**Chapter 3: Our Srila Prabhupada**

*During twelve pioneering years, Srila Prabhupada accepted the role of ISKCON’s founder-*acarya *with complete humility, nonstop surrender, and protective love.*

It is May 1969. In Columbus, Ohio, devotees have arranged for Prabhupada to perform onstage with counterculture poet Allen Ginsberg at a small auditorium on the Ohio State University campus. “A NIGHT OF KRISHNA CONSCIOUSNESS IN COLUMBUS,” read the posters. “TRANSCENDENTAL PASTIMES. ECSTATIC ILLUMINATIONS.”

On the morning of the event, Ginsberg meets with Prabhupada at the local ISKCON temple to discuss the evening’s program, as well as how Krsna consciousness could spread widely in materialistic America. Alluding to a prophetic text from the *Brahma-vaivarta Purana* (4.129.59), Prabhupada assures the poet that people everywhere “will take advantage of Hare Krsna for the next ten thousand years.” Ginsberg has seen Prabhupada rouse crowds to chant Hare Krsna in New York and San Francisco, but the conservative, provincial students of Columbus will present a special challenge.

That evening the 750-seat auditorium is overflowing, as nearly two thousand students, faculty, and townspeople fill the seats, aisles, and balconies, and spill into the clearing below the stage, flouting all fire codes. As the surprised devotees press through the crowds, distributing *Bhagavad-gitas,* Ginsberg pumps a harmonium onstage, chanting Hare Krsna, and the crowd—corn-fed, towheaded Midwesterners--chants back, clapping and singing, celebrating the semester’s end.

Then Prabhupada enters. Smiling and glowing, he ascends the stage, where Ginsberg invites him to lead the chanting. In *The Hare Krishna Explosion* Hayagriva Dasa describes what happened next:

Prabhupada stands and raises his hands, inviting the students also to stand and dance. The response is immediate. Students in the aisles are first to their feet, then students in the rows and balconies arise. There is little room for dancing; a spontaneous bounce catches hold instead. As Prabhupada bounces on the dais, the students bounce also. As he

waves his arms, they wave theirs. He leads them as a maestro conducts an orchestra, until gradually the inherent spiritual rhythm of the mantra itself prevails….the young voices empowered by the mantra, not even knowing the meaning of the words. “The amazing fact is that everybody was able to get up and dance,” says Ginsberg later, “nearly leaping out of their skins.”1

Had Prabhupada disclosed the Puranic texts directly preceding the ten-thousand year prophecy he mentioned, poet Ginsberg would have likely claimed Prabhupada its fulfiller. In those texts Lord Krsna tells the Goddess Ganga that five millennia hence He will send his *mantra-upasaka* (worshiper of the holy names) to spread the chanting of Hare Krsna and purify earth, water, sky, and humanity everywhere. “This period of worldwide chanting will continue for ten thousand years.” (*Brahma-vaivarta Purana*, 4.129.49-59)

While fulfilling this and other Vedic prophecies, Prabhupada never once called attention to himself, instead calling everyone’s attention to Krsna. Over the millennia, the Lord would set the stage of world history to send His “worshiper of the holy names” to the right place at the right time to launch the worldwide Hare Krsna movement—alone.

**Alone in America**

When Prabhupada’s spiritual master, Srila Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati Thakura, dispatched the first Vaisnava preachers from India to Europe in the 1930s, he gave them the full institutional support of his Gaudiya Mission. But after Srila Bhaktisiddhanta’s demise in 1937, the mission’s leaders neglected their master’s instructions to form a governing body and work cooperatively to spread Krsna consciousness. The infighting that ensued so fragmented the mission that by the time Prabhupada arrived in America to preach in 1965, there was no institution left to support him.

In New York City with almost no friends or funds, Prabhupada nonetheless saw a fertile preaching field in materially prosperous America, where people were spiritually starving and looking to the East for truth. Hopeful of reviving the cooperative spirit that once galvanized the Gaudiya Mission, Prabhupada began

writing his now isolated godbrothers, adjuring them to help him seize the time. The following excerpt from one such letter to the mission’s former manager is telling:

I came here to study the situation and I find it very nice and if you are also agreeable to cooperate….it will all be very nice by the will [of] Srila [Bhaktisiddhanta] Prabhupada….If you agree then take it for granted that I am one of the worker[s] of the Sri Mayapur Caitanya Math.2 I have no ambition for becoming the proprietor of any Math or Mandir but I want working facilities. (Letter to Bhakti Vilasa Tirtha Maharaja, 8 November 1965)

A “servant-leader” long before the phrase occurred, Prabhupada would still receive no tangible cooperation from his godbrothers. With only the scriptures he translated, annotated, and brought from India to sustain him, Prabhupada endured mostly alone the brutal New York winter that followed, writing letters and translating the *Bhagavad-gita.* In a letter six years later, Prabhupada reflected on those lone struggles:

When I was alone in your New York, I was thinking, who will listen to me in this horrible, sinful place? All right, I shall stay little longer, at least I can distribute a few of my books, that is something. But Krishna was all along preparing something I could not see….Now I can see that it is a miracle. Otherwise, your city of New York, one single old man, with only a few books to sell for barely getting eatables, how he can survive, what to speak of introducing God-consciousness movement for saving the humankind? That is Krishna’s miracle. Now I can see it.

(Letter to Sudama, 23 December 1972)

**From Obscurity to “Swamiji”**

The following spring Krsna’s miracle-worker-to-be relocated to a loft in New York’s infamous Bowery district. Rife with derelicts and crime, the district was dangerous, but Prabhupada took the risk to reach young seekers nearby. In the

loft, Krsna sent Prabhupada a few regular listeners, who came to his aid after an LSD-crazed youth attacked, forcing him to flee. With the regulars’ help, Prabhupada at last secured his own place, a cheap storefront on the city’s Lower East Side. Forced by the noncooperation of his godbrothers, Prabhupada dropped the attempt to revive his spiritual master’s institution, and instead on July 13, 1966, he officially launched “The International Society for Krishna Consciousness,” a fresh branch of the same disciplic community.3

Empowered by Srila Bhaktisiddhanta, Lord Caitanya (Krsna’s golden avatar), and his spiritual forebears, Prabhupada inspired a growing flock of followers that summer to chant Hare Krsna and take up the process of *bhakti-yoga.* No small miracle in New York City, the capital of “Do your own thing.” He did it by stressing the do’s more than the don’ts, the chanting more than the taboos. He had faith that as Krsna filled the consciousness of his young aspirants, they would outgrow their old ways and savor the higher taste of devotional service.4

It worked. By late November, after a few groups of devotees had received initiation, one of the earlier initiates approached Prabhupada: “Swamiji, what did you say the rules are for this practice?” Just what Prabhupada had been waiting to hear, for he knew they would follow the rules only when they were ready. The next day, November 25, 1966, Prabhupada posted the regulative principles of Krsna consciousness on the storefront’s bathroom door.5

**Only He Could Lead Them**

In January 1967 Prabhupada followed the counterculture trail to San Francisco, where disciples had opened ISKCON’s second temple. There he inspired a new wave of devotees to chant Hare Krsna and serve Lord Caitanya’s mission. As in New York, the young aspirants marveled at Prabhupada’s pace—a devotional whirlwind of chanting, teaching, worshiping, cooking, public preaching, private speaking, initiating newcomers, and translating scripture in the wee hours, while everyone else slept.

When Prabhupada returned to New York in April, despite his seventy-plus years the pace continued unabated. For his first followers, this was all part of the wonder that was “Swamiji.” So it was quite a shock when, toward the end of May, Prabhupada suffered a heart attack and stroke. He was their shelter; now

they would have to shelter him. To help Prabhupada recuperate, the devotees brought him to a beach bungalow on the Jersey shore. But the weather was gray and blustery, so with the doctor’s permission Prabhupada flew to San Francisco, where the devotees hoped the California sunshine would help him.Not to be. When the mountains and fog near his cottage mostly obscured the sun’s rays, Prabhupada said he would have to return to India, for its Ayurvedic medicines and bracing heat. Hayagriva explains what happened next:

Some of the devotees, worried that Swamiji has decided to go to India to leave his body, ask him whether, during his absence, one of his God- brothers should come to America to assume ISKCON leadership. The minute this question is presented to him, we sense that it is offen- sive. Swamiji becomes very grave, closing his eyes…then suddenly we see tears falling down his cheeks. “My Guru Maharaj, he was no ordinary spiritual master,” he says, wiping away the tears. “He…saved me.” Later, Swamiji tells us what we should have always known: There is no one to replace him. The very idea is insulting. “If someone comes and tells you something different,” he says, “you will be confused.”6

Owing to his absolute surrender to Srila Bhaktisiddhanta and Lord Caitanya’s mission, Prabhupada knew he was being uniquely empowered to turn people outside India’s spiritual culture toward Krsna consciousness. And that only he could lead them.

At the same time, concerned that his followers have a respectful attitude toward his godbrothers, Prabhupada wrote: “Even amongst our God-brothers we have misunderstanding, but none of us is astray from the service of Krsna. My Guru Maharaj ordered us to execute his mission combinedly. Unfortunately we are now separated. But none of us have stopped preaching Krsna Consciousness. Even if there was a misunderstanding amongst the God-brothers of my Guru-Maharaja, none of them deviated from the transcendental loving service of Krishna.” (Letter to Brahmananda, 18 November 1967)

**From “Swamiji” to “Prabhupada”**

Although Prabhupada’s uniqueness among contemporary gurus was obvious to his followers, they were still calling him “Swamiji,” a rather common address. In the spring of 1968, Krsna revealed an honorific more befitting Prabhupada’s position. When a devotee learned that the Sanskrit affix *ji* was a term of endearment, he asked Prabhupada if he could add it to his wife’s name, “Govinda,” and call her “Govindaji.”

“No, actually *ji* is a third-class form of address,” Prabhupada replied. “It’s better not to call her ‘Govindaji.’”

Govinda Dasi, a plainspoken Texas lady, remembers the rest:

So I piped up, I was sitting right in front of him and I said, “Well, if it’s a third-class form of address, why are we calling you ‘ji’? Why are we calling you ‘Swamiji’?” And he said, “It’s not very important.” I said, “Oh, no, it’s very important. If it’s a third-class form of address, then we don’t want to call you that. We want to call you the most first-class form of address. So tell us what would be a good name for us to call you by.” And he was very humble, very reluctant, but I pressed him, “We’ve got to change this,” and he said, “You can call me ‘Gurudev’ or ‘Guru Maharaj’ or ‘Prabhupada.’ So I said, “Well, that’s three. We need one. So which one is the best?” And he answered, “Srila Prabhupada” is nice, that is the best.’ So I said, “From today you will be called ‘Srila Prabhupada.’”7

Never demanding respect but commanding it by his own endearing example, Prabhupada had seized Krsna’s teachable moment to quietly disclose the appropriate address. In a disciplic line there are many “Gurudevas,” but “Prabhupada” is a guru of gurus, “a master at whose feet all masters sit.”

**From “Prabhupada” to “Founder-Acarya”**

In December 1969, the opening of ISKCON London set the stage for the movement’s phenomenal global expansion in the 1970s. In twelve years Prabhupada would circle the globe fourteen times, initiate thousands of disciples, and establish the Krsna consciousness movement on every major continent. During his travels, he would found over a hundred temples, schools, farms, and restaurants, all while writing and publishing dozens of translations and commentaries on foundational Vaisnava scriptures.

But success would bring enemies, too, the worst from within. In 1970, after critical remarks by a few of his godbrothers negatively influenced some of his leaders, Prabhupada asked a dozen trusted disciples to help him form a Governing Body Commission (as Srila Bhaktisiddhanta had requested his disciples) to protect ISKCON and ensure its continuance. On July 28 a legal document call “Direction of Management” listed the GBC members and officially referred to “His Divine Grace A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada” as ISKCON’s “Founder-Acharya.”8

But bad signs persisted. On one of his books, his ISKCON Press identified the author as simply “A.C. Bhaktivedanta,” nearly stripping his name of any spiritual significance. When his new publishing house, The Bhaktivedanta Book Trust, moved into its headquarters, Prabhupada saw nothing on the building identifying the organization’s name or founder. And when some of his temple presidents wrote him on their own stationery, Prabhupada had to tell them to write him on official temple stationery, displaying his full name and founder-*acarya* title. For good reason. One day a noncomplying temple president sold the temple, collected the money, and disappeared. He, not ISKCON, had been the legal owner.

After the last incident, in the summer of 1974 Prabhupada drafted an amendment to his earlier management document, including a strongly worded statement about his position and authority as ISKCON’s founder-*acarya*:

It is declared that His Divine Grace A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada is the Founder-Acharya of (ISKCON) International Society for Krishna Consciousness. He is the supreme authority in all matters of the society. His position cannot be occupied by anyone else, and his name and title must appear on all documents, letterheads, publications, and buildings of the Society.

(Amendments for Official Documents, July 22, 1974)9

That same summer, even as Prabhupada was reasserting his supreme position in ISKCON, while he was translating the *Sri Caitanya-caritamrta*, he also reasserted his (and his followers’) fidelity to Srila Bhaktisiddanta in the mission of Lord Caitanya:

As members of the Krsna consciousness movement, we belong to the family, or disciplic succession, of Sarasvati Gosvami, and thus we are known as Sarasvatas. Obeisances are therefore offered to the spiritual master as *sarasvata-deva*, or a member of the Sarasvata family (*namaste sarasvate deve*), whose mission is to broadcast the cult of Sri Caitanya Mahaprabhu (gauravani-pracarine) and to fight with impersonalists and voidists (*nirvisesa-sunyavadi-pascatya desa tarine*).

(*Sri Caitanya-caritamrta, Adi-lila* 10.84 purport)

Prabhupada was hopeful that if his followers would do as he was doing—keeping his movement connected to its spiritual roots while creatively fulfilling Lord Caitanya’s desires—it would survive the ravages of time and eventually carry Krsna consciousness to every town and village on earth.10

**Notes**

1For a complete account of the Columbus event, see *The Hare Krishna Explosion*, by Hayagriva Dasa. Available on The Bhaktivedanta Vedabase/Books by ISKCON Devotees/The Hare Krishna Explosion/Part 3: New Vrindaban, 1968-1969/Chapter 17: The Guru and the Poet. 2Formerly the flagship temple of the Gaudiya Mission. 3In his commentary to *Sri Caitanya-caritamrta*, *Adi-lila* 12.73, Prabhupada calls ISKCON a “branch” of Lord Caitanya’s *bhakti-kalpataru*, or desire tree of devotional service.” 4Prabhupada’s strategy was based on Srila Rupa Gosvami’s dictum in *Bhakti-rasamrta-sindhu* (1.2.4): “One should fix his mind on Krsna by any means. All the rules and prohibitions mentioned in the *sastras* should be the servants of this principle.” 5Prabhupada required his initiates to chant the Hare Krsna mantra a prescribed number of times on their meditation beads, and to avoid intoxication, illicit sexual activity, meat-eating, and gambling. For the complete contents of what Prabhupada posted, see *The Hare Krishna Explosion*/Part 1: New York 1966/Chapter 5: The Hare Krishna Explosion. 6*The Hare Krishna Explosion*/Part 2: San Francisco, 1967/Chapter 12: Passage to India. 7From *Following Srila Prabhupada – Remembrances* (compiled by Yadubara Dasa), available on The Bhaktivedanta Vedabase/Biographies and Glorification of Srila Prabhupada/Following Srila Prabhupada/DVD 01 – November 1965—July 1970/May 1968, Boston. 8In The Bhaktivedanta Vedabase see Legal Documents/Direction of Management. 9In the Bhaktivedanta Vedabase, see Legal Documents/Amendments for Official Documents. 10In his commentary on *Sri Caitanya-caritamrta*, *Madhya-lila* 25.264, Prabhupada cites Lord Caitanya’s prediction: “In every town and village, the chanting of My holy name will be heard.” (*Caitanya-bhagavata*, *Antya* 4.126)

*In Chapter 4, we’ll trace the roots of Srila Prabhupada’s mission, from the time he met his Guru Maharaja to the event that triggered his mission’s plan.*