

# Ox Cart Sankirtana by Lokanatha Swami

An age-old mode of travel goes a long way in awakening Vedic culture in rural India.

During the eleven years from 1966, when **Srila Prabhupada** founded the International Society for Krishna Consciousness in New York City, to 1977, when he passed away in **Vrndavana**, India, he circled the world fourteen times, started temples, asramas, schools, and farms on six continents, wrote more than seventy books, and introduced literally millions of people to the chanting of the Hare Krsna mantra.

Yet in addition to this great concern for spreading Krsna consciousness outside India, Srila Prabhupada was also eager to revive it in his own country and not just in the big cities like Bombay, Calcutta, and New Delhi either, but in the more than a half million villages of India.

Planes and trains will not take you to these villages. Not even buses reach some of them. Thus, Srila Prabhupada revealed his plan. A small party of devotees, traveling from village to village by ox cart, would perform sankirtana: chanting Hare Krsna, distributing transcendental literature, and giving out prasadam (vegetarian food offered to Krsna).

About the time that Srila Prabhupada conceived his plan, I and about thirty other single male devotees had just finished traveling and preaching throughout parts of India in several Mercedes vans. Not only were the vans expensive to maintain and always breaking down, but in due course we had to ship them back to Germany, because their permits had expired. We were in New Delhi at the time, and when Srila Prabhupada arrived and came to know that we no longer had vehicles for our preaching program, he called me to his room and instructed

me to start the ox cart sankirtana program.

We all rushed to Vrndavana, about ninety miles south, to get everything ready. The devotees at our Krishna-Balaram Mandir in Vrndavana had already heard of our ox cart sankirtana, and they were enthusiastic to help us. The head priest came forward and offered his personal set of Gaura-Nitai Deities. (Gaura is Lord Caitanya, and Nitai is His spiritual brother, Lord Nityananda.) We took this gift to be the special mercy of the Lord. Five hundred years before, Lord Caitanya had traveled extensively throughout India spreading Krsna consciousness, and now once again He was to head up a program of traveling and preaching. The Lord's participation greatly inspired us.

Soon we had acquired some cooking pots and a supply of Srila Prabhupada's books in Hindi. We also had a few thousand copies of a handbill that described our program and our destination Mayapur, the birthplace of Lord Caitanya. When everything was ready and we were all set to go, we went to see Srila Prabhupada, who was now visiting Vrndavana, to get his blessings. He spoke to us about how Gandhi had wanted to stop the flow of people from the villages to the big cities, but had been unable to do so. Srila Prabhupada said we could accomplish this, however, simply by giving the people a taste for the holy name of Krsna. If they developed a taste for **chanting Hare Krsna**, he said, they would be content with their simple life in the villages and wouldn't run after the illusory pleasures of the cities. They would remain at home, happy in Krsna consciousness. Finally, Srila Prabhupada advised us always to camp near a well or other source of water. The well, he said, is the heart of the village. With Srila Prabhupada's blessings, about eight of us started from Vrndavana toward Mayapur, nine hundred miles away. It was October 1976, and we planned to cover the distance in five months so we could attend the yearly festival at ISKCON's center in **Mayapur**. We would pass through the states of Uttar

Pradesh, Bihar, and West Bengal.

When we started from Vrndavana, we had everything we needed except the oxen and the cart. So we got a ride to Agra, the city of the Taj Mahal, where I sent the devotees out in pairs to the homes of our patron members to solicit funds for the oxen and the cart. I also sent two devotees to Jaipur for the same purpose. After a few days we had raised enough money, and we went to a weekly animal bazaar near Agra where we bought a pair of white oxen for a little more than two thousand rupees (about \$230). We also bought a cart and equipped it with automobile tires. Now our ox cart sankirtana party was ready to get into full swing.

India is thickly populated, with villages everywhere, so for us to stop in each village along the way would be impossible. Usually we would pass through a village chanting Hare Krsna, passing out handbills, and trying to sell some of Srila Prabhupada's books. As soon as we arrived in the village where we were going to stop for the night, most of us would get down and form a chanting party at the front of the cart. Only the driver and one other devotee, who held a big poster of Srila Prabhupada, would stay in the cart.

As we passed along the main roads of the village chanting Hare Krsna, two devotees would approach the houses on either side of the road. Carrying shoulder bags, they would beg for a little rice and dal (beans) and whatever they needed for cooking. During this **sankirtana** procession, someone would always come forward and suggest a place where we could stay. Every village, small or large, had a temple or at least a public dormitory, and sometimes a farmer would invite us to stay at his house.

When we arrived at the place where we were to stay, we would unload our things, install the Deities, and immediately begin cooking. We had no gas or kerosene stove, so our cook would simply find three medium-size rocks or some bricks and make a

fireplace, while several devotees collected wood for fuel and several others collected grass for the bullocks.

Then I would have a devotee take a megaphone and go throughout the village to announce our evening program of kirtana, arati (offering of incense and other articles to the Deities), lecture, and prasadam. The turn-out was always good. Sometimes everyone in the village would come. In many villages the people were already practiced to chant the Hare Krsna mantra, and they would participate in the kirtana very enthusiastically. After the lecture, the last and most popular part of the program would be the distribution of prasadam. We would serve kichari (a spicy dish made with rice, dal, and vegetables), and the villagers would come for seconds and even thirds.

We would also have our early-morning devotional program, of course, but that was mainly for the devotees, although sometimes a few villagers would also participate. Without fail the devotees would get up early (around 4:00) and bathe either by dipping into a nearby river or pond or by drawing water from the village well and throwing a few bucketfuls over themselves. And then, as at any ISKCON temple, we would have mangala-arati at 4:30. Then we would go through the village chanting Hare Krsna and singing a song called Jiva Jago ("O Sleeping Souls, Wake Up!"). Both adults and children would come running straight from their beds. The sound of the drum, the cymbals, and the holy name reminded them of Krsna and of their Krsna culture, and they were invariably pleased.

After our kirtana through the village, we would return to our camp, do our japa (private chanting on beads), and have a class on the **Srimad-Bhagavatam**. Then one or two devotees would cook breakfast. After taking prasadam, we would load everything back into the cart, and by 9:00 we would be ready to start. In some villages the people were so enthusiastic that we would spend two or three days. Sometimes they wouldn't let us proceed, but would beg us to stay for a few more days.

Because of this popularity we were averaging only about twenty miles per week.

For the most part, the villagers were very simple and friendly. We spoke their language, we talked about their welfare, we entertained them with kirtana, and we fed them with prasadam. They would all honor the bullocks, the cart, and the devotees especially the foreign devotees, who were the main attraction. The villagers would always follow them and look for a way to interact with them. In most of the villages we visited, no one had ever seen a foreigner.

And these foreigners weren't just ordinary foreigners they were foreign sadhus! Their bodies may have been foreign, but the religion they were practicing wasn't at all foreign: it was the villagers' very own, which they were unfortunately no longer following very strictly. For these villagers, seeing foreign devotees of Lord Krsna was a big surprise and also a necessary reminder. The foreigners were requesting the villagers to study the Bhagavad-gita, their own most holy book, and to chant the holy name of Lord Krsna, who had appeared in their country and who was supposed to be their worshipable Lord.

Today most Indians, including those living in the villages, are busy imitating the Westerners. The people in the villages are eager to go to the cities, and the people in the cities are looking forward to the day when they can go to the West. Srila Prabhupada's idea was that if the Indians at all want to imitate the Westerners, let them imitate these Westerners who have taken up Krsna consciousness. Then, by such imitation, all of India would again be Krsna conscious, to its great benefit.

In January we reached Allahabad, the city where three holy rivers converge. It was the year of the Kumbha-mela, a large gathering of the faithful that takes place every twelve years at that city, and Srila Prabhupada had come from Bombay by

train to participate in ISKCON's programs. When we met him, he gave us a lot of attention and mercy. He heard our ox cart sankirtana stories at length, and he especially appreciated how the devotees would go from door to door begging handfuls of rice or anything else the householders would offer. The begging taught the devotees humility and engaged the villagers in Krsna's service.

At the **Kumbha-mela** several devotees joined us, and now we had about a dozen on the ox cart. We had the Deities, books, pots, the devotees' personal things, sacks of grain, some food for the oxen, and on top of everything, a dozen devotees all in one ox cart!

Next we reached Varanasi, a famous holy city on the banks of the Ganges. In February the Mayapur festival was to take place, and since we were behind schedule, we decided to load our whole show into a truck and get to West Bengal fast.

Arriving in West Bengal, we again began traveling by ox cart from village to village. We had many ecstatic adventures. Especially successful was our program of distributing prasadam. As our sankirtana party would reach the gate of someone's home, the ladies of the house would come out and wash the feet of all the devotees, offer obeisances, receive us with folded hands, and offer us a basketful of rice with some vegetables on top. So we carried on our simple traveling and preaching in the land of Lord Caitanya.

When finally we reached Navadvip, just across the Ganges from Mayapur. we were greeted by crowds of enthusiastic people. They were surprised at the simple ox cart sankirtana organized by the Hare Krsna devotees. On top of the cart, as usual, a devotee held up a big portrait of Srila Prabhupada, and everyone got the blessing of seeing His Divine Grace, as they happily joined in the chanting of Hare Krsna. At the bank of the Ganges we loaded everything into a small ferryboat and headed for Mayapur.

Upon arriving at **ISKCON's Mayapur project**, we held a big kirtana as we passed through the gates. We went all the way up to the temple and entered. Just as we entered, the curtains opened, and we had an ecstatic view of the Lord in His Deity incarnation. Then we went up the stairs and there was Srila Prabhupada on the balcony. He immediately called us into his room and had us garlanded and given milk sweets. We sat down at Srila Prabhupada's feet, and he asked us about the journey. He was smiling. He was satisfied, and that was our perfection.

We explained to him that we'd visited seventy-two villages between Vrndavana and Mayapur. When we had come to large highways, we had marveled at how everyone was running and riding in a great hurry. They were going nowhere, we had realized, whereas we were marching slowly but steadily back home, back to Godhead. Once one of our tires had been punctured, and we had had to pay four rupees (about fifty cents) to get it repaired. That had been our only expense throughout the entire journey!

As I sat with Srila Prabhupada, we expressed our sorrow that no new devotees had joined us. Because we had remained for only a very short time in each village, people hadn't had enough time to build up their faith in the chanting of Hare Krsna and the philosophy of Krsna consciousness. But **Srila Prabhupada encouraged us: "Do not mind," he said, "You have sown the seed. I am very happy to hear of your nice activities on ox cart sankirtana. I wish I could have joined you. I like your program very much. If you continue this program, you will be benefited, the people will be benefited, and everyone will become happy in Krsna consciousness."**

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# Rathayatra Pastimes by Lokanath Swami

Sri Caitanya Mahaprabhu spent His later years in Jagannatha Puri, Orissa, immersed in love of Godhead and absorbed in wonderful pastimes with His intimate associates and with the Deity of Krsna in Puri, known as Jagannatha, “the Lord of the universe.” This was nearly five hundred years ago.

One of the most attractive of Lord Caitanya’s pastimes was His role in the yearly Rathayatra, the Festival of the Chariots, in which Lord Jagannatha parades through the main street of the city on a huge decorated cart pulled by devotees. Year after year for eighteen years altogether Lord Caitanya took part in the Rathayatra festival in Puri.

Lord Caitanya Mahaprabhu was Krsna Himself in the mood of Srimati Radharani. So during the festival He used to chant and dance in front of Lord Jagannatha’s cart, acting out a drama. Srila Prabhupada, commenting on the Caitanya-caritamṛta, where these pastimes are described, says that the two Lords Lord Caitanya and Lord Jagannatha were reenacting a conjugal pastime, or madhurya-lila. Lord Caitanya, absorbed in transcendental emotions, would play the role of Srimati Radharani, Lord Jagannatha’s eternal consort. Sometimes Lord Caitanya would fall behind Lord Jagannatha’s cart. The cart would then stop as Jagannatha tried to catch sight of Caitanya Mahaprabhu, attracted by His graceful and enchanting dancing.

The two Lords were reenacting the pastimes performed five thousand years ago in the holy place of Kuruksetra when Sri Sri Radha and Krsna met after many years of separation. They had last seen each other in Vrndavana, when Akrura had come to take Krsna and Balarama to nearby Mathura. That day had been the worst day for Radharani, the gopis (cowherd girls), and all the Vrajavasis (residents of Vrndavana). As Krsna left, He



promised that after killing the demons outside Vrndavana He would return.

Krsna, the life of the Vrajavasis, stayed in Mathura for some time and then moved to Dvaraka, where He continued His wondrous pastimes. During these many years, Radha and the Vrajavasis intensely, almost unbearably felt separation from Krsna's lotus feet.

The Meeting at Kuruksetra- When Nanda Maharaja (Krsna's father) and Srimati Radharani and the other residents of Vrndavana learned of Krsna's plan to visit Kuruksetra, not far away, they at once decided to go there. The long-awaited meeting of Krsna with these devotees from Vrndavana took place in Kuruksetra on the occasion of a solar eclipse, when the residents of Dvaraka came to bathe in Kurukshetra's holy lakes.

The residents of Dvaraka, members of the Yadu dynasty, erected their royal camp, and nearby the cowherd Vrajavasis parked their simple carts. Krsna and His brother Balarama, Their sister Subhadra, and the residents of Dvaraka and Vrndavana like Vasudeva, Devaki, Nanda Maharaja, Yasoda Mayi, Rohini, Radharani, the gopis all met together, mingling and sharing one another's company.

The Vrajavasis and the gopis were especially pleased to meet Krsna, the Lord of their life. Yet they felt that meeting Him at Kuruksetra was different from meeting Him in Vrndavana. They were accustomed to see Him as a simple cowherd boy, not as a royal prince. The Kuruksetra setting left them unsatisfied. They wanted Krsna to come back to Vrndavana.

When Radha and Krsna met, Radharani, unable to hide Her desire, expressed Her feelings in this way (Caitanya-caritamrta, Madhya-lila 13.126-131):

You are the same Krsna, and I am the same Radharani. We are meeting again the same way that We met in the beginning of Our

lives. Although We are both the same, My mind is still attracted to Vrndavana-dhama. I wish that You please again appear with Your lotus feet in Vrndavana.

Kuruksetra is crowded with people, their elephants and horses, and the rattling of chariots. In Vrndavana, however, there are flower gardens where the humming of the bees and chirping of the birds can be heard. Here at Kuruksetra You are dressed like a royal prince, accompanied by great warriors, but in Vrndavana You appeared just like an ordinary cowherd boy, accompanied only by Your beautiful flute.

Here there is not even a drop of the ocean of transcendental happiness that I enjoyed with You in Vrndavana. I therefore request You to come to Vrndavana and enjoy pastimes with Me. If You do so, My ambition will be fulfilled.

Radharani also pleaded on behalf of the Vrajavasis: “Why is it that You are simply keeping them alive in a state of suffering? The inhabitants of Vrndavana do not want You dressed like a prince, nor do they want You to associate with great warriors in a different country. They cannot leave the land of Vrndavana, and without Your presence they are all dying. What is their condition to be?” (Cc. Madhya 13.145-146)

Hearing Srimati Radharani’s pleas further stirred Lord Krsna’s love for the residents of Vrndavana and perturbed His body and mind.

**“My dearest Radharani,”** the Lord said, **“Please hear Me.** I am speaking the truth. I cry day and night simply remembering all of You inhabitants of Vrndavana. No one knows how unhappy this makes Me.

“All the inhabitants of Vrndavana-dhama My mother, father, cowherd boyfriends, and everyone else are like My life and soul.... I am always subservient to the loving affairs of all of You. I am under Your control only. My separation from You and residence in distant places have occurred due to My strong

misfortune" (Cc. Madhya 13.149-151).

Full with the desire to take Krsna back to Vrndavana, the gopis tried to convince Him and pull His chariot. And again, just as when He had left Vrndavana on Akrura's chariot, the Lord promised Radharani He would return. "Your loving qualities always attract Me to Vrndavana," Krsna said. "Indeed, they will bring Me back within ten or twenty days, and when I return I shall enjoy both day and night with You and all the damsels of Vrajabhumi" (Cc. Madhya 13.158).

**The Secret Behind Lord Caitanya's Dancing-** In this meeting of Sri Sri Radha and Krsna lies the secret behind Lord Caitanya's drama at the Jagannatha Puri Rathayatra. Only a few of Lord Caitanya's intimate associates could understand it. Srila Prabhupada comments that the whole mood of the Rathayatra festival is that of bringing Krsna back from Kuruksetra to Vrndavana. The imposing temple of Lord Jagannatha in Puri is taken to represent the kingdom of Dvaraka, the place where Krsna enjoys supreme opulence, and the temple of Gundica, to which the Lord is brought, stands for Vrndavana, the realm of His sweetest pastimes.

Assuming the part of Srimati Radharani, Lord Caitanya felt the ecstasy of this most exalted of the gopis. By falling behind the Rathayatra cart, He was testing Lord Jagannatha, seeking His reciprocation: "Is Krsna remembering us? I want to see. Does He really care for us? If He does care, then He will wait and try to find out where we are."

Amazingly, every time Lord Caitanya would go behind the Rathayatra cart, it would stop. Lord Jagannatha was waiting, trying to see, "Where is Radha? Where are the Vrajavasis?" Lord Jagannatha, who is Krsna Himself, was trying to convey that transcendental feeling to Sri Caitanya Mahaprabhu. "Even though I was away from Vrndavana, I have not forgotten You, My dear devotees, especially You, Radharani."

**The Deities' Unusual Forms**— Anyone who sees the forms of Lord Jagannatha, Lord Baladeva, and Subhadra as They are worshiped in Jagannatha Puri may wonder why They look the way They do. Usually Krsna is worshiped in His humanlike form of Syamsundara, playing the flute. Why would Sri Caitanya Mahaprabhu choose to worship Lord Jagannatha, this crude, strange-looking form of the Lord? And why has such a form appeared in Puri in the first place? To discover the reason, let us go back to Kuruksetra.

During the visit by the Vrajavasis, a confidential pastime took place. Rohini, Lord Balarama's mother, met in a big tent a group of residents of Dvaraka. She had been staying in Vrndavana and now wanted to tell the residents of Dvaraka how much suffering the Vrajavasis were going through because of separation from Krsna. Before beginning her narration, she posted Subhadra at the entrance of the tent. "If Krsna and Balarama come this way," Rohini told her, "don't let Them in." She didn't want the Lords to hear her report, which would certainly agonize Them.

When Krsna and Balarama did happen to come by, Subhadra dutifully stopped Them from getting in. But They managed to listen from outside the tent. As They began hearing, Krsna, Balarama, and even Subhadra, who stood between Them, became motionless. They were completely dumbfounded, immersed in intense thoughts of Radha, the gopis, and all the Vrajavasis.

Krsna, Balarama, and Subhadra had heard of the Vrajavasis' feelings of separation, but never directly from a Vrajavasi like Rohini. As a result, Krsna, Balarama, and Subhadra became simply astounded. Their eyes grew bigger and bigger in amazement, and other parts of Their bodies arms, legs, and neck withdrew into Their bodies, until Krsna, Balarama, and Subhadra exactly resembled the Deities now worshiped at Puri.

How Jagannatha Came to Puri- How then did these forms come to be worshiped? A few thousand years ago, Visvakarma, the

architect of the demigods, agreed to carve Deities of Lord Jagannatha, Baladeva, and Subhadra, at the request of a great devotee king named Indradyumna. The king promised to let Visvakarma carve in seclusion until the work was finished. But the impatient king broke into the room early, and Visvakarma disappeared, leaving behind the set of unfinished Deities. As the king began lamenting for what would be the use of unfinished Deities? Lord Jagannatha revealed His identity.

The Lord told the king that He had appeared in this form to fulfill the Vedic statement that although He is without hands and feet He accepts the offerings of His devotees and walks about to bestow His blessings upon the people of the earth. He added that the devotees who have achieved love of Godhead see Him as Syamasundara, Krsna, the original Lord, holding a flute.

Then the sage Narada came on the scene. He disclosed that Lord Krsna had appeared in this particular form once before in Kuruksetra. Narada himself had had the good fortune to see this. Hearing these statements, the king accepted Lord Jagannatha as his worshipable Lord. He understood that the form of the Deities was not an accidental creation: because he had been feeling intense separation from Krsna, the Lord had appeared in this form. This was also a sign that the Lord had felt similar separation from the king. Overwhelmed with ecstasy, King Indradyumna began his worship. Since then these forms of Jagannatha, Baladeva, and Subhadra have been worshiped in Puri.

### **The Ideal Place for Caitanya Mahaprabhu**

It is not by chance that Sri Caitanya Mahaprabhu lived in Puri and there worshiped the Deity of Lord Jagannatha. Lord Caitanya, during His final pastimes, showed more and more the mood of Radharani. Day and night He lamented His separation from the Lord with intense feeling. Lord Jagannatha is the form Krsna assumes as He thinks intensely and solely of the

Vrajavasis, the gopis, and Radharani. Therefore the most appropriate Deity for Lord Caitanya, who had assumed the mood of Radharani, was Lord Jagannatha.

## **The Meaning of the Rathayatra Festival**

Externally, Rathayatra is spectacular colorful and entertaining. Yet the Gaudiya Vaisnavas, the followers of Lord Caitanya, see in the Festival of the Chariots much more than just a happy event. The pulling of the cart by the Lord's devotees symbolizes the attempt of the Vrajavasis, especially Radharani and the gopis, to bring Krsna, Balarama, and Subhadra back to Vrndavana.

Vrndavana can also represent the heart of Krsna's devotee. Sri Caitanya Mahaprabhu prayed to Lord Krsna, "For most people the mind and heart are one, but because My mind is never separated from Vrndavana, I consider My mind and Vrndavana to be one. My mind is already Vrndavana, and since You like Vrndavana, will You please place Your lotus feet there? I would deem that Your full mercy" (Cc. Madhya 13.137). For the devotees of Lord Jagannatha who follow in the footsteps of Lord Caitanya, pulling the Rathayatra cart is like pulling their worshipable Lord, Jagannatha or Krsna, into their heart.

## **Festivals Around the World**

The Lord of the universe now parades in major cities all over the world, increasing His mercy unlimitedly, responding to the desire of His pure devotee Srila Prabhupada, who brought the Rathayatra to the West. The first Rathayatra outside India was held on July 9, 1967, in San Francisco. That year the Deities rode on a flatbed truck borrowed from a group of hippies. In later years the Deities were placed on a more traditional chariot, a large wooden structure decorated with canopies and flags and pulled through the streets by the festival-goers.

As years passed, the chariots were made taller, and more beautiful, and soon ISKCON began holding Rathayatras in many

cities: New York, Los Angeles, London, Paris, Rome, Zurich, Sydney, Vancouver, Toronto, Montreal, Guadalajara, Rio de Janeiro, Moscow. Srila Prabhupada happily acknowledged, “In 1973 there was a gorgeous Rathayatra festival in London, England, and the car was brought to Trafalgar Square. The daily newspaper The Guardian published a front-page photo caption: ‘ISKCON Rathayatra is rival to the Nelson Column in Trafalgar Square.’ “

People everywhere are becoming attracted to the joyful and colorful Rathayatra festival. Thousands of pleasure-seekers throng to behold the giant chariots, chant and dance a bit, enjoy tasty prasadam given free to all, or take part in a full festival of music, dance, exhibits, and spiritual entertainment. And because Lord Jagannatha is a most merciful form of the Lord, even those who hardly understand the philosophy behind Rathayatra benefit just by seeing the festival or taking part in it.

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## Thirty Days In Krsna's Land by Lokanath Swami

In remote corners of **Vrndavana**, Pilgrims find little known places of Krsna's pastimes and get a clearer view Into their own hearts.

**THE VRAJA Mandala Parikrama\*** is a walking pilgrimage throughout the land of Vraja, or Mathura, the district in North India where Lord Krsna appeared five thousand years ago. Devotees walk the entire parikrama path, stopping at the places where Krsna performed His pastimes. Vraja Mandala Parikrama can be considered pada-sevanam (serving Sri Krsna's

lotus feet), one of the nine forms of devotional service.

## **Sri Caitanya Mahaprabhu**

Within Mathura, the Yamuna River and the twelve forests of Vrndavana form the stage for the divine play of Radha and Krsna's transcendental pastimes. Lord Krsna presides over the seven forests on the Yamuna's western bank: Madhuvan, Talavan, Kumudavan, Bahulavan, Vrndavana, Kamyavan, Khadiravan. And Lord Balarama rules the five forests decorating the eastern bank: Bhadravan, Bhandiravan, Bilvavan, Lohavan, and Mahavan. These twelve beautiful forests are the most important places of pilgrimage.

Sri Caitanya Mahaprabhu, the Supreme Personality of Godhead Himself, set an example by touring Vrndavana's twelve forests. While Lord Caitanya was performing the parikrama, the residents said:

Who says He is a sannyasi? He is Krsna Himself appearing in this dress and form. Just see the proof. Different birds are all coming for His darsana [audience]. The cuckoos and parrots are happily addressing Him as Krsna, and the peacocks are dancing in jubilation. See the wonderful blooming of the trees! O brother, just see the creepers showering flowers on this person, who is disguised as a sannyasi. The deer are coming near Him and staring undivertedly towards His face. All the cows are coming running from all sides with raised tails, and they also look at His face. By the tears of ecstasy falling from the eyes of these creatures, we can understand that they are meeting Him after a long period of time.

From the book Mathura Mandala Parikrama, based on Srila Narahari Cakravarti Thakura's Bhakti Ratnakara

The six Gosvamis and other associates of Lord Caitanya, as well as thousands of faithful in His line (Gaudiya Vaisnavas) throughout the centuries, have enthusiastically executed Vraja Mandala Parikrama, a blissful form of devotional service. In



October 1932, Srila Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati, the spiritual master of His Divine Grace A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, led a group of more than a thousand disciples and other pilgrims on a month-long parikrama of the sacred places of Vrndavana. It was one of the largest parikramas ever seen in Vrndavana. Srila Prabhupada, then a married man living in Allahabad, traveled to Vrndavana intent on seeing Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati and hoping to join the parikrama party.

**“I was not initiated at the time of the parikrama,”** Srila Prabhupada recalled, “but I had very good admiration for these Gaudiya Math people. They were very kind to me, so I thought, ‘What are these people doing in this parikrama? Let me go.’ So I met them at Kosi.”

Today dozens of groups of devotees from different parts of India still perform the padayatra (walking festival) of Vraja Mandala to see and hear about the places of Krsna’s pastimes. Every year during the month of Kartika (Oct.-Nov.), Krsna devotees taste the ecstasy of circumambulating Sri Vrndavana Dhama. Besides being a wonderful way to see and serve Sri Krsna’s transcendental land, Vraja Mandala Parikrama purifies one’s consciousness.

Srila Rupa Gosvami has described Vraja: “I remember the Lord standing by the banks of the Yamuna River, so beautiful amid the kadamba trees, where many birds are chirping in the gardens. And these impressions are always giving me transcendental realization of beauty and bliss.” Even non-devotees can feel the bliss described by Rupa Gosvami. The places in the eighty-four-square-mile district of Mathura and Vrndavana are so beautifully situated on the banks of the river Yamuna that anyone who goes there will never want to return to this material world.

## **Simple, Sacred Life**

We rise before the sun and walk through hills and valleys, traveling deep into Vrndavana. Little remote villages dot our path. Village life is simple and austere, but the villagers are warm and generous. Whenever we stop they offer us fresh water, buttermilk, and steaming hot whole-wheat rotis (chapatis, or flatbreads).

As we cross cultivated fields, a team of oxen and a straw-laden donkey amble past rice paddies ornate with exotic birds. The sounds of the cuckoo bird, the mourning dove, and the Hare Krsna maha-mantra mingle together. Some devotees keep to the back of the kirtana party, silently chanting japa on their beads. The morning is calm, and the soft sandy path is gentle on our feet.

As we enter Madhuban, children bounce beside us, their eyes twinkling with glee. The kirtana reverberates off the mud walls and through the narrow lanes. The village brahmana greets us, a wise old man with happy eyes and stubbly beard. He sprinkles holy water on us. The cow-dung homes smell fresh and clean. In a spotless courtyard, children carrying bows and arrows imitate Sita, Rama, Laksmana, and Hanuman. Villagers invite us into their homes for something to eat or drink.

While some devotees rest or read, others venture farther into the village to get a closer look at the life of the local residents (Vrajabasis). Some devotees take a refreshing bath in a pond, while others wash their laundry. Clustered around the village water pump, we watch the children dexterously fill their waterpots. It is a crowded scene. Suddenly, a teenage boy and his mother approach the well. The boy pushes his way through the crowd and takes hold of the pump handle. We think he's angry that we're using "his" pump. But with an infectious smile, he begins to pump water for everyone.

## **Time to Think**

Most devotees who visit Vrndavana never experience Vraja like this. One devotee comments, **“If you don’t walk, you miss ninety per cent of Vraja.”** Normally in Vrndavana we tend to feel like transcendental tourists, catching buses to the holy places. But to see Vraja on foot allows one more time to think and to find one’s real identity.

We visit Talavan forest, where Lord Balarama killed Dhenukasura. In the village of Etarsi, we visit the temple where breathtakingly beautiful deities of Balarama and His eternal consort, Revati, reside. A tala tree stands just inside the temple compound.

It is traditional to perform parikrama barefoot, and we try our best to follow the example of the saintly persons who have walked before us. Sometimes small thorns prick our feet, and we try to remember the austerities of Dhruva Maharaja, compared to which ours are insignificant. Vraja Mandala Parikrama strips one of all pretensions. We may have a big position in this world, but the thorns don’t discriminate.

Before it gets too hot, we climb to the summit of Kedarnath Mountain. A stone staircase etched into the mountainside leads us up 270 steps to a temple of Lord Siva. The temple is a natural cave, its overhang resembling the hoods of a multi-hooded snake. From atop the hill, we view the unique panoramic scene of the Vraja plains, stretched for about twenty kilometers all around us. As our gaze wanders out over the expanse of sacred land, we meditate on and hear about Krsna’s Vrndavana pastimes.

### **Krsna’s Footprints**

In the early afternoon we take to tarred road on a seemingly endless walk to Caran Pahari. Here, Krsna would play His flute and melt the rocks with a touching melody. The rocks captured Krsna’s footprints. We eagerly rush to see them and smear on our heads the dust from these fivethousand-year-old

footprints. We pray that our stone like hearts may also melt in response to Krsna's call.

Where Krsna played His water sports and submerge ourselves in the Yamuna River, where He performed unlimited pastimes. We feel like we are following Him around Vraja. If we stay on His trail, we'll turn the last corner of material attachment and catch up with Him. On parikrama we get a glimpse of the mood of separation from Krsna as we wander through the forests of Vrndavana. Parikrama instills appreciation for devotional sentiments even within the heart of a neophyte devotee.

Finally we see the city of Mathura rise from the plains of Vraja like an ancient medieval kingdom. We've made it! One hundred sixty-eight miles in thirty days. A tremendous feeling of accomplishment and exhilaration rises in our hearts. Our Vraja Mandala Parikrama is almost over, and our walk on the path back to Godhead has shortened.

A tall bridge leads us across the Yamuna back to Mathura. The kirtana resounds through the crowded back streets of the city. We take our final bath at Vishram Ghat. Vraja Mandala Parikrama is a perfect test for one's spiritual health. In the pure atmosphere of the Lord's land, our impurities stand out clearly, like black spots on a white sheet. Out here we see how far we have come in spiritual life and how far we have to go. Yet, this is encouraging; it increases our desire for purification, so that one day we may become qualified to reside eternally in Vrndavana. Lokanath Swami is the director of ISKCON Padayatras ("walking pilgrimages") worldwide and the author of the recently published book Kumbha: The Festival of Immortality. He has been coordinating Vraja Mandala Parikrama since 1987.

## **Replica of the Spiritual World**

IN THE SPIRITUAL world of Vrndavana the buildings are made of touchstone, the cows are known as surabhi cows, givers of

abundant milk, and the trees are known as wish-fulfilling trees, for they yield whatever one desires. In Vrndavana Krsna herds the surabhi cows, and He is worshipped by hundreds and thousands of gopis, cowherd girls, who are all goddesses of fortune. When Krsna descends to the material world, this same Vrndavana descends just as an entourage accompanies an important personage. Because when Krsna comes His land also comes, Vrnda-vana is not considered to exist in the material world. Therefore devotees take shelter of the Vrndavana in India, for it is considered to be a replica of the original Vrndavana. Introduction to Teachings of Lord Caitanya, by His Divine Grace A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada

### **Instructions from Sage Narada**

Narada Says to Dhruva: "My dear boy, I therefore wish all good fortune for you. You should go to the bank of the Yamuna, where there is a virtuous forest named Madhuvana, and there be purified. Just by going there, one draws nearer to the Supreme Personality of Godhead, who always lives there." Srimad-Bhagavatam 4.8.42

### **Acquiring Spiritual Flavors In Vrndavana**

SRILA BHAKTISIDDHANTA Sarasvati Thakura states that the business of the tongue is to gratify itself with the varieties of flavor, but by wandering in the twelve holy forests of Vraja-mandala (Vrndavana), one can be freed from the twelve flavors of material sense gratification. The five principal divisions of material relationships are neutral admiration, servitude, friendship, parental affection, and conjugal love; the seven subordinate features of material relationships are material humor, astonishment, chivalry, compassion, anger, dread, and ghastliness. Originally, these twelve rasas, or flavors of relationships, are exchanged between the Supreme Personality of Godhead and the living entity in the spiritual world; and by wandering in the twelve forests of Vrndavana one can respiritualize the twelve flavors of personal existence.

Thus one will become a liberated soul, free from all material desires. If one artificially tries to give up sense gratification, especially that of the tongue, the attempt will fail, and in fact one's desire for sense gratification will increase as a result of artificial deprivation. Only by experiencing real, spiritual pleasure in relationship with Krsna can one give up material desires.

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## **Confidential Servant of the Lord by Lokanath Swami**

SRILA PRABHUPADA appeared in this world just a day after the celebration of Lord Krsna's appearance day. We followers of Srila Prabhupada's see this as a sign of his intimate relationship with the Lord. The Vedic literature teaches us that because a spiritual master such as Srila Prabhupada is the Lord's most confidential servant, we must honor him as much as we honor the Supreme Lord Himself. We are therefore honoring Srila Prabhupada throughout his Centennial Year and especially on the 100th anniversary of his appearance day.

Srila Prabhupada often said, "I am not God, and you are not God, but we are eternal servants of God." Although we are all servants of God, most of us have forgotten our positions. Prabhupada, however, was a self-realized servant of the Lord, as we can understand by examining the selfless work he performed on behalf of the Lord.

In Bhagavad-gita (4.8) Lord Krsna says, **"To deliver the pious and to annihilate the miscreants, as well as to reestablish**

**the principles of religion, I Myself appear, millennium after millennium.”** Srila Prabhupada writes in his purport to this verse that the Lord sometimes comes to earth Himself and sometimes sends His empowered representatives to carry out His mission. Let us briefly consider Srila Prabhupada’s contributions to the Lord’s mission on the earth.

### **To Deliver the Pious**

To shelter pious and sincere souls, Srila Prabhupada founded the International Society for Krishna Consciousness. The Society’s schools, farms, and temples are spiritual oases that give relief to faithful devotees in the desert of material existence. And the different aspects of the Society such as Deity worship, Food for Life, congregational chanting, and spiritual festivals are meant to revive the devotion of pious souls and prepare them to return to the spiritual kingdom of the Lord.

### **To Annihilate the Miscreants**

Following in the footsteps of Sri Caitanya Mahaprabhu, Srila Prabhupada worked to curb down the demoniac tendencies of the people of this age. Prabhupada spoke out strongly against anything or anyone opposed to Krsna consciousness. His words were razor sharp, his books bombs smashing illusion. His Bhaktivedanta purports will continue to devastate atheistic opponents for thousands of years to come.

### **To Reestablish the Principles of Religion**

Real religion is one: to serve the Supreme Personality of Godhead. Srila Prabhupada translated bhakti not just as “devotion” but as “devotional service,” to emphasize that devotional service is the eternal occupation of all living entities.

Lord Caitanya Mahaprabhu introduced the main process of devotional service for the present age: the chanting of the

holy names of the Lord. Lord Caitanya spread the holy names within India. And Srila Prabhupada said that Lord Caitanya had left to the International Society for Krishna Consciousness the job of spreading the holy names to the rest of the world. When Prabhupada first came to America, he chanted by himself in New York City. Later, he encouraged his disciples to chant and dance through the streets of cities all over the world.

In early July forty devotees attended a two-day conference on social development within ISKCON. The conference, held at Radhadesh, ISKCON's center in Septon-Durbuy, Belgium, was the third in a series of conferences meant to develop recommendations to the GBC (ISKCON's governing body) concerning ISKCON's social structure. The discussions at Radhadesh centered mostly on the importance of the grhastha asrama, or married life in Krsna consciousness.

### **Silver Anniversary of Srila Prabhupada's Moscow Visit**

Guests from Europe and America joined nearly one thousand devotees from all over the Commonwealth of Independent States for the twenty-fifth anniversary of Krsna consciousness in Russia. The event took place in Moscow on July 14. Syamasundara Dasa, who had accompanied Srila Prabhupada on his visit to Moscow in 1971, guided a tour of the places they had stayed at or visited. Special guests were Professor C. G. Kotovski, whom Srila Prabhupada had met during his visit, and Ananta Santi Dasa, Srila Prabhupada's only disciple in Russia. The event coincided with the arrival in Moscow of Padayatra Europe—a group of devotees completing a 10,000-km walk from Belfast.

### **ISKCON Incorporation Day**

On August 7 devotees gathered in temples worldwide to remember the early days of ISKCON and review its purposes, as given by Srila Prabhupada when he incorporated the Society in 1966. Devotees discussed the successes and failures of their



respective centers and made plans for improvement. In many places devotees passed out pamphlets explaining the Society's goals, purposes, and history.

## **Other Centennial News**

### **TV Series on Srila Prabhupada**

In India, a weekly television series about Srila Prabhupada is now on the air, in Hindi. The series is called "Abhay Charan—The Life and Teachings of Srila Prabhupada." Doordarshan, Indian national TV, broadcast the first episode on September 7, the day after Srila Prabhupada's appearance. The series is scheduled to run for at least 104 weeks. Producer: Bhakti Caru Swami.

### **Street Named After Srila Prabhupada**

Bhaktivedanta Swami Circle is the new name for the street in front of ISKCON's temple in Durban, South Africa. The city renamed it in honor of Srila Prabhupada.

### **New Books about Srila Prabhupada**

The Centennial Year has inspired many devotees to publish their memories and realizations of Srila Prabhupada. Many books about Prabhupada are already available, and more are expected before the end of the year. **Here is a list of books we know about: Published \***

Acarya—Portraits of Srila Prabhupada, by Sesa Dasa

The Jaladuta Diary, by The Bhaktivedanta Archives

Journey to the Pacific Rim, by Bali Mardana Dasa

My Glorious Master, by Bhurijana Dasa

Srila Prabhupada and His Disciples in Germany, by Vedavyasa Dasa

One Hundred Prabhupada Poems, by Satsvarupa Dasa Goswami

Prabhupada Sayings, by Aditya Dasi

Srila Prabhupada At Radha Damodara, by Mahanidhi Swami

Srila Prabhupada's Visit to Malaysia, by Janananda Dasa

A Transcendental Diary, Vols. 1-3, by Hari Sauri Dasa (more volumes to come)

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## Kurukshetra – The Land of Dharma By Lokanath Swami

War and pious deeds have often come together at this ancient North Indian site.

**KURUKSHETRA**, about one hundred miles north of New Delhi, is best known as the place where the great battle of the Mahabharata was fought and Lord Krsna spoke **the Bhagavad-gita**. But long before that, Kurukshetra had played a dominant role in the history and culture of ancient India. For thousands of years it was a hub around which the Vedic civilization spun in its full glory. Kurukshetra's religious importance is described in many scriptures, including the Bhagavad-gita, the Mahabharata, and various Upanisads and Puranas. The scriptures refer to it as a place of meditation and an abode of demigods. The atmosphere of Kurukshetra is still charged with the chanting of Vedic hymns, especially the Bhagavad-gita.

The first verse of the Gita refers to Kurukshetra as **dharma-ksetra**, or "**the field of dharma**," indicating that it was already known as a holy place. Today one can find many ancient

temples and sacred lakes at Kurukshetra, an area of about one hundred square miles between the sacred rivers Sarasvati and Drsadvati in Haryana state.

### **The Great King Kuru**

Kurukshetra was formerly known as **Brahmaksetra, Brghuksetra, Aryavarta, and Samanta Pancaka**. It became known as **Kurukshetra because of the work of King Kuru**.

The Mahabharata tells of how King Kuru, a prominent ancestor of the Pandavas, made the land a great center of spiritual culture. King Kuru went there on a golden chariot and used the chariot's gold to make a plow. He then borrowed Lord Siva's bull and Yamaraja's buffalo and started plowing. When Indra arrived and asked Kuru what he was doing, Kuru replied that he was preparing the land for growing the eight religious virtues: truth, yoga, kindness, purity, charity, forgiveness, austerity, and celibacy.

Indra asked the king to request a boon. Kuru asked that the land ever remain a holy place named after himself, and that anyone dying there go to heaven regardless of his sins or virtues. Indra laughed at the requests.

Undaunted, Kuru performed great penance and continued to plow. Gradually, Indra was won over, but other demigods expressed doubts. They said that death without sacrifice did not merit a place in heaven. Finally, Kuru and Indra arrived at a compromise: Indra would admit into heaven anyone who died there while fighting or performing penance. So Kurukshetra became both a battlefield and a land of piety.

### **The Mahabharata Battle**

When the Pandavas claimed their legitimate share of their paternal kingdom from their uncle Dhrtarastra and his sons, the Kauravas, they were given the Khandava Forest in the south of the Kuru kingdom. There they built a magnificent city

called Indraprastha, located where Delhi is today. The Kauravas kept Hastinapura, situated to the northeast of Delhi, as their capital.

Later, the Pandavas were exiled for thirteen years after Yudhisthira's defeat in a game of dice. After the exile, the Pandavas demanded the return of their kingdom. On behalf of the Pandavas, Lord Krsna went to Duryodhana, the eldest Kaurava, and begged for five villages for the five Pandavas. But proud Duryodhana refused to give any land. "I won't even give them enough land to fit on the tip of a pin," he said.

The war was therefore unavoidable, and the Kauravas and Pandavas decided to fight at Kurukshetra, because it was large, uninhabited, and abundant with water and fuel-wood.

The Pandavas won the Battle of Kurukshetra, which lasted only eighteen days.

### **The Birth of the Gita**

The Battle of Kurukshetra began on the day known as Moksada Ekadasi. (Ekadasi is the eleventh day of either the waxing or waning moon, and moksada means "giver of liberation.") On that day, Krsna enlightened Arjuna with the knowledge of Bhagavad-gita, liberating him. Now every year on that day considered the birthday of Bhagavad-gita festivals in honor of the Gita are held at Kurukshetra and many other places in India. The grand festival in Jyotisar, the spot where the Gita was spoken, is organized as a state function, with chief ministers and governors presiding. Coincidentally, this is also the time of ISKCON's annual Prabhupada Book Marathon, when devotees distribute hundreds and thousands of copies of Srila Prabhupada's Bhagavad-gita As It Is in India and around the world.

### **Rathayatra's Kurukshetra Roots**

Once, when Krsna was preparing to go to Kurukshetra at the

time of a solar eclipse, He invited the gopis (cowherd girls) and other residents of Vrndavana to meet Him at Kurukshetra. When He had left Vrndavana in His youth, He had promised to return very soon. But He had been away for a long time (about a hundred years), so out of intense spiritual love, the residents of Vrndavana had always felt ecstatic longing to see Him again.

The residents of Dvaraka (a majestic city) arrived at Kurukshetra on chariots; the residents of Vrndavana (a simple cowherd village), on ox carts. Because the families of Vrndavana and Dvaraka were related, a joyful reunion took place.

Of all the residents of Vrndavana, the leading gopi, Srimati Radharani, had felt the pangs of separation from Krsna more than anyone else. She and the other gopis were determined to bring Krsna back to Vrndavana. The loving exchange between Krsna and the gopis at Kurukshetra is the esoteric meaning behind the festival known as Rathayatra (**“Festival of the Chariots”**). So whenever Hare Krsna devotees put on Rathayatras in cities around the world, they are proclaiming the glories of Kurukshetra.

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## The History of Kumbha-Mela by Lokanath Swami

The Inhabitants of the earth benefit from a cosmic fight for immortal nectar.

THE LORD'S pastime of protecting the devas (demigods) from the asuras (demons) by producing nectar from the ocean of milk is described in detail in the Srimad-Bhagavatam, Canto 8, chapters 5 through 11.

Millions of years ago, the sage Durvasa visited the capital of Indra's kingdom in the heavenly planets. While Durvasa Muni was passing on the road, he saw Indra on the back of his elephant and was pleased to offer Indra a garland from his own neck. Indra, however, being too proud of his material wealth, took the garland and placed it on the trunk of his carrier elephant. The elephant, being an animal, could not understand the value of the garland. It threw the garland between its legs and smashed it. Seeing this insulting behavior, Durvasa Muni cursed Indra to become poverty-stricken.

The asuras, the natural enemies of the devas, took this opportunity to attack Lord Indra and steal all the riches and virtuous possessions in his kingdom. A fierce battle for supremacy of the heavenly planets raged. Bereft of all influence and strength, the devas were defeated.

The devas then went to Lord Brahma for help. Unable to offer a solution, Lord Brahma took them to Svetadvipa, the abode of Ksirodakasayi Visnu in the ocean of milk.

### **Snake-And-Mouse Logic**

Lord Visnu advised the devas to cooperate with the asuras and churn the ocean of milk to attain an immortal nectar that would make the devas invincible. He told the devas to follow the logic of the snake and the mouse in dealing with the asuras. A snake and a mouse were once caught in a basket. The snake said to the mouse, "Look, I could eat you very easily, but it's more important for me to get out of this basket. So why don't you make a hole so that we can both escape?" The mouse agreed and started working. But as soon as the hole was big enough, the snake ate the mouse and came out of the

basket.

Similarly, the Lord wanted the devas to take help from the asuras, but He had no intention of giving any of the nectar to the asuras. He would appear as Mohini-murti and cheat them.

The asuras and devas uprooted Mandara Mountain to use as a churning rod and requested Vasuki, the king of the serpents, to serve as the churning rope. With the churning, the mighty golden Mandara Mountain began to sink slowly into the ocean of milk. The devas and asuras became discouraged at the turn of events.

Then the Lord took the form of a tortoise, known as Kurma-avataara. He entered the water and held the great mountain on His back. The mountain moved back and forth with the churning motion, scratching the back of Lord Tortoise, who, while partially sleeping, was pleasingly experiencing an itching sensation.

Soon a fiercely dangerous poison was produced from the ocean, covering all directions. The compassionate Lord Siva drank the poison and held it in His throat, turning his neck bluish and earning him the name Nilakantha, "one who has a bluish neck."

### **Products of The Milk Ocean**

The milk ocean then produced many wonderful items: a surabhi cow, a beautiful horse named Uccaihsrava, the elephant Airavata, eight great white elephants that could go in any direction, eight she-elephants, the crescent moon, a conch shell named Pancajanya, a bow named Haridhanu ("the bow of Hari"), the goddess Varuni, the precious Kaustubha jewel, a desire-fulfilling parijata flower, Apsaras (the most beautiful women in the universe), Laksmi (the goddess of fortune), and Dhanvantari.

A partial incarnation of the Lord, Dhanvantari rose slowly from the ocean. Srimad-Bhagavatam (8.8.32-33) describes his

beautiful form:

He was strongly built; his arms were long, stout, and strong; his neck, which was marked with three lines, resembled a conch shell; his eyes were reddish; and his complexion was blackish. He was very young, he was garlanded with flowers, and his entire body was fully decorated with various ornaments. He was dressed in yellow garments and wore brightly polished earrings made of pearls. The tips of his hair were anointed with oil, and his chest was very broad. His body had all good features, he was stout and strong like a lion, and he was decorated with bangles. In his hand he carried a jug filled to the top with nectar.

The jug of nectar was the prize everyone was waiting for. The asuras quickly stole the jug, and they began to fight over who should take the first drink. While they argued, the Lord assumed the form of an extremely beautiful woman known as Mohini-murti and slowly approached them.

**Mohini-murti** said, "The demigods are very miserly and are excessively anxious to take the nectar first. So let them have it first. Since you are not like them, you can wait a little longer. You are all heroes and are so pleased with Me. It is better for you to wait until after the demigods drink."

The asuras, overwhelmed by Her beauty and charm, gave Her the jug of nectar, and She promptly delivered it to the devas.

The asuras were furious at the deception and attacked the devas with all their force. According to the Skanda Purana, at one point during the fight, Jayanta, a son of Indra, took the kumbha (jug) and ran away toward the heavenly planets. The asuras followed, eager to retrieve the nectar, and the fierce fighting continued. From time to time during twelve days of fighting, circumstances compelled Jayanta to place the kumbha at four places on earth: on the bank of the Godavari River in Nasika, Maharashtra; at the Shipra River in Ujjain, Madhya



Pradesh; at the Ganges in Haridwar, Uttar Pradesh, and at the Triveni-sangam in Allahabad, Uttar Pradesh.

When the kumbha was lifted at each location, some drops of nectar fell onto the earth. That same nectar appears at these sites during certain planetary configurations. Even today, millions of people come to partake of the nectar, to become immortal by bathing in the holy rivers and drinking the nectarlike waters. Because the fighting between the devas and the asuras lasted for twelve earth years (twelve demigod days), **Kumbha-melas** are held at each of these sites once every twelve years.

Lokanath Swami is the director of ISKCON Padayatras (“walking pilgrimages”) worldwide and the author of the recently published book *Kumbha: The Festival of Immortality*.

### **Srila Prabhupada at Allahabad**

**FOR THIRTEEN YEARS** Srila Prabhupada lived in Allahabad. He moved there in 1923 with his family. Allahabad was a good location to start his pharmaceutical business, Prayag Pharmacy. He entered a business partnership with a physician, Dr. Ghosh, who diagnosed patients and gave medical prescriptions, which Prabhupada would fill. Motilal Nehru and his son, Jawaharlal, (the future Prime Minister of India) were both customers at Prabhupada’s pharmacy.

During his time in Allahabad, Prabhupada stayed in contact with Srila Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati, whom he had first met in 1922 in Calcutta. On November 21, 1932, under the direction of Srila Bhaktisiddhanta, the Allahabad Gaudiya Matha held a cornerstone-laying ceremony for their new temple. The governor, Sir William Haily, was the respected guest. Srila Bhaktisiddhanta held an initiation ceremony, and Prabhupada received initiation (harinama and Gayatri) from him.

Previously, upon learning that Prabhupada had requested initiation, Srila Bhaktisiddhanta had remarked, “He likes to

hear. He does not go away. I have marked him. I will accept him as my disciple.”

## **Prabhupada at Kumbha-mela**

The Vedic literature states that whoever bathes in the Triveni-sangam at the auspicious time of the Kumbha-mela is guaranteed of liberation from birth and death. That is why the Mela has always attracted millions of pilgrims.

Yet Srila Prabhupada said, **“We are not interested in liberation. We have come to preach devotional service. Being engaged in Krsna’s unalloyed devotional service, we are already liberated.”**

In contrast to almost everyone present, Prabhupada emphasized giving spiritual knowledge as the prime reason for attending the Mela. The devotee’s only ambition is to enlighten as many people as possible. Pilgrimage was secondary. With this mood, the devotees attended the 1971 Kumbha-mela with Prabhupada and enthusiastically presented Krsna consciousness to the millions of pilgrims.

None of the western devotees had ever attended the Kumbha-mela. The many bizarre sights can bewilder and confuse the mind, but Prabhupada reminded the devotees that spiritual life is neither exotic nor bewildering, but simple and practical.

“To go to a holy place means to find a holy person and hear from him,” Prabhupada had said. “A place is holy because of the presence of the saintly persons.”

In a conversation recorded in January 1977 (just before the Kumbha-mela), Prabhupada said that the real purpose of the Kumbha-mela is to take advantage of the spiritual knowledge presented there:

The Kumbha-mela is sat-sanga. If you go to the Kumbha-mela to find out a man of knowledge, then your Kumbha-mela is right.

If one thinks that this salila, the water to take bath in the water is Kumbha-mela, then he is a go-kharah [a cow or an ass]. But the real idea is "Now there are assembled so many saintly persons. Let me take advantage of their knowledge." Then he is intelligent. People should take advantage. You can go to different groups of saintly persons. Different groups means " **brahmeti paramatmeti bhagavan iti**". There are some yogis, some jnanis, some bhaktas. They are of the same category, little difference. But they're all spiritual. They have no interest in this material world.

### **Some Real Yogis**

Srila Prabhupada said that although many of the sadhus present were inauthentic and didn't really know the highest goal of human life, many were perfect yogis. These yogis, from remote parts of India, would come out for the Mela and then return to seclusion.

"I have personally seen," Prabhupada said, "that they take bath in the Ganges and come up in the seven sacred rivers. They go down in the Ganges and come up in the Godavari River. Then they go down and come up in the Krishna River, and go down, like that."

The devotees, therefore, should respect everyone who attended the Mela.

Prabhupada also explained that one is not liberated automatically by taking bath at the Kumbha-mela on the specific auspicious days. But by coming to the holy tirtha and taking bath on the holy days, the door to liberation gets opened.

"If you are trying to enter a room and the door is closed," he said, "there is some prohibition. It is more difficult for you to enter the room. But if the door is opened for you, then your entrance to the room is easier."

## **Monkey Renunciation**

After the 1977 Kumbha-mela, the story of the death of a Naga Baba made the national newspapers. Wearing no clothing, he had died from the extreme cold. Prabhupada commented on the incident. "He must die. They imitate. They have no sadhana [regulated spiritual practice], no bhajana [worship], and simply naga [naked]."

The devotees told Prabhupada that the imitators smoke chillums (marijuana) and become so intoxicated that they don't feel the cold. One disciple told Prabhupada that he had seen a Naga who had been smoking cigarettes for twelve years without stopping. Another man had been holding his arm up in the air for the past twelve years. His fingernails had grown very long, and his arm was flat. Another renunciant hadn't sat down for eighteen years. He carried a small swing with him, which he would tie to a tree and lean on.

"This is markata-vairagya, the renunciation of a monkey," Prabhupada said, referring to the type of renunciation that, although difficult to perform, doesn't produce any advancement in Krsna consciousness. The monkeys also have no clothes to wear and live in treetops in the secluded forest, but the male monkeys have a large group of female monkeys to sport with. Some devotees concluded that severe penance was not recommended anywhere in the Vedas, but Prabhupada corrected them: "No, Hiranyakasipu did it. But what did he gain? He became a raksasa [demon] and was killed."

## **The Significance of Prayag**

THE WORD prayag refers to a place where great sacrifices are held. Many ages ago, Lord Brahma chose as a place for sacrifice a prime piece of land encircled by three sacred rivers: the Ganges, the Yamuna, and the Sarasvati. That site became known as Prayag. In A.D. 1573, the Mogul king Akbar erected a large fort at the confluence of the three rivers and

renamed the city Ilahabas or Ilahabad, “the city of Allah.” From that time, Prayag became known as Allahabad.

The confluence of the three rivers is known as the Triveni-sangam. Tri means “three,” veni refers to a braid, and sangam means “union.” The dark blue and black Yamuna flows swiftly into the white and gray Ganges. The Sarasvati flows underground.

Bathing in any of these sacred rivers is purifying, but the purification is said to increase a hundred times where the rivers meet. The Varaha Purana states: “In Prayag there is the Triveni. By bathing there one goes to heaven, and by dying there one gets liberation. It is the king of all tirthas [holy places of pilgrimage] and is dear to Lord Visnu.”

Lord Brahma has said, **prayagasya pravesesu papam nasyanti tatksanam**: “All sins are at once cleansed upon entering Prayag.”

Many exalted saints and sages have visited Prayag. Sri Caitanya Mahaprabhu, Lord Nityananda, and Advaita Acarya all spent time there during pilgrimage tours.

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## **How I Came to Krishna Consciousness by Lokanath Swami**

The unseen merciful hand of Lord Krsna helps a determined young student become one of Srila Prabhupada’s first Indian disciples.

I was born in Aravade, a small village in the Indian state of Maharashtra that differs little from more than seven hundred thousand others in India. After I graduated from high school, my family sent me to Bombay to study chemistry in college. But my college career was not to be.

In the year 1971, in late March, something happened to prevent me from following the program my family had so carefully laid out for me. For the first time, His Divine Grace A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada was touring India with his foreign disciples. They had arrived in Bombay just before I had, and now they were going to have a pandal (a spiritual festival) at Cross Maidan.

The devotees publicized the pandal very widely, in newspapers and on billboards. In the advertisements, Srila Prabhupada's disciples were described as American, Canadian, European, African, and Japanese sadhus (saintly devotees). This was unprecedented. Previously, whenever the word sadhu had been applied to someone, it was understood that the person was Indian. There could be no other consideration. But these advertisements were talking about sadhus from all over the world. This was indeed a novelty for every Bombayite, and it especially fascinated me.

Intrigued, I went to the Hare Krishna Festival, which was quite well organized. The Hare Krsna sadhus were the biggest attraction for me. I appreciated their singing, dancing, walking, and talking. In fact, I liked everything about them, and I attended the function practically every evening. I would simply watch and listen. Though I knew English, I wasn't fluent, and speaking with foreigners was too difficult for me. I purchased a few magazines and a few booklets with the little money I had.

Srila Prabhupada spoke every evening. He discussed many issues relating to Krsna consciousness and made many points. But the point that had the greatest impact on me, and which attracted

me to him and his society more than anything else, was the simple point that if you serve Krsna, the Supreme Personality of Godhead, you simultaneously serve everyone and everything else. Srila Prabhupada gave the analogy of what happens when one waters a tree. Just by pouring water on the root of a tree, one automatically waters all the leaves, branches, fruits, and flowers on the tree.

Srila Prabhupada had simplified my job. "Here is my chance," I thought. I had always wanted to serve others, and thus at different stages in my life I had contemplated becoming an engineer or a doctor or a lawyer. Whenever I thought of my future, I would think of how I could serve others. Yet although throughout all these years I had mainly thought of service, I didn't know where to begin, and I had practically no resources in my possession. But now Srila Prabhupada had cleared my path by showing the easy way of serving the whole creation through the simple medium of serving the Lord, the source of all that be. This idea greatly appealed to me.

As scheduled, the Hare Krishna Festival ended after eleven days, and everything went back to normal.

I continued going to college in Bombay. I shared a room with some people from my village, whom my family had asked to keep an eye on me. Once, several years before, I had left my studies and gone to join an asrama in a town nearby my village. I had almost made it to the asrama, but the unseen merciful hand of the Lord brought me back so that later I could join Srila Prabhupada instead.

After this incident, my family had anticipated my going away somewhere, sometime, and that is why they asked the villagers to watch over me. But how much could they watch me? I had gone to the Hare Krsna function practically every evening, and no one had noticed that. I would keep Hare Krsna magazines and booklets inside my big fat chemistry books and read them for hours. My roommates would marvel at how seriously I was

studying chemistry. They couldn't detect that instead of absorbing myself in analyzing chemical solutions, I was probing into the ultimate solution to the problems of life.

Whenever my roommates went out, I would bolt the door and, with my arms raised, chant Hare Krsna and dance to my full satisfaction. Having seen the devotees chanting and dancing onstage at the festival, I was trying to imitate them. Thus, in hiding, I was following the process of Krsna consciousness: chanting, dancing, and reading over and over again the few pieces of literature I had.

I knew that the Hare Krsna devotees were living somewhere in Bombay, but after the function their small group had merged into the big city, and I was deprived of their association.

One year passed.

Then, in March 1972, ISKCON organized another festival, this time at Juhu Beach. During the course of the year, the devotees had purchased some land at Juhu, and the function was going to be held right on their premises. Once again, advertisements appeared in the newspapers and in other media, and news of the festival reached me by the causeless mercy of the Lord. I had been waiting for this news, and I was extremely happy to receive it.

Naturally, I attended the programs. I would go long before they began, borrow books, and read them. During the chanting I would join in wholeheartedly. The foreign devotees, in Indian dhotis and kurtas, and the Indian student, in imported trousers and shirt, would dance together.

Occasionally, during prasadam time, when I happened to be near the gate, the devotees would invite me to come and take prasadam with them. I was eager to observe their life closely, so I would take advantage of the opportunity and join them. They were all nice devotees. On top of that, they were all foreigners, and I was duly impressed.



A few days after the festival at Juhu ended, I sat down and composed an application for membership in ISKCON (the International Society for Krishna Consciousness). I had decided to join the devotees, and to join any organization, I thought, one needed to fill out an application. I addressed my application to the president of ISKCON, Bombay. I wrote that I agreed to follow the four regulative principles no meat-eating, no intoxication, no illicit sex, and no gambling. I also stated that I liked their dazzling aratis, ecstatic kirtanas, and sumptuous prasadam. (I had picked up all these terms from their publicity handouts.) I went to a typing institute and had the application typed out. ISKCON was an international society, so I thought everything had to be formalized and just right.

Then I went to the Hare Krsna asrama at Juhu and asked who the president was. It wasn't difficult to get to see him. His name was Giriraja dasa. He went through my letter-application, and on the spot he accepted me and embraced me. Not only that: he welcomed me in and immediately introduced me to all the asramites as a new devotee.

I quickly adjusted to my new lifestyle. I had a new home, a new uniform, new associates, a new program almost everything was new to me. Nonetheless, I immediately embraced all of it and liked it. Although the devotees were mostly foreigners, I felt completely at home. I was determined to make this my life's commitment.

One week passed quickly. Then my elder brother arrived at the temple with one of my old roommates. Among the things I had left in my room was a handbill with the Hare Krsna address at Juhu on it. That's how they'd found me. It was no big surprise to them that I'd joined the devotees. They had been expecting something like this for some time, and now all they had feared had come to pass.

My brother wanted me to visit my family, especially for the

sake of my mother. If I wouldn't go she might die, he said. But he assured me my family had no objection to my returning after the visit. I had always respected my brother, and here he was practically begging me to return home, saying that it was a matter of life and death for my affectionate mother and that I could return soon. Finally, I asked permission from Giriraja and left, wearing my new uniform of dhoti and kurta.

After I arrived in my village, people began saying that though I used to be such a nice boy, now something had gone wrong with me. The difference was that I was wearing a dhoti and kurta, chanting Hare Krsna, and avoiding the association of nondevotees. The townspeople considered all these things strange and abnormal.

My father requested me not to wear my new clothes and not to put on tilaka, even though he wore clothes similar to mine and occasionally wore tilaka himself. He was a devotee of Lord Vittala, a form of Lord Visnu, or Krsna, and devotees of Lord Vittala apply tilaka in a way similar to that of the Hare Krsna devotees. On special occasions my father would put on his tilaka, but he didn't want me to imitate him, because he was worried about what people would think. (If such is the reaction of Indian parents, I can hardly imagine the reaction of parents of devotees in other lands).

Thus my parents tried everything in their power to dissuade me from returning to the Hare Krsna devotees. They even went to astrologers to learn some way to "cure" me or to find out how long I would continue living this "strange type of life." They were really concerned.

More than a week passed, yet no plans were made for my return to the devotees, as per the original agreement between my brother and me. My parents kept telling me that some relative or other still had to come see me and that it wouldn't be proper for me to leave without meeting him. My family planned to enlist the relatives as agents to somehow or other talk me

out of this sadhu business. My parents tried everything on me, but my mind was fixed on going back to the Hare Krsna devotees.

One day I saw my sister shedding tears. When someone asked her what was wrong, she replied, "Just see how in our house all the other boys are nicely engaged in playing cards, but my brother Raghunatha isn't sitting with them." Such was the cause of her tears. She was feeling sorry that I wasn't playing cards with the other boys but was instead busy chanting the holy names of God on my beads.

When my family all realized I wouldn't give up the life I had embraced, they came up with the proposal that I could continue the life of a sadhu but that I should do it in our village. They promised to build a small temple so I could do my devotional practices there. I rejected this idea, too, however, because I wanted to associate with the devotees. There is no question of leading a spiritual life without proper association, without the association of devotees who are practicing Krsna consciousness full-time. I didn't want to be just another bogus sadhu. India was already overcrowded and overburdened with them. I wanted to engage in the service of Krsna in the Hare Krsna movement. Srila Prabhupada had already cleared my path. He had given me my life's mission, and I was fully satisfied once and for all with that.

I had sold my heart to Srila Prabhupada and Lord Krsna. So, finally, my family accepted the inevitable. I returned to Bombay after about a month and moved back into the asrama. Since I had stayed in my village quite a long time, I wasn't sure how Giriraja and the other devotees would react to my return. When they saw me, however, I was surprised to find myself most welcome, just as before and they were surprised to see me back in their midst. Their experience had been that many Indian devotees had come and gone, promising to return soon, but hardly any had actually returned. Thus they were surprised and pleased to see me. By the causeless mercy of my

spiritual master, His Divine Grace A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, and Lord Sri Krsna, the Supreme Personality of Godhead, my return to the devotees became possible.

Although it may appear that my joining ISKCON disrupted my family's life and caused a disturbance in my small village, these negative effects were only temporary. In the years since I joined ISKCON, I and many other devotees have often visited Aravade and taught the principles of Krsna consciousness, and now my family and my whole village embrace ISKCON as a genuine religious movement. There are seven full-time devotees from there, my sister has enrolled her son into the ISKCON gurukula school in Vrndavana, and whenever I see my father he asks me for tilaka and proudly decorates his forehead with it. Also, my family and many other families in Aravade regularly chant Hare Krsna on beads. All in all, my whole village loves the Hare Krsna movement, and there is no disruption of any kind.