

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 Navadwip, 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."**