**Chapter 4: His Mission’s Roots**

*From the day Srila Prabhupada was born, Lord Krsna prepared the events of his life for everyone’s ultimate benefit.*

From the beginning, signs of Abhay Charan De’s divine destiny appeared: his birth1 by the Ganges on Nandotsava, the celebration of Lord Krsna’s advent; his childhood devotion to deity worship, especially Rathayatra, Lord Krsna’s chariot parade; his pure devotee father’s constant prayer that his son become a great preacher; and his stars and palm affirming that at the age of seventy he would cross the ocean, become a powerful spiritual leader, and open 108 temples.2 “One astrologer, sometimes he read my hand. He said in Hindi, *hokum chelbe….* ‘Your hand speaks that your order will be executed.’”3

Yet when invited to meet Srila Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati, the saintly person who would become his spiritual master, Abhay was reluctant to go. Growing up in Calcutta, he had seen his father host so many so-called saints who were better at begging food than distributing spiritual knowledge. When at last he let a close friend drag him to an audience with Srila Bhaktisiddhanta, Abhay was struck by his first words to them: “You are educated young men. Why don’t you preach Lord Caitanya Mahaprabhu’s message throughout the whole world?”4

By his own account, Prabhupada was “Gandhi’s devotee” at the time, dressed in the white *khadi* of an Indian nationalist and boycotting all things British. Impressed by Srila Bhaktisiddhanta’s bold conviction, Abhay nonetheless felt compelled to test him: “Who will hear your Caitanya’s message....We are a dependent country. First India must become independent. How can we spread Indian culture if we are under British rule?”5

Srila Bhaktisiddhanta replied that Krsna consciousness—the original, pure consciousness of every embodied soul—was too urgent to wait for a change in politics. Misidentifying with matter, suffering humanity was forever chasing freedom through temporary, earthbound movements, like Gandhi’s. But reconnecting everyone to Krsna, the Supreme Personality of Godhead and our dearest friend, constituted the highest welfare work.

Struck again by his masterful reply, Abhay’s allegiance flew straight from

Gandhi to Srila Bhaktisiddhanta, whose mission would soon reignite Lord Caitanya’s divine movement throughout India. “I accepted him immediately,” Prabhupada recalled. “Not officially, but in my heart.”6

Already a husband, father, and office manager at a Calcutta pharmaceutical company, Abhay was in no position to abruptly join Srila Bhaktisiddhanta’s mission, though he wished he could have: “At that time I thought, ‘This great personality is asking me to preach. I [should] immediately join….but now I am married. It will be injustice.’”7

A responsible and enterprising householder, Abhay decided to start his own pharmacy, expand the business, and contribute to Srila Bhaktisiddhanta’s mission. In 1923 he moved his family to Allahabad and started Prayag Pharmacy, which flourished early on under his diligent management. His sense of mission would also flourish as he studied the writings of Srila Bhaktisiddhanta and his Gaudiya predecessors, the disciplic lineage from Lord Caitanya.

**Initiation**

In 1928, when senior renunciants approached Abhay for help starting a branch of the Gaudiya Mission in Allahabad, he was delighted to contribute his contacts and resources and later became a favorite speaker and singer at the temple. As Abhay got more involved with the Mission, he shared plans with his wife to invite people to their home for sanctified meals and discussions about Krsna. She didn’t share his enthusiasm: “My wife was a devotee of Krsna,” Prabhupada recalled, “but she had some other idea. Her idea was just to worship the deity at home and live peacefully. My idea was preaching.”8

By 1932 it had been ten years since Abhay met the saintly person he revered as his spiritual master. That autumn, when he heard that Srila Bhaktisiddhanta was leading a massive *parikrama,* or pilgrimage, around Vrindavan, the sacred place of Krsna’s early pastimes, he briefly broke free from his business to join the pilgrims. Soon after he arrived at Kosi, the devotees were given the choice of visiting the nearby Sesasayi Visnu deity9 or staying to hear Srila Bhaktisiddhanta give his final talk before leaving the party. Prabhupada recalled: “At that time I think only ten or twelve men remained….And I thought it wise, ‘What can I see

at this Sesasayi? Let me hear what Srila Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati will speak. Let me hear.’”10

In 1933, while Srila Bhaktisiddhanta was visiting his Mission’s new branch at Allahabad, the local leader recommended Abhay for initiation. “Yes, I shall initiate this boy,” Srila Bhaktisiddhanta said. “He is very nice. He hears me very patiently. He does not go away.”11

Although Abhay’s wife chose not to attend the ceremony, a brother and sister were present as Srila Bhaktisiddhanta gave Abhay the initiated name Abhaya Caranaravinda Dasa, “the servant of one fearless at Lord Krsna’s lotus feet.” He also gave his capable disciple instructions to study deeply Srila Rupa Gosvami’s *Bhakti-rasamrta-sindhu*, which Prabhupada would later summarize as *The Nectar of Devotion*, the “lawbook” for devotional service. Prabhupada recalled, “From 1922 I got the impression of preaching Caitanya Mahaprabhu’s cult….That was the initiation by my Guru Maharaja. Then officially I was initiated in 1933.”12

Over the next few years, Abhay would meet Srila Bhaktisiddhanta perhaps a half-dozen times, yet the talks were intimate enough to raise eyebrows. Prabhupada: “Sometimes I would talk freely with him and the godbrothers would become angry. They would say, ‘Fools rush in where angels fear to tread.’I thought, ‘I may be a fool, but what can I do?’ With my Guru Maharaja we would talk so many private things. I was only a *grhastha* [family man], but whenever I came, my Guru Maharaja would be very glad to talk with me.”13

**Blessings**

Although an astrologer had predicted Abhay could become one of the wealthiest men in India, in 1934 bad debtors and cutthroat competitors obliged him to turn over the debts and accounts of the Prayag Pharmacy to his supplier and former employer in Calcutta. After setting up a small pharmaceutical works to support his family in Allahabad, Abhay and a brother ventured to Bombay, seeking new sales and production opportunities.

Lord Krsna, it turned out, had greater opportunities in mind. As in Allahabad, Abhay met senior Gaudiya renunciates, who asked him to help them start a Mission branch in Bombay. His preaching increasing since initiation, Abhay

soon helped them launch a successful center.

On the evening of February 25, 1935, Srila Bhaktisiddhanta’s sixty-first birthday, Abhay delivered an English speech and poem to the members of the Bombay branch, capturing Srila Bhaktisiddhanta and his mission so eloquently that a godbrother dubbed him *kavi*, “learned poet.” Especially pleasing to his spiritual master was the couplet “Absolute is sentient, thou hast proved/Impersonal calamity thou hast moved.” When Abhay submitted the speech and poem to the mission’s English journal, *The Harmonist*, Srila Bhaktisiddhanta instructed the editor, “Whatever he writes, publish it.”14

That July Srila Bhaktisiddhanta came to install the deity of Lord Krsna in Bombay and was pleased with the progress of the center. The leader said that “much of the work was due to Abhay Babu, who had collected funds and established the new branch. ‘Why is Abhay living separately?’ [he] asked. ‘He should be president of this Bombay center.

“Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati replied, ‘It is better that he is living outside your company. He will do. When the time comes, he will do everything himself. You don’t have to recommend him.’”15

Mystified by what he heard his spiritual master had said, Prabhupada later reflected: “That means he was so kind that he expected that I shall do something. That was my asset—his blessing. And I was thinking that ‘his, this Mission must be done very nicely’….So desire was there, and maybe blessing was there. Yes. There was no question of qualification.”16

November once again found Abhay with his spiritual master on Vrindavan *parikrama*, this time at the most sacred place for Gaudiya Vaisnavas, Radha Kunda.17 Walking with his intimate disciple, Srila Bhaktisiddhanta confided in Abhay grave concerns about dissension in the ranks. Since a wealthy Calcutta patron had constructed palatial headquarters for the Mission, his senior disciples had been quarreling over who would have the best room. If in his presence his leading preachers were becoming attached to position and opulence, what would happen in his absence?

 Deeply concerned, Srila Bhaktisiddhanta said to Abhay, “*agun jvalbe*”: “There will be fire”---one day there would be fire in the Calcutta Gaudiya

 [Mission], and that fire of party interests would spread and destroy…. Srila Bhaktisiddhanta then said directly to Abhay, “*amar iccha chila kichu bai karana*”: “I had a desire to print some books. If you ever get money, print books.” Standing by Radha-Kunda and beholding his spiritual master, Abhay felt the words deeply enter his own life: “If you ever get money, print books.”18

That grave blessing mirrored a grave reality in Abhay’s life. Although he was preparing to execute his spiritual master’s mission by becoming wealthy, his Bombay business ventures were not bearing fruit. Despite Abhay’s assurance he had new plans to expand, his situation especially disturbed his wife. Whenever Abhay visited his family in Allahabad, he tried to tried to involve her in preaching programs at home. But when interested guests would come, she stayed with the children in another room, sipping British tea.

The vicissitudes of family and business inspired Abhay to see events through the eyes of scripture. In the *Srimad-Bhagavatam* (10.88.8), “The Personality of Godhead said: If I especially favor someone, I gradually deprive him of his wealth. Then the realtives and friends of such a poverty-stricken man abandon him. In this way he suffers one distress after another.”

Abhay showed this verse to a trusted godbrother, who confirmed that this may very well be how Krsna was handling his life, preparing him to receive---and distribute---infinitely greater blessings.

**Confirmation**

Although Abhay had already contributed much to Srila Bhaktisiddhanta’s Gaudiya Mission---donating money, helping launch the Allahabad and Bombay centers, submitting excellent English offerings---in December 1936 he wrote his spiritual master a letter, asking if there was some way he could contribute more. Prabhupada later recalled the highlights of his spiritual master’s reply:

 I am fully confident that you can explain in English our thoughts and arguments to the people….This will do much good to yourself as well as your audience…

 I have every hope that you can turn yourself into a very good English preacher if you serve the mission to inculcate the novel impression of Lord Caitanya’s teachings in the people in general as well as philosophers and religionists.19

Little more than a fortnight after Abhay read this letter, his spiritual master passed away. The same instruction he had received at their first meeting was now confirmed. A reconfirmation followed while Abhay was reading a *Bhagavad-gita* commentary stating that one must accept the order of the spiritual master as one’s life and soul. Srila Bhaktisiddhanta’s order was now the very purpose of his life.

**War**

The “fire” in the Mission broke out almost immediately. Although Srila Bhaktisiddhanta had clearly ordered his disciples to form a governing body and work “conjointly,” some leaders began competing to replace Srila Bhaktisiddhanta as the Mission’s supreme spiritual authority as well as the controller of his institution’s assets. The fighting ended up in the courts, but because none of the parties was authorized, the unified Gaudiya Mission Srila Bhaktisiddhanta had led throughout India and beyond fragmented into isolated temples.

“Living outside,” Abhay felt inspired and protected by the order Srila Bhaktisiddhanta had given him. Yet the breakup of the Gaudiya Mission was heartbreaking. In 1938 he dropped his Bombay ventures and moved his family back to Calcutta. To maintain, he began to produce pharmaceuticals in the front room of his flat. Deepening his study of his spiritual master’s books, he spoke Krsna conscious philosophy to whoever would listen, determined to somehow carry on Lord Caitanya’s movement.

When a few renunciant godbrothers from Mayapur needed a Calcutta base, Abhay rented them his rooms next door and seized the opportunity to discuss scripture with trusted *sannyasis.* Sripada Sridhara Maharaja recalled: “We did not see Abhay as working very hard for making money, nor did he seem very rich or to have a lot of liquid funds. He was attracted more to the spiritual side

of affairs than to his family affairs.”20

In 1939 Abhay wrote an introduction to the *Bhagavad-gita*, indicating his intention to translate and comment on the entire text. Impressed by Abhay’s writing and preaching, his godbrothers gave him the title Bhaktivedanta, “one who knows the end of knowledge, devotion to Krsna.”

When World War II broke out that year, England drafted India into the war effort. In Calcutta Abhay would endure bombs and manmade food shortages as he and his *sannyasi* godbrothers—survivors of the Gaudiya Mission’s implosion—continued to study, write, and preach the remedy for all suffering: Krsna consciousness.

In 1944, on Srila Bhaktisiddhanta’s birthday anniversary, Abhay launched a devotional journal, *Back To Godhead.* Offering spiritual solutions to material life’s endless problems, *BTG* saw print only twice that year owing to the Indian government’s severe rationing of supplies, including paper. Abhay’s messages were scarcely valued.

Even less so at home. After the war ended in 1945, Abhay saw a good opportunity to expand his pharmaceutical operation in Lucknow, six hundred miles northwest of Calcutta. With enough profit potential to expand *BTG* and better situate his family, Abhay made a big capital investment. But when he directed the family’s best servant to come help him, the family wouldn’t let him leave. Indifferent to Abhay’s preaching ambitions, or even an opportunity to improve their own living standard, the family he was supporting was now becoming an albatross. In a letter dated November 13, a disgusted Abhay wrote his servant: “What’s the point in holding you back with an excuse that there is no servant or maidservant? I tried to serve them enough by keeping enough servants, maidservants, and cooks. But up until today they have not become attached to devotional service. So I am no more interested about those affairs.”21

Even before this development, Srila Bhaktisiddhanta had begun appearing to Abhay in dreams, asking him to enter the renounced stage of life and preach full-time. But he felt unprepared to live as simply as his renunciant godbrothers, and, Prabhupada would later recall, those dreams “horrified” him. Uncooperative though his family was, he dutifully continued to maintain them while looking for opportunities to advance his mission.

**The Spark**

Although victorious in the war, Britain would soon lose India to Mahatma Gandhi’s Nationalist Movement. The triumph of his former hero gave Abhay an idea. With the roots of his mission firmly planted, in July 1947 Abhay wrote Gandhi a letter. An excerpt follows:

 I am your unknown friend….You should therefore take a note of warning from your insignificant friend like me, that unless you retire timely from politics and engage yourself cent percent in the preaching work of Bhagwat Geeta, which is the real function of the Mahatmas, you shall have to meet with such inglorious deaths as Mussolini, Hitlers, Tojos….met with.22

Six months later Gandhi was assassinated. Prabhupada later recalled:

 I wanted to start this movement from India. I even requested Mahatma Gandhi that “Mahatmaji, you have got some respect all over the world, and you are known as a great student of *Bhagavad-gita.* Now you have got your *sva-rajya*---the Britishers have gone away---let us preach *Bhagavad-gita…*” My letter might have reached him or not reached him. The secretaries might have rejected….But then….he was killed.23

Abhay’s letter now proved prophetic. Although he had hoped to engage Gandhi to advance Lord Caitanya’s mission, Gandhi’s demise would soon spark the articulation of his mission’s plan. As Prabhupada later reflected, “I had my plans and Krsna had His.”

**Notes**

1September 1, 1896. 2*Srila Prabhupada-lilamrta*, Satsvarupa dasa Goswami, Volume I, *A Lifetime in Preparation;* Chapter 1: “Childhood.” 3Srila Bhaktisiddhanta Disappearance Day Lecture, 13 December 1973, Los Angeles. 4Lord Caitanya Mahaprabhu (1486-1534), the “golden avatar” of Krsna who inspired the modern-day Hare Krsna movement. 5*Srila Prabhupada-lilamrta*, Chapter 3: “A Very Nice Saintly Person.” 6Srila Bhaktisiddhanta Disappearance Day Lecture, 13 December 1973. 7Srila Bhaktisiddhanta Appearance Day Lecture, 7 February 1969, Los Angeles. 8*Srila Prabhupada-lilamrta*, Chapter 4: “How Shall I Serve You?” 9Krsna in His Visnu form reclining on the divine serpent Sesa. 10*Srila Prabhupada-lilamrta*, Chapter 4. 11Srila Bhaktisiddhanta Disappearance Day Lecture, 10 December 1976, Hyderabad. 12Ibid. 13*ISKCON in the 1970s*, Satsvarupa dasa Goswami, “If You Want To Know My Secret.” 14*Srila Prabhupada-lilamrta*, Chapter 4. 15Ibid. 16Conversation and Instruction on New Movie, 13 January 1977, Allahabad. 17The bathing pond of Lord Krsna’s greatest devotee, Srimati Radharani. 18*Srila Prabhupada-lilamrta*, Chapter 4. 19Ibid. 20Ibid. 21Ibid. 22Letter to Mahatma Gandhi, 12 July 1947, Kanpur. 23Interview with Trans-India Magazine, 17 July 1976, New York.

*In Chapter 5 we’ll see how the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi triggered the articulation of Srila Prabhupada’s mission---introduced in the 1950s as The League of Devotees, then fully launched in the 1960s as The International Society for Krishna Consciousness.*