destiny took everything away,
embraced the wisdom of the sacred *Bhagavad-gita*.



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FOREWORD

Two kinds of travelers traverse this world: the conditioned soul who, forced by time, perpetually transmigrates from one material body to another in endless pursuit of sensual enjoyment; and the pure devotees of God who move freely, impelled by the order of their spiritual masters rather than by the force of karma.

Guided and empowered by Krishna’s divine energy, such preachers move freely, dutifully spreading the Lord’s message, despite all impediments.

These empowered preachers know the art of staying constantly in touch with the Lord. They know that just as fire, hidden within wood, bursts forth when friction is applied, so the Lord, present everywhere, appears whenever and wherever pure devotees perform *Sankirtana*.

*naham tisthami vaikunthe
yoginam hrdayesu va
tatra tisthami narada
yatra gayanti mad-bhaktah*

“I am not in Vaikuntha nor in the hearts of the yogis. I remain where My devotees engage in glorifying My activities.”

Such traveling preachers live to benefit others, using everything available to them as a resource for teaching others about the panacea for this fallen age—*Nama Sankirtana*.

As you hear the episodes of His Holiness Indradyumna Swami—the quintessential traveling preacher—you experience

first hand the miraculous effects of applying the principle of Sankirtana in your own life.

Those who know His Holiness Indradyumna Swami have come to expect the unexpected, and relish following his journeys. *Diary of a Traveling Preacher* (Vol. 9) demonstrates once again that the merciful and compassionate Lord lives always with the traveling preacher and that we too can live with the Lord by just by hearing His devotees' adventures.

Vaisesika dasa

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Once again I am indebted to Advaita Candra for printing my annual diary. This year he made an extra effort by also publishing the first two volumes of the diary—as well as my book *Vraja Lila*—all of which have been out of print for many years.

I am also indebted to both of my editors, Umapati Swami and Ken White who spend many hours refining my work.

I thank Lakshmivan das for the cover photo and Jal Keli for the cover design. I am also very grateful to Mayapriya dasi for the design and layout of the book and to Sri Thakur Mahasaya dasa for the file preparation work.

Indradyumna Swami



DIARY OF A
TRAVELING
PREACHER

VOLUME 9



CHAPTER ONE



A PERFECT ENDING

| JANUARY 19 – 28, 2008 |

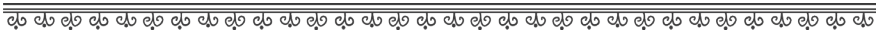
The devotees on our tour were tired from seven weeks of festivals throughout Australia and New Zealand, but they looked forward to the final two programs, to be held in Hong Kong.

But we almost didn't make it. The day before our departure from Auckland, our Russian and Ukrainian devotees had not yet been granted visas for Hong Kong. That night I called Chandrasekhar das, one of the leaders in the temple there.

"It's 9 PM," I said. "We're due to fly out in nine hours. Have the visas come through?"

"Not yet," he said, "and the situation doesn't look good. We've been trying to contact the immigration office all week, but it's impossible to get through. Our lawyer is trying to reach them through special channels. I'll call you if something happens."

I understood Chandrasekhar's anxiety. He and a team of local devotees had been organizing the festival for six months. At great cost they had rented an auditorium with 1,000 seats for two evenings at a prestigious university in downtown Hong



Kong. Never before had the small yatra attempted such a bold preaching program. A number of special dignitaries, including the Consul General of India would be attending.

“We have to start making alternative plans now,” I said to Santi Parayana das after the call with Chandrasekhar. “Our visas to New Zealand are finished tomorrow morning. Either we fly to Hong Kong tomorrow or back to Europe. Call our travel agent at her home and see if our flights can be redirected to London.”

I told the rest of the devotees to go to bed.

Hours passed. I fell asleep. At 2:30 am my cell phone rang. I grabbed it.

“The visas have been granted!” said Chandrasekhar excitedly. “It’s a miracle.”

“Wow!” I said, instantly awake. “How did it happen?”

“Somehow our lawyer got through to an immigration official in Hong Kong,” he replied. “It was after hours and the official just happened to be in his office. She impressed upon him the importance of the event. He replied he would need time to think about it. She called him back three times in an hour and kept repeating the urgency of the situation. Finally he agreed. They’ll have someone waiting for you with the visas when you get off the plane.”

“That’s as close as they come,” I replied. “Three and a half hours before departure.”

I ran into the room where the men were sleeping.

“Everybody up!” I said loudly as I turned on the light.

The men slowly opened their eyes and sat up.

“Where are we going?” said Gaura Hari das, rubbing his eyes. “London or Hong Kong?”

“Hong Kong,” I said with a smile. “And we’re out of here in 45 minutes.”

We made it to the airport with no time to spare. As we were on several different flights, I gave the devotees final instructions on how to fill out immigration cards when they arrived.

One girl spoke up. “Guru Maharaja,” she said, “is the Hong Kong harbor still full of those boats they call junks, the ones with the big sails?”

“Maybe there’s a few for the tourists,” I laughed. “But Hong Kong is a modern city. It’s one of the business capitals of the world.”

I had also had had a romantic idea of Hong Kong before visiting the city last year, but on my arrival I found an ultra-modern, efficient, and surprisingly clean city. China had ceded Hong Kong to the British after the Opium Wars in the late 19th century, and got it back in 1997. Although much of the old Chinese culture disappeared under British rule, many aspects of it are still present, and as my troupe of devotees soon discovered, there remains a blend of old and new even today.

The day after our arrival we split up into two Harinama groups to advertise the festivals. One hundred and twenty devotees from various places joined us. I took out one party and my Godbrother Bhakti Bringa Govinda Maharaja, who was also visiting, took out the other.

As my group chanted and danced blissfully down the crowded streets, we stopped to chant in front of a large convenience store. Our devotees were shocked when they read the signs advertising the products inside:

“On special today: Dried gizzards, snakehead soup, and Chinese caterpillar fungus.”

The streets were crowded, and it was hard to move along, but people kindly accepted our invitations. After several hours I saw very few on the ground.

“It’s a hopeful sign,” I thought.

That evening Govinda Maharaja led a long bhajan in the small temple. Many of the Chinese devotees had never experienced such a blissful kirtan before, and they chanted and danced with great pleasure. As the kirtan continued, I went to speak to Chandrasekhar in his office.

“It’s an ambitious plan to try and fill a thousand seats two nights in a row,” I said.

“I’m hoping we can do it,” Chandrasekhar replied. “Nowadays a number of people in Hong Kong are expressing an interest in Indian culture. Since 2004, over 30 schools and colleges have visited our temple. And yoga studios are springing up all around the city.”

The next day we took a large Harinama to Sai Kung, a town just outside Hong Kong. Much less commercial than Hong Kong itself, it represented the normal Chinese culture outside the cities. But whereas people in Hong Kong showed some interest in our chanting party, people in Sai Kung busied themselves with their work and hardly seemed to notice us.

“It would have been wiser to continue chanting in Hong Kong,” I thought.

As we were about to finish, we passed an old Chinese temple.

“Can foreigners go inside?” I asked a local Chinese devotee.

“Let’s see,” he replied.

With five or six devotees following us, we entered the temple.

“How old is it?” I asked quietly.

The devotees looked at some inscriptions on the wall. “It’s 140 years old,” someone whispered.

The temple was dimly lit, and I had to squint to see the altar. Finally I could make out a deity of a tall, bearded man with long hair.

“Who is that?” I asked a devotee.

“Guan Gong,” he replied, “He’s a famous warrior who defended this area from outside warlords, centuries ago.”

There was an abundance of incense burning on the altar. “Do they worship him?” I asked.

“Oh yes,” the devotee replied. “People come here to pray to him for protection. They believe that some special persons attain divinity after they die and have supernatural powers.”

I glanced around the temple and saw old wall hangings, bells, and articles for worship. The walls were thick with black soot from 140 years of incense smoke.

“Look over here,” the devotee continued. “People take these two wooden pieces, the size of your fists, and throw them in front of him. If the pieces both land with the smooth side up, it means he agrees to answer a question.

“You ask a question and then pull a wooden stick from this pile of numbered sticks. You check the number on your stick and then go over there, where you see a pile of old parchments. You take the parchment with the corresponding number on it and read the answer to your question. Do you want to try?”

“No thank you,” I replied respectfully.

We walked out of the temple. “Maharaja,” said a devotee, “there is nothing that corresponds to this type of worship in Vedic Culture, is there?”

“Actually,” I replied, “there is for a certain class of men. This is akin to worship of the ancestors. Krishna says in *Bhagavad-Gita*:

*yanti deva vrata devan
pitrn yanti pitr vratah
bhutani yanti bhutejya
yanti mad yajino'pi mam*

Those who worship the demigods will take birth among the demigods; those who worship the ancestors go to the ancestors; those who worship ghosts and spirits will take birth among such beings; and those who worship Me will live with Me.

[*Bhagavad Gita*, 9.25]

Just outside the temple, we passed a large furnace where a priest was offering different articles made of paper into the fire.

“What in the world is he doing?” I asked a local devotee.

“People believe you can send things to your ancestors this way,” he replied. “For example, if you want to send them a car, you offer a paper car into the fire with certain prayers.”

“Let’s get back to the pure chanting of the holy names,” I said. “I can hear the kirtan party just around the corner.”

The next day we continued advertising the festivals with a big Harinama along a boardwalk near the port. Devotees got tired after some time, but I was determined to keep them out as long as possible.

“I’ll be happy if we can fill just half the hall each night,” I thought.

While chanting down the street we were again reminded of local tastes in food. As we passed a big restaurant we saw a large

array of live seafood swimming in huge aquariums outside the restaurant. There were octopuses, eels, water snakes, huge crabs, and a bizarre assortment of sea fish I had never seen before.

Customers would stop and indicate to an employee which creature they wanted. The employee would reach in and catch the aquatic and quickly take it back to the kitchen. A half hour later it would be on the customer's table ready to eat.

When a large family of 12 people chose a fish almost as big as I am, I told the kirtan leader to quickly move on.

I turned to Gaura Hari. "It's Lord Caitanya's mercy," I said. "Even people with habits like those can become devotees."

I quoted a famous verse from *Srimad Bhagavatam*:

*kirata hunandhra pulinda pulkasa
abhira sumbha yavanah khasadayah
ye'nye ca papa yad apasrayasrayah
sudhyanti tasmai prabhavisnave namah*

Kirata, Huna, Andhra, Pulinda, Pulkasa, Abhira, Sumbha, Yavana, members of the Khasa races and even others addicted to sinful acts can be purified by taking shelter of the devotees of the Lord, due to His being the supreme power. I beg to offer my respectful obeisances unto Him.

[*Srimad Bhagavatam* 2.4.18]

"Maharaja," said Gaura Hari, "'Khasa' refers to the Chinese. But 'ye 'nye ca papa' means 'others addicted to sinful acts.' That would include Westerners such as us, wouldn't it? Think of what they serve in the restaurants in America."

I felt humbled. "Yes," I replied, "you're correct. We were also addicted to sinful activity before coming to Kṛṣṇa con-

sciousness. We're not better than they are, just more fortunate, that's all. We have already come to Krishna Consciousness."

The next morning, our festival group and a number of local devotees went to the auditorium to begin setting up the stage. When we walked in we were stunned. One thousand seats cascaded gracefully down towards an immense stage, which was complete with every imaginable lighting, curtain, and facility needed for a professional show.

"This dwarfs the Melbourne City Hall we performed in," said a devotee.

I couldn't help staring at the impressive stage. "Our show deserves such a setting," I said. "We're presenting the highest culture. With such a facility, people will be able to appreciate our presentation much more. But let's hope we get enough people. This place will look empty even if 500 people show up."

"Maharaja," said a devotee, "Chandrasekhar said ticket sales have been going well the last couple of days as a result of the Harinams."

The devotees were dressed and ready two hours before the show. Everyone was excited. It would be a fitting end to our two months of preaching. Spontaneously I called a meeting with all of them.

"I'll be leaving the morning after the last program," I began. "I just wanted to thank all of you for the wonderful service you've performed during the last two months. I'm sure all of us will cherish memories of this tour for the rest of our lives."

"We worked hard spreading the message of Lord Caitanya," I continued. "Sometimes it was like drinking hot sugar-cane juice: so hot it burned the lips, but so sweet we couldn't stop."

"And we had so many nice morning programs," said a devotee. "We really enjoyed chanting our rounds together and discussing *Srimad Bhagavatam*."

“And great prasadam,” added another.

Then there was a moment of silence as everyone realized the tour was almost over.

Suddenly the devotees looked sad. “The only consolation,” I said, “is that we’ll all be together again in a few months for the summer festival tour in Poland.”

A big cheer went up.

“Now let’s get ready to go on stage,” I said enthusiastically. “The show starts in a few minutes.”

The moment we had been waiting for all week was at hand. I decided to take a peek through the giant curtain on the stage and see how many people had come. I went before the curtain, paused for a moment, and pulled it slightly back.

What a jolt! The hall was almost full. Row after row of Chinese people were sitting, waiting patiently for the show to begin. In the front row I saw a number of dignitaries, including the Consul General of India, the Vice Chancellor of the Chinese University of Hong Kong, a number of professors, and several prominent Hong Kong businessmen.

For a moment I felt a tinge of nervousness. “We’ll be performing in front of a number of distinguished guests and a crowd of 900 people,” I thought.

Then I laughed. “We’ve performed in front of hundreds of thousands of people through the years,” I thought. “And they almost always appreciate the show. Why should this program be any different? In fact, with a hall like this it can only be better.”

And better it was. The program that night was flawless, and the audience loved every minute of it. The VIPs seemed to applaud the loudest.

The next day the hall was just as full and the festival even better. It was the last show on the tour, and the devotees gave it everything they had. Early the next morning Chandrasekhar drove me to the airport.

“So how did you like the festivals?” he asked.

“A perfect ending to a wonderful tour,” I replied.

“What’s next?” he asked.

“I’m going to Bali, Indonesia,” I replied. “The devotees there have invited me to come and preach for a week.”

“Oh, that’s very nice,” he said. “It’s a tropical island. Do you plan to take a break as well?”

I reflected for a moment.

“Next life,” I said with a laugh. “For now, I’m too happy preaching in the association of so many loving devotees of the Lord.”

As I boarded the plane, I thought of something Srila Prabhupada had written:

Try to remember Krsna always by following the principles as you know them; namely rising early, taking bath, cleansing, attending aratika, reading scriptures at least one hour or two hours daily, chanting sixteen rounds on beads of Hare Krsna mantra, going for street sankirtana, offering all your foodstuffs to Krsna, like that. In this way very quickly you will make progress in Krsna Consciousness and become very, very happy in your life.

[Srila Prabhupada, letter to Susan Beckam September 29, 1972]

CHAPTER TWO



THE MOTHER TEMPLE

| JANUARY 29 – FEBRUARY 13, 2008 |

On the flight from Hong Kong to Bali, I thought about a conversation I had had with my Godbrother B. B. Govinda Maharaja the previous day. We were talking about seeing Srila Prabhupada at the Detroit airport in 1971. It was our first meeting with Srila Prabhupada, and I asked Maharaja if he remembered anything from Srila Prabhupada’s arrival address.

“Yes,” he said smiling. “Srila Prabhupada leaned forward from his chair at one point and said, ‘Please believe me when I say you are not the material body.’ “

“Incredible,” I said. “That’s exactly what I remember from the lecture.”

As we sped through the air, I reflected on Srila Prabhupada’s words, “Please believe me.” I thought how any preacher in Kṛṣṇa consciousness is always praying his audience will embrace his message. In that mood, I was overjoyed to read a letter from a disciple while going through my email a few hours later:

ॐ नमो भगवते वासुदेवाय ॐ नमो भगवते वासुदेवाय ॐ नमो भगवते वासुदेवाय ॐ नमो भगवते वासुदेवाय ॐ नमो भगवते वासुदेवाय ॐ नमो भगवते वासुदेवाय ॐ नमो भगवते वासुदेवाय ॐ नमो भगवते वासुदेवाय ॐ नमो भगवते वासुदेवाय ॐ नमो भगवते वासुदेवाय

DIARY OF A TRAVELING PREACHER

Dear Srila Gurudeva,

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

Thank you so much for bringing your festival tour to Australia.

My mother was very touched by the lecture you gave at the festival program in Sydney. I was at a family dinner at her house recently, and my brother-in-law asked how devotees view birthdays. I started to tell him how we are not these material bodies, but the soul within.

Suddenly my mother interrupted. She said, 'Yes, and when you die it's just like taking off old clothes and putting on fresh, new ones. The body changes but the soul remains the same.'

I let my mother continue as she was so enthusiastic. For the next few minutes she quoted many examples straight out of your lecture. For example, how the body is like a car and the soul is the driver. Finally she stood up and when she had everyone's attention said, 'So, we can take birth again in the material world or we can go back to the spiritual world which is eternal, full of knowledge and bliss.'

She paused and then continued, 'So obviously it's best if we try to go back to the spiritual world.'

Everyone sat stunned. I started to clap and then suddenly everyone else began clapping and cheering. Then my mother quietly sat back down.

Before the program she had little interest in Krsna consciousness. Somehow, as a result of your wonderful presentation, her heart changed.

Your servant, Vilasa Manjari.

The jet engines continued to drone as my attention turned to Bali. I had been there once before, 15 years ago. At that time our movement had been suppressed by the local brahmanas, who being mainly demigod worshipers saw our worship of Krsna as a threat. Public Harinamas were banned, and devotees had to meet in secret. The tense situation was eventually resolved when Bhakti Swarupa Damodar Maharaja met

the brahminical community and assured them of our desire to work cooperatively.

Though Bali is 6,000 kilometers from present day India, Vedic culture has been there for thousands of years. That fact seems to support Srila Prabhupada's statement that Vedic culture once existed all over the world:

At the time of Maharaja Prithu, the world was ruled by one emperor, although there were many subordinate states. Just as there are many united states in various parts of the world, in olden days the entire world was ruled through many states, but there was a supreme emperor who ruled over all subsidiary states.

[*Srimad Bhagavatam* 4.16.27, purport]

"If I have time," I thought, "I'll look for evidence that India's ancient culture existed in Bali for centuries."

Eventually the captain announced we were circling Bali and would soon be landing. When I looked out the window I was stunned by the beauty of the island from the air. It looked like a greenish-colored pearl set in a shimmering blue oyster shell. As we came in to land, the lush green tropical scenery seemed to jump out at us.

After clearing immigration and customs, I gathered my bags and was met outside the terminal by a warm tropical breeze and a group of 30 enthusiastic devotees having a rousing kirtan. As we drove to the house where I would be staying, devotees told me that on Bali the temperature varies only a couple of degrees throughout the year, the flowers bloom without cessation, and there are no wild beasts, poisonous snakes or spiders, or cyclones.

“Like heaven on earth,” I said as we entered Kuta, a large town and a popular tourist center.

“Not exactly,” said Padma Locan das pointing towards a huge ornate structure with a long list of names embossed in gold on it.

“What’s that?” I said.

“The names of the 202 people killed in the Jemaah Islamiyah terrorist bombing in 2002,” he replied. “Most of them were foreigners.”

We were silent as we passed the memorial.

That afternoon we went for a drive to a different part of the island. While passing through a small village, I asked the driver to stop, so we could explore on foot. As we strolled around a market, I saw many exotic fruits including snakeskin fruit, yellow watermelon, and mangosteen. I also noticed there were many temples.

“There are more than 11,000 temples in Bali,” said Padma Locan.

My idea to connect the present religious life of Bali to the spiritual culture of India came to mind. “Are they very old?” I asked.

“Some of them are several hundred years old,” he replied.

“Not so old,” I said.

“The people here don’t know very much about Krsna,” said Mahamuni dasi. “At almost all the temples in Bali they are worshiping demigods, ancestors, and ghosts.”

“Ghosts?” I said.

“Yes,” she said. “They worship the ghosts so they won’t disturb them. Do you see all these little offerings along the paths in front of the houses? They’re called yajna-sesus. They’re for the ghosts.”

THE MOTHER TEMPLE

I looked and saw offerings of fruits and flowers as well as cigarettes and wine in the leaf cups.

After we returned and rested, we traveled to a program at the Radha-Rasesvara temple in the jungle two hours from Denpasar, the capital. It is one of the four main ISKCON temples on the island.

The devotees were having a big kirtan when we arrived. Having seen the beauty of the island, I then gave the first of a series of lectures on how devotees must remain fixed in Krsna consciousness and not be distracted by the beauty of this world. I said the only real danger I saw on the heavenly isle of Bali was that the idyllic nature of the place, could easily make one forget Krsna. Devotees nodded their heads in agreement.

The next day we took a drive around another part of the island to chant japa. In every village I noticed that in the center of the traffic circles were large dioramas depicting pastimes of the Lord from the Ramayana and Mahabharata. In one place I saw Lord Ramacandra engaged in battle with Ravana; in another, Draupadi and her five Pandava husbands. Yudhisthira was featured on the traffic island of a small market town, and Hanuman flying through the air carrying a mountain of herbs for Laksman was the choice of a neighboring village.

I realized that although the dioramas were fairly recent they offered proof that the roots of Vedic culture had existed here for millennia. With this kind of art all over the island, it would be easy to remember God. It seemed that Bali had the best of both worlds.

The jungle thickened along the route we were taking. Once in a while I'd see crystal-clear waterfalls flowing into large pools. Monkeys played on the rocks, colorful birds flew in and out of the trees, and butterflies fluttered around.

On one occasion Mahamuni turned to me. “Would you like to visit a nearby botanical garden, Maharaja?” she said.

“Your whole country is a botanical garden,” I said laughing.

As the countryside drifted by, I noticed many more temples. They were constructed in the open Balinese style, and all had fresh fruit offerings on the altars. Passing over a bridge, on each of the four corners, I saw ferocious carved figures dressed in colorful, fresh cloth.

“What is that?” I asked.

“Minor deities who protect the traveler,” said Padma Locan. “The people take good care of the deities, as you can see, and in turn they believe the deities take good care of them.”

I was impressed that the Balinese recognized the forces of nature as personal, that there were controlling deities behind every aspect of the natural world. However, I felt disappointed that they didn’t seem to understand there was a supreme personality who ultimately controlled everything and to whom everyone owed allegiance. But that was nothing new. The problem was prevalent 5,000 years ago. Krsna says:

*sa taya sraddhaya yuktas
tasyaradhanam ihate
labhate ca tatah kaman
mayaiva vihitan hi tan*

Endowed with such a faith, he seeks favors of a particular demigod and obtains his desires. But in actuality these benefits are bestowed by Me alone.

[*Bhagavad-gita* 7.22]

In the evening we attended a program in the Gauranga temple, close to Kuta.

“There is no need to criticize the people’s worship of demigods,” I said in the lecture. “Although the tourists who come here may see it as uncivilized, actually it is a more advanced understanding than that of modern science, which says everything is happening by chance.

“What we can offer is that if we simply worship Kṛṣṇa, we please all the demigods, who are His devotees.”

The next day as we walked along a beach chanting our rounds, I sat and considered that if the Vedic culture actually flourished in Bali thousands of years ago, there must be evidence of worship of Kṛṣṇa, or maybe Viṣṇu, for the worship of demigods and the worship of the Supreme Personality of Godhead have always existed simultaneously in Vedic culture.

I went to Mahamuni. “You mentioned there are thousands of temples on Bali,” I said, “but all I’ve seen is worship of the demigods and ghosts. Is there a temple where Viṣṇu is worshiped?”

“Oh, yes,” she replied. “Pura Besakih. We call it the Mother Temple. It’s the most sacred place in Bali. Brahma, Viṣṇu, and Śiva are worshiped there.”

“Wow!” I said. “That’s what I’ve wanted to hear. Is it also several hundred years old, like the other temples we’ve seen?”

“No,” Mahamuni said. “It’s 17 hundred years old.”

I was speechless. “That’s the proof I need,” I finally said. “It would support the *Bhagavatam*, which says Vedic culture was once worldwide.”

“It takes some time to get there,” Mahamuni said. “It’s on Mount Agung, a live volcano. But don’t worry. The last time it erupted was in 1964. Many tourists go to see the temple although there are some places they are not allowed. It’s actually

a large complex of many temples, like a small version of Angkor Wat in Cambodia.”

“We should go tomorrow,” said Padma Locan. “It’s an auspicious day.”

“There is a festival there every six months,” said Mahamuni. “Many Balinese make the pilgrimage on those days to pray. The people believe that God spared the temple during the eruption. The lava came within meters of the temple complex but caused no damage to any structures. Nearby, entire villages were wiped out. One thousand people perished.”

That evening there was a program in ISKCON’s Sandipani Muni temple in Denpasar. When I arrived, hundreds of devotees were waiting.

“Wherever we have a program, there are so many blissful devotees,” I said to Padma Locan. “How many devotees do we have in Bali?”

“More than 2,000,” he said with a smile.

In the lecture I again discussed how all beauty in this world is temporary and ultimately has to be renounced. But I stressed that real renunciation was engaging everything in God’s service and that the devotees should use the natural opulence of the island to glorify Krsna.

After class a devotee approached me and said, “We dovetail the beauty of our beaches by going on Harinamas there every Saturday and having kirtan for the tourists.”

When he showed me his photographs, I was surprised to see Australian and European tourists chanting Hare Krsna and dancing with the devotees on the beach. I congratulated him for bringing spiritual life to the attention of the sun seekers.

Early the next day we left for Pura Besakih. On the long drive through mountainous terrain covered by jungle on all

sides, I marveled that worship at the temple had been continuing for 1,700 years. I could hardly wait to take in the surroundings and the opportunity to find evidence of a Vedic connection in Bali's past.

Eventually we arrived at a parking area one kilometer from the temple.

"The tradition is to walk the last kilometer," said Padma Locan. "Walking up the hill provides time to reflect on the greatness of God and how we are His humble servants."

The climb was steep, and it was hot and humid. I struggled on the last part until we crossed over a little rise. Suddenly the gigantic temple came into view, framed by the beauty of the jungle behind it.

"My God!" I exclaimed. "I've never seen anything like this."

We walked the final 200 meters and after catching our breath continued up a long flight of steps leading to the first assortment of temple structures. The antiquity of the site was overwhelming.

"I feel like I'm in another age," I said to Padma Locan.

As we were walking we could hear priests making offerings in the temples. Like the other temples I had seen in Bali, they were not closed structures but open-sided and approachable from all angles.

"You won't find deities here," said Padma Locan. "It's different from India. They say the gods come only when they are being worshiped."

As we walked around the large complex, I was awestruck by the unique architecture. Finally we came to an opening that led into a vast courtyard where I could see many priests offering oblations.

“Tourists can’t go in, only the faithful,” said Padma Locan, “and beyond here, where they worship the demigods, is the temple of Visnu.”

“That’s what I came to see,” I said eagerly. “I’m dressed as a sannyasi. Will they let me through here?”

“We can try,” he said.

I put my hand in my beadbag and started chanting loudly as we entered the compound. Padma Locan put a traditional Balinese hat on my head. As we walked into the large courtyard, several priests looked at me suspiciously. I chanted louder.

Suddenly, halfway across the compound, an elderly priest approached and said something in Balinese to Mahamuni.

“Oh, well,” I thought, “it was a good try.”

Mahamuni turned to me and smiled. “If you want to pass through this complex,” she said, “you must pray to the demigods.”

The priest put out a mat with several items of worship including incense, a candle, fruit, and spices.

“He wants you to offer these to the demigods,” said Mahamuni.

“A strict Vaisnava doesn’t worship demigods,” I thought as I recalled the words of Narottam das Thakur:

O brother, I say to you, if you want to become a pure devotee of the Supreme Lord do not hanker for benedictions from the demigods.

[Prema Bhakti Candrika]

“But if I don’t offer some worship,” I thought, “I’ll never make it to the temple of Lord Visnu.”

The priest was becoming uncomfortable with my hesitation. Suddenly I had an idea.

“Okay,” I said. “I’ll sit and pray to the demigods.”

By Kṛṣṇa’s grace I had been reading the 10th canto of *Srimad-Bhagavatam* and had recently memorized a prayer that seemed perfect for the occasion. I bowed down to the nearest altar and then sat up. I lit the incense, offered it, and prayed:

*katyayani maha maye
maha yoginy adhisvari
nanda gopa sutam devi
patim me kuru te namah*

O goddess Katyayani, O great potency of the Lord, O possessor of great mystic power and mighty controller of all, please make the son of Nanda Maharaja my husband. I offer my obeisances unto you.

[*Srimad Bhagavatam* 10.22.4]

The priest was impressed and after giving us some caranamrita, happily sent us on our way to the temple of Viṣṇu.

“What was the object of your prayer?” said Mahamuni.

“I repeated a prayer of the gopis,” I said, “but nothing I’ll achieve in this lifetime.”

We continued walking through the courtyard and then up several flights of steps, finally reaching the top of the hill on which the entire temple complex was situated. From there we had a direct view of Mount Agung.

“It must have been terrifying when the volcano exploded,” I said.

“It’s still very active,” said Padma Locan. “From time to time it belches thick smoke and ash. It’s only a matter of time until it explodes again.”

“Hopefully not today,” I said with a nervous smile.

We turned left, and walking a further 50 meters along a stone path finally came to the temple of Lord Visnu. As we entered I was surprised to find we were the only pilgrims there.

“They worship Siva as supreme here in Pura Besakih,” said Mahamuni, “not Visnu.”

“I’m sure it wasn’t always like that,” I said. “Just look at this magnificent temple, the intricacy of the stone work. At some point Visnu must have been the principal deity here.”

Suddenly from around the back of the temple an elderly man appeared, dressed in white.

“The priest,” whispered Padma Locan.

He offered a bowl of fruit on the altar to Visnu and said some prayers. I waited patiently and when he was finished approached him.

With Mahamuni translating I spoke. “Sir,” I said, “we are devotees of Lord Visnu, or Krsna. We are pleased to see you making an offering to Him with such devotion.”

He humbly bowed his head but didn’t say anything.

“How long have you been a priest at this temple?” I said.

“Since I was a boy,” he replied. “My father was a priest here, and his father and his father . . .”

“How old are you?” I asked.

“Eighty-three,” he replied.

“You don’t look that old,” I said.

“A lady who lives in my village is 225 years old,” he said. “She was born in 1783.”

Padma Locan’s eyes opened wide in astonishment.

“In previous generations, many people here lived for well over 200 years,” the priest continued.

“How was it possible?” I asked.

He chuckled. “They worked hard in the fields,” he said. “They drank water from the streams, they ate mainly rice and vegetables, and they visited this temple every day.”

“Visited the temple every day,” I repeated, trying to understand how that was connected to longevity.

He smiled. “They were happy,” he said, “but none of us will live forever. What’s important is where you’ll go when you die.”

“Where do you hope to go when you die?” I asked, eager for the realization of one who had served the Lord his entire life.

He paused for a moment looking at the altar. “With Him, of course,” he said.

The priest fell silent, and just at that moment it started to rain.

“We have to go,” I said. “Your darsan was worth the entire trip here. We’re happy to have seen this ancient temple which stands as evidence that India’s spiritual culture once reached far beyond its present borders and, most important, is still producing men of your caliber, full of faith in God.”

Srila Prabhupada writes:

In the modern age people are under the impression that during the Vedic period America and many other parts of the world had not been discovered. But that is not a fact. Prithu Maharaja ruled over the world many thousands of years before the so-called prehistoric age and it is clearly mentioned here that in those days not only were all the different parts of the world known, but they were ruled by one king. It is clear that the kings of India once ruled all the world and that their culture was Vedic.

[*Srimad Bhagavatam* 4.21.12, purport]

CHAPTER THREE



PASTIMES OF THE HOLY NAMES

| MARCH 1 - 15, 2008 |

In early March, I boarded a flight from Los Angeles to Atlanta, where I would catch an onward flight to Santiago, Chile. It had been three years since my last visit to the Chilean yatra, and I was excited about seeing the devotees there again.

When the flight landed in Atlanta, I went to the boarding gate for Santiago. The boarding area was crowded, and the only seat available was in front of a television screen showing a news report about a woman who had become ill on a recent flight across the United States.

When the woman asked a flight attendant for oxygen, she was apparently refused. Minutes later the woman asked again, and seeing her desperate condition, the stewardess tried to administer oxygen, but the oxygen bottle malfunctioned. Shortly afterwards the woman died.

The broadcast continued to say that the airline was defending its actions, but it seemed obvious that there was negligence

ॐ नमो भगवते वासुदेवाय ॐ नमो भगवते वासुदेवाय ॐ नमो भगवते वासुदेवाय ॐ नमो भगवते वासुदेवाय ॐ नमो भगवते वासुदेवाय

on the part of the cabin crew. The report concluded with advice on what to do should a passenger fall ill in a similar situation. “Call the flight attendant, administer oxygen, and try to keep the patient calm,” said a special guest on the show.

“It’s awful,” I thought. “I can only imagine how horrific such an incident would be during a flight.”

I didn’t have to wait long to find out.

I boarded the plane and took my seat, chanting quietly on my beads. I had been upgraded from economy to business class because of my frequent-flyer points. The passengers seated around me all appeared affluent and had paid thousands of dollars for the flight.

I could sense that my presence made several of them uncomfortable. Nearby, a woman who was filing her nails looked at me suspiciously. When the man seated next to her, who was reading the *Wall Street Journal*, glanced up at me, he shook his head disapprovingly. The lady next to me didn’t reply when I asked if this was her first flight to Santiago.

So as not to attract more attention, I put my beads aside and took out a book to read. As the last remaining passengers boarded the plane, the cabin crew went about their final duties before closing the cabin door. I smiled politely as several stewardesses from our cabin passed by to attend to something in the rear of the plane.

Suddenly, the man seated across the aisle from me started shaking uncontrollably. His eyes rolled back and he started foaming at the mouth. My first thought was that he was having either a stroke or a heart attack. I quickly looked around to see if there were any cabin attendants present, but they had all gone to the back of the aircraft.

The passengers around me sat frozen in shock. The woman filing her nails held the file motionless above one finger. The man reading the newspaper stared in horror as the sick man started to fall out of his seat.

I remembered the advice given on the television report. I jumped up and grabbed the man and carefully laid him down in the aisle, straddling him. I tried to calm him, but he was quickly losing consciousness. I looked around at the other passengers, who continued to stare in shock, their comfortable reality having been shaken by the ugly scene before them.

“Somebody call a flight attendant!” I shouted.

The woman who had been sitting next me just closed her eyes in fear. Others turned their heads away and looked out the windows.

I looked at the man’s wife who was crying uncontrollably.

“Is he epileptic?” I asked.

“No! No!” she said frantically. “He’s not.”

“Is he on some kind of medication?” I asked.

“No! No!” she said, shaking her head.

“Does he have a history of heart problems?” I said.

“Please save him!” she screamed.

Her husband began gasping for breath. I tried to position him so he could breathe easier. I also began to chant, softly at first but louder and louder as it appeared he might die.

I looked up at the nearby passengers, who were still sitting motionless and staring. “Oxygen!” I yelled.

No one moved.

I had to do something to get their help.

“For Christ’s sake!” I screamed. “Somebody get a Goddamn oxygen bottle or this man is going to die!”

It worked. Two men jumped up and ran towards the galley. Seconds later they returned with an oxygen bottle. As all three of us struggled to get it working, I put the mask on the man's face. Suddenly, from the corner of my eye, I saw several flight attendants racing down the aisle.

Within moments they arrived and took control of the situation, administering the oxygen and calling for medical assistance on their cell phones. The captain arrived and called for a defibrillator, a device used in emergency treatment of heart attacks.

Because of the cramped space, I was unable to move out of the way and sat pinned in the middle of the frantic scene. The man continued shaking, flailing his arms and grimacing in pain. Unable to offer any more practical help, I continued chanting clearly so he could hear every syllable of the holy names. At one point he briefly came to consciousness and our eyes met.

I wanted to tell him that everything was going to be all right, but I sensed this wasn't the case. I leaned forward and chanted even louder hoping that, should he leave his body, he would be fortunate enough to hear the names of the Lord.

I continued chanting while the flight attendants tried to help him. I kept wondering when a medical team would arrive. Periodically, the flight attendants moved the man into different positions to try to make him more comfortable. Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, a medical team arrived.

I stood up and then sat in the man's seat while the rescue team put him on a stretcher and quickly took him away. His wife followed. By that time he was almost motionless. "He may not make it," I overheard one of the attendants say.

I returned to my seat and started chanting on my beads again. My heart was still beating strongly, and my adrenaline was surging. A stewardess came and offered me a glass of water.

After I had calmed down, I looked around the cabin. The woman who had been filing her nails smiled at me gently as if to indicate she was grateful for what I had done. When I glanced at the man with the newspaper, he nodded his head in approval. The lady sitting next to me finally spoke up. "Thank you," she said.

Soon the cabin door closed. I was exhausted from the ordeal and soon fell asleep. By the time I woke up we were well on our way and most of the passengers around me were sleeping.

I sat up in the dark and thought about the incident. "We never know," I thought. "We never know when such a thing will happen to us. Generally we only see situations like this on the news, and we always assume it only happens to others. I pray that when my time comes, there will be somebody to chant the holy names for me as well."

The more I thought about it, however, the more I realized that because I often travel alone, I may very well be by myself or with a group of strangers when I leave this world. The thought was unsettling.

"What if I suddenly passed away from a heart attack on an airplane 37,000 feet up in the air?" I thought. "Or in bed at night alone in some far-off country? But even the most well-planned departure, surrounded by loving devotees, can be an embarrassing affair. Death is difficult for everyone. When that day comes, I hope I'll be remembered for my service and not for the way I died."

I thought about a story I had heard recently. A person was asked how his friend had passed away. “Don’t ask me how he died,” he answered. “Ask me how he lived.”

Nine hours later our flight landed in Santiago. As the passengers disembarked, the head purser approached me in my seat and asked if I could remain behind for a few minutes. I sat patiently, and when all the other passengers had left, she returned with several other flight attendants.

“We wanted to thank you for your quick action in helping that man,” she said. “You may have saved his life.”

“I’m happy I could help,” I replied, “although I didn’t do that much. It was all of you who gave him the medical attention he needed.”

“What we really appreciated,” said another stewardess, “was the calming effect you had on everyone. When you were singing, it felt like everything was going to be all right.”

“Yes,” said another stewardess. “It was very special, so comforting.”

“What exactly were you singing?” asked another stewardess.

“I was singing the names of God,” I replied. “I follow a faith from India where God is called Krishna. India’s ancient scriptures say that wherever God’s Name is chanted there’s nothing to fear.”

“Well, we certainly understand that now, don’t we, ladies?” the head purser said.

“Yes, we do,” they replied.

“And we have you to thank for that,” a stewardess said to me.

“It wasn’t me,” I said with a smile. “It was the Lord’s Holy Names. So the next time something terrible happens, remember to sing Hare Krishna.”

“Can you write the song down for us?” said another stewardess.

“Yes, of course,” I said.

After giving them the paper with the mahamantra on it, I reached for my carry-on items. But the attendants picked them up first and then escorted me to the door. While going through immigration and walking to the baggage area, I couldn’t help but marvel at the pastimes of the holy names.

Srimad Bhagavatam states:

*tasmat sankirtanam visnor
jagan mangalam amhasam
mahatam api kauravya
viddhy aikantika niskrtam*

Sukadeva Gosvami continued: My dear king, the chanting of the holy name of the Lord is able to uproot even the reactions of the greatest sins. Therefore the chanting of the sankirtana movement is the most auspicious activity in the entire universe. Please try to understand this so that others will take it seriously.

[*Srimad Bhagavatam* 6.3.31]

The driver looked out through the window. “Where you guys wanna go?” he said in a thick New York accent.

“26 Second Avenue,” Gadadhara yelled above the traffic.

We were barely inside when the cab sped away from the curb and merged into the traffic. The driver looked at us in his rearview mirror. “Nobody wanted to pick you guys up,” he said.

He turned his head around to look directly at us. “People are too judgmental,” he continued. “We have to respect others. That’s what I say. I mean, you guys are dressed different, but that don’t mean you ain’t good people. You know what I mean?”

“Yes, sir,” I said nervously, “but don’t you think you should keep your eyes on the road?”

“The car—it drives itself,” he laughed. “You just ask it to turn. That’s what one of my buddies said. It got into that book. What’s it called?”

He turned his eyes back to the road. “Oh yeah,” he said. “Taxi Driver Wisdom. Ever read that one?”

“No, sir,” I replied. “I can’t say that I have.”

“You ain’t read that?” he said. “It’s my favorite book.”

He paused. “You live around here?” he asked.

“No,” I replied. “I’m always on the move. I’m going to England in a couple of weeks.”

“England,” he said. “That was called Britannia. Then the Jewish tribes came in and they were Yiddish and they used a lot of ‘ish’ so they called them British.”

Gadadhara and I looked at each other.

“That’s another one from the book,” he said with a laugh. “I came here from Pakistan 20 years ago, driving a cab from day

one. I saw some people laughing at you guys standing on the street corner. Let me tell you what the problem is with this city. People are too materialistic, that's all."

I decided to try for the answers I needed for the diary chapter. "Can I ask you a few questions?" I said.

"Sure," he said, "but first I want to say that I know you guys. I've seen you singing on the streets. You're nice to everybody. You don't pick on no one. And I see bad stuff everyday. I mean the other day a guy was shot dead right in front of my cab. What's happening to this world?"

He paused for a moment.

"When are people gonna start learning tolerance and love?" he said emotionally.

I started to say something, but he continued. "I'll tell you," he said. "It's when people start becoming religious. Religion is the only thing we got in common. I mean, we're all God's children. Ain't that right?"

Before I could answer he continued. "But I have to confess to you guys," he said. "I'm not a very good Muslim. I mean I don't bow down five times a day and I don't go to the mosque regularly. I'm really sorry about that."

"But you seem to be very pious ..." I said.

"And sometimes I use bad words," he interrupted. "But I promise I won't use bad language in front of you guys. My mullah once told me that God gives and forgives. But us? We get and forget."

Just at that moment a police car pulled alongside us in the next lane. Our driver slowed down and pulled in behind the police car.

"Why did you do that?" I asked.

“Let me tell you, Mister,” he said, “it’s always better to be behind a police car. Omar, my friend, said that. That’s some down-to-earth philosophy, ain’t it?”

“Very much so,” I replied. “Now, I’d like to ask ...”

He interrupted again. “You remember when the Taliban tore down the big statues of Buddha in Afghanistan a few years ago?” he said.

“Yes, of course I remember that,” I replied.

“Well, I was crying when I saw the pictures,” he said. “You gotta have respect for all the religions. All of them worship the same God. Slam one, you slam your own. You know what I mean?”

“Yes, I do,” I said. “And I wish more people ...”

“My philosophy is that man is here to do good for others,” he continued. “And the best way you can help another man is to encourage him to follow his religion. It makes no sense to condemn his religion. And let me tell you what the cause of all the problems in the world is. You wanna know?”

“Yes, sir,” I replied trying to be patient. “I’d like to know.”

“I learned it driving this cab all those years,” he said. “The problem is that people are too materialistic. And what’s worse is that they bring materialism into religion. They go to the mosque, the church, or the temple and ask God for material things. Mister, there’s only one thing for which you should ask God. You know what that is?”

Surprised by his realizations, I was speechless.

“Service,” he said. “We should ask only for service. We were created by God to serve Him. Not the other way around. That’s natural. And if you do things naturally you’ll be happy. Do I have it right?”

“You hit the nail on the head,” I said, reflecting on how his words echoed Rupa Goswami’s definition of pure devotional service.

“I learned it all in a taxi,” he repeated with a smile as he looked over his shoulder at us again.

“Look out for that truck!” I yelled.

He turned around quickly and deftly avoided the vehicle.

“I see more of what’s going on around me because I’m not concerned with finding a parking place,” he said with a laugh. “That would be in the book too.”

We weaved in and out of traffic for some time and then he spoke up again.

“Religion is all messed up these days,” he said. “People are worshiping God for the wrong reasons. That’s why a lot of people are giving up on religion. One of my best friends, Hafiz, became an atheist last year. I mean what do we have in common anymore? One day he said, ‘Prove to me there’s a God.’ I put him in the back of my taxi and sat there with him. I told him, ‘It’s a question of faith, Hafiz,’

“He replied, ‘I don’t believe in faith.’

“I said, ‘You got faith the Atlantic Ocean’s not gonna overflow, right? You got faith them stars in the sky ain’t gonna fall down and smash New York City, don’t you? Yes, you do. And you know what? Somebody’s controlling all that. And that somebody is God. It’s not all happening by chance.’

“Hafiz became an agnostic after that. He started believing that ‘something is out there.’

“But you guys, you’re helping people become religious all the time. That’s why I like you. You live for others. I live for myself, just driving this taxi. I know that Allah is more pleased

with you than me. You're out in the rain and snow, singing for Him. I've seen you. And that's why I picked you guys up."

"Sir," said Gadadhara, "that's our temple, just over there."

"Oh it's beautiful," he said, "just beautiful."

As we pulled up to the curb, the driver turned around. "Hey fellas," he said, "this one's on me. I really enjoyed our conversation."

"Thank you so much," I said. "That's very kind of you."

"Conversation?" Gadadhara whispered as he gathered his things. "You hardly got a word in."

The driver quickly jumped out of the taxi and raced around to my side of the cab. As he opened the door he bowed slightly from the waist.

"The fare is 16 bucks," he said. "But don't worry about it. New York needs more guys like you."

As I got out of the cab he stepped forward and suddenly hugged me. Then he stood back.

"I just have one request for you guys," he said. "Please pray for me. Okay? And get that book that I was telling you about."

"Will do," I said as he got back into the taxi. "And, hey, you pray for us too."

"Now that's what folks should do," he said, his voice trailing off as he drove away. "Religion is supposed to bring people together, not tear them apart. My friend Omar once said ..."

Within a few seconds his taxi joined the fast-moving traffic. As we walked to the temple, Gadadhara laughed. "You never did get to ask your questions, did you?" he said.

I smiled. "Doesn't matter," I said. "Even without the questions, I learned more about New York than I would have

TAXI DRIVER WISDOM

thought possible. We really connected with that taxi driver. He was a great guy.”

The next day I went out and bought the book. I found the following passage in it:

If there is understanding, there is love. If there is no understanding, there is only an endless stream of questions.

[*Taxi Driver Wisdom*, Risa Mickenburg, Chronical Books, 1996]

CHAPTER FIVE



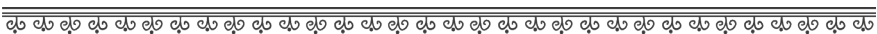
HURRICANE KATRINA REVISITED

| APRIL 13 - 14, 2008 |

During my preaching tour in the United States, I was invited to visit New Talavan, an ISKCON rural community in Mississippi. My Godbrother Yogindra Vandana das picked me up at the airport in New Orleans. As we drove through the city I was impressed by the beauty of the old southern buildings, but soon I was shocked to see several neighborhoods still ramshackle and abandoned after being flooded by Hurricane Katrina two and a half years ago.

“Eighty percent of the city was under water,” Yogindra Vandana said. “The entire Mississippi coast was devastated. Reconstruction work has been going on steadily, but it takes time.”

“Almost two thousand people died, and 285 thousand homes were destroyed,” he continued. “More than a million acres of forested land was ruined. The total economic impact in the region exceeded 150 billion dollars. The US Department of



Homeland Security described the hurricane as one of the worst natural catastrophes in the country's history. It will take years, perhaps decades, to rebuild the city to its original glory.

"We were sitting on a time bomb because parts of the city are below sea level. There's always a risk that the nearby Mississippi River may overflow and flood the city in an exceptionally large storm. During Hurricane Katrina the levies surrounding the city, which were built to prevent flooding, proved inadequate."

"Just look over there," he said, pointing to an abandoned shopping mall. I couldn't believe my eyes. The huge mall was lifeless and eerily quiet in the middle of the day with not a soul in sight.

"Everything inside was swamped," Yogindra Vandana said. "The water was 20 feet deep. There are a number of shopping malls like that around the city, completely abandoned."

"We still live in the wake of Katrina. It was big news in the media for several months, but eventually most of the public lost interest. The only positive result has been that people here are more receptive to Krsna consciousness than ever. Life is such that it often takes a tragedy to awaken people to its real goal."

"True," I said. "Thank God that New Talavan was spared the wrath of the storm."

"Actually, Maharaja," Yogindra Vandana said, "we bore the full brunt."

"Is that so?" I said.

"Yes," he said, "and many of our community members were involved in the relief work in a Krsna-conscious way."

"I wasn't aware of that," I replied.

"Most ISKCON devotees probably aren't," he said.

"Tell me what happened," I said, "and I'll let them know."

“The hurricane hit on a Monday morning,” he began. “We had just celebrated Janmastami and Srila Prabhupada’s Vyasa-puja over the weekend. Because severe hurricane warnings had been issued, a number of New Talavan families had left for Atlanta, Georgia. But not everyone had a place to relocate. Around seven families and fifteen single men and women remained.

“I was performing mangala-arati in the temple when the storm hit. The winds were so strong I thought the roof was going to come off. After arati all the devotees sat together. We could see debris flying around outside. Electrical lines were down showering sparks and the sound of the wind was overwhelming. It was frightening, but the devotees sat calmly chanting Hare Krsna.

“When the eye of the storm was overhead, it became quiet, and I ran outside to assess the damage. It was a scene of devastation. Debris was everywhere. Many of the trees on our property had been blown down. Much of our fencing was destroyed. Our cows were roaming around confused. I found several of them dead, killed by falling trees. Our workshop was completely destroyed. After waiting out the remainder of the storm we discovered that four devotees’ homes had excessive damage.

“What we didn’t realize immediately was the extent of the damage in the region. Much of New Orleans was under water for 30 days. Trees littered the roads in all directions. A number of electrical poles in the region were down and as a result cell phones, landlines, and computers didn’t work for weeks. For an entire month there were no commercial or retail stores open along the south coast. Schools were closed for a year and a half, and New Orleans Airport was not operational for six months.

“Our first order of business was to clear the roads on our property with chainsaws and try to mend enough fences to keep our cows contained. We spent a lot of time re-roofing some of the buildings.

“Despite the desperate situation we were better off than many of our neighbors because we had two essential things: a generator that enabled us to pump clean water and liquid propane gas for cooking. Our neighbors didn’t have clean water because many of the pipes delivering public water had broken, and the supplies were contaminated. And most people had no means to cook because they couldn’t get into town to buy propane.

“But our greatest asset was that we had a satellite dish to communicate with the outside world. We immediately informed devotees in various temples that we were okay, that no one was injured, and we had basic supplies and facilities for survival.

“Then for days we sat back and waited. Because there were so many trees on the roads, we couldn’t go outside the community and no one could come in. It took a massive effort on the part of the Mississippi authorities just to clear the roads.

“The positive side was that we were obliged to live a very simple life. In particular, because there was no electricity we went to bed when the sun set and had mangala-arati every morning by candlelight. Because of our Krsna-conscious training we were prepared for such adjustments. But you can imagine how difficult it was for others. Sanitation was a real problem. People were forced to evacuate into plastic bags in their homes and bury the bags in their gardens.

“After several days we received news that some of the roads had been cleared. Then we began our real work: distributing Krsna’s mercy in the form of prasadam.

“Fortunately, besides our propane gas we also had extra food supplies because we had stocked a lot of bhoga for Janmastami. So we began a daily program of cooking and driving south to the coastal areas to distribute hot prasadam in the towns. The US Federal Emergency Management Agency [FEMA], charged with disaster mitigation and recovery, had been slow to respond, so in many places we were the first relief workers of any kind to arrive. People really appreciated it.

“For weeks we gave out a thousand plates a day. We also had kirtan and chanted Hare Krsna. At one point when FEMA complained that smaller relief organizations were complicating things in the area, a local congressman said to us, ‘You have my support. Keep doing what you’re doing, and don’t worry what FEMA says.’

“Because of the huge demand for food we soon ran out of supplies and made an appeal via our satellite dish to ISKCON temples around America. Within days devotees in Alachua, Florida, sent a truck with 20 thousand dollars worth of food-stuffs. Priyavrata das, who heads Food for Life Global in Washington, DC, teamed up with Sudajivana dasa, who gathered thousands of dollars of supplies and drove his own truck to the disaster area.

“In order to keep up the distribution we had to repair our own buildings. We made another satellite appeal and donations arrived quickly. Bir Krsna Goswami and I collected 40 thousand dollars from around the country in just a couple of weeks. Before the storm we were struggling to make ends meet.

Suddenly Krsna was sending us unlimited resources to preach in the middle of the catastrophe.

“With renewed enthusiasm, we continued our distribution through the hard-hit coastal towns. We’d focus on areas where the Mississippi National Guard was distributing water and ice. People would form lines to receive those staples and we’d give them prasadam as a bonus. The soldiers were especially happy to get hot food because all they had were cold, army-style rations. We made a lot of friends down there.

“One advantage for our distributors was that the local telephone company, Southern Bell, put up free phone lines for a while. Our devotees from India were in bliss because they could phone home free for hours.

“In New Orleans our temple miraculously escaped any significant damage, but city officials deemed the whole area uninhabitable and the 22 devotees in the temple were asked to leave. Fearing that the temple would be looted or damaged devotees hesitated. Every day the Louisiana National Guard, which was sent into the city after the hurricane, would come and tell them to go.

“Eventually the devotees from Dallas sent a huge truck to New Orleans to collect the large Radha-Krsna Deities and other paraphernalia in the temple. It was a difficult mission because the military and police were admitting only essential vehicles for maintaining order and other emergency services. But a reporter accompanied the devotees in the truck, and each time they were stopped at a checkpoint he would identify himself and ask why the devotees were not being allowed in to save precious religious artifacts. Not wanting to get negative publicity, the officials let them through at each checkpoint.

“At the temple the devotees had just started loading the Deities when a military patrol arrived and wanted to seize the truck. They said it had entered the city illegally and they were taking it for emergency work elsewhere. When the devotees refused, an argument broke out. At one point the head of the patrol threatened the devotees’ lives. Another truck of the same size was then seen being driven along the opposite side of the street. Apparently it was an illegal vehicle, which the patrol had no hesitation in requisitioning. The devotees continued loading the Deities and other important temple paraphernalia into their truck and quickly left for Dallas.

“The hurricane continues to be a source of great misfortune for this region. But devotees provided so much relief that in appreciation the Bush-Clinton Fund, set up to channel donations to reinvigorate the area, gave us 30 thousand dollars to fix our broken buildings. The US Department of Agriculture also gave us a grant of 36 thousand dollars to rebuild our fences as well as buy a bulldozer to pile up the fallen trees in the forests on our property.

“Most important is that our distribution of prasadam and chanting of the holy names earned us respect and admiration, especially among the local and federal authorities. By combining forces with them, we were able to offset some of the suffering that Katrina wrought and to give people genuine spiritual welfare.”

Srila Prabhupada writes:

Somehow or other everyone can manage to perform such a yajna [sankirtana] and distribute prasadam to the people in general. That is quite sufficient for this age of Kali. The Hare Kṛṣṇa Movement is based on this principle: chant the Hare Kṛṣṇa mantra at every moment,

HURRICANE KATRINA REVISITED

both inside and outside of the temples, and, as far as possible, distribute prasadam. This process can be accelerated with the help of the state administrators and those who are producing the country's wealth. Simply by liberal distribution of prasadam and sankirtana, the whole world can become peaceful and prosperous.

[*Srimad Bhagavatam* 4.12.10 purport]

CHAPTER SIX



ENEMIES IN
POWERFUL
POSITIONS

| MAY 2008 |

I arrived back in Europe in early May and met with Jayatam dasa and Nandini dasi to discuss the summer Festival of India tour in Poland. We spend the entire year organizing the 50 festivals, including the Woodstock Festival, that we hold along the Baltic Sea coast. In total, the festivals attract some 750,000 people.

The final weeks before the first festival are always hectic. This year we faced the challenge of obtaining special visas for the 200 Russian and Ukrainian devotees on the tour. They needed Schengen visas, which allow the holder to enter the European Union and visit most countries there for three months. To obtain it, however, one must have a job, a bank account, and references.

ॐ नमो भगवते वासुदेवाय

It poses a problem because many of our Russian and Ukrainian devotees live in temples. We had to negotiate at the highest levels, including meeting representatives of the Polish Ministry of External Affairs, to find a solution. The problem was resolved only days before the first festival, and the devotees were granted visas with unprecedented concessions.

“It was only because of our good track record in holding these cultural events for almost 20 years,” Nandini told me.

A contributing factor was the support of the new Indian Ambassador to Poland, who became a welcome ally when he revealed his appreciation for ISKCON and expressed a keen interest in helping us spread Vedic culture in the country.

“ISKCON is India’s cultural ambassador to the world,” he said to Jayatam and Nandini.

He offered to let the Indian Embassy be the official patron of the tour this year. With this diplomatic support we went forward with fresh enthusiasm, putting the Indian flag on our newly designed posters and invitations.

Despite the support, however, we found ourselves facing the usual opposition. In preparation for the tour, Nandini had contacted the town councils in all the towns where we planned to hold festivals. Most welcomed us back, saying they were receiving inquiries from people planning their vacations as to when the Festival of India would be in their town. But one particular town posed a problem for us, and it wasn’t the first time.

It is one of the largest towns along the coast, with a population that swells to several hundreds of thousands during the summer. Our festival there is always our biggest and most prestigious. Months ago Nandini made a request to hold the festival in a large park in the center of town. We were assured by the authorities that there would be no difficulty. But in late May

Nandini received word from the council that the park was being allocated to a handicraft fair for the entire summer.

“This is the problem all along the coast,” Nandini told me over the phone while I was in America. “There are hardly any cultural events anymore. Everything has become business. It’s almost too late now to find another spot, but I’m going to try for the beachfront.”

“The beachfront is the most prestigious place of all,” I said. “If we can’t get the park, how in the world will we get the beachfront?”

The promenade along the beachfront is the very heart of the action in the town during summer. Although we had previously held festivals there, we knew that many of the town’s well-placed people were opposed to our getting the location again.

Nandini contacted the official in charge of the promenade and asked if there were any weekends available. “It’s funny you called just now,” he said. “The spot has been booked for months, but just fifteen minutes ago we had a cancellation for the weekend of July 5th and 6th. Would you like to take those dates?”

Nandini couldn’t believe her ears. “That’s one of the best weekends of the summer,” she thought, and eagerly said she’d take it. She was told the council would be notified and she could sign the contract in the official’s office in two weeks.

Nandini decided that while she was visiting the town she would meet the mayor to talk about the Baltic coast resorts giving preference to business over culture, and she made an appointment for the same day.

The recently elected mayor was no stranger to Nandini. Three years ago he was the headmaster of the biggest high

school in town. He heard about our festival from some students and came to see it himself. He was suffering from a prolonged illness and was interested our Ayurvedic Cures tent.

He waited in a long line to see a devotee consultant in Ayurveda, but the festival ended while he was still waiting. He felt frustrated and approached Nandini, who was standing nearby. She arranged to bring the consultant to the headmaster's home that same night.

It was 11:00 PM when they arrived, but he was eager to receive them, and they spoke well into the night. Nandini and the consultant encouraged the headmaster to live a simpler life and give up some of his bad habits. He took their advice and was eventually cured. This year he ran for the office of mayor and won. He was still grateful to the devotees.

Two weeks later Nandini drove north to sign the contract for the spot on the beachfront. The official in charge of the promenade greeted her enthusiastically. "Everything's all right," he said. "I'm just waiting for the final paper from the town hall. Please come back in half an hour."

When she returned the man's demeanor had changed. "I'm sorry," he said. "There's been a last-minute change. The council has canceled your event, and a soccer match has been scheduled for that weekend."

"How can that be?" Nandini said. "You told me two weeks ago the spot was open and you reserved it for us."

The man looked down. "I'm sorry," he said. "There is nothing that can be done. The council has made its decision."

"I'll bring this issue up with the mayor," Nandini thought. "By Krsna's arrangement I have an appointment with him in 90 minutes."

On the way out she called me again and updated me on the situation. “It doesn’t look good,” she said, “but I’ll keep trying.”

On the way to the town hall she stopped at the home of an old friend who has connections with the council.

“It’s true what you say,” the woman said. “The council is less and less inclined to cultural events as each summer passes. They give all the prime locations to business enterprises. And I’ll tell you something else: at a recent council meeting your festival was discussed. There was a lot of opposition. That’s when the council decided against giving you the park this year. After the resolution was passed one of the senior council members slammed his fist on the table and said, ‘There will never be another Festival of India in our town!’”

“Was the mayor there?” Nandini asked.

“No, he wasn’t,” her friend said. “Not everyone was pleased, of course. You have a lot of supporters here, but be warned, your enemies are in powerful positions.”

Nandini then left for her appointment with the mayor, where she was greeted by his secretary and escorted into his office.

“It is wonderful news that you’ll be having your festival on the beachfront this year,” the mayor said.

“The festival has been canceled,” Nandini said, holding back her anger. “First we were denied a request to hold it in the park, and now it’s been officially canceled altogether.”

“Canceled?” the mayor said. “Who canceled the festival?”

“The council,” Nandini said, raising her voice.

“But I’m the head of the council, and I wasn’t informed,” the mayor said.

He turned to his secretary. "Have you ever been to the Festival of India?" he said.

"Yes, Lord Mayor," she said, "I have."

"And what did you think of it?" he asked.

She paused for a moment. "It's a wonderful event," she said enthusiastically. "The citizens love that festival, especially the children. They all look forward to it."

"Thank you," the mayor said.

He reflected for a moment then looked at his secretary. "Ask the deputy mayor to come to my office," he said.

Five minutes later the deputy mayor and the council spokesman came into the mayor's office. Without introducing Nandini the mayor talked briefly with the deputy mayor, then leaned back. "Have you ever been to the Festival of India?" he asked the spokesman.

"Oh, yes," the spokesman replied, "several times."

"And did you like it?" the mayor asked.

"Very much so," he replied. "I look forward to it each summer."

The deputy mayor looked disturbed.

The mayor turned to him. "And Mr. Deputy Mayor," he said, "have you ever been to the Festival of India?"

"Yes, I have, Lord Mayor," replied the deputy mayor.

"And what did you think of it?" said the mayor.

"It's terrible," the deputy said. "We should never let that event disgrace our town again."

The mayor then introduced Nandini. "This is Agnieszka," he said. "She's in charge of securing sites for the Festival of India along the coast during the summer. She just informed me that the festival, which had reserved a site along the beach-

front for the first week in July, was canceled this morning by the council.”

The deputy mayor looked down.

The mayor paused for a few moments. “Do you have any idea who in the council took it upon himself to cancel this event?” he said.

The deputy mayor shifted uncomfortably. “I canceled the festival, Lord Mayor,” he said.

The mayor leaned forward. “Without consulting anyone?” he asked.

“Yes,” the deputy mayor replied, “without consulting anyone.”

“Well, let me tell you,” said the mayor, “I’m reinstating this festival on the beachfront for the weekend of July 5th and 6th. Is that absolutely clear, Mr. Deputy Mayor?”

The deputy mayor clenched his fists. He glanced angrily at Nandini and then back at the mayor. “Yes, it is, Lord Mayor,” he said.

The deputy mayor stood up. “And could I be excused now, sir?” he said.

“You’re excused,” the mayor said.

The mayor turned to Nandini. “I hope your festival will be a great success,” he said.

Nandini smiled at the mayor. “We’re hoping the Indian Ambassador will be our special guest at the festival,” she said. “And if he is, diplomatic etiquette would require you to be there as well. That being the case, I’m sure the festival will indeed be a success.”

An hour later Nandini called me. “Guru Maharaja,” she said, “we have the site on the beachfront for the first weekend in July.”

“Wonderful!” I exclaimed. “How in world did you do it?”
“It was all Krsna’s mercy,” she replied. “There’s no other explanation.”

Srila Prabhupada writes:

If the preachers in our Krsna consciousness movement are sincere devotees of Krsna, Krsna will always be with them because He is very kind and favorable to all His devotees. Just as Arjuna and Krsna were victorious in the Battle of Kuruksetra, this Krsna consciousness movement will surely emerge victorious if we but remain sincere devotees of the Lord and serve the Lord according to the advice of predecessors If we attempt this seriously within society, it will be successfully done. There is no question of estimating how this will happen in the mundane sense. But without a doubt, it happens by the grace of Krsna.

[*Sri Caitanya-caritamṛta*, Madhya 4.79, purport]

CHAPTER SEVEN



CAN YOU SEE THIS?

| JULY 1 - 4, 2008 |

The first two festivals of the Polish tour went exceptionally well, with thousands of people attending. Throughout both of them, however, devotees were meditating on the third festival—in the town where the deputy mayor had almost succeeded in canceling the event. It would be our biggest and most prestigious festival of the summer.

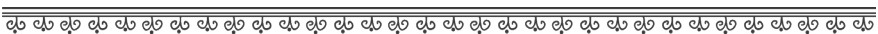
Nandini dasi met with officials at the town hall to discuss receiving the Indian Ambassador as our guest of honor.

The mayor's secretary blushed. "Oh my God!" she exclaimed. "We didn't finalize the plans for his visit before the mayor left on vacation."

"What?" said Nandini. "You mean the mayor won't be opening the event with the ambassador?"

"I'm afraid not," the secretary replied. "Let me call the mayor immediately."

She was unable to reach him and told Nandini she would keep trying and contact her the next day.



At 9:00 am the next day the secretary called. "The mayor apologizes, but he will be unable to attend," she said.

The secretary chuckled. "But he has told the deputy mayor to open the festival," she said.

Nandini could hardly believe her ears. "The deputy mayor?" she said holding back her own laughter. "You mean the one who slammed his fist on the table and said there would never be another Festival of India in your town?"

"That's correct, Madam," said the secretary.

Two days later we began advertising the festival throughout the town. Weaving through thousands of sunbathers on the beach, our Harinam party distributed 12 thousand flyers in just over four hours. As always, people waved and greeted us.

We passed two women lying on the sand. "What is this?" I heard one ask her friend.

"The festival," her friend replied.

"Which festival?" the woman asked.

"The festival!" her friend replied.

"But there are so many festivals," the woman said.

Her friend smiled. "Not like this one," she said. "It's always the biggest and best in town."

Our Harinam party of 100 devotees went out early on the day of the festival. Although rain had been predicted, the demigods played their part and the sky was clear with the sun shining. As we danced and chanted along the boardwalk, the women waved golden-colored Chinese fans that glimmered in the sun. Their bright silk saris moved gracefully in the light breeze coming off the ocean. The men, in well-pressed kurtas and dhotis, some with colorful turbans, played kartalas and other musical instruments.

The people loved it and flocked forward to take pictures with the devotees, and the kirtan party was sometimes stalled for 20 or 30 minutes. While an entire family posed for a photo with us, a devotee distributing invitations came up to me.

“Guru Maharaja,” she said, “I just saw a family laughing and laughing. I asked them why, and the wife replied, ‘Just imagine, we used to think you were a cult. Can you believe it? Calling such culture a cult. It’s so ridiculous.’”

I wanted to inspire the devotees who were setting up the festival site, so I took the kirtan party back along the boardwalk. We could see our new 8-meter-high stage from a distance. Fully automatic, it’s the pride and joy of our festival this summer. It was resting on the boardwalk, with 25 of our tents extending to the beach.

Suddenly, as if from nowhere, dark clouds appeared with a threat of rain. “That’s unusual,” I thought as the wind picked up. “It’s like an inauspicious omen.”

And sure enough, trouble was in the air. Bhakta Dominique, the site manager, came up to me as our kirtan party came close to the site.

“Maharaja,” he began, “we have a serious problem. The owner of the hotel in front of which we’re setting up the festival has ordered us to leave. He’s called the police. It seems he owns this particular portion of the boardwalk, between the hotel and the beach. He says the council hasn’t informed him of the event.”

At that moment the police arrived and spoke to Dominique.

“They say we have to go,” Dominique said. “I’ve called Nandini. She’ll be here in a few minutes.”

“Don’t let the devotees know anything at this point,” I said. “I don’t want them to get discouraged.”

As I directed the kirtan party toward the beach, I turned my head back to Dominique. “Call me with any update,” I said.

An hour later my phone rang. As I pulled it from my kurta pocket, I saw that the clouds were beginning to disperse and the wind was dropping. People who were leaving the beach saw the good weather returning, and they went back to where they had been lying.

“A good omen,” I thought.

“I have good news,” Nandini said over the telephone, and the sun suddenly burst forth from the clouds. I smiled.

“The owner of the hotel has agreed we can stay,” Nandini said. “But it wasn’t easy. When I walked into his office, he began laughing. He said, ‘You’re the organizer of this event? I was expecting a big man, not a tiny woman.’ He said he had 24 court cases going against the town and against people who had attempted to set up events on his portion of the boardwalk. I told him our event was not for commercial purposes and that we are here to share our spiritual culture with the people. Somehow his heart softened, and eventually he said we could stay.

“When I phoned the town hall, the mayor’s secretary said it was true that he owned that area, but she hadn’t had the heart to tell me earlier. When she heard that he had agreed to our event she said, ‘It’s a miracle, simply a miracle.’ Then she laughed and said, ‘Would you like a job with the town council?’ “

I felt so relieved that I encouraged the devotees to chant and dance even more enthusiastically. By now, however, our Harinam party had begun to tire, so I soon ended the kirtan

and we returned to the site. On the way back I overheard people who seemed to notice me and refer to me as guru. I was a little embarrassed and asked Mathuranath das, one of my assistants, how they knew I was the spiritual master.

“Guru Maharaja,” he said, “you’re dressed in saffron cloth, you’re in front of the kirtan party, and you’re obviously much older than the rest of us. What’s more, you’ve been speaking on our festival stage here for the past 18 years.”

As the devotees quickly took lunch and made last-minute preparations for the festival, the Indian ambassador and the deputy mayor arrived backstage along with Jayatam and Nandini. It was obvious that the ambassador was pleased to be there and just as obvious that the deputy mayor felt extremely uncomfortable. He was sweating profusely and wringing his hands while looking around nervously.

Hundreds of people were seated on the benches in the sand before the stage, and many more were walking around the festival site as the ambassador and the deputy mayor came onstage to open the event at 6:00 pm. I’ll never forget the look of astonishment on the deputy mayor’s face when he saw the large number of people and the magnitude of the event. From the stage it was apparent that our colorful festival projected almost to the sea. He stood there dumbfounded as the audience rose and respectfully applauded him and the ambassador.

As the deputy mayor looked out at the people who were waiting for the event to begin and then at the ambassador (a distinguished diplomat eagerly supporting our cause), I could sense a change in his heart. I’ll never know all the unfavorable images he had previously held about our movement. They could have been due to the propaganda our opposition has relentlessly broadcast throughout the country for so long. But those days

are coming to a close, and whatever misconceptions people had about us are gradually fading because of the many festivals we have held over the years, festivals that have convinced them of our authenticity and melted their hearts in affection for us.

I watched as the deputy mayor surveyed the festival grounds. Our restaurant was full of people eating prasadam, and the yoga tent was overflowing with participants. In the cooking tent, a demonstration was packed with women eager to learn the art of vegetarian cooking. All the tents with displays on Vedic culture were jam-packed, and the questions-and-answers tent overflowed. People were walking around with Srila Prabhupada's books already in hand, and many of the children's faces were decorated with gopi dots. The huge site was so packed it was hard to move anywhere.

The deputy mayor stared in amazement, and I could hardly believe my eyes when I saw him look down at his prepared speech and then put his notes back in his pocket. Glancing once more over the event before him, he stepped up to the microphone and began to speak off the cuff.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he began, "it is indeed an honor for our town to host this great event here on our beautiful coast."

Devotees looked at each other in astonishment. No one had expected him to glorify us.

"The very fact that the Indian Ambassador is present shows the importance of the occasion," said the deputy mayor.

Devotees shook their heads in disbelief.

"Looking around," he said, "we can see it is an event of great magnitude, bringing an ancient and colorful culture to our shores."

My mind turned to Srila Prabhupada. "My beloved spiritual master," I prayed, "can you see this? Can you see this?"

The deputy mayor continued. “As many of our respected citizens know,” he said, “we reserve this boardwalk location for only the most prestigious events, and I consider this Festival of India to be such an event.”

Devotees were grinning from ear to ear.

“Thus,” he continued, “as deputy mayor I hereby declare that our town will happily host this event, on this very spot, for many years to come. My dear citizens and tourists, please enjoy this wonderful event.”

The crowd began to clap politely, but the devotees stood up and wildly applauded. I was unable to say or do anything. I sat in my seat dumbstruck, my eyes brimming with tears.

“Who would have ever imagined?” I thought. “Such things are possible only by the mercy of Lord Caitanya.”

Stepping back from the microphone, the deputy mayor asked the ambassador to come forward and say a few words. The ambassador was full of praise for our movement and all that we are doing to spread Kṛṣṇa consciousness in Poland. In fact, he was so inspired that after leaving the stage he spent two hours in the questions-and-answers tent fielding questions from the public.

A man challenged him. “Does this Hare Kṛṣṇa movement really represent your culture?” the man asked.

“Yes,” the ambassador replied with a smile, “to the highest degree.”

Afterwards he returned to the main stage and delivered a half-hour lecture on the importance of controlling the senses to understand the self within.

That evening, after the guests had left, I lingered as devotees cleaned up the site. I sat on an empty bench and remembered the great display of Lord Caitanya’s mercy I had seen that day.

CAN YOU SEE THIS?

“How privileged I feel to be part of this movement!” I thought. “It is bringing unlimited good fortune to the people of this country. It is astonishing that the incredible things I read in sastra, I am able to see first-hand through this festival. Such are the modern-day pastimes of Lord Caitanya, inspiring devotees and non-devotees alike.”

*satatam janata bhava tapa haram
paramartha parayana loka gatim
nava leha karam jagat tapa haram
pranamami saci suta gaura varam*

I bow down to Gaura, the beautiful son of Mother Saci, who is always removing the suffering of people’s material existence, who is the goal of life for those who are dedicated to their supreme interest, who inspires materialists to accept transcendental qualities and to become like bees, eager to lick up the honey of krsna-katha, and who removes all fear of the material world.

[Sri Sarvabhauma Bhattacharya, *Sri Gauranga-mahima*, verse 4]

CHAPTER EIGHT



THE CURSE

| JULY 5 – 12, 2008 |

The devotees were in high spirits after our resounding success with the festival on the beachfront. The next day we drove to Mrzezyno, the site of our next program. Several devotees asked me whether we could go out chanting earlier than usual.

I smiled. “Conserve your energy,” I said. “We’ve got 43 more festivals to go.”

At no other time of the year do we all work so hard for such an extended period. We put on a major event every day of the week, except Monday, for nearly two months. In other places, devotees may take days to recover from Ratha-yatra or Gaurapurnima, but on the tour, each day is a major festival with another the next day.

How do the devotees do it? By enjoying each other’s company and sharing their good fortune with those who are not yet devotees. It’s not surprising. It’s been going on for hundreds of years.

ॐ नमो भगवते वासुदेवाय

Sri Narahari Chakravarti Thakura writes: News of how countless persons were being converted to Vaisnavism spread throughout the land. All of the devotees became enlivened because of this. Harinama das and Ramakrishna das happily engaged themselves in performing sankirtan. As a result, they became completely indifferent towards materialistic life after gaining the most valuable wealth of devotional service to the Lord. Having become devotees, they began to stay with Balarama Kaviraja so that they could always be engaged in hearing and chanting the glories of the Lord.

[Narottama-vilasa, 10th vilasa]

That morning, our Harinam party chanted down the beach giving out invitations and telling people of the coming event in the evening. The devotees didn't have to wait long to see the effect of their sincere efforts. As we passed a family sitting in deckchairs on the sand, the man called me and one of my disciples over.

"We're thrilled that you're having your festival while we're on vacation here," he said. "We came last year and really enjoyed it. In fact, we can't forget you even for a day. Our four-year-old daughter is your biggest fan. All year long, every day, she sings your song, even in her sleep."

"Which song, Sir?" I asked.

"Marta," the father said, "sing the song."

Little Marta stood up with a big smile and bright face. She began singing:

*Hare Krsna, Hare Krsna, Krsna Krsna, Hare Hare,
Hare Rama, Hare Rama, Rama Rama, Hare Hare.*

She sang the verse not once, but repeatedly. We excused ourselves and ran to catch up with the kirtan party, which had moved farther down the beach.

A little later, as we came off the beach onto the boardwalk, we saw a 10-year-old boy doing yoga with a collection box in front of him. I was impressed. His limbs were so subtle that he was easily performing yogic asanas that only an accomplished yogi might tackle.

“Where did you learn this?” a devotee asked him.

“I didn’t learn it from anyone,” the boy replied. “It came naturally. I just knew how to do it from when I was very young. I try to teach yoga at my school, but most of the kids aren’t interested. They’re just into football or chasing after girls all day. Some of them even take drugs. They’re so stupid. I’m alone most of the time. I’m trying to collect money here so one day I can go to India and learn yoga from a guru in the Himalayas.”

As we walked away, two verses from *Bhagavad-gita* came to my mind:

The unsuccessful yogi, after many, many years of enjoyment on the planets of the pious living entities, is born into a family of righteous people, or into a family of rich aristocracy.

On taking such a birth, he again revives the divine consciousness of his previous life, and he tries to make further progress in order to achieve complete success, O son of Kuru.

[*Bhagavad-gita* 6.41,43]

After four hours, I brought the Harinam party back to the festival site. Our prasadam van had just arrived, and the devo-

tees ate with gusto. They then took a few minutes to rest on the grass before going on to their festival services. I marveled at their stamina: after four hours of Harinam they were beginning five hours of festival duties with only a short break.

As I walked close to the stage Bhakta Dominik approached me with disturbing news.

“Two nuns were just here, walking around and appreciating the festival site,” he said. “But when they were told that we are Hare Kṛṣṇa devotees they suddenly became outraged and began cursing us. ‘You’re a dangerous sect!’ one of them screamed. ‘You’ve brought the Devil to our town!’

“The other nun yelled, ‘God will personally smite you down! He’ll punish you and everyone who comes to this festival! We curse you! We curse you that your event will be destroyed even before it begins!’

“Then they went away. A number of people were watching and some left with them. It was very unpleasant.”

I walked around the festival site to be sure all the tents were open and the devotees in their places. Guests were flooding in, and the opening bhajan onstage was just beginning. The sweet music permeated the entire area, creating a wonderful atmosphere.

Suddenly the sound and lights onstage went dead. Our three-ton generator had ground to a halt. Dominik and three boys from the maintenance crew ran backstage and began working frantically.

I was at a loss to understand how a practically new generator could break down. After 20 anxious minutes the audience was becoming restless. Then Dominik came over and told me they couldn’t find the problem.

“Dominik,” I said, “we’ve got five hundred people in front of that stage. They’ll leave unless we can continue.”

I sat watching the crowd. Another 20 minutes passed and people started to leave. Suddenly a big puff of white smoke belched from the generator. Dominik, his body half inside the machine, turned and gave me a thumbs-up. Electricity returned to the stage.

“Start the show,” I hollered to the stage crew. Within seconds the bhajan began, but moments later the lights failed again.

One of the boys from the stage crew called out to me. “Maharaja,” he shouted, “should we stop the show?”

“No,” I shouted. “The sound is working. Continue without the lights.”

It was overcast, making it difficult to see what was happening on the stage, but we had no choice. Dominik and his crew were now under the stage working on the lighting system. Fifteen minutes later the lights came on again. But again the generator stopped, along with the program. Having seen at least part of the show, the crowd was graciously patient as the boys worked furiously to fix the generator. Ten minutes later, it started up again.

“Nothing like this has ever happened before,” I thought. I looked at the thousands of people milling around our festival site, and I prayed that this was the end of our difficulties.

The very next moment Dominik came running up. “Maharaja,” he said, “I inexplicably left all the CDs for the stage performances back at the base. I sent someone to get them, but it will take two hours.”

I was dumbstruck. We had no choice but to play CDs from last year. With a capacity crowd the problems that kept appear-

ing were more than disappointing. I decided not to dwell on them and headed to the restaurant.

On the way, I saw a man sitting down, leaning against a trash can. From his torn clothes, unshaved face, and sad appearance, I could tell he was a homeless person. Coming closer, I was surprised to see him drawing a beautiful picture of the festival with colored pencils.

“You’re very talented,” I said to him.

He looked up. “Thank you,” he said. “I draw only the beautiful things of the world. That way I maintain some hope in my miserable life.”

“Where did you learn to draw like that?” I asked.

“It’s always been a hobby,” he said. “I’m an accountant by profession. I was once wealthy with a prestigious job, a beautiful wife, children, and my own house, but I lost everything.”

“But surely a gifted and intelligent man like you can pick himself up again,” I said.

“Not if it’s my destiny to remain like this,” he said. “I hope to have better luck in my next life.”

“Do you believe in reincarnation?” I asked.

“Yes, I do,” he said. “Every day I read the *Bhagavad-gita*. It’s my only possession. Many years ago I bought it from someone who was distributing books on the street. It had the original Sanskrit, translations, and purports by Swami Prabhupada. I wasn’t really that interested, but I kept it at home. It’s the only thing I took with me when everything fell apart. It’s in my backpack in the forest, under a tree.”

“That’s amazing,” I said. “Did you know this festival is based upon the teachings of *Bhagavad-gita*?”

“I can see that,” he said.

I excused myself and continued walking to the restaurant. Two hours later the same man approached me as I was watching our now fully functional stage show from a distance.

“Excuse me,” he said. “Someone told me you’re the guru.”

“Yes,” I said, “I am the spiritual master for some of these devotees.”

“Thank you for taking the time to speak to me,” he said. “I didn’t realize who you were.”

“I’m no one special,” I said. “I’m just fortunate to have met the person who translated the *Bhagavad-gita* you are reading.”

“I do feel fortunate to have met you,” he said. “I’d like to ask you several questions but I have to leave now. Is it possible we could meet at the next festival in three days? I know the location.”

“It’s a long way,” I said.

“I’ll manage,” he said. “It’s that important to me.”

“Then I’ll see you there,” I said.

That evening a devotee asked a question. “Guru Maharaja,” he said, “some of the devotees are saying that we had so many problems at the beginning of the festival because the nuns cursed us. Do you think that’s true?”

“That’s ridiculous,” I said. “Devotees are always protected by the Lord. What’s more, this festival is just like Vaikuntha, the spiritual world. One obtains only good fortune here. Curses are ineffective.”

Srila Prabhupada writes:

Because of the curse of Daksa, Narada is never allowed to live continuously in one place. Sridhara Swami, however, has pointed out, *na tasyam sapadeh prabhavah*: in Dwarka there is no influence of curses or other such evils, because Dwarka is the abode of the Supreme

THE CURSE

Personality of Godhead and is always protected by His arms, as shown by the word *govinda-bhuja-guptayam*. The conditioned souls are struggling within the kingdom of *maya* against the cruel laws of material nature, such as birth, death, old age and disease, but if such conditioned souls have the good fortune to enter the city of the Supreme Personality of Godhead, whether Dwarka, Mathura or Vrindavana, and live there under the direct protection of the omnipotent arms of the Supreme Lord, Krsna, they will experience the unlimited transcendental bliss of real life, which is eternal and meant to be lived in the personal company of God.

[*Srimad Bhagavatam* 11.2.1, purport]

CHAPTER NINE



SPECIAL MENTION

| JULY 13 - 15, 2008 |

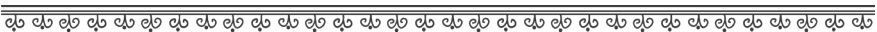
News of the good weather along the Baltic Sea coast spread throughout Poland, and the beaches swelled with vacationers from all over the country. By the second day of Harinam on the crowded streets of Niechorze, the town was buzzing about our festival for that evening. As I brought the Harinam back to the festival site in the afternoon, a young man came up to me.

“I’ve been watching you singing and dancing all day,” he said. “Is this something new or an ancient tradition?”

“It’s one of the oldest spiritual traditions in the world,” I said. “It’s based on the teachings of *Bhagavad-gita*, which was spoken by Lord Krsna five thousand years ago.”

“I study a lot of old cultures,” he said. “Did you know the Mayan calendar ends on December 21, 2012? Some people say a cataclysmic event at that time will cause the world to end.”

“I’m aware of that calendar,” I said, “but the *Bhagavad-gita* is more authoritative and doesn’t mention that the world will come to an end then.”



“When will it end?” he said as we walked beside the Harinam party.

I chuckled. “Long enough away that you don’t have to worry about it,” I said.

“But I want to know exactly when,” he said.

“At the close of Lord Brahma’s life, the universe will be destroyed,” I said, “and that’s in about 311 trillion, 40 billion earth years.”

“Wow!” he said, “Then what happens?”

“The universe is created all over again,” I said. “Let’s sit on the bench over there, and we’ll talk in more detail.”

We had a long conversation about the creation and dissolution of the cosmos. Finally, he lifted up his hand. “Just look at my arm,” he said. “The hairs are standing on end. You guys have a lot of knowledge. Where can I learn more?”

“At the festival,” I said. “Just follow me.”

As we walked towards the festival site, dark clouds suddenly gathered overhead, threatening to rain.

“Oh, no,” I thought. “Don’t rain now, just as the festival is about to begin.”

But sure enough, as the first bhajan got under way, it started to rain. People scattered to take shelter in our tents. As I stood dejected, a little girl looked at me with concern. “Sir,” she said, “why does it always rain whenever you have a festival here?”

It continued raining intermittently throughout most of the event. Many people went home, but to my amazement, when the sky cleared during the last hour, people flooded back to the site, eager for any remnants of the show. Within minutes, 600 people were sitting on benches or standing in front of the stage. Every tent was brimming with guests.

I gave a short lecture from the stage emphasizing the importance of chanting Hare Krsna and then went to check on the astrology tent. As soon as I arrived, our astrologer, Prahlad Nrsimha dasa, came up to me.

“Maharaja,” he said, “a very nice gentleman just left. I was reading his chart and offered him advice for more than an hour. When he understood the difficulties that lay ahead in his life, he looked at me and said, ‘I can try to change my bad habits, as you’re suggesting, but I won’t be able to do it alone. I’ll need God’s help. What I really need from you is a prayer. Can you recommend one for me?’

“Just at that moment you were beginning your lecture on the stage. I told him to go outside the tent and listen. When you finished he came back in and said with a smile, ‘I learned the prayer I wanted. Thank you.’ I gave him a set of japa beads, and he was chanting on them even as he left.”

Before the last kirtan our master of ceremonies, Tribuanesvara das, announced that we would be opening the festival the next day with a Vedic wedding for three devotee couples. As people left I could hear them speaking excitedly about the event.

The rain came back the following afternoon, this time with a strong wind, and we struggled to set the stage for the wedding. At one point I even thought of canceling the event, but suddenly, just minutes before the festival was to begin, the rain stopped and the wind died down. As if on cue, people came out of their homes and tourist bungalows onto the festival grounds.

As the clouds were disappearing on the horizon, a devotee turned to me. “If that doesn’t give one faith in the Lord,” he said, “what will?”

“True,” I said, “and we’ll acknowledge that mercy.”

“What do you mean?” he said.

I smiled. “You’ll see later,” I said.

As I walked to the stage to preside over the marriage, a man with his five-year-old daughter stopped me.

“I want to thank you for giving my daughter this sari on-stage last night,” he said. “She was one of the girls who won the dancing competition. When we got home she insisted on sleeping in it. This morning we had to wash it, as she wanted to wear it again today. But as you can imagine, my wife and I had no idea how to dress our little girl in six meters of cloth. I even went on the Internet to search for a method. Eventually, we managed. I was supposed to return to work in Warsaw today, but my daughter cried so much and insisted that we come for the wedding that I called in sick, and here we are.”

The marriage ceremony was a big hit with the crowd of several thousand. While the couples were sitting and throwing grains into the fire and the priest chanted mantras, a devotee was distributing rice throughout the crowd so people could throw it on the couples at the end. But following the example of the newlyweds, everyone started throwing rice into the fire whenever the priest said “svaha.” With every mantra, a deluge of rice would fly through the air onto the stage and into the fire.

A devotee came running up to me. “Maharaja,” he said, “you can’t let them do this. They’re not purified. It will ruin the yajna”

I laughed. “Try to stop them,” I said. “It’s impossible. Just take it as another installment of Lord Caitanya’s mercy.”

After the ceremony I stood before the crowd and thanked them for coming. Then I made an extra announcement. “Ladies

and gentlemen,” I said, “before we finish, I’d like to make special mention of someone who is very near and dear to us all. As you know, until the moment we began today, the weather was terrible. Then suddenly it changed for the better, giving us the opportunity to hold this wedding. We have only one person to thank for that, and that is the good Lord above. Please everyone, stand and applaud His mercy upon these young couples.”

I’ll never forget how the crowd applauded the Lord that day. They went on and on, and some even looked towards the heavens. As we were all loudly acknowledging His mercy, I took it to be as good as sankirtan, the congregational chanting of the holy names. Such is the effect of just one of our festivals. I can only imagine what additional nectar awaits us as we continue to spread the mercy of Lord Caitanya along the Baltic coast.

*kecit sagara bhū dharan api parakramanti nrtyanti vai
kecid deva purandaradisū maha ksepam ksepam ksipanto muhuh
anandodbhata jala vihvalataya te dvaitacandradayah
ke ke noddhatavanta idrsi punas caitanya nrtyotsave*

Some dance so enthusiastically they seem to leap over mountains and oceans, and others repeatedly revile Indra and the other demigods. Who among the devotees headed by Avaitacandra is not now overwhelmed with bliss in the dancing festival of Lord Caitanya?

[Srila Prabodhananda Sarasvati:
Sri Caitanya-candramrta, chapter 2, text 27]

CHAPTER TEN



TIMES HAVE CHANGED

| JULY 18 – 20, 2008 |

Although we have had resounding success with our festivals this summer, we have had some setbacks as well. We thought we had another setback when Nandini dasi called the man in charge of the amphitheater in Miedzzydroje, where our festival was to take place in two weeks.

Miedzzydroje is host to an annual summer event featuring Poland's best-known movie stars and other entertainers. Its fine beaches draw hundreds of thousands of vacationers every July and August.

"I'm the new director of the amphitheater," said the man who answered Nandini's call, "and I say you can take your festival and go back to India."

"But we have a contract," said Nandini.

The man laughed. "Your contract's in my garbage can," he said and hung up.

ॐ नमो भगवते वासुदेवाय ॐ नमो भगवते वासुदेवाय ॐ नमो भगवते वासुदेवाय ॐ नमो भगवते वासुदेवाय ॐ नमो भगवते वासुदेवाय ॐ नमो भगवते वासुदेवाय ॐ नमो भगवते वासुदेवाय ॐ नमो भगवते वासुदेवाय ॐ नमो भगवते वासुदेवाय ॐ नमो भगवते वासुदेवाय

The next day Nandini called the town hall to inform officials we wouldn't be coming. "We have to cancel all previous arrangements for water, electricity, and security for our festival," she said. "The director of the amphitheater canceled our event yesterday."

"Oh, no," said the woman who answered the phone. "Wait just a moment. Let me get the mayor's secretary."

"How dare he treat you in such a way!" said the secretary. "Let me discuss this with the mayor, and we'll get back to you."

Meanwhile, we began making plans to do the festival in another town.

Two days later the mayor's secretary called Nandini. "The mayor knows of your event," she began. "He would like to offer you the grassy field just off the boardwalk this weekend for your festival. It's where the festival for the movie stars is held each summer. We've never given it for any other function."

Nandini was speechless.

"Hello?" said the secretary. "Are you there?"

Nandini collected herself. "Yes," she said. "We accept the mayor's gracious offer. Please thank him."

Nandini called and told me of the windfall.

"I've been eyeing that spot for 18 years," I said. "It's a dream come true."

But the coming weekend was a week earlier than we had planned for the festival in Miedzyzdroje.

"We don't have enough time to advertise the event," said Nandini. "It's only a few days away."

"We'll try our best," I said. "And depend on Krsna."

Two hours later she called me back. "Guru Maharaja," she said, "you won't believe what just happened. As I was driving

back to our base, I tuned into the main Polish radio channel to listen to the weather forecast. The news was just finishing, and the announcer said that anyone who knew of a significant entertainment event that was taking place this summer could call in, and they would announce it. As he gave the number, I pulled over to the side of the road and immediately called the station.

“After describing our festival in Miedzyzdroje, the station decided to put me on live. I spoke for more than five minutes. I described the entire festival in detail: the stage show, the restaurant, the yoga classes, the exhibitions, everything.

“I concluded by giving my number and the address of our website. As soon as I hung up I was inundated with calls from people asking for more information. Jayatam das just called to say that 600 people have logged on to our website in the past half hour.

“Two minutes ago a representative of the second-largest radio station in the country called. He had been listening to me on the rival station’s broadcast. He said his station wants to do a special show on the festival in Miedzyzdroje. It will publicize the event during the next few days. I’m on my way for the interview now. Along with your Harinam, we now have more publicity than we could ever have imagined. Can you believe it?”

“I can,” I said with a smile. And I quoted a verse that seemed more relevant than ever:

*ananyas cintayanto mam
ye janah paryupasate
tesam nityabhiyuktanam
yoga-ksemam vahamy aham*

But those who always worship Me with exclusive devotion, meditating on My transcendental form—to them I carry what they lack, and I preserve what they have.

[*Bhagavad-gita* 9.22]

The next day we went for Harinam on Miedzyzdroje's long white beach. Only the wealthy can afford to go on vacation there, so the beach was packed with many well-to-do people. As we stepped onto the sand, I flashed back to the late 1970s, when I would often take a ragtag handful of brahmacharis on Harinams during the summer in St Tropez, a prestigious town on the French Riviera. But people hardly took notice. I remember thinking, "We're supposed to be representing the highest culture, but we have little to show for it."

We started chanting down the crowded beach in Miedzyzdroje. "How times have changed!" I thought. Hearing our kirtan, everyone looked up. Many smiled, and why not? The devotees were blissful, the kirtan was melodious, and we all danced in well-rehearsed, choreographed steps. Each devotee wore a colorful silk garland and held either a musical instrument, a beautiful Chinese fan, an exotic flag, or an umbrella from Bali. People carefully read our attractive invitations. None ended up on the ground—a sure sign that many would come to the festival.

As we passed a family lying in the sun, the mother stood up with her three-year-old daughter in her arms. "One day, darling," said the mother to the daughter, "you can join the Hare Krsnas."

Yes, the times have definitely changed, and the reason is the devotees' enthusiasm for chanting the holy names. Because we chant for long hours every day, the devotees are always in a joyful mood. I sometimes lament that, for whatever reason, there

is not as much kirtan in our movement on a daily basis as there used to be. Kirtan is central to happiness in every devotee's life.

*yavat achila sabe mahaprabhu sange
prati dina ei mata kare kirtana range*

As long as the devotees remained at Jagannatha Puri with Sri Caitanya Mahaprabhu, the pastime of sankirtan was performed with great jubilation every day.

[*Sri Caitanya-caritamṛta*, Madhya 11.241]

The day of the festival we held a last Harinam along the boardwalk. We had already distributed more than 30 thousand invitations, but we wanted to make sure that as many people as possible were informed. As we chanted and danced up and down the long walkway, we passed the grassy area where our boys were setting up the huge stage and colored tents. It was a big operation, and people stopped to watch. At one point we also stopped and had kirtan in front of the site.

While distributing invitations I overheard a lady talking to her friend. "They were in the amphitheater last year," she said. "Now they have a much better location. Just look at their stage. Now we'll really get to appreciate their festival."

As we wound around town one more time, a devotee pointed out that people were wearing silk garlands similar to ours.

"They sell them in the shops," he said. "I've seen a lot of people wearing them along the coast. It's like a fad now. I've even seen some people with fans like ours."

"I've noticed, too," I said.

The devotee frowned. "They're just copying us," he said. "They've obviously seen our Harinams over the years, and now they're copying us."

“No,” I said, “it’s good. There’s a saying that imitation is the highest form of flattery.”

I took the Harinam party back to the site a little early so everyone could rest and take prasadam. But to my amazement, people started arriving an hour before the event, and I had to push the devotees to finish prasadam quickly and begin their festival duties. By the time the show started, there were three thousand people in front of our stage. Thousands more moved throughout the site. Every tent was overflowing.

“It’s our biggest festival ever,” I said to Jayatam.

“Yes,” he said, “and the quality of the people is the best ever as well.”

I took a chair and sat on a knoll overlooking the festival. “All the hard work,” I thought, “all the organization, the fundraising, the obstacles—it’s all worth it just for this one event.” I sat for a few minutes, relishing the sight of so many people enjoying Krsna consciousness.

Then a girl of about 16 came up to me with a friend. “Do you remember me?” she asked.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I don’t. When did we meet?”

“Seven years ago,” she said. “I was on vacation with my parents, and we came to your festival in Pobierowo. You were telling some children’s stories about Krsna, and I sat and listened for a long time. It was so enchanting.”

“I begged my parents to buy a book. Although they were opposed to your movement, they somehow agreed, and it eventually ended up on a bookshelf in our house. As I grew older I used to read it whenever they weren’t home. In the back of the book it explained how to make chanting beads. One day I went through my mother’s costume jewelry and fashioned a string of

pearls into chanting beads. I've been secretly chanting on them ever since.

"I was elated when I found out you had a festival here today. I begged my parents to come. They were hesitant but finally agreed. We've been through all the tents and exhibits, and they watched the stage show. Now they're eating in your restaurant. I can't believe it. Your festival is so wonderful that they've had a change of heart. They even agreed I could buy real japa beads in the shop. And look, I have neck-beads too. You can't imagine how happy I am. I wish there were a way I could repay you."

I smiled. "You already have," I said. "Your words are more valuable to us than you could ever imagine."

That night, in the final kirtan, many people danced with the devotees. I even saw a man in a wheelchair spinning around when the kirtan got going. The teenage girl was there too, dancing with abandon in front of the stage. As she chanted, her eyes lit up and she held her arms up high. Off to the side her parents looked at her and smiled slightly.

I also smiled as I witnessed the power of the holy names melting the hearts of the fallen souls of this age.

As the sound of the sankirtan penetrated the ether, the entire three worlds began to float on waves of happiness. Huge crowds of people eagerly pushed forward to get a glimpse of the Lord's beautiful dancing, as the demigods showered flowers on His head. Even the lame, the blind, and the deaf suddenly forgot their handicaps and hurried to join the sankirtan. Stonehearted people wept in joy upon hearing the melodious chanting of the Lord's holy names, and animals and birds became restless.

[Sri Narahari Chakravarti Thakura: *Narottama Vilasa*, fourth vilasa]

CHAPTER ELEVEN



WOODSTOCK: A NEW DIRECTION

| AUGUST 1 - 3, 2008 |

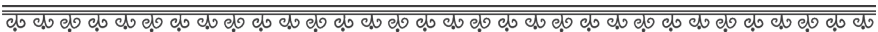
As always, we arrived in Kostrzyn a week before the Woodstock Festival. When I went to look at the enormous field where the event would take place, I was surprised to see that the main stage had already been set up. Hours later our boys arrived and began putting up our large village, including a 60-meter tent and our trademark 3,600-liter, one-ton cooking pot.

It would take five days to assemble the half-acre village. As soon as the boys had put up the big prasadam tent, another group unloaded two tons each of rice, sugar, oil, butter, semolina, and dhal. Nearby they offloaded six thousand liters of oil and 120 thousand papadams.

“It’s going to be a huge yajna,” I thought.

A young couple passed by wearing backpacks. “Early birds,” I said with a wink to Amritananda das.

On the boy’s backpack was scribbled, “Punk’s Not Dead.” He sported a Mohawk haircut dyed blue, yellow, and green.



The girl's hair was purple, and she wore a T-shirt with huge letters saying, "Sex, Drugs, and Rock and Roll."

"That's not the message the organizers are sending out this year," said Amritananda, "Woodstock has moved on."

It was true. This year Jurek Owskiak, the inspiration behind Woodstock and the main organizer of the event, had decided to put up two large circus tents on the grounds. He had invited a number of renowned personalities to speak to the young people about achieving positive goals.

Included in the list were Professor Leszek Balcerowicz, an economist who had served as Poland's finance minister for a number of years; Wieslaw Ochman, a well-known opera singer; and Kamil Durczok, a respected anchor from Polish network news.

We had followed suit and decided to make cultural exchange the focus of Krishna's Village of Peace this year. We decreased the number of devotee rock bands to play on our own stage and were scheduling devotees to speak about spiritual science, Ayurvedic medicine, devotional yoga, and solutions to environmental problems.

When the Indian Ambassador to Poland, His Excellency Chandra Mohan Bhandari, heard about the new direction Woodstock was taking, he asked if we could arrange a meeting with him and Jurek. At the meeting the ambassador, eager to promote India's culture among the youth of Poland, suggested that this year's festival emphasize the theme of Indian culture.

The ambassador offered to help by bringing several prominent entertainers and Ayurvedic physicians along with displays of Indian handicraft to the festival. Jurek agreed and suggested a title, Mala Indie, or Little India. The ambassador decided to spend the entire three days of Woodstock participating in the

Village of Peace, and we booked a hotel room for him and his family.

Woodstock was being billed as Europe's largest open-air music event with 52 rock bands plus Warsaw's Philharmonic Orchestra to add a touch of culture. The Woodstock field soon filled to capacity with an ocean of tents and more than 300 thousand young people.

The day before Woodstock began, we opened the Village of Peace. As always, kids flooded onto our site, eager for everything we had to offer. A large tent erected especially for kirtan was packed as Bhakti Bringa Govinda Maharaja charmed the audience with his kirtans and got hundreds to chant and dance along with him into the wee hours. The tons of foodstuffs we had stockpiled soon turned into thousands of plates of delicious prasadam, much appreciated by the crowds. As always, Krishna's Village of Peace became the place to eat.

The next day, the Woodstock Festival officially opened. Our large Ratha-yatra chariot began moving along the main thoroughfare of the festival, accompanied by hundreds of devotees and tumultuous chanting of the holy names.

At the same time, Jurek held a media conference near the main stage. His theme of using Woodstock to enlighten the kids about the higher values of life struck a chord with the media. Representatives of every prominent television station, radio station, and newspaper came, and they were intrigued by the presence of the Indian Ambassador and the iconic Professor Balcerowicz, who is credited with having established a robust economy in the 1990's after decades of communism.

After an hour of questions and answers, Jurek glorified us during his closing words: "I have been trying to impress upon all of you for years that the Hare Krishna Movement is not a

cult but an ancient spiritual tradition with much to offer Polish society. The presence of the Indian Ambassador in their village this year obviously confirms this. Please acknowledge this in your reports.”

At the opening ceremony on the main stage before a crowd of 150 thousand kids, Jurek invited everyone to enjoy the music and attend the numerous seminars in the circus tents. While touching on the theme of Little India, he called the ambassador and me to the front of the stage. The crowd cheered, and we waved back.

That evening our Ratha-yatra parade was featured on Poland’s main television news channel. The whole country saw the Lord’s smiling face and His enthusiastic devotees loudly chanting His holy names.

The next day, as the kids poured into our village to take prasadam, visit our tents and exhibits, and join in our kirtans and seminars, I took out our second Ratha-yatra parade. The huge cart rumbled down the road, towering high over people’s heads on the crowded street, and many joined us in pulling on the ropes. Not long after we began, a large group of Christians came from the opposite direction, pulling a large boat made of cloth on a float displaying the words “Noah’s Ark.” They were also singing and dancing, and some kids left us to join them pulling the float.

“They were singing last year,” a devotee said, “but they’ve added the boat, an idea they got from us.”

I noted a touch of pride in his voice. “That’s true,” I said, “but we can learn from them as well. They’ve been successfully preaching in this country for almost 15 hundred years. We arrived only 30 years ago and are struggling to maintain a few small temples.”

When we returned to our village several hours later, we saw long lines of people waiting to get prasadam. On our stage Nandini was translating the ambassador's lecture about self-realization to a crowd of 400. I went in to listen and was pleasantly surprised to hear that his philosophy was in line with our understanding of *Bhagavad-gita*. "The goal of life is not material enjoyment," he concluded, "but bhakti, or the awakening of our love for God, Sri Krishna Bhagavan." Respecting his position as the ambassador, many people listened attentively.

When I walked over to the book tent, it was so packed I could barely walk in. "I just sold several books to an interesting person," said Radha Caran das. "He came with a long list of titles, but somehow I could sense he wasn't so interested, and when I asked why he was buying so many books, he said, 'They're not for me. They're for my cousin. He's a priest in a local village. He's interested in your understanding of God, but he's afraid to come here and buy the books himself.'"

Then I headed to the astrology tent, where Prahlad Nrsimha das was concluding a seminar. Several hundred kids were listening carefully. When he finished he came over to speak to me.

"You see the gentleman over there?" he said, pointing to a man reading *Bhagavad-gita*. "He's come for the past two days and has been asking many interesting questions. But he always sits in front, off to the side. I noticed he never turns around to look at the rest of the audience. I asked him why. He blushed and said he's the local priest. He's fascinated by our philosophy and wants to learn more. He's been coming in normal clothes and keeping a low profile so his congregation won't notice."

As I left the tent I remembered a passage from the writings of Srila Bhaktivinoda Thakur:

The dharma preached by Caitanya Mahaprabhu is universal and not exclusive ... The principle of kirtan as the future church of the world invites all classes of men, without distinction of caste or clan, to the highest cultivation of the spirit. This church, it appears, will spread worldwide and replace all sectarian churches, which exclude outsiders from the precincts of the mosque, church, or temple.

[*Sri Caitanya Mahaprabhu: His Life and Precepts*, pages 68-69]

At the questions-and-answers tent I was surprised to see the ambassador and Nandini. He was answering questions about karma, reincarnation, and vegetarianism. “Not your typical modern-day statesman,” I said to Amritananda.

Passing by our stage, I saw Bhakti Marg Swami encouraging the devotees he had trained for his drama about *Bhagavad-gita*. After the play the kids gave him and the other devotees a big round of applause.

That night in our kirtan tent, BB Govinda Maharaja and I kept more than 100 kids chanting Hare Krishna and dancing until 2:00 am. When we finished, many of them hurried to the food tent, where devotees were still distributing prasadam. Rasikendra das, the devotee in charge of cooking, was smiling. “We’ll easily surpass 120 thousand plates this year,” he told me.

On the final day of Woodstock, all 500 of our devotees rose as early as possible to begin their duties. By noon I was taking the Ratha-yatra cart through the site for one last parade. Many kids joined our ranks and chanted alongside us, and the ambassador also joined us for an hour, pulling on the ropes and chanting along with everyone else. After the parade many kids

came back and sat in our clean field, taking shelter from the loud music on the main stage some distance away.

As I walked around our site, I noticed a few priests in their black robes preaching to some kids eating prasadam. A devotee came up to me. "Maharaja," he said, "should we ask the priests to leave?"

"Why?" I said. "They're not saying anything different from us. If they criticize us, you can politely ask them to leave, but otherwise they are welcome."

I also noticed many families from local towns. During the first few years of Woodstock the local people stayed away from the festival out of fear, but because it had now taken a cultural direction they seemed to feel more comfortable. I smiled seeing many of them wearing Woodstock T-shirts they'd purchased in stands around the site. Some even had their hair temporarily dyed different colors to match the mood.

As I sat watching thousands of people wander through our village, a girl wearing a sari and tilaka came up to me and offered obeisances.

"Hare Krishna," she said. "My name is Ania. I'm 13 years old."

"Hare Krishna," I said. "Did you come with the devotees on one of the buses from Ukraine or Croatia?"

"No," she said. "I live here in Kostrzyn. I've been coming to Krishna's Village of Peace every year since I was nine years old. I wait all year for you to come. Throughout the year I read your books and chant Hare Krishna. My Mom encourages me. She's Catholic, but she says you are worshiping the same God and I can become a Hare Krishna if I want."

"That's very nice," I said.

She paused for a moment. “Actually,” she said, “I came to ask you a special question.”

“Feel free to ask anything you like,” I said.

She hesitated. “Would you please be my spiritual master and accept me as your disciple?” she said. “In the books it says many times that a devotee should learn about Krishna from a spiritual master.”

“But there’s a whole process ...,” I began and then stopped. “How do you know me?”

Her face lit up. “I listen to your lectures every time you are here,” she said. “And I sing Hare Krishna with you well into the night throughout Woodstock. I know you very well.”

Her eyes filled with tears. “Please,” she continued. “I’m lost in this world. I want to go back to Krishna.”

“Well, first you have to ...,” I started to say but again stopped.

“I’ve been praying to God every day for an entire year that you would accept me as your disciple,” she said. “Even on Sundays in church. And I follow all the rules.”

I nodded. “Yes,” I said. “I’ll happily accept you as an aspiring disciple.”

That night at the final kirtan on our stage, with the ambassador present, BB Govinda Maharaja led what I considered one of the best kirtans of his life. All the young people who had become attracted to Krishna consciousness during Woodstock danced with us for hours. At one point I looked into the huge crowd and saw Ania standing with palms joined, tears streaming down her face as she chanted along with us.

We continued chanting long after the music on Woodstock’s main stage had finished. Late that night, as the kids finally

started to go to sleep, all one could hear across the huge field was the chanting of Krishna's holy names.

When we finally finished the kirtan, I sat for a moment watching as everyone slowly left our village. "I wish it could be like this all the time," I thought, "so many hundreds of thousands of people getting so much mercy."

As I walked back to my van with a group of devotees, a woman reporter came up to me. "I know you're very tired," she said, "but may I ask you one or two questions?"

"Of course," I said.

"I've been watching all of you since the first day," she said. "You're working so hard. But why do you do all of this? It's such a big operation—so many tents, so many programs, and so much food. And most of it's free. You can't be making much money."

I smiled. "We just want to share our good fortune with others," I said.

She hesitated before copying that into her notebook. "But there must be other reasons," she said.

I looked back at the field where the great yajna had taken place. "Actually," I said, "there is another reason."

I paused, waiting for the right words to come. "We're hoping to attract the attention of the Lord," I said, "praying that one day we can serve Him again in the spiritual world."

"You mean, like angels?" she said.

"Something like angels," I said. The devotees smiled.

*jaya subha lila mrta rasa lila
maya bhavad ali parijana palim
anugananayam aham apiyayam
iti bhava pasa vrta matir asam
api racayeyam phalatu mameyam natha*

O all-auspicious Krishna! May You be victorious! You perform all kinds of sweet pastimes. Let my name also be there when You count Sri Radha's associates. This is my prayer. Although I am covered by material consciousness I can still aspire for this. O Lord, may my prayer be fulfilled.

[Visvanath Cakravarti Thakur: *Sri Nikunja Keli Virudavali*, verse 67]

IN ADORATION

ocean, at least his books would be present to guide humanity in Krsna consciousness.

It is not easy to preserve an ancient culture in a quickly changing world. But if we, as devotees of Krsna, can properly maintain the Lord's teachings through writings and the spoken word, any sincere seeker of the truth can have the opportunity to revive his dormant love for the Lord, even in the advanced stages of Kali-yuga.

Thus your presentation of our philosophy in a scholarly and attractive way all these years has been a great service to the Lord and our guru-parampara. I have said many times that you are one of the best speakers in ISKCON. I sometimes lament that your lectures are not more widely distributed for the benefit of devotees and non-devotees alike. I know how much I have benefited from them, and I wish others could have the same opportunity.

I also appreciate your great love for and service to the holy dhama of Sri Vrindavan. Your parikramas and lectures in the dhama are legendary. The goal of all our philosophy is, of course, to awaken our love for Krsna, the Supreme Personality of Godhead, in His Vrindavan lila. Srila Prabhupada established the Krsna-Balarama Mandir in Vrindavan just to give his followers the chance to understand and awaken this special love for Krsna.

You, like several others among my Godbrothers, including Deena Bandhu Prabhu and BB Govinda Maharaja, have been attracted by these uniquely sweet pastimes of the Lord. Thank you for helping others capture that mood through your parikramas. It has done a lot for me. I consider you one of my Vrindavan gurus.

I was happy that I could render the service of giving you your Govardhan-sila, but in reality it is you who have given Govardhan to me. By following in your footsteps and preaching the message of Krsna consciousness around the world and taking the time to live in Sri Vrindavan dhama, I feel that I am coming closer to pleasing Gira-Govardhan. I pray that one day by His mercy I may be granted eternal residence in that transcendental abode.

So today, on your auspicious Vyasa-puja, I thank you for everything you are doing for all of us. Please continue to lead the way in showing how we can please our founder-acarya, Srila Prabhupada, and Sri Sri

DIARY OF A TRAVELING PREACHER

Radha-Radhanath.

On this auspicious day I offer you my prostrated obeisances. I also offer my humble obeisances to each and every devotee who is present at your Vyasa-puja celebration.

*srinvanti ye vai guru tattva gatham
gayanti yatnair hari nama mantram
arcanti sadhum guru devatam ca
caitanya bhaktah kali kala madhye*

“In the midst of the age of quarrel, the devotees of Sri Caitanya Mahaprabhu hear songs concerning the characteristics of the bona fide guru. With much endeavor they sing the great mantra of Lord Hari’s names. They adore the saintly devotees of the Lord and the bona fide guru.”

[Sri Sarvabhauma Bhattacharya,
Susloka-Satakam, verse 81]

Your admiring Godbrother, Indradyumna Swami

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



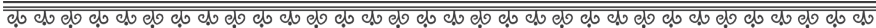
RAIN OR SHINE

| AUGUST 7 - 20, 2008 |

With the success of Polish Woodstock fresh in our minds, we returned to the Baltic Sea coast for our last two weeks of festivals. We had completed 40 to date, and the devotees were exhausted.

But I knew the devotees wouldn't agree to canceling any of the remaining programs. They had felt the deep satisfaction of preaching Krsna consciousness, and nothing was going to stop them. Some managed to catch a few hours of extra rest here and there, while others nodded out on the job, but by Krsna's mercy we went on and somehow held our festival in Mrzezyno, just two days after returning to our base.

We enjoyed perfect weather the first two days of the next festival, in Rewal. On the third and final day, we began preparing early in the morning for a Vedic wedding of two couples, expecting a big crowd. But Mother Nature had other plans, and just before noon it began pouring rain. The rain continued unabated and 20 minutes before starting time, I called Jayatam



das to say I was canceling the event. The brides and grooms looked devastated.

I turned to them. "We can't conduct an outdoor marriage in the middle of a storm," I said.

Or could we?

Just as I ended the call I glanced towards the entrance of the festival grounds. I couldn't believe my eyes. Hundreds of people were coming onto the grounds, each one carrying an umbrella. I watched dumbfounded as they wiped the water off the benches in front of the stage. Within minutes the benches were full. I counted 632 people.

By that time many devotees had gone to the buses to go back to our base. I ran behind the stage and jumped into one of the buses.

"Prabhus!" I yelled. "Hundreds of people are sitting in front of the stage! The wedding's on!"

No one moved. They sat staring at me in disbelief.

"Guru Maharaja," a devotee said, "it's pouring rain."

"I know," I said, "but the people came. They're waiting. Let's go."

Within minutes all the devotees had returned to their duties around the festival site. I stepped onto our covered stage to address the crowd and looked out on a sea of umbrellas. In between, here and there, I saw a face or two peeking out from under them.

"Ladies and gentlemen," I began, "I must thank you for coming today in this terrible weather. We were about to cancel this event, but seeing your enthusiasm, we have decided to continue. Let the wedding begin!"

Everyone applauded, and the two grooms and a kirtan party made their way forward to the stage. Like everyone else, each

groom carried an umbrella over his head. As they reached the stage, I introduced them, and the crowd roared with pleasure.

Next the two brides came forward with their kirtan party. The crowd rose and stood respectfully as the girls passed by. The brides came on stage and circumambulated their husbands to be, and as I introduced them, the storm became more intense.

Throughout the ceremony it continued to rain, and sometimes I had to speak up in order to be heard over the downpour. People watched intently, sometimes adjusting their umbrellas.

But no one left. Everyone stayed for two hours, until the very end, and rushed forward to give presents and take photos with the couples when they came down from the stage.

I turned to Amritananda das. "That's one wedding I'll never forget," I said with a chuckle. The crew cleared the stage for the rest of the program.

Heavy rain was predicted for the rest of the week, making it almost impossible to advertise our last festival, in Ustronie Morskie. Nandini dasi called the town hall and asked officials to post a warning on its website that if the bad weather prevailed we would have to cancel the festival.

The next morning the office was deluged with calls from people requesting that the festival go on at any cost. Finally, a secretary changed the number on the website to Nandini's cell-phone number, and Nandini was inundated with calls all afternoon and into the evening.

Nandini finally called me. "Guru Maharaja," she said, "it's like you say in America, 'Rain or shine the show must go on.'"

Despite the bad weather, some people were out on the streets of Ustronie Morskie shopping, and we were able to do Harinam. As we got out of the buses one morning and started down the street, a well-dressed man ran up to me and began

vigorously shaking my hand. “You’re here!” he said. “Thank you! We heard you might not come. We’ve been waiting for you.”

When I woke up on the day of the festival, I looked out the window and was disappointed to see it was still raining. I was even more discouraged when I went online and saw the weather report: it would continue raining steadily for two more days.

“Not the way I hoped to end a successful tour this year,” I said to myself. “It’s always best to end on a high note.”

Sure enough it poured throughout the day. I passed by Dominik, who was setting up the sound equipment on the festival site. “Maharaja,” he said, “nothing short of a miracle will stop this storm.”

He broke into a smile, “But I’ve been on this festival tour for 10 years,” he said, “and I’ve seen plenty of miracles.”

Because it was the last day of the tour, I went around thanking devotees for their service. When I had almost finished, one of our hired security guards approached me.

“Sorry about the rain,” he said. “Looks like it will be the first time you’ll have to cancel the event this summer.”

I looked up at the sky. “Maybe it will change,” I said.

“It’s a long shot,” he said. “The show is supposed to start in an hour. Anyway, I did want to thank you for all these wonderful festivals. I love these programs, and I don’t need this job. I’m an accountant by profession.”

“You are?” I said.

“Yes,” he said. “I took this job only so I could be with you people all summer. I love it when I’m assigned to guard the questions-and-answers tent. I learn so much.”

Forty-five minutes before show time, the rain slowed down to a heavy drizzle. No one expected it to stop, save perhaps

Dominik. I was watching him make the last adjustments on the sound equipment when the wind suddenly began blowing strongly. As the wind roared, Dominik smiled and looked upwards.

I'll never forget what happened just then. Right before our eyes, the big, dark clouds started moving across the sky. It was happening so fast it seemed as if someone were fast-forwarding a video. After a while the sun broke through, and in the distance we could see clear sky. Devotees started to cheer.

Forty minutes later the clouds were gone. Then the wind died down as quickly as it had started. I looked at my watch. There were just five minutes left till show time.

Dominik turned to me with a smile, "It's not the first time, Maharaja," he said, "but it is amazing. There's not a single cloud left. "

As I moved around getting everything ready, I watched the familiar sight of people flooding into the festival at the last minute.

Suddenly Amritananda jumped up. "Hey!" he shouted loud enough for all to hear. "There's a rainbow!"

I looked up and saw a beautiful rainbow perfectly framing our stage.

A few latecomers took their seats. The stage show started, and the audience applauded loudly. "Only God himself could write this script," I thought. "It's a perfect ending to a perfect summer tour."

Srila Prabhupada writes:

The Madhya-khanda of Srila Locana dasa Thakura's Caitanya-mangala also relates that once at the end of the day, when evening clouds assembled overhead and thundered threateningly, all the Vaisnavas were very

much afraid. But the Lord took His karatalas in His hands and personally began chanting the Hare Krsna mantra, looking up toward the sky as if to direct the demigods in the higher planets. Thus all the assembled clouds dispersed, and as the sky became clear, with the moon rising, the Lord began dancing very happily with His jubilant and satisfied devotees.

[*Sri Caitanya-caritamrita*, Adi-lila 17.89, purport]

There was only one other passenger in business, and he fell asleep in his seat well before departure. As the flight took off, no announcements were made and the two stewardesses assigned to our section didn't check to see whether our seatbelts were fastened.

When we were airborne, one of the stewardesses asked if I wanted anything to eat. I rarely eat food served on an airplane, but I was exhausted and hungry.

"Could I have a vegetarian meal?" I asked.

The stewardess looked at me intently. "Are you serious?" she said.

During the flight I tried to sleep, but fleas in the old seat cushions bit me relentlessly. I changed seats several times only to meet the same fate. Finally, I just sat and chanted on my beads.

At one point I noticed the stewardesses taking small bottles of vodka intended for business-class passengers and putting them in their own hand luggage. They then sat in the spare seats and fell asleep.

Several hours later I became thirsty, so I nudged one of the stewardesses and asked for some water. She woke up with a start, swore at me in Russian, and stormed off to get a bottle of water. After giving it to me, she sat back in her seat and went to sleep again.

The captain eventually announced that we were approaching Irkutsk but would have to circle the airport until some fog had dispersed. Some time later the two stewardesses approached me. "The captain is asking you to pray to God for all of us," one of them said.

"We are running out of fuel," said the other, "and we can't circle the airport much longer."

They stood waiting. “Well,” said one of them, “are you going to pray?”

I hesitated. Then I joined my palms, closed my eyes, and said a short prayer. When I finished, they left to tell the captain.

Suddenly the plane veered left and headed in another direction. There was no announcement. The plane continued for about half an hour and then began to descend. I called one of the stewardesses over and asked what was happening.

“We’re landing in Ulan Ude to wait until the fog clears in Irkutsk,” she said nervously, smelling of liquor. “We had just enough fuel.”

We left our bags on the plane and walked down the steps to the terminal. As I took in the surroundings, I almost thought we’d landed on another planet. The vast Siberian steppe stretched endlessly in all directions, and although it was the end of summer, the temperature was only six degrees centigrade.

As I reached for my sweater, Uttama-sloka turned to me with a smile. “The man sitting next to me said this is the best time to visit Ulan Ude,” he said, “because it’s between the ferocious mosquitoes of summer and the freezing temperatures of winter.”

As we entered the terminal, several people of Asian appearance stood before me with palms joined and offered respects.

“What’s that?” I asked Uttama-sloka.

“Many of the people here are Buddhist,” he replied. “They think you’re a Buddhist monk because of your robes.”

Looking through the windows I noticed a large number of Asians on the concourse outside.

“Ulan Ude was founded by Cossacks in 1666,” Uttama-sloka said. “Because of its geographical location it became a trade center connecting Russia, China, and Mongolia. There are

about 400 thousand people living here now. It's at the 5,640-kilometer mark on the Trans-Siberian railway."

I looked at him in surprise.

"I remember that from school," he laughed.

"Gosh," I said. "I wonder if there are any devotees in this Siberian outpost."

"I've heard there are quite a few devotees here," he said.

I suddenly realized I'd left my beads on the plane. "Oh boy!" I said. "I was hoping I could catch up on my rounds while I'm waiting here."

Out of the corner of my eye I saw a kiosk selling what looked like souvenirs. We walked over and found statues and paintings of the Buddha. There were also the small-sized meditation beads used by Buddhist monks as well as strands of larger beads similar to our Krsna-conscious chanting beads.

I pointed to a strand of beads. "Count the number of beads on that set," I said to Uttama-sloka

He counted the beads. "There are 108, Guru Maharaja," he said.

Just then the salesman stood up behind the counter. "Hare Krsna, Maharaja," he said. "I'm a devotee, and this is my shop. I sell Buddhist and Krsna-conscious paraphernalia. Are you interested in that japa mala?"

Uttama-sloka winked at me. "Every town and village," he said.

Two minutes later I was happily chanting my rounds on my new set of beads. And I had plenty of time to chant. Twenty-four rounds later I turned to Uttama-sloka. "Go and ask what is happening," I said.

He went and then came back. "The fog has lifted in Irkutsk," he said. "We can start boarding soon."

We went to the boarding gate along with the other passengers. An hour later we were still waiting. People started getting angry and shouting at the ground staff. One man even threw something at them.

“This would never happen at an airport in America,” I said to Uttama-sloka.

He shrugged. “America is 9,680 kilometers away,” he said.

“Did you learn that in school, too?” I said.

He smiled. “No,” he said, “on the internet while we were waiting.”

After a while the shouting stopped, and people sat down on the ground or on their bags, frustrated. Uttama-sloka went up to the counter and then came back. “I overheard them discussing the real problem,” he said. “The pilots have gone into town to sell merchandise.”

“What?” I said. “To sell merchandise?”

“It’s not uncommon,” he said. “This is the middle of nowhere, and you can make a quick buck if you bring in what’s in demand and sell it to retailers.”

An hour later the two pilots returned.

We finally landed in Irkutsk and were driven to where we’d be staying. We joined 500 devotees in the evening on the first day of festivities. BB Govinda Swami, Bhakti Caitanya Swami, and Prabhavisnu Swami were there as well. It’s rare for the Siberian devotees to get so much association, so they were especially excited. Kirtan went on for hours.

Siberians are a hardy bunch, having to live most of the year in harsh conditions. The winters are especially difficult, with temperatures plunging almost down to -50°C . And unlike Moscow and St Petersburg, which are now prosperous, modern

cities, Irkutsk and other Siberian towns still look the way they did during the Communist era.

The good side is that many people there are under no illusion about the difficult nature of material existence and are open to spiritual life. As I have been coming to Siberia off and on since 1990, I have a number of disciples in the region. Few have left Kṛṣṇa consciousness, knowing well the difference between stark material life and blissful devotional service.

In between the seminars and kirtans over three days, I made an effort to meet as many disciples as possible. I would often ask how they became devotees.

Actinya-sakti dasi came to see me, and I asked her when she had joined.

“Eleven years ago,” she said.

“So you must be in your mid forties,” I said. “Correct?”

“No, Guru Maharaja,” she said with a chuckle, “I’m 71.”

I looked at her and shook my head. “That’s not possible,” I said.

“I was born in 1937,” she said.

“But you look half your age,” I said.

“Life in Siberia can work to one’s advantage,” she said. “I attribute my good health to the simple life I’ve lived. Of course, sometimes it was more than simplicity. It was deprivation.

“World War Two broke out when I was a child. All the men of fighting age were sent to the front. The women and children had to do everything while the men were away. Communications and transportation had been destroyed on the Moscow front, so few if any supplies reached us in Siberia. We had to live on the fruit and vegetables we grew during the summer.

“There were few cars in those days, so we walked everywhere. After the war, I still used to walk seven kilometers to school and back each day even in the winter, and you know what winter means in Siberia.

“We lived a simple but healthy life. During the summer we would plow the fields with horses, harvest the grain by hand, drink milk from the cows, and make jam from fruit and berries.

“We didn’t hear much news about the world during Communism. There was only one local newspaper, and we had a radio in our house, but information was heavily censored. In one sense it was good. We had no fear or anxiety about distant events unconnected to us.

“I eventually got a degree in geology and worked for the government, searching for minerals in different parts of the country. It was then that I saw the difficulties others experienced in Russia. It made me begin searching for spiritual life.

“Once I was sent to Mongolia, where most of the people are Buddhist. I was attracted to the philosophy of karma and reincarnation. Then, in 1997, I met the devotees, and eventually you, at programs in another city in Siberia.

“Since then I’ve lived the good life of Krsna consciousness. That’s why I’m healthy and happy.”

I smiled. “You look so fit,” I said, “I think you’ll live to be well over 100.”

“Please no, Guru Maharaja,” she said. “I don’t want to stay here that long. I want to go back to Godhead.”

“Where do you live?” I asked.

“I have a small apartment, and I live off my government pension,” she said.

Her tone became excited. "I want to help your preaching," she continued. "I want to donate each month for your festival program in Poland. Can you give me your bank account details?"

"But how is that possible?" I said. "How much do you get each month?"

"My pension is 250 dollars," she said, "and I want to give you 100 dollars every month."

"That's almost half your income," I said. "I won't accept that. It will make life too difficult for you. How will you survive?"

She smiled. "Like I always have," she said. "Maybe it will be a little more austere. But if it will help your preaching I'm happy to do it. You're my spiritual master, and I have a great debt towards you."

She paused for a moment. "I'm used to these things," she said. "I'm Siberian."

After she left, Uttama-sloka turned to me. "They're tough here," he said.

"And good devotees," I added, "but I won't accept her proposal although her offer of 100 dollars a month means as much to me as 1,000 dollars from someone else."

The day after the festival in Irkutsk, we went to the airport to catch our flight back to Moscow. I was worried that there might be fog again and we would be delayed. But the sky was clear, and our flight took off on time.

When we reached Moscow, one of the devotees meeting us rushed up to me in the parking lot. "Guru Maharaja," he said, "after your flight took off from Irkutsk, there was an earthquake measuring 7.5 on the Richter scale. There are reports of 900 people injured, some dead as well. They are estimating more than 15 million dollars worth of damage."

“Call and see if the devotees are okay,” I said.

As he turned to leave I caught his arm. “There’s an elderly mataji, Actinya-sakti dasi. Ask if she’s all right.”

“Who is she?” he asked.

“A surrendered devotee who I wouldn’t want to lose,” I said.

That evening he called to report that all the devotees in the earthquake region were safe and well.

“And there was one other thing,” he said. “Actinya-sakti is asking for your bank account number.”

Srila Prabhupada writes:

“[Lord Krsna said to Sudama Brahmana:] ‘With great compassion our Gurudeva said, “My dear boys, it is very wonderful that you have suffered so much trouble for me. Everyone likes to take care of his body as the first consideration, but you are so good and faithful to your guru that without caring for bodily comforts you have taken so much trouble for me ... That is the way for a bona fide disciple to become free from his debt to the spiritual master.”’”

[Krsna, the Supreme Personality of Godhead, The Meeting of Lord Krsna
with Sudama Brahmana]

READY AND WILLING: A VYASA PUJA OFFERING

the shackles of my miserable fate and set me free on the path of devotional service to the Lord.

Since meeting you, I have seen every moment of my life enriched by Krsna consciousness. What can compare with the chanting of the holy names that you so kindly bestowed upon us, letting us taste the highest love and bliss? Or the knowledge you spoke, which destroys the darkness born of ignorance, enlightening us from within?

And what within this world equals one single moment of association with devotees who have taken shelter of you? Who can imagine what a pitiable state this planet would be in had such devotees not traveled far and wide sharing your treasure of wisdom with others?

And who among us can fathom the great fortune that still lies ahead as long as we remain faithful to your teachings and help you in your mission? By helping you, we qualify ourselves to serve you in the spiritual sky, where you now associate with your beloved Lord in a mellow of love, the nature of which we have yet to see or understand.

My innermost desire is to join you one day in those eternal pastimes, but I feel hopeless at this stage, for my resumé of devotional qualifications is meager at best. Nevertheless, I am as determined as ever to work toward that goal. I stand before you today, ready and willing to help you in your mission in any way you choose, even if it should mean taking birth again.

Please bless me, then, that in any future birth I may remain an effective instrument in your hands and that I may always remember the supreme goal of life: to serve Radha and Krsna. Please bless me that wherever you send me I may maintain my preaching spirit and that I may always have a taste for chanting the holy names.

Should I be born again, I pray to always be surrounded by your loving servants and free from intimate association with the opposite sex and from the entanglement of householder life. May I always, in every birth, respect all living entities as eternal servants of the Lord, and may my compassion for them deepen with each day. I pray that your books may remain the guiding light in this life and the next and that I may never forget your kindness upon me.

DIARY OF A TRAVELING PREACHER

And finally, my beloved lord and master, when you are satisfied that your mission in this world has been accomplished, please call me to your lotus feet and take me home to the eternal pleasure groves of Sri Vrindavan Dhama to be with you again.

*ayam avilolatayadya sanatana kalitadbhuta rasa bharam
nivasatu nityam ihamrita nindini vindan madhurima saram*

“O Sanatana! Your lotus feet surpass even the nectar of the gods. Finding in this lotus flower of your feet the essence of sweetness which is endowed with truly wonderful mellows, I pray that today the bee of my mind will eternally reside there.”

[Sri Rupa Goswami, Stava-mala]

Your eternal servant,
Indradyumna Swami.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



UNTIL WE MEET AGAIN

| SEPTEMBER 2, 2008 |

My dear Godbrother Sridhar Maharaja,

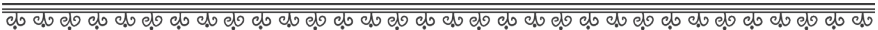
Please accept my most humble obeisances. All glories to Srila Prabhupada!

Today is the celebration of your Vyasa-puja. It is a day of mixed feelings for me: I am happy to remember your exalted service to Srila Prabhupada, and at the same time I am sad. I miss your association and friendship more than you can imagine.

Despite our intimacy I always considered you my respected Godbrother and held you in the highest esteem. I remember my good fortune in the early 1980s, when as a new sannyasi, I traveled with you throughout Canada and the USA.

During those three months, I served you as a menial servant and you reciprocated by training me in the life of the renounced order. Although this life is strict and demanding, you made it fun by showing that real pleasure is in service to guru and Gauranga, and although at times our schedule was intense, your jolly mood created an atmosphere of light-heartedness.

You were older and more advanced, but you were always kind and encouraging in many ways. I especially remember something you



DIARY OF A TRAVELING PREACHER

said to me one day: “Indie,” you said, “before you took sannyasa, most leaders in our movement had never heard of you. I remember you as a grhastha chanting and dancing through the streets of Paris. Now, suddenly you are in the renounced order and a great asset to our movement.”

Thank you for those kind words, Maharaja. They still reverberate in my heart, though many years have passed. We all need the encouragement of our Godbrothers and Godsisters, and when such words come from a devotee of your caliber, they are especially meaningful.

Being a well-wishing friend, you offered not only praise but also chastisement. You were direct and to the point, not compromising in your presentation or practice of service to the Lord. Once you scolded me for placing some laksmi on the ground. “How dare you place the consort of the Lord on the dirty ground?” you said.

I feel especially blessed that I was able to help you in your final days. I met you in London just before our journey to Mayapura, your final destination. Again I was able to render menial service, as you were incapacitated and rapidly declining in health.

I was amazed that despite your pain and discomfort you remained upbeat while instructing your disciples, who had come to see you for the last time. The airplane trip was long and hard, but I watched you take the time to preach to people who came to you with questions about Krsna consciousness.

I’ll never forget the wonderful reception the devotees gave you in Mayapura. They knew you were coming to the holy dhama to leave your body, and they rushed to greet you and express their appreciation for your years of service. Our car slowed to a snail’s pace as everyone surged forward in a show of love.

How proud I was of you! How grateful I was to Krsna for arranging such an acknowledgment of your service!

Now you are gone, and the days of your association are no more. Your humor, which could light up the darkest day, is a distant memory. Your example as a dedicated disciple of our Guru Maharaja is no longer present for those of us less inclined in service. It’s harder without you here to inspire us. It’s difficult for your disciples, it’s difficult for your

UNTIL WE MEET AGAIN

Godbrothers, and it's difficult for the souls who would have benefited from your association had you stayed longer in this world.

Your last words to me were, "Happy trails, until we meet again." Because you've gone ahead of me on the trail of serving our spiritual master, you'll once more be in a position to guide me.

Ultimately, one goes where his heart takes him. Thus my heart goes out to you with the hope and expectation of seeing you again. I look forward to that day with great anticipation.

*so 'py ascaryamayah prabhur nananayor yan nabhavad gocaro
yan nasvadi hareh padambuja rasas tad yad gatim tad gatam
etavan mama tavad astu jagatam ye nye py alankurvate
sri caitanya pade nikhata manasas tair yat prasangot savah*

Because the wonderful Lord never came before my eyes, and because I never tasted the nectar of service to His lotus feet, I simply pray to attain the jubilant festival of the association of those great souls now decorating this world whose hearts are fixed at Lord Caitanya's lotus feet.

[Sri Prabhodananda Sarasvati,
Sri Caitanya-candramrita, text 50]

Your servant in separation,
Indradyumna Swami.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



THE FORTUNE TELLER

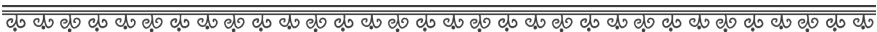
| SEPTEMBER 8 – 13, 2008 |

The chilly weather of eastern Siberia proved too much for me. When I returned to Warsaw I fell ill for six days with the flu. I had to cancel most of my preaching tour of Hungary, managing to visit for only three days. On the last day, Radhastami, I had a relapse and was laid low again.

The next day I flew to the Greek city of Thessaloniki with Uttama-sloka das and several other devotees. Tara das and his wife, Radha Sakhi Vrnda dasi, had recently opened a preaching center there and had invited us to present two programs.

As we drove to the center from the airport, Tara started telling me about the city. “Thessaloniki is the second largest city in Greece,” he said, “with almost one million people. It was founded in 315 BC by the King of Macedonia, who named it after his wife, a half-sister of Alexander the Great.

“Look over there,” he said as we passed the port area. “There’s the statue of Alexander.”



I saw a huge statue of the legendary warrior looming over the tourists as they walked down a wide boardwalk alongside the port.

“We asked the city officials whether we could have a sit-down kirtan at the port while you’re here,” Tara continued, “but they declined because there’s an international convention taking place this week.”

“How would a small kirtan disturb the convention?” I asked.

“They’re not giving permission for any official events,” he said, “because the communists and anarchists would take advantage to demonstrate and get attention.”

“Greece is part of the European Union,” I said. “Are communists and anarchists still here?”

“Oh yes,” he replied, “and sometimes they’re very vocal.”

As we drove through the main part of the city I remarked on the beauty of the buildings, and Tara told me something of the city’s past.

“Thessaloniki has a rich and diversified history,” he said. “It’s been part of the Roman, Byzantine, and Ottoman empires. For hundreds of years, it’s been Greece’s second major industrial, commercial, and political center. And it’s one of the most important places for the Greek Orthodox Church.”

He pointed to a group of priests with long, gray beards, dressed in black robes walking into a church.

“Several hours from here is Mount Athos, or the Holy Mountain,” he continued. “It’s home to twenty Eastern Orthodox monasteries. It’s a self-governed monastic state, under the direct jurisdiction of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople.”

“Twenty monasteries?” I said.

“Yes,” he replied, “and it’s accessible only by boat. Only males are allowed entrance into Mount Athos, which is called the Garden of the Virgin by monks. Even female animals are removed from the area. More than 2,500 monks live there.

“The church is very influential in Greece, and there is a law that prohibits proselytizing by other religions. Our movement has been officially closed down twice during the past 30 years. Foreign devotees have been blacklisted, and once our stock of books was confiscated. That’s why my wife and I opened a hatha yoga center, where we teach yoga and vegetarian cooking, gradually introducing people to Kṛṣṇa consciousness. We don’t dress in devotional clothing on the streets.”

Just at that moment we arrived at the center, and as I stepped out of the car all eyes were upon me.

“Looks like the first time people here are seeing someone in devotional attire,” I said.

Tara smiled. “Correct,” he said.

As we walked up the steps to the center he continued. “When the Muslims recently wanted to build a mosque in Athens,” he said, “they were denied permission. So we try to keep a low profile here. Of course, Athens is more cosmopolitan, and devotees preach more openly there. We’ll go out tonight around 9:00 PM so you can get a feel for the city.”

“Isn’t that a little late?” I said.

“For the Greeks it’s the most important part of the day,” he said. “It’s when they go strolling through the streets or sit and talk in the outdoor cafes. Bear in mind the temperature outside at the moment is almost 38 centigrade, and it’s very humid.”

That evening we went for a walk. I was amazed at the number of people in the streets. But the people were more amazed to see me. Their seemingly cold stares made me feel uncomfortable.

“What are they thinking?” I asked Tara.

“Nothing,” he said. “They have no preconceptions. They’ve just never seen anyone like you before.”

“At least one or two could smile,” I said.

“Let’s see their reaction when we do our inaugural Harinam here tomorrow night,” he said. “Although the city officials wouldn’t give us permission to sit and chant at the port, I don’t think they’ll mind a small walking kirtan through the streets of the city.”

Gaura Hari das and his wife, Balesvari dasi, had come from England to join us for a few days. The next day after dinner, they prepared the paraphernalia for Harinam. Tribuvaneshvara dasa, who had come from Poland, readied his accordion. At 9:00 PM we walked onto the main street with six other devotees and began chanting.

Within minutes everyone on the street had stopped and was staring at us, no longer with cool detachment but rather with big smiles. As we chanted and danced through the streets, people waved and called out to us from the cafes. I couldn’t believe it.

I turned to Tara. “It’s like the difference between day and night,” I said. “As soon as we started kirtan the whole atmosphere changed. People love the Harinam.”

Tara laughed. “Don’t put it beyond them,” he said. “After all, a Greek was one of the first Western Krsna devotees.”

“You mean in the 1970s?” I said.

“No,” he replied as our kirtan party stopped on a corner and started to draw a large, curious crowd, “I mean in the second century BC.”

“Huh?” I said.

“Yes,” he said. “Heliodorus, a Greek ambassador to India, erected a large pillar in central India in the second century before the birth of Jesus, with an inscription that says he was a devotee of Vishnu, or Krsna. We’re working on a new pamphlet for our center, and we’ve included the quote.”

He pulled a draft of the invitation out of his bag and handed it to me. It read: “This Garuda column of Vasudeva, the God of gods, was erected here by Heliodorus, a worshiper of Vishnu, the son of Dion, and an inhabitant of Taxila, who came as a Greek ambassador from the great King Antialkidas to King Kasiputra Bhagabhadrā, the savior, then reigning prosperously in the fourteenth year of his kingship.”

Tara smiled. “If he was a devotee from Greece, there must have been more,” he said.

“Yes,” I said. “If we knew the whole story, scholars might include Vedic culture along with the Roman, Byzantine, and Ottoman histories of Thessaloniki.”

As we weaved our way through the streets and lanes, the holy names of Krsna reverberated off the building and walls of the ancient city. People everywhere continued waving, and a few even joined us in dancing. After a while we arrived at a square where hundreds of young people were lounging around on a grassy area.

“Ask them if we can sit on a portion of the grass,” I said to Tara. As soon as he asked, about 20 kids respectfully rose and moved aside.

We sat chanting for half an hour, and then, as we had planned, Keli-cancala dasi from Hungary performed an Odissi dance in the square. As the tape of her music began to play, a large crowd gathered. When she finished, hundreds of people applauded.

I was feeling exhausted from the heat, which still lingered in the evening, so I stood up and walked a short distance to the front of a store, where cool air was gushing from the air conditioning inside. As I stood watching the blissful kirtan, a nicely dressed, elderly man approached me. He had an Oriental appearance and penetrating blue eyes. I had noticed him following our Harinam for several hours.

He came and stood right in front me, carefully studying my face. His long, gray hair moved slightly in the breeze as he stood with fixed attention. I felt a little uncomfortable but decided to be patient.

Finally he spoke. "You are a man of extraordinary strength and stamina, especially for your age of 59 years," he said. "If it were not for your constant travels, you would be in perfect health."

"What?" I said. "How do you know that I'm 59 years old and that I travel a lot?"

"I can read faces," he replied softly, still staring at me intently. "But your unlimited reserve of energy is not your own. It comes from your master. And he gets his from above."

I was stunned.

"You have many followers, and you will have more," he said. "But always remember the reason they've come: to hear from you what your master taught you."

I could only nod my head in agreement.

He moved back slightly and looked me up and down. "Your liver is not in good condition," he said, "and you have a bad bug."

"No, sir," I said. "I just had a bad flu. It's over now."

"It's not over," he said, "and because of it your mission here will be only partially successful."

He turned and walked away.

As I stood there trying to fathom what had just happened, a girl and her boyfriend came up to me. “We love your singing,” the boy said in English. “Are you Buddhists?”

“No,” I said. “We’re from the Hare Krsna movement. We have a small center here. Here’s an invitation. We’re having a program tomorrow night.”

“We thought you were Buddhists because you were talking to the Chinese man,” the girl said. “He’s a well-known doctor in town. He practices Chinese medicine. He’s been living here for 30 years.”

“He can see if you have a disease by studying your face,” said the boy.

“He can tell your future,” said the boy, “but you can’t ask him. He’ll tell you only if he feels it’s necessary.”

“A lot of my parents’ friends have been cured by him,” said the girl.

“Well, he did say some amazing things,” I said, “but he was wrong about a flu bug. I just recovered from that. Anyway, try to make it to our program tomorrow. I’ll be giving a talk on reincarnation.”

“Wow!” said the girl. “That sounds great. We’ll be there for sure.”

That night we got back to the center at 1:00 AM and I fell asleep immediately. The next morning when I awoke, I quickly realized I had a fever along with aches and pains all over my body.

I looked at Tara, who was waking up nearby. “Oh no,” I said. “My flu’s back, for the third time.” I thought of the prediction of the Chinese man, and I rolled over and pulled up the covers.

Later that morning, at my suggestion, the devotees moved me to a nearby hotel so they wouldn't catch the flu. Then they went on Harinam. Throughout the day I would look out the window and see them chanting blissfully. In the evening they held the program in the center without me.

"It was a nice program," said Tara when he came to visit me, "but it wasn't the same without you."

The whole next day I lay in bed with a high fever. But I was determined to go to the second and final program at the center that evening. At 6:00 PM I called Tara and told him to come pick me up.

"Are you sure, Maharaja?" he said.

"Yes," I said, covering my head with a wet cloth. "I'm feeling much better." When I arrived at the center, I put on a big smile to convince everyone I was all right and proceeded to give a lecture. While speaking I forgot about my illness and afterwards chanted and danced along with everyone else. As the guests were departing, Radha Sakhi Vrnda came up to me. "Guru Maharaja," she said, "you shouldn't have done the program when you are so sick."

"I didn't want to miss the opportunity," I said. "Greece is such an exciting field for preaching."

"Still," she said, "you shouldn't have pushed yourself."

"The Chinese fortune teller said our programs would be partially successful, not altogether unsuccessful," I said with a chuckle. "So I had to attend at least one."

"Well, thank you for coming," she said. "No one visits this place, although you can see there is so much interest among the people."

As I was leaving, a woman came up to me. "Did your spiritual master ever come to Greece?" she asked.

I stopped to think for a moment. “No,” I said, “not that I know of.”

“That’s too bad,” she said. “I think even a brief visit would have done a lot for this country.”

Early the next morning Uttama-sloka and I caught a taxi to the airport. “Are you from a spiritual movement?” the taxi driver asked me in broken English as we drove.

“Yes, we are,” I replied, “the Hare Krsna movement.”

“How do like Thessaloniki?” he asked.

“It’s a very beautiful city,” I replied.

“Yes,” he said, “and people here are very open-brained. They like other cultures.”

“You mean open-minded,” I said with a smile. “But yes, you are right. We were very well received here.”

“I can see you are a spiritual man,” he continued. “Can you teach me how to be peaceful? All day and half the night I’m in this taxi. So much stress and anxiety.”

“Yes,” I said. “I can teach you a song that will bring you peace and happiness wherever you go. It’s composed of different names of God in Sanskrit.”

“I’m ready,” he said.

“Repeat after me,” I said, and I taught him the Hare Krsna mantra word by word: Hare Krsna, Hare Krsna, Krsna Krsna . . .”

“I like it,” he said when we finished.

When we arrived at the airport he stopped the taxi at the curb. As we opened the door and got out, he went behind the car and took our bags from the trunk. After handing them to us he got back in the taxi.

“Excuse me, sir,” I called out. “How much will that be?”

“You can’t put a price on peace,” he said with a smile and then began singing the Hare Krsna mantra as he drove away.

That night, I came across the following conversation with Srila Prabhupada:

Woman: In which country of Europe has the Hare Krsna movement been the most powerful or successful?

Prabhupada: Everywhere.

Woman: What about Greece?

Prabhupada: I never went to Greece.

Satsvarupa: You said you went to the [Athens] airport and they were chanting.

Prabhupada: Yes.

O’Grady: Really?

Woman: I would think they would be in danger in Athens. There’s no way that this movement could be very successful in Athens or in Greece.

Prabhupada: Yes, when I was going to Nairobi from London I got down in transit, on the hall. Some young men, as soon as they saw me, they began to chant, Hare Krsna.

O’Grady: No, really? In Greece, this was, in Athens?

Prabhupada: Athens, yes.

O’Grady: Incredible.

[Room conversation with Irish poet Desmond O’Grady, May 1974]

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



A HISTORY OF DISCONTENT

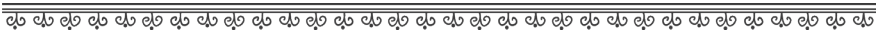
| SEPTEMBER 22 - 23, 2008 |

Several weeks before leaving for Russia, I phoned Uttama-sloka das and asked him to arrange a program in southern Russia before we attended the annual Russian yatra festival near the Black Sea. When I arrived in Moscow, he met me at the airport.

“We have to move quickly,” he said. “We’re catching a connecting flight to Adegeya at a domestic airport some distance from here.”

“Adegeya?” I said. “I’ve never heard of it. Where is it?”

“It’s a small, autonomous republic in the foothills of the Caucasus,” he said as we jumped into a taxi. “There are only five hundred thousand people living there, but it has its own president, legislative body, and laws. It sends three representatives to the parliament of the Russian Federation when it’s in session. Russia keeps a close watch on Adegeya, because 90 percent of the people are Muslim and the region has a history of discontent.”



“If that’s the case, what will we be doing there?” I said.

“Your disciple Madira dasi and her family are doing amazing preaching in the region,” he replied.

Two hours later we boarded a three-hour flight to Krasnodar. After we landed, we drove to Maykop, the capital of Adegeya. We passed through lush countryside, dense forests, and rustic villages with wooden buildings reminiscent of 18th century Russia. Many buildings flew the flag of Adegeya, a green banner with yellow stars and three arrows.

“Forests cover 40 percent of the republic,” Uttama-sloka said, “and the soil is rich. But the people mainly raise hogs and sheep and grow tobacco, so it’s one of the poorest areas in Russia.”

After a long drive we finally reached Maykop. It looked much like any other town in Russia except that I didn’t see any churches, just one large mosque in the center of town. People were out and about, shopping or strolling along the streets.

“Looks like a great place for Harinam,” I said. “Maybe we can all come out for an hour or two and chant.”

“No chance,” Uttama-sloka said. “It would be risky. These people are very religious, and we might get stopped, or worse. There’s a lot of tension here now because of what’s happened recently in nearby South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Although Abkhazia declared independence in 1999, it continues to be regarded as a breakaway region by Georgia. Recently South Ossetia was pressing for independence as well, and Georgia attacked it. Russia came to Ossetia’s aid and repulsed the Georgians.”

“I know about that,” I said. “It’s all over the news.”

“The republics in the area don’t like Georgia because they feel bullied by it,” he said, “but it’s also because Georgia is Christian.”

“The Western media painted a slightly different picture,” I said.

“It’s always like that,” said Uttama-sloka.

“That’s politics,” I said. “We’re here to share Krsna consciousness with anyone who is willing to listen.”

Just at that moment we arrived at the home of Ramazan and his wife, Madira. They received us warmly with a large group of people and a subdued kirtan.

“We don’t want to draw too much attention from the neighbors,” said Ramazan apologetically as he led us into the house.

When we were inside, however, the devotees closed the door and broke into an enthusiastic kirtan. As I sat down I noticed a slight touch of Muslim décor mixed with Krsna-conscious paintings and other paraphernalia. A beautiful altar graced the room just in front of where I was sitting.

“I must apologize that I don’t speak Circassian,” I told the group of devotees and guests. “With your permission I’ll speak in English and Uttama-sloka will translate into Russian.”

I then gave a short lecture about the appearance of the Lord and His representatives in the material world.

“Sometimes the Lord comes Himself,” I began, “or sometimes He sends His representative, like Mohammed, Jesus, or other saintly persons. But the purpose is always the same: to remind us that we are all children of God, regardless of where we are born or our nationality.

“The central point is that God is the father. Just as here in Adegeya you say, ‘Allahu Akbar,’—‘God is great’—so in Krsna consciousness we address the father by another name: Krsna.

“The reason our movement is becoming popular all over the world is that we are giving so much information about the

father. The goal of religion is to love Him, but to love someone you have to know that person.”

The audience sat and listened attentively as I tried to present our philosophy in such a way that they would be attracted but at the same time not offended. It was not the first time I had addressed people of Muslim origin, so I felt comfortable speaking to them. At the end I could see they appreciated my lecture when they all chanted Hare Krsna enthusiastically during kirtan.

Afterwards Madira and her daughter, Visnu-priya dasi, introduced me to each of the guests, a number of whom were regular members of their weekly Nama Hatta meetings.

I congratulated Ramazan and Madira for their success in spreading Krsna consciousness in the area. “It certainly is not an easy task under the circumstances,” I said.

“On two occasions Federal Security Service agents took my husband in for questioning,” Madira said. “They wanted to know why he was preaching a different religion here in Adegeya. Somehow he convinced them we are not a threat, and they haven’t disturbed us since, although I suspect they keep us under surveillance.”

Soon prasadam was announced. “The men will honor prasadam upstairs,” Ramazan told me. “It’s the custom here.”

Upstairs the conversation soon turned to the conflict between Georgia and its breakaway regions.

“The Georgians killed 16 hundred people when they shelled Tskhinvali in South Ossetia,” said one man.

Another man spoke up. “If it had lasted any longer,” he said, “we would have gone there and fought the Georgians the way we did in the 1992-93 secessionist war in Abkhazia.”

As the men continued their discussion, I could see that Krsna consciousness had strong competition in the deep national and religious sentiments of the local people. I could understand why Uttama-sloka had advised against Harinam. It became obvious to me that in many places of the world our movement must wait for more favorable times to expand, but that this was all the more reason to preach vigorously in places where circumstances are conducive.

I wanted to change the subject, so I turned to Madira, who was serving prasadam. "How many years ago did Ramazan propose to you?" I asked.

She blushed, and Ramazan laughed heartily.

"I didn't propose to her," said Ramazan. "I kidnapped her."

I almost dropped my spoon.

"It's the tradition here," he said. "When you favor a girl and want her as your wife, you must kidnap her."

"I see," I said, placing my spoon carefully on the table.

"Yes," he said. "One night I climbed into her father's house through the window and carried her away. The whole family ran after us, but I was too fast."

"Didn't they pursue you later?" I asked.

"No," he said. "By the next morning she was my wife."

Madira nodded. "That's why we keep our doors and windows locked at night," she said, "so that our daughter, who is now 22, will not be kidnapped. We want her to marry a devotee boy, of course."

"How did you all become devotees?" I said. "The Islamic tradition is so strong here."

"Visnu-priya and I were visiting Moscow in 1991," Madira said. "We were watching television when a program came on

about Krsna consciousness. The devotees were chanting and dancing in ecstasy. I was so attracted. During the next few days I asked around how I could find them but no one could help me. For the next two years I often prayed to God to help me locate them.

“One day I was walking along the street here in Maykop when a young sankirtan devotee approached me with books. I couldn’t believe my good fortune. I knew that God had answered my prayers. I purchased the *Bhagavad-gita* and *Krsna, the Supreme Personality of Godhead*.

“In the back of the *Krsna* book was a section about how to practice Krsna consciousness at home. From that day Visnu-priya and I began chanting 16 rounds daily.”

“What about Ramazan?” I asked.

She laughed. “He was very busy with his business,” she said. “He told me, ‘For now, you practice on my behalf. I’ll practice later.’ Just recently he has decided to chant 16 rounds.

“Ten years ago we started our weekly Nama Hatta programs, and now many people in the area are chanting. Although we can’t advertise publicly, the message of Krsna consciousness is spreading by word of mouth from house to house.

“We know it’s the only solution to the problems faced by our people in the Caucasus. There is so much division, and there has been so much bloodshed through the years. Krsna consciousness is the only path to peace because we see all souls equally on the spiritual platform. So although it goes slowly, we are determined to keep preaching.”

“You’re a wonderful example for devotees everywhere,” I said.

Later that night, as I was lying in bed, I thought about two verses:

*yavanto vaisnava loke
paritranasya hetave
ratanti prabhunadista
dese dese grhe grhe*

“All the Vaisnavas in the world, on the order of the Lord, proclaimed His names from home to home, in country to country, just to deliver the fallen souls.”

*jagad bandhor jagat kartur
jagatam trna hetave
yatra tatra hareh seva
kirtane sthapite sukhe*

“Wherever the service to the Lord, who is the protector and creator of the universes, and wherever the congregational chanting of His names were well established, they set the worlds in peace.”

[Sriila Sarvabhauma Bhattacharya, *Susloka-Satakam*, Text 47-48]

CHAPTER NINETEEN



THE WARLOCK

| SEPTEMBER 24, 2008 |

As we were driving through beautiful forests on our way out of the Republic of Adegeya, a disciple turned to me. “Guru Maharaja,” he said, “there’s a man who lives nearby who is said to have amazing healing powers. You often mention that your liver is not well. Would you like to see him?”

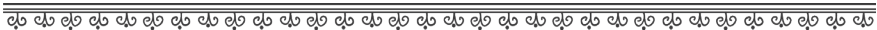
“I don’t believe in such things,” I said.

“But he’s cured many people,” said the devotee. “I personally know several.”

“How does he do it,” I scoffed, “with a magic wand?”

“No, Guru Maharaja,” said the devotee, “he uses local herbs. He searches for them in the forests and mixes them in combinations that no one else can understand. He’s become so popular that Russia’s Deputy Minister of Health was sent to investigate him. She concluded that he is either a mystic or an alien because his formulas are impossible to reproduce.”

“That’s exactly why I don’t want to waste time seeing him,” I said. “It’s all hocus-pocus.”



Another devotee spoke. “Local doctors call him when they can’t determine someone’s illness,” he said. “Every day he goes to hospitals in the region, advising doctors and patients.”

“I must admit,” said Vaikuntha-pati das sheepishly, “I’ve been to him, and he has helped me.”

“Did he?” I said with a touch of sarcasm.

“Guru Maharaja,” said Vaikuntha-pati, “there’s no harm in visiting him. I can arrange an appointment now. Usually it takes up to a year. He’s that popular. Maybe he can help you.”

“My problem is not that serious,” I said.

“Any illness left unattended can become serious,” he said.

Finally I relented. “All right,” I said. “We can stop by for a few minutes, but no longer. We still have a four-hour drive ahead to the Russian-yatra festival tonight.”

Vaikuntha-pati called the healer and made an appointment for an hour later. Our driver changed direction, and we turned onto a winding road that took us through rolling hills and misty valleys. Colorful flowers dotted the green landscape, and small streams crisscrossed our path.

We reached a small settlement of rustic cottages on the outskirts of a town. As we pulled up next to a cottage, I saw a disabled man come out. He walked with difficulty toward our car and gestured to us to follow him inside.

“He must be one of the patients,” I said to Uttama-sloka das.

As we entered the cottage, I turned my head behind to Vaikuntha-pati. “Don’t tell the healer anything about me,” I said. “I want to see if he can find out what’s wrong with me by himself.”

“Nobody tells him their problems,” said Vaikuntha-pati.

As we sat in the musty living room filled with antique Russian furniture, I wondered whether the healer would be able to diagnose my sore liver, the three problematic vertebrae in my neck, my weak knees, and my occasional headaches. And last year a doctor told me my blood pressure was high.

Lost in thought, I was surprised when the disabled man entered the room and sat down in a chair facing me. I turned to Uttama-sloka. "Ask this gentleman if the healer has helped him," I said.

Before Uttama-sloka could say anything, the man took my hands in his and closed his eyes.

"What in the world is going on?" I said to Vaikuntha-pati.

"He's the healer," he said.

The man opened his eyes. "Your blood pressure is slightly high," he said.

He closed his eyes again and clasped my hands tighter. "And three vertebrae in your neck are damaged from when you were hit by a car."

"Maharaja," whispered a devotee sitting nearby, "you were never in a car accident."

"Actually, I was," I said, "in the early 1990s in Durban, South Africa. I was hit by a van while crossing the street."

The healer continued. "Your liver is slightly swollen," he said, "you get headaches from time to time, and your knees are weak, especially the left one."

I was speechless. After a few moments I regained my composure. "Sir," I said, "how do you know all that?"

He looked across the room at an icon of the Virgin Mary holding baby Jesus. "By the grace of God," he said. "I can also tell you your liver is weak because you had hepatitis many years

ago. You have to be careful what you eat. But don't worry about the Alzheimer's disease that runs in your family. It won't affect you."

My jaw dropped. My grandmother died of Alzheimer's years ago. I sometimes wondered whether I would suffer the same fate.

"There's nothing serious," he said, "but you have to take care. With natural herbs you can be cured. Herbs are God's gift to man in the form of medicine."

"I cured myself with herbs," he continued. "I was born with severe paralysis. When I was eight years old I asked my grandmother to go into the forest and bring back certain herbs. I tried many different combinations, and eventually they worked. According to the doctors, I was supposed to be bedridden my entire life.

"Some people say I'm a warlock, but look at that diploma on the wall. I have a pharmaceutical degree. If I'm unconventional it's only because I sometimes use toxic herbs in small doses to stimulate the body into action. But the result is that I have cured more than 3,000 patients of cancer."

That raised my eyebrows.

"It's not a fairy tale," he said. "When the hospitals give up on cancer patients, they send them to me as a last resort. I'm not always successful because I'm not God, but I've found His herbs to be the most effective cure for disease. My record for helping women who cannot conceive children is much higher."

I was writing furiously in my notebook.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"He keeps a diary, which he publishes," said a devotee.

"Promise me you won't tell anyone where to find me," he said. "I won't consult a single person who might come here as a

result of your visit. I'm here for my own people. The indigenous herbs are most effective on the local population. Anyway, I can't possibly help more people than I'm currently seeing. And who outside of this town will believe what you write about me?"

"They may believe in the benefit of natural medicine," I said, "but I'm also wondering how in the world you knew what was wrong with me just by holding my hands."

"That's another thing," he said. "I spent 12 years in Tibet studying medicine with Buddhist lamas in their monasteries."

He handed me a glass of water. "Drink this," he said, "and your liver will feel better soon."

I hesitated.

He chuckled. "There's no poison in it," he said, "just herbs."

I drank the water.

He looked at me intensely. "You people are doing the most important work of all," he said. "You're curing souls. If you take care of yourself, you'll live another 20 years."

He stood up. "There are many patients waiting," he said.

As we left the cottage, we were all silent. Some time later, while we were driving, a devotee spoke. "What do you think Maharaja?" he said. "Was it all hocus-pocus?"

I thought for a few moments. "Well," I said, "he has a medical degree, and it appears he has helped many people. And who can argue that herbs are a natural way to cure people?"

"And what about your liver?" he asked.

I clutched my right side. Suddenly I realized that the dull pain in my liver had subsided for the first time in many months.

"The pain ..." I said. "It's gone."

In the Ramayana there is a passage about the power of herbs:

“Hanuman plunged his hands into the side of the mountain and broke off the entire section containing all the herbs. Lifting the huge mountain summit above his head he soared high into the sky and soon arrived near Lanka.

“Vibhishana rushed over and embraced the monkey. The Raksasa then set about finding the medicinal herbs, perceiving them by virtue of his occult vision.

“Taking a handful of the herbs Hanuman went quickly to Rama and Laksman. He looked anxiously at the two princes, who appeared like the sun and the moon fallen to earth. His hand shook as he placed a bunch of herbs under Rama’s nostrils.

“Slowly, the prince began to stir. He breathed deeply, inhaling the celestial fragrance. Gradually His eyes opened. He looked up at Hanuman and smiled. The monkey breathed a deep sigh of relief. Quickly he began administering the herbs to Laksman. Slowly, He too returned to consciousness.

“The surviving monkeys moved swiftly among the wounded troops, administering the herbs to them. They crushed the herbs and allowed the wind to carry the pungent fragrance.

“By the potency of the healing herbs hundreds of thousands of the Vanara warriors were restored to consciousness and they jumped up shouting with joy. Even some monkeys who had been killed, but whose

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bodies were not destroyed, were brought back to life by the herbs' potency. Soon the monkey army stood again in their millions, ready and eager for the fight.”

[*Ramayana*, Part 3, Chapter 10, translated by Krsna Dharma das]

CHAPTER TWENTY



IN HER OWN HANDWRITING

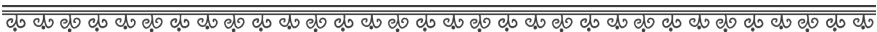
| OCTOBER 4 – NOVEMBER 14, 2008 |

For most people the New Year begins on January 1st. For me it comes in early October, when my yearly worldwide preaching tour finishes and I head to Vrindavan for spiritual rejuvenation.

Just before leaving for India this year, I sat down and made up my itinerary for 2009. When I finished, I saw there was hardly a day to spare, with visits to most continents and almost 100 full-scale festivals in Poland, England, South Africa, Hong Kong and Australia.

I looked at the itinerary and shook my head. “My dear Lord Krsna,” I said aloud, “please give me the inspiration, spiritual strength, and stamina for all the service ahead.”

Although I have visited Vrindavan many times in the past 38 years, I still feel a sense of mystery and expectation whenever I begin another trip there. As I boarded a flight from London to Delhi in early October, I was so excited it was as if I were



going to Vrindavan for the first time. As the flight took off I thought about what India had been like in the '70s and '80s. In those days India was still considered a third-world country, and in the West, I would often hear people speak of India's "starving masses." Of course, there were no starving masses in India, but people had little knowledge of the facts, so the rumors persisted.

When our flight reached cruising altitude and the seat belt sign was turned off, I reached for a copy of the International Herald Tribune in the seat next to me and saw an article about President Bush signing an agreement to trade nuclear technology with India, ending a 30-year ban.

The agreement will give India access to civilian nuclear technology and fuel and will clear the way for American and European nuclear corporations to bid for contracts worth \$27 billion to build 18 or 20 nuclear reactors in India.

"How times have changed," I thought.

Unfortunately, India's rise to a world power has affected even places like Vrindavan. The sleepy little town I went to in 1973 has grown into a small metropolis with guest houses, homes, and businesses being built at an alarming rate. Gone are the peaceful, quiet days when one could walk through Vrindavan without getting lost in huge crowds and having to dodge motor rickshaws, buses, and cars.

Nevertheless, Vrindavan remains and will always be a pure and sanctified place, untouched by material contamination. To deepen my appreciation for the dhama, I read selected verses from *Srimad Bhagavatam* as the flight continued to Delhi.

After landing, I caught a taxi to Vrindavan. As we entered the town, I asked the driver to stop, and I got out of the car and rolled in the dust, as is the tradition, much to the surprise of tourists passing by in another car.

I entered the room where I would be staying and set up my computer to check my email. Then I caught myself. “This is not why I’ve come here,” I thought and put the computer aside.

After settling in, I picked up my cell phone to call Jayatama dasa in Poland and get an update on his recent lunch with the Indian ambassador. Again, I stopped myself. “It can wait,” I said softly.

Minutes later, a devotee came by to greet me.

“Welcome to the holy dhama, Maharaja,” he said. “How was your trip?”

I told him about the flight.

Then he started talking about the news of the world. “What are your thoughts on the presidential race in the U.S.?” he said. “Do you think Obama can win?”

“It’s hard to say at this point ...,” I began.

Then I caught myself once more. “Here I go again,” I thought.

I politely excused myself, saying I had other things to do.

After my friend left I sat before my Deities and prayed They would give me direction on how to accomplish my purpose in coming to Vrindavan: to deepen my love for the Lord and get spiritual strength for the huge task that lay ahead.

Later in the evening I decided to go on Vrindavan parikrama. I picked up my japa beads and started barefoot on the two-hour walk along the perimeter of the town.

As I rounded the first turn, I saw a man come out of his home and climb onto a bicycle. As he began to pedal away, his five-year-old daughter burst out of the house and ran down the street after him. Crying, she called out to him again and again. But within moments, her father had pedaled out of sight.

The little girl stopped, fell to ground, and continued sobbing uncontrollably.

“Thank you for showing me that, my Lord,” I thought. “If I can learn to cry for You as intensely as that little girl cried for her father, my spiritual life will be successful.”

The next day devotees arrived from different parts of the world to take part in the parikrama that BB Govinda Maharaja and I would be leading. For the next three weeks we immersed ourselves in kirtana and classes in Vrindavan, Jaipur, and Hrsikesh. At every temple, samadhi, holy river, and kunda, I prayed intensely for the awakening of my love for Radha and Krsna and for the strength to preach in the coming year.

And by the Lord’s grace, inspiration continued coming.

While on Govardhana parikrama with our group, I started feeling tired half way around. “Maybe I should give up,” I thought.

After some time I was walking at a snail’s pace, focusing on my aching muscles and tired feet. Suddenly a pilgrim walked briskly past me, chanting prayers to Govardhana Hill. I looked at him closely and was shocked to see that he was totally blind.

“Despite his blindness he’s as eager as everyone else to perform the 16-mile journey,” I thought. “Who am I to complain?”

I caught up with him and spent the rest of the parikrama following in his footsteps, listening to his prayers and praying for the same determination.

Several days later, our parikrama party was to go to Varsana, where Srimati Radharani had lived with her parents, King Vrsabhanu and Queen Kirtida Sundari. Exhausted from the

previous parikramas, I got up late and rushed through my puja to be on time.

Then I scolded myself. “It’s not proper to do puja quickly, especially in the dhama,” I thought.

That day as we walked with our parikrama party up the winding road to Varsana, I saw an elderly woman carrying a Deity of Gopal in a small basket. At each holy spot on the way up, she would stop and show Gopal the sacred place. She handled the Deity with such care and attention it was obvious she had much love for Him.

At one point she laughed and shook the basket. “You naughty boy, Krsna,” she said to the Deity, “here’s where You stopped Radharani and the gopis and tried to tax them for their milk products.”

“Thank you again for another lesson, my Lord,” I said softly. “I can only hope one day I will worship Your Deity form with such love and devotion.”

I wanted still more inspiration, so I went to see my friend Caturatma dasa. “Prabhu,” I said, “could you recommend a book about the lives of great devotees who spent time in the dhama?”

“Prema Vilasa by Nityananda das,” he replied. “It’s filled with the pastimes of great devotees like Jahnava Mata, the wife of Lord Nityananda. And it describes the pastimes of Narottam das Thakur and Srinivasa Acaraya in great detail.”

“Is it authorized?” I asked.

Caturatma smiled. “Srla Prabhupada quotes it in the purport to verse 60 of the 13th chapter of Adi-lila in *Sri Caitanya-caritamrta*,” he said.

I found a copy of the book, published by ISKCON’s Isvara das from Touchstone Media. Day by day I became more en-

thusiastic as I read about the previous acaryas and their love for Vrindavan.

But as the month of Kartika was coming to a close I found myself still hankering for more mercy.

“I’ve never attempted 100 festivals in a year,” I thought.

On my last day in Vrindavan, I prostrated myself in the dust before beginning my final parikrama around the dhama. “My dear Radharani, Queen of Vrindavan,” I prayed, “I beg You, please send some special mercy my way.”

As I walked along, I made mental images of all the temples, Deities, and samadhis, hoping the impressions would stay with me throughout the entire year.

“Rupa Goswami says that if one cannot live in Vrindavan,” I thought, “then one should always remember the holy place. In this way one will always remain enlivened.”

Just before finishing the parikrama, I stopped off at a place where my Godbrother Kiran Prabhu had invited me for lunch.

Kiran has been living in India for almost 30 years. Much of this time he spent preaching in West Bengal. While there he wrote a detailed book on the holy places of Bengal and the pastimes of Lord Caitanya and His associates there.

After lunch we talked about having his book published. Then just before leaving, I went to his room to take darsan of his Deities. I was surprised when I found only a small frame on the altar with thin pieces of old wood inside. There appeared to be writing on the wood, though it was faded.

“What is this?” I asked Kiran.

He looked lovingly at the frame. “The handwriting of Gadadhara Pandit,” he said, “one of the members of the Panca Tattva.”

“The handwriting of Gadadhara Pandit?” I said. “The incarnation of Srimati Radharani in Lord Caitanya’s pastimes?”

“Yes,” he said softly. “It’s part of a *Bhagavad-gita* he was copying.”

My eyes opened wide.

“It’s mentioned in our Gaudiya literature,” he said.

“But how did you get it?” I asked.

“I was serving with the Bhaktivedanta Charity Trust set up by Srila Prabhupada in the 1970s to restore old temples in Bengal,” Kiran replied. “One time I visited a temple in Bharatpura where that *Bhagavad-gita* is preserved and worshiped. Once a year, on Gadadhara Pandit’s disappearance day, the Gita is put on display for the public.

“I arrived just as the priest was taking the sacred text, written on thin pieces of wood, out of a box. As he turned around he bumped into a pillar, and a few brittle pieces of the text broke off and fell to the ground.

“We both stood there stunned for a few moments. Then I calmly reached down and picked up some of the pieces that had writing on them. Somehow the priest didn’t object. Since that day I’ve been offering bhoga and arati to these pieces of the book.”

I couldn’t control myself. “Oh Prabhu,” I blurted, “would you consider giving me just a small fragment? Even just one letter?”

“How could I refuse you?” Kiran replied. “You’re doing so much service in the West.”

He reached for the frame and opened it. With a pair of tweezers he picked up a small piece of wood with a perfectly formed letter on it and carefully placed it in my trembling hands.

That night I lay in bed reading the final chapters of *Prema Vilasa*. I wanted to finish the book before leaving the dhama the next morning. I was struggling to keep awake when sud-

denly I came across the following passage, which confirmed what Kiran had told me:

“O readers, please listen carefully. One day as Gadadhara Pandit was making a copy of *Bhagavad-gita*, Lord Caitanya asked, ‘O Pandit, what are you writing?’

“I am writing *Bhagavad-gita*,’ Gadadhara Pandit replied.

“The Lord forcibly took Gadadhara Pandit’s writing materials, wrote a sloka, and then returned them. When Gadadhara Pandit saw the verse he became jubilant and offered prayers to the Lord. Lord Caitanya embraced Gadadhara Pandit, who then quickly completed his work on *Bhagavad-gita*.

“Just before his disappearance, Gadadhara Pandit called Nayananda Misra and said, ‘I have a Deity of Krsna that I always keep hanging around my neck. From now on you should worship Him with great care. Also, take care of the Gopinatha Deity. Now take this *Bhagavad-gita* and worship it with great devotion. Lord Caitanya wrote a sloka in it.’

“After saying this, Gadadhara Pandit left this world. Nayananda Misra performed the necessary rituals for the spiritual master’s departure and moved to Bharatpura.

“Desiring to serve the lotus feet of Sri Jahnava and Viracandra, I, Nityananda das, narrate Prema Vilasa.”

[Nityananda das, *Prema Vilasa*, 22nd vilasa]

When I finished the passage I was overwhelmed. “My prayers were answered,” I thought. “By the mercy of Srimati Radharani, I now have a tiny fragment of that sacred text. In fact, it is Her very own handwriting. What more inspiration and mercy could a preacher want in his efforts to serve the sacred mission of Sri Caitanya Mahaprabhu?”

The next day I left the holy dhama fully rejuvenated and ready for the services and challenges that lay ahead.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

INDRADYUMNA SWAMI is a traveling preacher in the International Society for Krsna Consciousness. He joined the movement in 1971 in Detroit, Michigan, and soon after went to Europe to help establish Krsna conscious centers in France, Switzerland, Italy, and Spain. In 1979 he accepted the *sannyasa* order of life (a renounced monk) and in 1986 began preaching in Eastern Europe and Russia. He continues to oversee the development of the movement there, as well as give guidance to his disciples. For the past seventeen years he has also organized a large festival program in Poland that introduces Vedic culture to hundreds of thousands of people. Traveling extensively in many parts of the world, he happily shares his experiences and realizations with others in the form of this diary.

For further information about Indradyumna Swami, his preaching activities, the Festival of India in Poland, and his books, please visit his website www.travelingpreacher.com. His lectures are available at www.narottam.com, and you can write to him at Indradyumna.swami@pamho.net.