**Chapter 5: His ISKCON Branch**

*By Lord Krsna’s supreme will, in the 1960s and ‘70s,* after *decades of planning, Srila Prabhupada established the Hare Krsna movement.*

Shocking as it was, the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi in January 1948 only intensified Abhay’s desire to spread the movement of Srila Bhaktisiddhanta and Lord Caitanya. Unable to engage the Mahatma during his life, Abhay would now engage him in death to launch his mission as “the Geeta Nagari”:1

“The Geeta Nagari will properly utilize the huge resources of Mahatma Gandhi memorial fund….Gandhi’s memory can be well preserved by his exemplary activities and not by simply constructions of huge buildings or deadstone statues….Mahatma Gandhi was saintly reformer and his memorial fund may be utilized for the purpose of converting degraded persons into saintly order.”2

Abhay urged the fund’s director to “keep in motion Gandhi’s spiritual movements”:3  his prayerful recitation of sacred sounds; his restoration of deities to temples; his recognition of everyone as a *harijana*, a person of God; and his ideal of a spiritually harmonious society. “The above four-fold Gandhi movements,” Abhay wrote, if done in an organized, scientific way supported by all the authentic scriptures of all [religions], will bring in that tranquility of peace [and a] respite from all harshness and bitterness of the present world, which we have longed for till now.”4

But fresh from independence, India’s leaders longed only to be “modern” and were uninterested in Abhay’s spiritual proposals. Undaunted, in 1952 he found his first receptive audience among medical students in the northern Indian town of Jhansi. One of the students was able to connect Abhay with a pious estate executor, who let him use the estate’s property and buildings to teach, and to rebrand his mission as “The League of Devotees.”

Canvassing among the students, Abhay ran an ad in the local newspaper: “Wanted---candidates from any nationality to qualify themselves as real Brahmins for preaching the teachings of Bhagwat Geeta for all practical purposes throughout the whole world. Deserving candidates will be provided with free boarding and lodging. Apply: A.C. Bhaktivedanta, Founder and

Secretary of the League of Devotees…”5

The peace that the League of Nations had failed to bring after World War I, that the United Nations would also fail to bring after Word War II, the League of Devotees would now bring through systematic spiritual education “and thereby achieve real unity and peace of the contending elements of the present world.”6

The events that would compel Abhay to eventually set aside the League, leave his family, accept the renounced order of life, and finally journey solo to the West have been well-documented in *Srila Prabhupada-lilamrta*. What concerns us here is how Prabhupada finally established his mission as ISKCON, The International Society for Krishna Consciousness, unfolding its purposes in distinct phases.

**A Branch of Lord Caitanya’s Movement**

In his commentary to the *Sri Caitanya-caritamrta*, *Adi-lila* 12.73, Prabhupada identifies ISKCON as a “branch” of the *bhakti-kalpa-taru*, Lord Caitanya’s “desire tree” of devotional service.7

Though but a branch, his mission carries the spiritual power to transplant the “tree of love of Godhead” worldwide. Prabhupada memorably begged for that empowerment in the poem he wrote the day he landed in America. As one verse reads: “O Lord, I am just like a puppet in Your hands. So if You have brought me here to dance, then make me dance, make me dance, O Lord, make me dance as You like.”8

During his first year in the West, when the Lord revealed to Prabhupada he would have to start a fresh branch of His mission, the same educational purpose he had announced for the League of Devotees he now declared in ISKCON’s incorporation papers: “To systematically propagate spiritual knowledge to society at large and to educate all peoples in the techniques of spiritual life in order to check the imabalance of values in life and to achieve real unity and peace in the world.”9 Six more points followed, all reflecting the same educational mood and mission.

In 1976, ten years after he had incorporated ISKCON, Prabhupada was back in New York City to celebrate Rathayatra, the temple’s first chariot parade.

Reflecting on his Society’s global expansion in such a short time, Prabhupada compared ISKCON to Varahadeva, the Lord’s boar incarnation. As Lord Varaha had appeared from the nostril of Lord Brahma and then quickly assumed a cosmic form, so ISKCON had appeared in a tiny storefront on New York’s Lower East Side and quickly covered the earth. It had done so because Prabhupada had been utterly and absolutely surrendered to Krsna’s plan, whose “movements,” or phases, he had been formulating since the 1940s.

**Phase One: Holy Names And Holy Books**

In a 1950s *Back To Godhead* article highlighting the importance of absorption in sacred sound, Prabhupada wrote: “Leaders and politicians may take lessons from the life of Mahatma Gandhi….in respect of his daily evening prayer meetings and regular recitation of Bhagwat Geeta….[R]eciting the….Geeta makes one able to get rid of the demoniac way of life and gradually rising up to the plane of pure devotional life of the gods.” (*Back To Godhead*, 20 May 1956)

Launching ISKCON in 1966, Prabhupada was the exemplar of ecstatic devotion. Brows knit, eyes slit in concentration, “Swamiji” led his first followers in chanting Hare Krsna for hours together---inside the storefront that first summer, then outside in nearby parks that fall. Those publicized outings were a historic marker in Prabhupada’s public outreach, which he continued to expand globally through his followers.

Back at the storefront he would hold *Bhagavad-gita* classes every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday evening. Since Prabhupada had not finished translating his *Bhagavad-gita As It Is*, he used the version of a famous impersonalist whose commentary Prabhupada exposed as misleading speculation. Not till late 1968 would his *As It Is* edition appear in ISKCON. Till then Prabhupada himself was the main focus, the holy names and holy books issuing from one empowered holy man.

To impress upon his followers their responsibility to continue spreading Krsna’s teachings after he was gone, Prabhupada had them start an American edition of *Back To Godhead.* Rolling off old mimeograph machines at first, by the end of the decade BTG had become a colorful magazine, whose copies ISKCON devotees would offer people gathered round their street chanting parties. These were the infant days of the literature distribution that would become a hallmark of Prabhupada’s movement.

**Phase Two: Temples and Deities**

In the above-mentioned 1956 BTG article, Prabhupada cited Gandhi’s “temple entry movement” to show the crucial role temples play in a spiritual revolution. Though Gandhi was known as a “politician among saints,” Prabhupada praised him for trying to restore the deity forms of Krsna to temples desecrated by Hindu-Muslim violence. Unfortunately, he wrote, the temples have become “rendezvous of demoniac dance….so many plague spots for preaching atheism….”10 Hence his proposal to regenerate the temples as centers of spiritual education.

During ISKCON’s launch a decade later, as Prabhupada’s raw recruits became practiced to chant Hare Krsna and hear *Bhagavad-gita*, Krsna deities often appeared first as devotional paintings in low-rent storefronts, then as imported images blessing former churches.

Surprisingly, “homemade” forms appeared right away in the first San Francisco temple, a storefront in the heart of America’s counterculture. Prabhupada asked a skilled devotee to carve deities modeled after figurines spotted in an import store. Never mind that the carver’s wife had purloined them, or that the carver himself wasn’t yet following the disciplines of Krsna consciousness. Inclusive Prabhupada was inviting everyone to appreciate the deity in his unusual form as Jagannatha, “the Lord of the Universe.” And where else but in psychedelic San Francisco would people so easily accept his invitation and bow before Jagannatha’s large, festive eyes. Under those watchful eyes, Prabhupada was thus able to slip past the iconoclasts and introduce deity worship to Westerners.

**Phase Three: Initiation and Congregation**

In a 1949 letter to Indian Deputy Prime Minister Dr. Sardar Patel, Prabhupada wrote: “The third item is to take up the harijana movement. This movement is, in the real sense, a spiritual initiation movement, and this should be organized in such a manner that people all over the world may take interest in it.”

The “harijana movement” was Gandhi’s attempt to allow everyone into the temples---not just the higher castes---by declaring everyone a *harijana*, “a person of God.” That’s true, Prabhupada noted, but in order for everyone to become fit to associate with the Lord, the *harijanas* must be initiated into a restorative process. As crude metal is said to transmute to gold in an alchemical process, so even a crude human being, by accepting initiation from a bona fide spiritual master, can gradually be restored to his original spiritual nature.11 Initiated devotees would gradually become the core of a wider congregation, whose history and development would vary from country to country.

When Prabhupada brought his first Western disciples to India, for example, they were the talk of the nation. Why would materially successful Westerners give up everything to dance and sing Hare Krsna in the streets? “You want to imitate Westerners?” Prabhupada would chide his countrymen, “then imitate *these* Westerners. They are fed-up with so-called modern civilization.” Rather, “the material advancement of the Western countries and the spiritual assets of India should combine for the elevation of all human society.” (*Srimad-Bhagavatam* 4.25.13, Purport)

Concerned that Indians might come to see the Western devotees as mere performers (some were already dismissing them as “spiritual hippies” or even CIA spies), Prabhupada temporarily suspended their street chanting and engaged them in a new program: Life Membership. For supporting ISKCON, members would receive whatever publications and accomodations the Society could offer them. Such respectable people would become the first congregational members as well as invaluable allies in the struggle to establish Prabhupada’s movement in India.

In the West, where people in general often regard Krsna consciousness as “foreign,” the congregation has taken more time to develop. Initially living and trained inside temples, Prabhupada’s first Western followers have since spread out into the community, working and raising families, to become congregational members themselves. The Indian diaspora and the rise of yoga culture worldwide have also helped turn ISKCON into a congregational movement.

To move the Hare Krsna movement from the margin to the mainstream,

Prabhupada identified a fourth phase his followers still need to embrace and develop.

**Phase Four: Natural Life**

In the same letter to Dr. Patel, Prabhupada wrote: “The fourth item is to organize the much discussed caste system as a solution of the natural division of human beings all over the world. Nationalistic division of human races is artificial but scientific division of the caste system (by quality and work) as envisaged in the *Bhagavad-gita* is natural.”

To show the world a better way to live and to leave, based on the *Gita’s* teachings, is the final phase of Prabhupada’s mission. As the body’s different parts are equally appreciated for their contribution to the whole body’s welfare, so the social body’s different classes should be equally valued for their role in serving the Supreme Lord. High or low, head to toe, deep inside we’re all God’s servants.

“When the Geeta Nagari will attempt to harmonise such sweet relation between man and God, man and the world and the world and God, at such an auspicious time only, the United Nations effort to establish peace in the world will be successful or the dream of a casteless society [of spiritual equality] all over the world will be realized in practice. (“The Conception of the Geeta Nagari,” Part II essay, circa 1948).

Because living the way Krsna lives amid his land and cows looks and feels very different from the way most of us live in the modern world, and because the first three phases of Prabhupada’s mission are perhaps more easily adaptable to modernity, we have been slow to approach Phase Four. Yet it is the timeless and natural spiritual life we and our modern world have been seeking and desperately need to recover.

NOTES

1”The village of the Bhagavad-gita.”

2First drafted after Gandhi’s assassination, most of this essay later appeared in the May 20, 1956 issue of *Back To Godhead.* 3Letter to Gandhi Memorial Fund, 5 July 1949. 4Letter to Dr. Sardar Patel, Deputy Prime Minister of India, 28 February 1949. 5*Srila Prabhupada-lilamrta*, Satsvarupa dasa Goswami, Vol. I, Chapter 7: Jhansi, The League of Devotees. 6Bhaktivedanta Vedabase/Legal Documents/League of Devotees Prospectus, 16 May 1953. 7Identified in the *Brahma-samhita* (5.29), “desire trees” yield limitless fruits to pure devotees, who have limitless desires to satisfy Lord Krsna. 8*Markine Bhagavata-dharma*, “Teaching Krsna Consciousness in America,” *Srila Prabhupada-lilamrta*, Vol. II, Chapter 12: The Journey to America. 9Bhaktivedanta Vedabase/Legal Documents/Certificate of Incorporation of ISKCON, July 13, 1966. 10Prabhupada is alluding to grotesque imitators of Lord Krsna’s divine dancing, and to impersonalist preachers who deny the personal feature of God and who thus encourage gross sensualism and dry speculation about life’s goal. 11This is Srila Sanatana Gosvami’s analogy from his *Hari-bhakti-vilasa.*

*With a better understanding of the conception and unfolding of our founder-acarya’s mission, in Chapter 6 we’ll look closer at its unfulfilled phase, known in Sanskrit as varnasrama.*