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INTERNATIONAL SOCIETY FOR KRISHNA CONSCIOUSNESS
Founder-*Ācārya*: His Divine Grace A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupāda

CONTENTS

Foreword

With appreciation, I present the 2025 volume of the *ISKCON Communications Journal* (ICJ), the fifth since the journal's revival in 2021. Each successive volume has reaffirmed the ICJ's role as a thoughtful forum for intellectual, spiritual, and institutional reflection about ISKCON and the wider Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava tradition. Reaching this fifth volume provides a welcome opportunity to briefly look at the themes and articles that shaped the journal for the last half decade.

The ICJ has consistently addressed relevant issues. The 2021 volume emphasized dialogue and engagement, including interfaith exchanges, through contributions from the leaders of both sides of ISKCON's Vaiṣṇava–Christian dialogue. Alongside that, ICJ published an article on the relationships between ISKCON and the Gauḍīya Maṭhas. The other articles covered science and consciousness, cow care, environmental ethics in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, and the benefits for ISKCON in paying attention to ethics and moral philosophy.

In 2022, the journal focused on hermeneutics. Contributors examined how interpretive tools can be applied within ISKCON and ways of understanding Śrīla Prabhupāda's distinctive mode of discourse and difficult historical remarks. That volume also discussed the relationship between perfected devotion (*prema*) and the self, called for intellectual engagement with contemporary culture, and proposed a modern framework for Vaiṣṇava–Muslim dialogue.

The 2023 volume addressed pressing social and institutional concerns. Articles called for institutional courage in dealing with the state of child protection, offered reflections on women's roles in leading ISKCON, critically examined the initiation system, and analyzed one of Śrīla Prabhupāda's particularly challenging remarks through careful theological interpretation. Sociological perspectives in another article highlighted the need for a cultural change in relation to families, leadership, and the movement's long-term sustainability.

In 2024, ICJ featured historical, philosophical, and ethnographic approaches. Contributions included a historical review of ISKCON's post–1977 initiation system by one of its earliest gurus, a study of the *Bhagavad-gītā*'s influence on Russian philosophy, an examination of the origins and context of *Life Comes from Life*, reflections on ISKCON's position in the religious landscape of the twenty-first century, and an enthnographic exploration of Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava aesthetic theology and its relevance to lived devotional experience.

Two contributions in this volume discuss institutional leadership and geographical heritage. Both articles expand on talks given by their authors at the ISKCON Communications Conference held in early May 2025 at Prabhupada Desh, a rural retreat center near Vicenza, Italy. This four-day gathering again demonstrated the value of bringing devotees and scholars together for in-depth, respectful exchanges. Kumari Sherreitt, co-director of ISKCON Communications in North America, draws on her doctoral research and leadership experience to examine the development of the next generation of leaders. Chandru Ramesh (Cakrapani Dāsa), Director of the Historika Foundation, contributes an article rooted in his work as a historian, author, and filmmaker dedicated to preserving India's sacred geographical heritage in Mathurā–Vṛndāvana.

As in previous volumes, this one reflects the ICJ's commitment to reasoned analysis, scholarly rigor, and openness to diverse perspectives, while constructively addressing difficult questions and examining ISKCON's teachings and practices with honesty and care.

I extend my sincere thanks to all contributors for their thoughtful articles, and to the editorial and design team and the Advisory Board for their dedication. I am also grateful for the support and encouragement of Anuttama Dāsa and his international Communications team.

I would also like to thank Tattvavit Dāsa, without whose hard work, commitment, diligence, and determination ICJ would not have been possible over the last five years. He is now concluding his service with the ICJ, and finding someone who can fully replace him will be difficult. He has offered to assist in training the next co-editor and production manager (he did both services) to help ensure a smooth transition.

As we move forward, I hope that the ICJ continues to serve as a meaningful platform for growth, reflection, and dialogue. I invite everyone to read the articles, and I request scholars and practitioners to contribute articles.

MAHĀPRABHU DĀSA

Introduction

R. David Coolidge's article is a valuable and unusual contribution to the journal. He foregrounds the roles of lived experience and relational trust in the formation of both scholarly and devotional understanding. His reflections offer readers an opportunity to see how Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism appears from the standpoint of an American Muslim scholar of Islam, engaged not merely with Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava texts but also with ISKCON scholars and communities. The emphasis he places on human connection as a prerequisite for meaningful interreligious engagement aligns with ISKCON's stress on personalism and relationality. For readers interested in how devotional traditions are taken up by outsiders in serious and respectful ways — and how personal relationships become vehicles of transmission and transformation — this essay offers much to consider.

His article opens a space for more experiential and relational approaches to interfaith discourse and the study of religion. The concept of "knowledge formations," introduced early in the piece, is a potentially rich framework for reflecting on how religious understanding is embedded in historically shaped communities of interpretation. He notes in his book *Hindu Bhakti through Muslim Eyes* that the descriptive study of religion "has indigenous roots in Muslim knowledge formations that can inform contemporary Islamic scholarship regarding religious pluralism" (p. 91). He cites texts such as the eleventh-century scholar al-Bīrūnī's *Book of India*.

Coolidge's article does not explore the political, institutional, and theological asymmetries that shape Muslim-Vaiṣṇava relations or the conditions of cross-traditional scholarship, especially when it comes to projecting interreligious possibilities across vastly different social and geopolitical contexts or in regions where structural violence and political suppression are ongoing, though he gestures toward these realities. It nonetheless explains why and

how a Muslim scholar can and should engage deeply with Caitanya Vaiṣṇavism by positioning himself as a bridge-builder between traditions for both human and academic reasons. His article and book are timely, now that both London and New York have elected Muslim mayors.

The article by Kenneth R. Valpey (Kṛṣṇa Kṣetra Swami) focuses on a biography and three autobiographies of devotees. Over the decades, dozens of biographical and autobiographical writings have appeared that are self-representational. His general concern is to call attention to how these representations of Kṛṣṇa-devotee selves may be used to track some of the directions that ISKCON has taken. More specifically, he is interested in how expressions of theological reflection emerge through life narrations.

Recently, Joshua M. Greene (Yogeśvara Dāsa) wrote down his recollections of Kṛṣṇa consciousness from ISKCON's early days in the United Kingdom. (He was nineteen when he became a devotee at the Bury Place temple in 1969.) Coincidentally, after his article was prepared for this volume, ISKCON London acquired the Bury Place building at auction and is now coming to terms with raising the money for it. His article celebrates devotional life in the Bury Place temple and the devotees' relationships with Śrīla Prabhupāda. The author's academic life has been dedicated to teaching and writing about the Holocaust and the memories of survivors, and he shares his reflections on what he has learned about the workings of memory.

Kumari Sherreitt's article reckons with ISKCON's leadership-succession challenges in North America. Drawing on her doctoral research and leadership experience in ISKCON, she highlights the concerns of would-be next-generation leaders. Her paper proposes a guiding framework for addressing the issues and offers practical solutions for recruitment and retention. Her main consideration for continued dialogue on leadership development is advocacy for the possibility of professionalizing and remunerating ISKCON's managerial leaders. She notes that other nonprofit religious organizations do this. She argues that such a cultural shift would allow ISKCON members to pursue managerial service as a viable career path, rather than juggling voluntary ISKCON leadership responsibilities with employment elsewhere. She further contends

that next-generation leaders must challenge the perception — held by some senior leaders, newcomers, and rank-and-file members — that professionalism in ISKCON temples and projects is overly corporate or insufficiently devotional.

The author Chandru Ramesh is the Director of the Historika Foundation. He visited Europe for the first time in May 2025 to speak at the annual ISKCON Communications Conference, where he presented his work as a historian, author, and filmmaker dedicated to preserving and reviving India's sacred heritage by integrating contemporary technology with devotional scholarship. In his article for this volume, he draws on his interdisciplinary research to argue for the urgent need for heritage conservation in Mathura-Vrindavan.

THE EDITORS

Being a Bridge: Why a Muslim Would Write a Book about Caitanya, Prabhupāda, and the Bhāgavata Purāṇa

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What is a knowledge formation? According to the sociologist Peter Weingart, it is a structured conversation in which multiple human beings engage over time.[1] A list of similar terms might include "tradition," a heavily loaded term within varying religious communities, or "discipline," a widely used word in Anglophone academic contexts. But "knowledge formation," as Weingart suggests, helps us to understand how all knowledge is embedded within historical human communities and uses specific languages to communicate. Physics, for example, is a knowledge formation. Whether you take a high-school course in the USA or obtain a PhD in the UK, there is a certain way of going about becoming knowledgeable in physics. Knowledge formations exist on any subject in any language, including those about religion in English. This article is part of that knowledge formation. Therefore, whether one is studying physics or religion in English, whether at high school or graduate school, there is a certain way of going about it. As this article appears in the *ISKCON Communications Journal* (ICJ), it is reasonable to assume that most readers will be involved with ISKCON in some way. If people who do not know what ISKCON means happen to come across

this article, they might be confused as to what is going on here. This is the situation for all human beings: we all need some context. So what is my context?

When I was a child, I did not even know that Hinduism existed.[2] But in my first year in high school (1993–4), my World History class visited the ISKCON temple in Chicago. This marked the beginning of my education in Krishna consciousness, also known as Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism or Caitanya Vaiṣṇavism. I now have a PhD and have written an academic book on the subject. When I first entered the ISKCON temple, I knew nothing about the *Bhagavad Gītā*, Rūpa Gosvāmī, Bhaktisiddānta Sarasvati, or anything else. However, because of the educational efforts initiated by Caitanya in the sixteenth century, refined by Bhaktivinoda Ṭhākura in the nineteenth century, globalized in the twentieth century by Bhaktivedanta Swami (hereafter Prabhupāda), and carried on in the twenty-first century by communities all over the world, a knowledge formation that was once only accessible in India to those who could read Sanskrit and Bengali is now available to all of humanity.[3] For it to be accessed, one just needs to know certain things, such as what the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* is and what it discusses.[4] Just as one must learn Einstein's theory of relativity in the early stages of studying physics, one must also begin learning the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* to understand Krishna consciousness. No historical symbol better represents this than the trunk of translations-with-commentaries of the First Canto of the *Bhāgavata* that Prabhupāda brought with him on the ship *Jaladuta* in 1965. Had the ship sunk, or had Prabhupāda succumbed to a heart attack, those books never would have reached the hands of young Michael Grant (Mukunda Goswami) and Joan Campanella (Yamunā Devī Dāsī).[5] But they did, and because of it, the world is now different. I am different.

Almost everyone has heard of the *Bible* and the *Qur'an*, even if they are not familiar with either text. But mention the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* (*Śrīmad Bhāgavatam*) in casual conversation, and most people will be puzzled by the mention. In my first quarter century as a practicing Muslim (I converted in 1998), there was not a single moment when a Muslim acknowledged the *existence* of this text, let alone its contents. However, while researching the legacy of al-Bīrūnī, the eleventh-century Muslim scholar who wrote the

Book of India (*Kitāb al-Hind*), I discovered that his mention of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* is important for historians interested in how the text spread throughout medieval India.[6] How could it be that a Muslim scholar from a thousand years ago knew of its existence, yet in the years since its availabilty through a simple internet search, not a single Muslim I have met has known anything about it?

The answer is simple. Just because knowledge exists on the pages of a book does not mean that someone will read it. Often, more is required than simply putting words out into the world. Real human connections are necessary to make any particular knowledge formation more likely to be taken seriously. In a high-school physics class, for example, if the teacher is good, more students will pay attention to what the textbook says. However, if the teacher is bad, even the most riveting physics textbook will not capture many students' interest. The concept of knowledge formations reminds us that it is human communities that embody and maintain knowledge. Physics is not just knowledge. It is the knowledge that humans form when and where they care about physics. If Michael Grant and Joan Campanella had not met Prabhupāda, would they have read the *Bhāgavata*'s First Canto? Unlikely. The human connection came first, and the book followed. That is my story, too. I first met Vaiṣṇavas in person, who taught me something about Vaiṣṇavism, and I followed up on the new knowledge over the years. And so I endeavor to do that for Muslims worldwide, to the extent possible, because someone needs to be a bridge between the knowledge formations regarding Islam and the knowledge formations regarding Caitanya Vaiṣṇavism in the English language.

The academic study of Caitanya Vaiṣṇavism

In the context of the academic study of religion, the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* has become a widely studied text, as have many other aspects of Caitanya Vaiṣṇavism.[7] At conferences such as the annual American Academy of Religion (AAR) gathering, scholars typically present a variety of papers on the tradition. The Institute of Vaishnava Studies brings together like-minded intellectuals for networking. The Bhaktivedanta Book Trust always has a booth at the Book Exhibition. However, Muslim scholars (and many others from

different worldviews) at such gatherings still do not know about the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*. One can have a PhD in Religious Studies, and still not know anything about Islam or Caitanya Vaiṣṇavism. Teaching others is left to those who take the time to become specialists in a knowledge formation. That is something I am doing. Like al-Bīrūnī, who lived many centuries before Europeans heard about the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, I am paying attention and encouraging others to do the same. I participate in panels on comparative theology and explain how my conceptions of cosmology expanded when I tried to grasp the concepts of time and space explained in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*. I attend gatherings for those interested in interreligious studies and discuss the connections between Muslims and Vaiṣṇavas. For example, Rūpa Gosvāmī and his brother Sanātana Gosvāmī were once high-ranking officials in the court of ʿAlāʾ al-Dīn Ḥusayn Shāh (r. 1493–1519). This year, I will attend a gathering of Muslim professors specializing in Islamic studies to discuss my book. Why? So that there will be at least one Muslim considered a competent expert in the academic study of the Caitanya Vaiṣṇava tradition.

Why is that important? In response, we might ask, "Why is it important that there are scholars of Chinese history in the USA?" The USA is not China. Surely there are hundreds of scholars of Chinese history in China. Why should U.S. universities spend money maintaining PhD programs in Chinese history? The reason is that the USA does not exist in isolation. The country needs individuals who can competently discuss places outside the USA, including China. The USA needs to produce its own knowledge formations about China, led by American scholars of Chinese history, language, literature, and so on. The knowledge formation about Chinese history in China does nothing for Americans unless there are American scholars of Chinese history who can act as a bridge to that knowledge formation. Similarly, Muslims worldwide need scholars who specialize in subjects other than Islam. This may sound strange to some, but al-Bīrūnī was exactly that: a Muslim expert on the Hindu tradition. Al-Bīrūnī was a bridge for the Arabic-reading community to understand India a little better.

What was true a thousand years ago is still true today. During the 2024 AAR conference, Anuttama Dāsa, the global director of

ISKCON Communications, invited me to go to the ISKCON San Diego temple for dinner. After a full day of intellectualizing religion, I watched the *kīrtana* (congregational chanting) and then ate with Draviḍa Dāsa and other community elders. I was reminded that they *live every* day what I just read and write about, just as al-Bīrūnī wrote about real people's lives and matters of greatest concern. Anuttama mentioned that he missed his interactions with Sanaullah Kirmani (d. 2024), a Muslim academic from Towson University. They had collaborated to establish a series of Muslim-Vaiṣṇava dialogues.[8] However, with the rising strength of Hindutva political ideology in India and Islamist political ideology in Bangladesh, the possibilities for Muslim-Vaiṣṇava dialogue have receded, as those political trends even have an effect on the thinking of diaspora communities in the West facing down the rising tides of Christian nationalism. However, scholars like al-Bīrūnī did not do their scholarship because it was politically expedient. Scholarship works on its own timeline, for a certain depth of study is required to understand how religion functions in human history and society. This takes time and effort, and the long road of scholarship often outlasts short-term political cycles.

Scholarship has to be careful, both for the sake of the complexity of human life, and for the sake of the specific knowledge formation under discussion. For example, while reading *Caitanya-caritāmṛta*, I noticed some discrepancies in the representation of Muslims. I kept this to myself, however, until Satyarāja Dāsa invited me to contribute to a special issue of the *Journal of Vaishnava Studies* about Caitanya.[9] I agreed to share my viewpoint because I trust him and have read much of his work over the years. The reality of every knowledge formation is that it is built on trust. Someone who reads my article on Chand Kazi who does not know me at all might assume that I am a Muslim apologist trying to uncharitably interpret *Caitanya-caritāmṛta* without qualification, even though I very carefully expressed my viewpoint in that article. Why? Because there is no inherent need for a member of ISKCON to trust a Muslim scholar, just as there is no inherent need for a Muslim to trust anyone from ISKCON. In building knowledge formations, we are all on the hook to demonstrate why it is important and why we, the creators of that knowledge formation, are worth listening to. When

high-school students walk into a physics class without trusting the teacher, they will not learn until that trust is established. Similarly, ISKCON does not function without trust in Prabhupāda's writings, recorded words, letters, and personal example. In the same way, the international community of researchers discussing the Caitanya Vaiṣṇava tradition in various formats cannot function without trust. Last year, I visited the new ISKCON temple in Naperville, Illinois, with Dr. Gopal Gupta, whose book on the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* was reviewed in the 2023 volume of the ICJ. I did so because I trust him, both personally and professionally, and because of that, we can learn from each other. If I break that trust, then the learning stops, and one side just represents the other in a way that is completely unaccountable to those being represented. If our trust breaks, I can say what I want about Vaiṣṇavas without any concern for what Gopal would think if he read it, and Gopal and Satyarāja can say whatever they want about Muslims without any concern for what I would think.

Because of the trust I have established with some Muslims, I hope to make the case that it is long overdue for Muslims to recognize Prabhupāda's success in making "Hare Krishna" household words. While some Muslims have studied the Hindu tradition, most have focused on the Yoga *darśana* and Advaita Vedānta. However, when it comes to Vaiṣṇava *bhakti* traditions, this focus is very rare. As far I know, I am the first Muslim to publish a scholarly book about Caitanya Vaiṣṇavism. For new possibilities to emerge from my book, for new knowledge formations to be created, I must leverage and expand my human connections. Having a trunk full of copies of the First Canto is not enough — one must go out and meet the Michaels and Joans who want to read it, and talk to them about it! But will Muslims be interested? I can only do what I feel I must do, as the Gita reminds us, and leave the results of my actions up to a power beyond my control. In my book I mention that both Bangladesh and Malaysia have active Vaiṣṇava communities. But how many Muslims are even aware of that?[10] How many even pay attention?[11] I contend that the Muslim scholarly authorities, whose decisions affect the lives of the Hindu minorities in these countries, would benefit from reading my book.[12] I cannot singlehandedly extend this knowledge formation. I have created a bridge, a place for Muslims

to step into the world of Caitanya Vaiṣṇavism with me as their guide. In this regard, what I am trying to do is very similar to what an American professor of Chinese history hopes to accomplish by teaching an "Introduction to Chinese Civilization" course somewhere in Nebraska.

Islam and pluralism

Throughout the book, I centered the concept of temples and mosques as physical locations where Caitanya Vaiṣṇavism and Islam come alive. As with my visits to ISKCON San Diego with Anuttama Dasa and to ISKCON Naperville with Dr. Gupta, there is a qualitative difference between reading about something and experiencing it firsthand. In doing so, I became hyper aware of the many fraught issues relating to the construction and demolition of houses of worship throughout history. Any Muslim from South Asia or the South Asian diaspora would want me to remember the destruction of the Babri Masjid mosque by Hindutva fanatics in 1992. I remember it primarily because my wife, who was young at the time, was stranded in her family's village in southern Maharashtra because of the random acts of violence occurring all over India. But how many of those same Muslims would be comfortable with me remembering the attacks on Vrindavan, the most sacred place on earth for the Caitanya Vaiṣṇava tradition, by Aurangzeb and Aḥmad Shāh Durrānī hundreds of years ago?[13] Some, but not all. The sad truth is that some Muslims want to be treated with respect but do not give it to others, including other Muslims. They expect non-Muslims to have sophisticated knowledge of Muslims and Islam yet do not want to take the time to gain sophisticated knowledge of their neighbors. Even worse, not a year has gone by in the last two decades that I have not read news stories about dozens of Muslims being slaughtered during prayer by other Muslims who think they are the wrong kind of Muslim. It's folly to think that in such environments and in the presence of such people a Hindu stands a chance for a life of peaceful coexistence. In the book, I focus on the USA, UK, and India as places where Caitanya Vaiṣṇavas and Muslims can potentially coexist and interact without fear. I do not use those examples based on an idealistic nationalism rooted in the belief that those places

are inherently better than others. Nor do I use them to obscure the awful things that regularly happen in those nations. Rather, I use these locations based on a realistic assessment that they are places where the conversations and connections I am trying to forge can happen. For example, a Muslim in London can visit Bhaktivedanta Manor and be safe, and a Vaiṣṇava can visit the Islamic College of Advanced Studies in London and be safe. Bangladesh and Malaysia are places where these encounters *may* also happen, God willing. However, when I think about some other nations — places I have visited and dearly love — the thought that comes to mind is, "proceed with caution."

As I make clear at the beginning and the end of my book, I am not qualified to interpret the rules of Islamic law (*fiqh*). If all Muslim scholars of Islamic law say that no Hindu should build a temple in Iraq, for example, then all I can do is listen and obey. However, I am not forbidden to reflect on what that means for this century. What does it mean that the towns on earth that are most holy for Caitanya's followers are open to me to visit as a Muslim, and there are even mosques there, yet in a city like Baghdad — which is not even considered a holy city by any sect of Islam — it is probably impossible for Caitanya Vaiṣṇavas to promote their beliefs publicly? I have noted the ongoing debates about the BAPS Swaminarayan temple that the UAE government has allowed to be built. However, this experiment has been made possible only by the autocratic rule and social engineering that have defined Emirati politics in the twenty-first century. Knowledge formations exist within political contexts, and the contexts circumscribe the possibilities (and consequences) for promoting those knowledge formations.

The reality is that I would not have been able to reach this point if I had not formally studied Caitanya Vaiṣṇavism as a PhD student at the Graduate Theological Union. I am able to do this work because a school existed where I could study with academic theologians of Hinduism such as Rita Sherma and Graham Schweig (Garuḍa Dāsa) even though I am a Muslim. Because I was given a supportive space to learn and think, I was able to ask questions that had never been asked before, at least in my experience of the transnational social world. Human life is lived, and the books we write are merely records of what was meaningful to us. Reading *Caitanya-caritāmṛta*,

one can feel the passionate love that Kṛṣṇadāsa Kāvirāja had for Caitanya. For him, that love was perhaps the center of his whole world, but we will never know that love the way he did. Instead, we only glimpse it through the text he left behind. I hope that the readers of my book will also get a glimpse of who I am and what I have experienced, even if we have never met. I hope they understand that Muslims and Vaiṣṇavas have been interacting with one another ever since the time of Caitanya until the present.

Love and the human condition

In closing, it is important to note that while trust is important, love elevates us further. Researching my book made me think very deeply about whom I truly love, due to the centrality of love in the Caitanya Vaiṣṇava tradition. There have been times when I have loved Husayn (d. 680), the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, so deeply that I would have been willing to die to see him. I say this not really knowing what it means other than that I have felt it. When I see the pain that some Muslims inflict on other Muslims, my heart screams out for Husayn, who was cruelly beheaded by the political leader of the Muslim empire. When I see the pain that Muslims sometimes unjustly inflict on people with different worldviews, my faith returns to Husayn and my belief that he would never do such a thing — perhaps that was one reason they killed him. Through Husayn, my Muslim faith comes alive and transcends historical and contemporary examples of raw conquest and bigoted cruelty. When I feel spiritually centered, I refocus my intention on becoming a servant of the servants of the servants of Husayn. I love him in separation, not out of duty but out of a fiery love that sometimes overwhelms me. British-Iranian Muslim scholar Javad Shomali contends in his commentary on Husayn's famous prayer, known as "The Prayer of the Day of 'Arafah," that Husayn teaches the Muslim to freely yearn for God with desire and move beyond a sense of ritual obligation.[14]

It is not difficult to see the parallels between my experience of faith and the Caitanya Vaiṣṇava concept of *viraha-bhakti* (love in separation). I am also well aware that Prabhupāda often used the phrase "servant of the servants of the servants." For me, however,

it is simply the truth. What does it mean that my truth so closely parallels the truths Prabhupāda wanted to share with the world? To be blunt, I do not know, which is why I did not explore it in the book. The book was a journey of discovery in and of itself, and I do not know what comes next. When I first stepped into the ISKCON temple in Chicago, did I know that one day I would write the first full-length academic book on the Caitanya Vaiṣṇava tradition by a Muslim? Absolutely not. Indeed, when I became a Muslim in 1998, I thought I would completely ignore Vaiṣṇavas, except perhaps to convert them. Now that the book is out, however, I can see the threads of my life woven into a tapestry that I am just beginning to understand. I feel more deeply that "human beings plan, and Allah plans, and Allah is the best of planners," or, as a devotee would probably articulate the same sentiment, "this was by Kṛṣṇa's arrangement."

That leads me back to the beginning. I visited Vaiśeṣika Dāsa at ISKCON Silicon Valley. He has a preaching effort called "Fan the Spark."[15] This is a reference to Prabhupāda's analogy that we are "sparks of fire." So, when did my spark first begin to glow? Looking back on my life, I realized it was when I went to ISKCON Chicago with my World History class. If there is one moment I can pinpoint when I really began to question whether God was real, it was then. That journey ultimately led me to become a Muslim, not a Vaiṣṇava. However, I cannot deny that ISKCON and Prabhupāda first fanned the spark. The fact of the matter is that I tried to ignore Vaiṣṇavas from 1998 onwards, but they kept reappearing in my life at different stages. Around 2016, I came across some devotees doing *kīrtana* in Union Square in New York City while I was teaching Islamic law at New York University. I made a fateful decision. Instead of ignoring them, I decided that, since they also were part of Allah's creation, I should at least approach them respectfully, as I had done many times with Jewish and Christian leaders in the USA. They gave me *Bhagavad Gita As It Is* and *The Science of Self Realization* and told me to visit The Bhakti Center when I had the chance. I read both books, visited The Bhakti Center, and that began the series of events that led me to this point. In short, it was the direct human connection and spontaneous association — the *sādhu-saṅga*, if you will — that made the moment.[16] If the books had just been on a table, I probably

would not have stopped to grab one. But because living, breathing souls were handing out the books, I felt responsible as a human being to pay attention to what they were doing with their lives. They were a bridge for me back into the world of Caitanya Vaiṣṇavism, and now I am trying to be that bridge for others as well.

Endnotes

1 Peter Weingart, "A Short History of Knowledge Formations," in *The Oxford Handbook of Interdisciplinarity*, ed. Robert Frodeman, Oxford Handbooks (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 3–14.

2 I use the terms Hinduism and Hindu because they remain the dominant terms in the English language to describe the complex and overlapping schools of thought that acknowledge the authority of the Vedas. These terms are used in contrast to anti-Vedic traditions, such as Jainism and Buddhism.

3 For my summary of Caitanya Vaiṣṇava history from the time of Caitanya until the present, see R. David Coolidge, *Hindu Bhakti Through Muslim Eyes: Islam and Caitanya Vaiṣṇavism in the Twenty-First Century* (Abingdon, Oxon; New York, NY: Routledge, 2025), 61–85.

4 Two ISKCON scholars have produced very useful companion volumes: a study and a summary of the contents of *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*: Ravi M. Gupta and Kenneth R. Valpey, *The Bhagavata Purana: Sacred Text and Living Tradition* and *The Bhāgavata Purāṇa: Selected Readings* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013 and 2017).

5 Coolidge, *Hindu Bhakti Through Muslim Eyes*, 20–21.

6 Friedhelm Hardy, *Viraha Bhakti: The Early History of Kṛṣṇa Devotion* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 2014), 486–88.

7 I follow the lead of ISKCON scholar Ravi Gupta's usage of the term "Caitanya Vaiṣṇavism" in academic literature: Ravi M. Gupta, *The Caitanya Vaiṣṇava Vedānta of Jīva Gosvāmī: When Knowledge Meets Devotion* (London and New York: Routledge, 2014).

8 Anuttama Dasa and Sanaullah Kirmani, "Vaiṣnava-Muslim Dialogue in the United States: A Model," *The Muslim World* 107, no. 2 (2017): 211–21.

9 R. David Coolidge, "What Should We Do With Chand Kazi?: Caitanya-caritāmṛta and Vaiṣṇava-Muslim Dialogue," *Journal of Vaishnava Studies* 32, no. 1 (2023): 159–71.

R. David Coolidge

10 This passage is from the first chapter of my book (p. 30): "Distinctly Muslim and Caitanya Vaiṣṇava congregations exist in the same social settings, whether or not they are aware of each other. As described earlier, one can easily imagine how both communities navigate life in Chicago, London, and Mumbai. In addition, one can also study the ways in which Caitanya Vaiṣṇavas sustain communities in Muslim-majority nation states. In particular, both Bangladesh and Malaysia have Caitanya Vaiṣṇava temples, and it would be enormously beneficial for Muslim anthropologists to produce studies of these communities. How do Muslims conceptualize their neighbors who attend these temples? How do those who attend the temples conceptualize their own tradition in relationship to the Muslim-majority society in which they live? In moments when violence happens, how does the community and government respond? In the case of Bangladesh, on October 15th 2021, two Caitanya Vaiṣṇavas were killed during widespread anti-Hindu violence. ISKCON appealed to the government to hold the murderers accountable and provide increased protection to the Hindu community. This is part of the larger struggle of religious minorities in Bangladesh seeking increased safety, representation and patronage." In the book's conclusion, I address this issue, encouraging Muslims to think very hard about how Muslim-majority societies handle religious differences. I revisit Bangladesh and Malaysia as relevant examples. However, addressing the specific socio-political contexts of any given country in depth is currently beyond the scope of my work.

11 So far, I have found that many Muslim intellectuals are uninterested in anything regarding the Vaiṣṇava tradition. Others are open to learning more, but they are wary and skeptical. A third group is enthusiastic.

12 Coolidge, *Hindu Bhakti through Muslim Eyes*, 130.

13 Coolidge, 69.

14 Javad Shomali, *Learning Spirituality from Imam Husayn (a): A Commentary on Du'a 'Arafah* (London: Fereni for the Soul, 2022).

15 https://fanthespark.com/

16 As this article so deftly shows, the Caitanya Vaiṣṇava tradition is built on human connection from the ground up: Jonathan Edelmann, "The Cause of Devotion in Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava Theology: Devotion (*Bhakti*) as the Result of Spontaneously (*Yadṛcchayā*) Meeting a Devotee (*Sādhu-Saṅga*)," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 135, no. 1 (2015): 49–69.

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Lifetimes in Preparation: A review article of post-Prabhupāda life-writing as narrative Vaiṣṇava theology

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Since Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupāda's passing away, in November 1977, there have appeared dozens of biographical and autobiographical writings by his followers. These are self-representational, either literally, as autobiographical works, or in the case of biographical writing, about an individual considered exemplary yet representative of the wider Hare Kṛṣṇa movement. My general concern is to call attention to how these representations of Kṛṣṇa-devotee selves may be useful in tracking some directions that the movement has taken. Specifically, I am interested in expressions of theological reflection through life narrations. I focus here on three autobiographies and one biography. This article was originally presented at the Fiftieth Anniversary of ISKCON Conference at Harvard University in 2016.

Introduction

The tremendous inspiration Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupāda instilled in his followers is recounted in several biographies of

him, texts that document a vast array of the details of his life and exchanges with others, especially disciples, during his eleven-year period of active missionary engagement worldwide (1966–77).[1] In addition to biographies, there appeared a small but significant genre of post-Prabhupāda life-writing, wherein the focus shifted to either the author (autobiography) or another follower of Prabhupāda (biography).[2] To be sure, these additional writings are strongly contextualized in relation to Prabhupāda, always foregrounding the subjects' disciplic relationship with him. Yet they are significant as accounts of the first-generation of dedicated non-Indian practitioners of Vaiṣṇava culture.

As such, the post-Prabhupāda examples of Western Vaiṣṇava life-writing can be, I would suggest, a source for considering several aspects of ISKCON's early history and development. Serving as documents of the Hare Kṛṣṇa movement's collective memory, these life-writings also promise to find use by present and future *kṛṣṇa-bhakti* practitioners as models of, and for, the enactment of *kṛṣṇa-bhakti* in the world. Furthermore, as moments in early post-Prabhupāda history, these writings show a considerable variety of self-understandings of the authors' identities as Western Vaiṣṇavas. They also show the fluidity of changing and developing thought — individually and collectively — on the nature of Kṛṣṇa conscious life and its challenges for those who purposefully took it up under Prabhupāda's guidance.

Due to the overall missionary context recorded in these life-writings, one can expect to encounter elements of the hagiographical spirit within them. But such a tendency is complicated and nuanced by the factor of self-understanding, especially that of being transitional subjects with (non-Vaiṣṇava, Western-cultural) pasts to be overcome or otherwise reckoned with. Thus, despite, or possibly because of, the presence — or, in some cases, the conscious avoidance — of hagiographical leanings in the works, students of the tradition in its larger contours may be challenged to consider just how late-modern life-writing functions in the ongoing process of reimagining the premodern Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava tradition and theological thought-world in late-modern globalized contexts.

In this essay, I undertake an exercise in sampling four works of post-Prabhupāda life-writing — three of an autobiographical character and one biographical work — with the aim of considering how the texts show implicit or explicit theological reflection. Broadly speaking, as might be expected, especially taking into account the likely mission-related motivations for writing, these texts have in common a spirit of affirmation. Having eagerly embraced identities as Prabhupāda's disciples, each author shows how attentiveness to his guidance brought a palpable sense of success in their practice of *kṛṣṇa-bhakti*. That said, each measures his or her success differently, while all aim to show that the reciprocal character of *bhakti* — a sense of devotional connection with Kṛṣṇa — has been well affirmed in their lives.

In these few samples we also discern other themes: the high value placed on success in spiritual practice; attention to the personal, social, and cultural challenges to attaining success; the importance of making personal choices as integral to the practice of Kṛṣṇa consciousness; the concern to work out internal or external contradictions encountered along the way; and the concern to work out relations between form and substance in matters related to practice and self-transformation. But we can also see differences among the selected works. Aside from obvious differences in style and approach, we can note how each text records a unique process of becoming and identifying oneself as a *kṛṣṇa-bhakta* (or Vaiṣṇava) and Prabhupāda's follower. These differences give us perspectives through which to view how Prabhupāda's followers represented themselves within what I have called elsewhere the "*bhakti* logos," or the truth of *kṛṣṇa-bhakti* as a theology of lived, embodied practice.[3]

This presentation of post-Prabhupāda life-writing works proceeds chronologically. The earliest, Tamal Kṛṣṇa Goswami's *Servant of the Servant* (1984), is followed by Satsvarūpa dāsa Goswami's autobiographical journal *Every Day Just Write* (1997); followed by Rādhānātha Swami's *The Journey Home: Autobiography of an American Swami* (2010); and finally Dīnatāriṇī Devī's *Yamuna Devi: A Life of Unalloyed Devotion* (2015). Other selected works that could have been discussed are listed in the bibliography.

Published in 1984, while ISKCON's zonal-guru system was still in full force and Tamal Kṛṣṇa Goswami (TKG) was one of those first eleven gurus, *Servant of the Servant* recounts the period between 1968 and 1975 (with a very brief overview of the author's life prior to that).[4] The book's general aim is to capture the pioneering missionary spirit, especially through details of the author's interactions with Swami Prabhupāda.

TKG draws his readers into the heady missionizing spirit of that time, during which the movement's expansion was palpably visible and measurable in the numbers of new recruits, of temples and centers opened, and especially of Prabhupāda's books "distributed." Indeed, as Prabhupāda so clearly encouraged these expanding and measurable results, in TKG's estimation they were signs of spiritual success and signs of Kṛṣṇa's pleasure and reciprocation with Prabhupāda's fledgling followers, the reward for sincere and dedicated service largely untainted by selfish motivations. Thus what emerges in *Servant of the Servant* is a sense of confident devotional mission as the key regulator of thought and action, whereby any individual with due resolve, despite his or her non-Vaiṣṇava, non-Indian background, proves able to consistently exhibit what we might regard as the *virtue of practice* by being tethered with firm faith to a *charisma of perfection* embodied in and preeminently exemplified by Swami Prabhupāda.

TKG portrays himself as absolutely dedicated to Prabhupāda's service, yet he also expresses occasional uncertainty as to whether he should remain with Prabhupāda as his personal secretary or be out in the field preaching on Prabhupāda's behalf. He also confesses to committing occasional blunders for which he receives sharp reprimands from his guru. A striking blunder occurs when he takes the liberty, without consulting Prabhupāda, to bestow the *gāyatrī*-mantra on a female devotee in Hamburg so that she may help with the formal temple worship practices. When he later informs Prabhupāda, Prabhupāda is nonplussed.

But lessons are quickly learned, and TKG sees himself as becoming an able leader for Prabhupāda's mission. He also sees himself as advancing spiritually in the course of performing his

various duties and being occasionally corrected. Having taken a *sannyāsa* vow after a brief marriage and having arrived in America to preach after four years of serving Prabhupāda in India, TKG notes,

> Śrīla Prabhupāda had pushed me to completely engage in Kṛṣṇa's service, and as a result my heart was cleansed enough so I could now begin to relish genuine spiritual sentiments.[5]

The sense of confidence that he was experiencing authentic progress on the path of *bhakti* does not, however, lead him to lose appreciation for the exalted position of his preceptor. One indicator of the difference between them is, for TKG, the fact that Prabhupāda had initially, for the sake of serving his guru, Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī, willingly endured the hardships of being alone and penniless in the USA after a difficult, month-long journey by ship. By contrast, TKG arrived comfortably in the USA after a one-day jet flight, to a situation of being warmly received and sheltered by fellow devotees.

Yet TKG also recounts his own readiness to take risks to please Prabhupāda. One such occasion, which he recounts in some detail, ends in a comic anticlimax. The quickly expanding group of London devotees goes daily for singing (*saṁkīrtana*) on Oxford Street, but they repeatedly get arrested. After a failed attempt to reach an understanding with the chief of police, TKG hatches a plan to win public sympathy for their cause, in the hope that the police will bow to public opinion. So, one day, as the devotees chant at Piccadilly Circus and the police, predictably, arrive to arrest them, this time the devotees refuse to cooperate, such that the police have to carry them into police vans for transport to the station — all while the devotee Gurudas photographs the incident. Although Gurudas succeeds in escaping from chasing policemen and brings his photographic evidence of police excess to newspapers for publication, hoping to make headlines, his story appears as a negligible second-page entry in the next morning's paper.

But as we know, Swami Prabhupāda's mission persists, and *saṁkīrtana* on Oxford Street eventually becomes a fixture, free from the interference of constables. Tamal Kṛṣṇa Goswami's account of

ISKCON's early days reminds us that the Society consists of individuals, each stepping forth in particular ways to jostle with and against the ways of the world as they attempt, with greater or lesser success, to conform and reform themselves into dedicated Western Vaiṣṇavas on a mission.[6]

Writing as a way of salvation

I now proceed to the next example of autobiographical writing, highlighting the contrast in ISKCON members' approaches to self-representation.

Satsvarūpa dāsa Goswami (SDG) has been, and continues to be, prolific in his writing. Although much of his writing has been focused exclusively on Prabhupāda and his teachings, a considerable portion of his writings may be considered autobiographical, or at least self-focused in the style of journal writing. As one example of his journaling genre, I look briefly at his 1997–2001 series of journals, *Every Day, Just Write.*

As the title suggests, SDG shares with his readers his efforts to articulate his relatively solitary life as a follower of Prabhupāda. Although, like TKG, he had also been one of the initial eleven gurus of ISKCON, SDG's missionary spirit was to become more and more expressed in the candid writing of one who wished to invite his readers to listen in on his personal struggles to be such a dedicated practitioner of Kṛṣṇa consciousness — especially of the daily practices of devotional *sādhana* — as he has considered to be the ideal, set by Swami Prabhupāda and earlier Vaiṣṇava preceptors. Indeed, writing became an integral part of his *sādhana*, at the same time becoming his way to "[push] on ... with the pen and the typewriter, with 'wild mind' and honest, unrehearsed feeling" (1998, p. 3). Writing has thus served him as an aid to being authentic, to recover clarity in his own thinking, and to "face doubts." He sees this sort of practice as increasingly necessary, and he addresses himself about this as much as any of his readers: "This is the time to do these things because these are my last years. Be who you are and then improve. Hare Kṛṣṇa" (1998, p. 3). To this end, SDG writes informally, again, sometimes addressing himself, placing a premium on candidness

about his own challenges. Referring to his self-imposed regimen for studying Prabhupāda's *Śrīmad Bhāgavatam*, SDG writes on the last page of his eighth volume of *Every Day, Just Write* (2001, p. 161):

> Night Notes: Scratch hatch. Another tape. Please stay in the good graces of your chosen scripture [*Śrīmad Bhāgavatam*]. I bought the three volumes [of ŚB, First Canto] from the Swami and that's when I began, never to stop. Interrupted, started again, dissuaded, not interested, seeking relief from the *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* — then back to it again. My life will end in the middle of it, or at the start or the end.
>
> Persona pretending to write a book, to be a writer, to be a devotee, a *sannyāsī* — who are you anyway?

I am tempted to compare SDG to Yudiṣṭhira in the *Mahābhārata*, in contrast to TKG as comparable to Arjuna, with the former pursuing a life of quiescence in contrast to the latter's missionary leadership zeal. Yet this may be an unfair caricature. SDG's fighting spirit is strongly evident throughout his writing — a spirit of wrestling with himself in his actualization of the teachings of his revered master, Prabhupāda. Sometimes this involves writing simple observations of nature as he takes walks in the Irish countryside, or it involves confessing wishes for receiving divine grace mixed with hope that he will receive it, as in this passage (2001, p. 156):

> I wish I could get more of the Lord's mercy so that my dutiful execution of chanting and hearing could yield more appreciation for the glories of His names. Then my chanting could produce more chanting. Kṛṣṇa is not giving me entrance. If I could appreciate His reality more, then I would stop merely going through the motions. My writing would cut through. Could I bear such surrender. I don't know if I dare. Do I dare to be merciful toward others? Kṛṣṇa can change me. I can only continue doing as I am for now, although I know it's not right. I'm inattentive in *gāyatrī* and *japa*.

Such ruminations are in the context of his reading the *Bhāgavatam*, in this case the story of Dhruva in the Fourth Canto. Taking inspiration from a purport of Swami Prabhupāda, SDG quotes, "And if a devotee follows strictly the direction of the spiritual master . . . then it is not difficult for him to achieve the favor of the Lord." (*Bhāg.* 4.12.42, purport; SDG 2001, p. 156). This spirit of wrestling with himself also involves confronting what he reads in the *Bhāgavatam* with the challenges of belief and plausibility. Thus, again regarding Dhruva, SDG writes (2001, p. 148):

> Dhruva was a *mahā-bhāgavata* [great devotee of *bhagavān*] and he was *mukta-liṅga,* liberated from his subtle body. There is knowledge even beyond hearing and the descending process. For example, I hear that a beautiful airplane descended from the sky and that Dhruva Mahārāja saw this plane at Badarikāśrama. I read it, but Dhruva *saw* it. It was real to him and it is theoretical to me. I "believe" it happened, but I guess not with total faith, intensity, and eagerness. Still, I appreciate what I have been given.

Thus, in his candid articulations of cognized limits to his conviction, SDG invites his readers to be self-reflective about their own convictions as an integral component of their pursuit of success in devotional practice, rather than suppressing feelings of uncertainty or lack of conviction. In the end, he suggests, one can at least appreciate what one has received from the sacred texts and preceptors of the tradition. By such openness, the author seems to suggest a certain openness to find out for oneself just how the theological doctrines of Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism might be understood and applied. This and his numerous other writings suggest that, while surely the Absolute Truth, or Kṛṣṇa, is one, it is ultimately for each individual devotee to find her or his unique relationship to Kṛṣṇa. One must tread one's own path, however much help may be taken from the guru and from other seekers.

The Journey Home similarly invites self-reflection in its readers, but it is of yet another style altogether. Rādhānātha Swami's *Journey* is of particular interest as a work that has taken significant shape as a tool for ISKCON's missionizing. Since its initial publication in English in 2010, the book has been translated into several languages and printed in large numbers of copies. Its echoes of orientalist-inflected romanticism and its content of spiritual adventure have been used to great missionary advantage for attracting a wide variety of persons to the way of life represented in ISKCON and in the wider Western Vaiṣṇava community.[7]

Unlike the other three examples of post-Prabhupāda life-writing considered here, *The Journey Home* traces the several stages of transition from Richard's (Rādhānātha Swami's given name) initial boyhood searches for higher truth to his meeting with, and eventually receiving initiation from, Swami Prabhupāda as Rādhānātha Dāsa. As fantastic and strange as some of the book's episodes may be to readers, the account of transcontinental wandering is gripping, both because we sense the consistent integrity of the would-be spiritualist and because one quickly sympathizes with the strong sense of *telos* — a "river of destiny" — that Rādhānātha experiences.

Once Richard manages to get to India, his river of destiny leads to encounters with a variety of spiritualists and *sādhus* of all imaginable stripes. One gets the sense that these chapters provide a panoramic display of contemporary ascetic Hinduism, all of which Richard finds fascinating, genuinely helpful, and illuminating; but none of the personages he meets fully satisfies his spiritual thirst.

The book's adventuresome narrative of searching for God is further enriched by interludes of family concern. Although writing home occasionally from the road, only after a year and a half of his absence are Richard's parents finally given a return address — in Vrindavan — to which they write their son heart-rending letters, pleading for his return home. Painful as it is, the young man's reply of reassurance is one of resolve to remain to secure his convictions.

As it happens, Richard finds that he still has painful lessons to learn before reaching such security of conviction. On one occasion, he is implicated in an apparently harmless deception for which he

is discovered and sharply reprimanded: A visiting disciple of the Gauḍīya ashram's Swami Bon Maharaj asks Richard's friend David to make a group photo with his camera. David whispers to Richard that he has but one frame of film remaining, which he had planned to use for another purpose. Agreeing that David should fake the click of the camera for the group photograph, Richard finds himself caught trying to deceive the guest Vaiṣṇava. The severe scolding for his behavior moves Richard to reflect,

> In ordinary society, such an insignificant transgression would be hardly noticed. But in a devotional culture, soft-heartedness and integrity are held sacred. What really is the culture of devotion? It is so very subtle, but it fertilizes the field of the heart so that the seed of true love may grow.[8]

This is one of several pithy reflections (set apart in italics in the book) sprinkled throughout the book as spiritual lessons learned by the author, lessons that readers as well are invited to benefit from in the course of his journey.

The sense we get as readers is that Richard matures quickly, such that when he meets Swami Prabhupāda in Vrindavan he has indeed become ready to recognize his spiritual home. Yet even then he hesitates to commit himself fully. Only some months later, after returning to the United States, does he finally get the divine message he has long awaited, assuring him that he has now found his spiritual master and is ready to make the lifetime commitment with vows as a disciple of Prabhupāda.[9] Thus, following Rādhānātha Swami's journey to its conclusion, readers are bound to feel that they have themselves been educated along the way, even prompting one perhaps to rethink the narrative of one's own life in more theologically relevant terms.

Cooking the ISKCON world

In our fourth sampling of post-Prabhupāda ISKCON life-writing, I turn from the autobiographical to the biographical genre, with

Dīnatāriṇī Devī's biography of Yamunā Devī, one of Swami Prabhupāda's first women disciples. Similar to the previous three works in terms of intended audience of ISKCON members and the wider (mainly Western) Vaiṣṇava community, this book is clearly pitched to an audience that seeks a fresh sense of what it can mean to be a devotee of Kṛṣṇa in the modern world. This is a photograph-rich, glossy-paper, two-volume work that sometimes has the feel of a well-organized memory scrapbook, inclusive of numerous quotes from Yamunā Devī about herself (thus lending an autobiographical element to the book), excerpts of transcribed audio-recorded conversations, and quotes from others who knew and interacted with her.

Of particular note is the considerable attention Dīnatāriṇī gives to Yamunā's struggle as a woman Vaiṣṇava with the marginalization she experienced during what could be called ISKCON's 1970s *renunciant turn*, as some of Prabhupāda's *sannyāsī* disciples were perceived as building up what Yamunā experienced as a wall of separation between Prabhupāda and his rank-and-file disciples, especially his senior women disciples. Despite such obstacles, Yamunā persists in her efforts to serve her guru, and we learn that throughout the difficult times Swami Prabhupāda had deep appreciation for her.

We also get a picture of Yamunā's indomitable determination to hold firmly to her understanding of spiritual life's essential practices that she had learned from her guru. For Yamunā, her engagement in meticulous *mūrti-sevā* — daily attendance to and worship of her small images of Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa — was the center of her practice, a practice that was further graced by her gracious hosting of guests in her home. Her *bhakti* practice was characterized by a spirit of mindful home hospitality to the divine couple, marked especially by her cooking (which, by all accounts, was exquisite). Indeed, this picture of hospitality-centered determination comes into sharp focus in the account of her persistent and patient writing of her cookbook, *Lord Krishna's Cuisine*, the product of ten years' work that brings her — to her complete surprise — the much-coveted International Association of Culinary Professionals (IACP) Cookbook of the Year award for 1987 (vol. 2, p. 162). Her consequent celebrity status, which opened many doors to public engagements over the next two years,

did not distract her from her devotional purpose. Dīnatāriṇī writes:

> In reviewing the two large three-ring binders of clippings on interviews Yamuna gave over the next years during book tours, cooking demonstrations, by phone or on television, it is telling to see how she openly and unabashedly honored Srila Prabhupada as her Guru and Krishna as the Supreme Lord. Her demeanor was so warm and unaffected that when she spoke of her spirituality, they somehow felt her depth of sincerity and were disarmed by her, even though they likely held contrary views. This was characteristic of Yamuna's presentation of Krishna *bhakti* throughout her life. Because it was integral to her sense of self, she was able to present it naturally and appealingly, leaving her audiences charmed and wanting to know more.[10]

The theme of naturalness in Yamunā Devī's mood of practicing and sharing *kṛṣṇa-bhakti* persists throughout the biography, inspiring readers with a sense that her strong yet gentle character embodied precisely the substance of Kṛṣṇa consciousness that called for being preserved and perpetuated. Indeed, it may be said that for many readers of the biography (much as for the many followers of Prabhupāda who knew her), Yamunā became an icon of how it is possible to live and persevere as a Vaiṣṇava — and more especially as a Vaiṣṇavī (a female Vaiṣṇava) — in the globalized Western cultural milieu. One gets the sense that she came to embody the spirit of all that ISKCON members might be and become. But at the same time, she comes forth in this book as having been, in her own humble and unassuming way, a perfect example of what the lived "personalism" ought to be that ISKCON as an institution needs to strive vigorously to foster, so as to resist the tendency toward institutionalization.

Unlike the previously sketched autobiographical works, Dīnatāriṇī Devī's book is a biography (or what she calls a "memoir/biography" — vol. 2, p. 446). And unlike the other works discussed, which recount a few days up to a few years at most, this book narrates an entire life. From reading the book, one gets a sense

of completeness, of a life well lived to its end. This sense is strongly conveyed by the author, who, as a very intimate friend and long-time companion of Yamunā Devī, feels free to eulogize her subject throughout the book, often with supporting evidence from others' recollections. Yet we are made to understand repeatedly that what has made Yamunā Devī's life so well lived was her success in imbibing and conveying to others the "magic" of *kṛṣṇa-bhakti,* and that this was all possible only with the blessings of, and dynamic relationship with, her guru, Swami Prabhupāda.[11]

Concluding reflections

I have ever so briefly sketched four works of post-Prabhupāda life-writing with the aim to invite consideration of such texts as "narrative theology." Whether or not this term is the most appropriate in this context, the idea is simply to call attention to how life-writing serves to articulate in narrative form ways that ISKCON members orient themselves to theologically significant ideas found in the composite of Vaiṣṇava thought that ISKCON aims to embody and promote.

"Theologically significant ideas" could be several, beginning with the cornerstone claim that Kṛṣṇa is the "Supreme Personality of Godhead," followed by two corollaries: first, that human beings are uniquely positioned to realize their atemporality in dynamic, personal relationship with Kṛṣṇa as the primordial divine person, and second, that devotional practice is both the means for realizing such a relationship and the final, ultimate goal of life.[12] It would seem that two sorts of general observations about these writings can be made in relation to such Vaiṣṇava theological axioms. One is that the writings seek to show how these axioms have been affirmed by particular practitioners, such that each work constitutes a "success story" demonstrating to readers the effectiveness and truth of Swami Prabhupāda's teaching. And second, as success stories, each work documents a unique experiment — a unique application of the precepts intended to bring about viable results, or "realizations" of the theological axioms.[13]

That each account shows a unique application of the precepts

is doubly significant. In one sense (from an "emic" perspective), these texts are affirmations of the embodied nature of *bhakti* — that, as early Gauḍīya theologians have extensively articulated, *bhakti* is what it is by acknowledging the embodied situation of individual souls. Thus the body's senses are to be directed toward and applied to the "service" (*sevā*) of Kṛṣṇa, the source of all sensate being. In this sense, we may regard these works as evidence of continuity with the early tradition's basic precept of the nature and functionality of *bhakti*: such practices are indeed what each of the devotees represented here has done.

But from a somewhat different (let's call it "etic") perspective, there is significance in these accounts as occurring in late-modern times, using the late-modern genre of autobiography and biography to represent — indeed to focus quite exclusively on — *individuals* in their engagements with a tradition that has a central aim of inverting the tendency toward ego-centered living into Kṛṣṇa-centered life. It would seem that the general predicament of conditioned, embodied life articulated repeatedly in Vaiṣṇava scripture is compounded by late-modern *individualism*, whereby the uniqueness of individuals is celebrated — from a Vaiṣṇava theological perspective — for all the wrong reasons.[14] Then again, autobiography and biography are surely not exclusively products of late modernity; rather, we can find examples of them, or something akin to them (however much they ring with hagiographic overtones), throughout Gauḍīya-Vaiṣṇava writing — not least Kṛṣṇadāsa's *Caitanya-caritāmṛta* and, indeed, the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*.

To be sure, the sort of life-writing I have sampled here can be expected to expand and develop further among contemporary followers of Swami Prabhupāda and among those in the wider Vaiṣṇava community. And surely the multiplication of such writing can be taken as a sign of health for ISKCON and the wider community, for they serve as individual and collective reflections on all dimensions of *kṛṣṇa-bhakti* life as it is lived "on the ground" in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. By studying these works, we can gain valuable insights into the life-world(s) as well as the thought-world(s), not least the experiences of lived theology, of contemporary practitioners of Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism.

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Endnotes

1 For a partial bibliography on Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupāda, see Oxford Bibliographies Online, Hinduism/ISKCON Bibliography, subheading "Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupāda": http://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780195399318/obo-9780195399318-0130.xml?rskey=NFwVGU&result=45

2 I am grateful to Mandali Mendrilla for her research assistance in preparing this article.

3 By the expression "*bhakti* logos" I mean "an encompassing understanding of devotional order that frames thinking about divine embodiment, becoming divinized, and relating divine and human agency, rooted in the Indic *bhakti* (devotional) current of thought, culture, and practice." (Valpey 2006, 3).

4 As indicated in the work's Preface, TKG wrote it expressly for his disciples but also for a wider — ISKCON-member — audience.

32 For TKG's disciples, an implicit message is carried throughout, that they should imbibe his — their guru's — spirit of surrender, service, and engagement of practical intelligence in missionary activities that he showed in relation to his guru, Swami Prabhupāda. The book is structured mainly around letters of Swami Prabhupāda, most of the some forty-seven letters quoted having been addressed to TKG.

5 *Servant of the Servant*, p. 397.

6 A thorough study of TKG's writings in autobiographical mode would need to include essays in his later work *A Hare Krishna at Southern Methodist University: Collected Essays 1995–1997*. The rather straightforward missionary zeal in *Servant of the Servant* gives way to a more reflexive stance in these later essays, and one could, for example, pursue his hint at experiencing the beginnings of "genuine spiritual sentiments" in light of later developments in his life.

7 One could reflect further on the potential irony of this book's popularity, considering the spirit of adventure portrayed in *The Journey Home* along with a spirit of openness to spiritual experience and meeting of a wide variety of spiritual leaders, that tellingly contrasts with a perceived increase in the "institutionalization" of ISKCON. The wide propogation of the book, including its distribution along with Swami Prabhupāda's books by ISKCON temple book distributors on public streets, can be viewed as a way of saying "Although we may appear as a religious sect with strange practices, what's really behind all this is a spirit of independent seeking, a spirit that invites one to experience spiritual life as a unique adventure, beyond all institutional constraints."

8 *The Journey Home*, p. 259.

9 Living for some time in an (unnamed) ISKCON ashram, on the day of Śrī Caitanya's appearance festival Rādhānātha Swami decides to seclude himself in the temple building's attic to focus on chanting the Hare Kṛṣṇa mantra. While doing so, he prays, "My dear Lord, on your birthday what gift can I offer you?" He continues, "As I chanted the very last of the one hundred thousand names, a voice within my heart called an answer to my question. 'offer your hair.'" Knowing that to give up his long hair

would mean for him accepting initiation, he takes it that the voice he has heard is that of the Lord, affirming that he was now ready for formal initiation. (*The Journey Home*, p. 338)

10 *Yamuna Devi: A Life of Unalloyed Devotion*, vol. 2, p. 166.

11 "Krishna's magic" was an expression sometimes used by Swami Prabhupāda. Dīnatāriṇī Devī refers to the expression several times in her book, noting in particular that for Yamunā Devī, the essence of "Krishna's magic" was visible in the "process of *bhakti* in action," best seen in young people taking up the practice of *kṛṣṇa-bhakti* seriously (vol. 2, p. 210).

12 Graham Schweig's affirmation that the term *theology* (typically thought to be owned exclusively by Christian theologians) is appropriately applied to intellectual activity in the Caitanya school of Vaiṣṇavism can serve to frame this reflection. He writes (in Goswami 2012, pp 207–08): ". . . if theology concerns itself with the nature and existence of the divine and ultimate reality and the human relationship to it, then certainly yes [it can be applied]; if theology is most fundamentally and necessarily grounded in the understanding of verbal revelation, and if it seeks a view to salvation or the ultimate perfection of human life, then yes. And if it reveals and seeks the undistorted messages of divine revelation and if it functions to clarify and critique the religious tenets of a religious institution by bringing its doctrine more in line with such verbal revelational sources, then yes."

13 While my focus here has been on "success stories," it bears mentioning that the subject of "failure stories" of Swami Prabhupāda's followers also deserves attention. See Fahy (2017) for an excellent discussion of failure in the contemporary practice of Krishna *bhakti*.

14 Relevant to these considerations is Gavin Flood's discussion of premodern versus modern conceptions of the individual, especially in regard to "inwardness" — conscious efforts in pursuit of a deeper truth of selfhood. Flood writes (p. 206), "We can . . . identify two types of inwardness: the intensification of subjectivity that is an inner transcendence or vertical ascent within a total cosmos, and a type of inwardness that is the expression of individualism, characteristic of modernity."

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Memories of London: Recollections and reflections from ISKCON's early days in the United Kingdom

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In celebration of fifty years since the 1973 installation of Śrī Śrī Rādhā-Gokulānanda at Bhaktivedanta Manor, my old friend Amita Dāsa asked me to supply some recollections of Kṛṣṇa consciousness from those early days. I was nineteen when I became a devotee at the Bury Place temple in 1969, and now at seventy-five I was grateful for the chance to capture those memories before they slip away.

My academic life has been dedicated to teaching and writing about the Holocaust and its effect on survivors. I've learned, for instance, that memories are not like books on a library shelf. They shift with time and change as a result of subsequent experiences. The memories I write about here concern themselves mainly with relationships, and I have done my best to report them honestly. Yet I admit that the details may have shifted over time. Someone else who was present at the same event may remember it differently. Still, here is something important about memories. Auschwitz survivor Charlotte Delbo (1913–85) began her memoir, *None of Us Will Return*, with this epigraph: "I am not sure that what I wrote is true, but I am certain that it is truthful."[1] In French, the two words are *vrai* and

veridique, true and truthful. Memories may be historically inaccurate yet nonetheless truthful and important.

However inaccurate my memories might be, I hope the stories that follow convey a little of the joys we first-generation disciples knew in Śrīla Prabhupāda's company and a taste of the realizations we had in those rough-and-tumble early days.

Temple life, 1970s, London – sublimely simple

ISKCON in those days was more like a family than an international institution. Everybody knew everybody. There was only a handful of centers and maybe two hundred initiated devotees in the movement. Things got more complicated with the establishment of hundreds of centers worldwide, but in the early 1970s, life in the Bury Place temple was still sublimely simple.

For instance, food. We had no money, so to secure sufficient fruits and vegetables to feed everyone during the week ahead, each Saturday at 5 a.m. Yamunā and I drove our donated, damaged and dangerous Volkswagen minibus to the Covent Garden wholesale market in the city's West End. Yamunā had made friends with many of the vendors, and as soon as we arrived, she announced our arrival by singing "Hare Kṛṣṇa" in a melodic and forceful voice.

The voices of Covent Garden vendors were not melodic, but they were definitely forceful, and every week we witnessed a verbal boxing match as each vendor vied with others for customers' attention.

"Best goods! Best prices!" one vendor yelled.

Not to be outdone, another shouted back, "Better goods — better prices!"

Then another, determined to come out on top, yelled, "Incredible goods — unbeatable prices!"

By 7 a.m., Covent Garden echoed with the bravado of a hundred vendors, thunderous as war cries at the Battle of Hastings. Yamunā sang like an angel, and when the vendors heard her familiar voice wafting above the fray, they knew the moment had come to take their overripe produce — mostly fruits and vegetables that were damaged and so unsellable, but still edible — and pack them in wooden crates as a donation to the Kṛṣṇa temple. Yamunā

graciously accepted the crates, passed them to me, and off we went, making our way down the next row of produce stands. By the time we were finished an hour or so later, the donated crates rose high above my head. It was a simple, if heavy, solution to feeding the devotees at a time when there was no money.

Some of what I recall from those early days strikes me now as simple, even banal. For instance, the Bury Place building, as pretty as it was from the outside, had limited workable space inside, and the men were obliged to sleep in the attic. Let me explain why this simple detail has stayed with me.

At bedtime, around 10 p.m., one of the men would pull down a folding ladder attached to the ceiling access panel, and one by one we climbed up and crawled along the attic floor to our spots. (You had to crawl because the ceiling sloped down too low for anyone to stand up.) Six hours later, when it was time for us to rise for the morning *ārati* ceremony, a tall, thin devotee named Rādhā-ramaṇa woke us with music. Rādhā-ramaṇa was always the first to rise, and it seemed to the rest of us that he possessed a magical biological alarm clock that went off precisely at 4:00 a.m. He first folded his sleeping bag, then he retrieved from a corner of the attic a long wooden stringed instrument called a *tāmbūrā* and began strumming a five-note drone. Quietly, in perfect harmony with the drone, he sang "Hare Kṛṣṇa," and the men — "the boys," really, since we were not old enough yet to be called "men" — sat up, yawned, folded our sleeping bags, and offered one another *praṇāma* greetings with joined hands. Then we took a damp cloth from a bucket by the door and wiped down the spots where we had been sleeping.

That was a long time ago, and many of my godbrothers and godsisters from those days are sadly gone. At least two died of cancer, and others are unaccounted for. The produce market is no longer located in Covent Garden, the Bury Place building is no longer a Kṛṣṇa temple, and the world has grown grey and frayed around the edges. Yet I recall that morning wake-up routine as though it took place today and not a half-century ago. Why? Did greeting one another with folded hands bring on some sophisticated mystical revelation? Not likely. Did Rādhā-ramaṇa's *tāmbūrā*-playing inspire us with profound insights into Vedantic philosophy? Doubtful. Did wiping the floor with a damp cloth resolve our confusion over

Puranic cosmological puzzles? Definitely not. To put it bluntly, the morning routine was just that: simply a routine.

So why do I recall it in such detail and with such pleasure? I suspect that is because the routine was the first time we young men and women experienced how joyful something simple could be. Consider how important "simple" things are in devotional life. The entire tenth chapter of the *Bhagavad Gītā* is dedicated to finding God in the simplicity of trees and the wind and flowing rivers. Elsewhere in the *Gītā*, Kṛṣṇa encourages his devotees to offer him something simple such as a piece of fruit or a flower. To qualify for initiation, a candidate must swear allegiance to simple behavioral standards such as a vegetarian diet and loyalty to one's life partner.

As simple as that morning rise-up routine was, it taught us the secret to knowing God. It taught us that knowing God does not require a PhD in Sanskrit, or a command of austere yogic practices, or years of seclusion in forests and caves of the Himalayas. It taught us that God reveals himself to anyone who joins his palms together in acknowledgment of God's presence in the hearts of all. It taught us that he gives himself to anyone who simply sings his name with devotion. It showed us that he is attracted by a simple personal quality such as cleanliness. Most of all, it reminded us that Kṛṣṇa lives in the simple details of everyday life.

The art of yoga is the art of sublime simplicity, a lesson that was driven home every morning in the Bury Place Kṛṣṇa temple.

The turning point

By the end of January 1970, my Christmas break from the university was coming to an end, and in the next few days I would have to decide what to do with the rest of my life.

One morning, while shaving in the men's locker room, I made the mistake of letting the water run. Tamal Kṛṣṇa, a senior devotee visiting from America, reached over and turned off the faucet. "If you were on a battlefield," he said, "you'd know how valuable water is."

And with that simple correction, I knew what I was going to do with the rest of my life. I was going to leave school and move into the London ashram. Why was that? Here were young people like me — some American, others British, French, Swedish, Asian,

maybe fifteen of us — living and serving together at a time when Vietnam was never far from our thoughts. By drawing my attention to the value of water, Tamal had connected our modest ashram life to an event that defined our moment in history.

Obviously, what convinced me to move into the ashram was more than being reminded to conserve water. It was also in part how impressed I was that Tamal Kṛṣṇa could convey in just a few words that natural resources are a precious gift and that a Kṛṣṇa devotee honors the relationship that binds us to the natural world. I moved in because I wanted more people like him in my life. I wanted the company of thoughtful women and men who, like Tamal Kṛṣṇa, were capable of excavating the extraordinary from the ordinary. That prospect excited me then, and it still excites me today.

Sing loud, sing soft

In the early 1970s, residents of the Bury Place temple went out for nighttime *saṅkīrtana* chanting parties. A group of ten to twenty devotees set out from Bury Place every evening, no earlier than 9 p.m., to optimize the odds of encountering crowds coming out of theaters or heading to bars and restaurants. Trivikrama, a tall American and the temple's oldest devotee (he might have been all of twenty-seven years old) led the chanting, tapping on a clay *mṛdaṅga* drum as we sashayed down Oxford Street, Shaftesbury Avenue, or some other well-trafficked area.

We timed our arrival at the Shaftesbury Avenue Theatre to coincide with the concluding scene of the wildly popular rock musical *Hair*. The show, which ran for an extraordinary two thousand performances between 1968 and 1973, told the story of a group of politically active hippies who were contending with drugs, free love, the Vietnam War, and other traumas of the 1960s. What made the show controversial — apart from the explicit lyrics and a few minutes of total nudity — was the final scene, when the cast started a *kīrtana* of its own. The ten-piece band kicked in with electric bass, drums, lead guitar, rhythm guitar, organ, and horn section, and after fifteen minutes or so, just when it seemed things couldn't get any more raucous, a technician opened the doors at the back of the theater — and in came the Kṛṣṇa devotees! Twenty of us in brightly colored saris and

dhotis ran in from the street, burst onto the stage, and began tossing handfuls of flower petals into the audience.

Then Mukunda or Gurudāsa or another temple leader gave the cue, and we jumped off the stage, grabbed everyone in the audience, and led them in high-kicking line dances, up and down the aisles. We blew conch shells, beat drums, whomped our whompers, and within minutes, everyone was singing "Hare Kṛṣṇa, Hare Kṛṣṇa, Kṛṣṇa Kṛṣṇa, Hare Hare / Hare Rāma, Hare Rāma, Rāma Rāma, Hare Hare."

Hair ended each night with the audience joining the cast and devotees onstage, chanting, clapping, whistling, and jumping up and down. Sweat poured down our faces — everyone was drenched — but nobody seemed to mind. The curtain came down, but the audience hugged us and refused to let us go. When at last we were able to disengage from their embraces, we made a mad dash for the exit, jumped into our donated, damaged and dangerous minibus, and headed out.

Trivikrama had an endearing way of rewarding us for these spectacular nighttime performances. He drove to Ambala, our favorite Indian sweet shop, and purchased a huge box of treats for everyone to share. In the entire material universe, after a wild *kīrtana* that required us to exhaust every last ounce of our energy, nothing tasted better or was more energizing than condensed-milk *barfī* rounds, soft spongy *gulābjāmunas* (cooked powdered-milk balls soaked in sweet rose-water sauce), almond *laḍḍū* squares with shredded nut-raisin topping, handfuls of pistachio *halvā*, sticky orange *jalebīs*, cottage-cheese *rasagullās*, and carrot-coconut *kulphī* ice cream on a stick. It was a miracle the entire population of the Bury Place temple didn't expire from diabetes or cardiometabolic plague.

As memorable as those nighttime chanting adventures were, perhaps my most precious memory was the final *ārati* ceremony of the day. Because most of the other devotees had evening duties, the only people in attendance were often just Yamunā and me. One by one, Yamunā waved the various articles of worship before the deities, while I played the harmonium and sang evening prayers. The melody for this final *ārati* was gentle, almost mystical, and as the *ārati* came to an end, Yamunā very slowly pulled the cord that closed the curtains in front of Rādhā–London-īśvara's altar. Then we both sang for a few more moments before wishing the deities

"goodnight." The soft singing of that evening *ārati* was different from the loud singing of our rambunctious onstage *kīrtanas* — not better or worse, just different — and when the curtains were finally closed, we offered obeisances and tiptoed out of the temple room.

When we sang in a theater filled with a thousand guests, we sang loud. When we sang to say goodnight to the deities, we sang softly. But always, we sang with hearts overflowing with gratitude for such a wonderful life.

Top of the Pops

By early 1970, George Harrison's first devotional recording, the "Hare Krishna Mantra," had become a top-ten hit. Records in those days were commonly called "45 rpm singles," meaning they were single songs recorded onto a seven-inch-wide vinyl disc that turned on record players at 45 revolutions per minute. The biggest hit singles could be heard day and night on popular radio shows, and the *Hare Krishna Mantra* was in constant rotation on radio across England and Western Europe. Now let me recall what I can of that amazing time when, for a brief period, devotees of Kṛṣṇa took their place alongside the pop music world's biggest celebrities.

George had his road manager book the Radha Krishna Temple into clubs almost every week, as George wanted Kṛṣṇa's names to be heard far and wide. I remember an outdoor concert in Holland. The sun was setting, and the audience lit their cigarette lighters and waved them back and forth in silent applause for the beautiful music. But by far the most extraordinary live appearance was on "Top of the Pops," the world's longest-running weekly television music show. TOTP, as it was called, was also the most watched television show in England, with as many as fifteen million viewers tuning in each week.

George and his then wife, Patti, watched the performance on television from their home in Esher. George had sufficiently studied Śrīla Prabhupāda's books to know that the names of Kṛṣṇa are a completely nonmaterial sound that penetrates consciousness and puts both the chanter and the listener in direct touch with Kṛṣṇa, or God. He watched with glee the devotees in devotional clothes, singing Kṛṣṇa's names on the most popular show in the UK, and he

teared up. He later commented that this was "one of the greatest thrills in my life."[2]

A visit from Śrīla Prabhupāda

Whenever Prabhupāda visited, there was a crowd, and whenever there was a crowd, there was at least one Indian man who would ask the same question, namely, "Aren't we all Kṛṣṇa?" Without fail. You could wager money that an Indian man was going to ask this question.

I remember one time after Prabhupāda had given the Sunday feast lecture, an Indian gentleman stood up and asked, "Isn't Śiva also the Supreme Godhead? We see posters of Śrī Kṛṣṇa offering flowers to Lord Śiva, so Śiva must also be God, and so we are all God . . ." And then he quoted verses from the *Bhagavad Gītā* to prove his point. (I don't recall which verses, but he was probably misinterpreting verses such as 5.18, where Kṛṣṇa says a realized person sees everyone as equal.) He didn't really want to ask Prabhupāda a question. Essentially, he was trying to impress Prabhupāda by how many verses he could quote. Big mistake — huge.

When someone asked this question, "Aren't we all God?" Prabhupāda often had the same reaction. He gave a big sigh — [*sigh.*] — then he'd look around the room until he found a devotee looking back at him, and he would look that devotee in the face and chuckle and shake his head back and forth as if sharing a joke, and then he'd nod his head at the Indian man and say, loud enough for everyone to hear, "Here's *another* rascal."

This particular Sunday, he turned to the man and said, "That is Kṛṣṇa's kindness. He *so appreciates* his devotees that sometimes he worships them. This is a Vaiṣṇava. A Vaiṣṇava never thinks himself God. He is servant of God. To think you are God — that is *dog's* philosophy: '*Gao! Gao!* Why are you disturbing? I am God. Why are you coming to bother me?' It is dog's philosophy — do you mean to say you are a dog?"

Then Prabhupāda quoted a dozen verses, one right after the other, to prove that Śrī Kṛṣṇa dismisses the idea that we are all God. Prabhupāda quoted the verses with great force, and the lines of Sanskrit were firing out of him like bullets from a machine gun, one

after another after another. By this point, the poor Indian man was completely humiliated and had begun inching backwards toward the rear of the temple, sweat dripping down his face, his hands folded together in submissive surrender, and his knees knocking so hard you could hear them. He reached the back wall, and with a *plop!*, collapsed on the floor, defeated, exhausted, and shaking like a leaf in a storm.

By now everyone was trying really hard to not laugh, since we knew Prabhupāda wouldn't want this gentleman thinking he was being disrespected by the devotees. Then Prabhupāda said something wonderful. He looked around the room, shook his head, and told the devotees, "Do not laugh. He is also Kṛṣṇa's devotee, and he is quoting from *Bhagavad Gītā* — that is to his credit."

Everyone sobered up quickly — and that gentleman did not feel at all like he had been insulted. He felt corrected and cleansed, and after that he became a regular visitor at the Bury Place temple.

Śrīla Prabhupāda had offered us a memorable display of courtesy and appreciation.

The Kṛṣṇa Book

The day advance copies of the *Kṛṣṇa Book* arrived from Dai Nippon Printers in Japan was a day none of us who were there will ever forget. (The full name of the book is *Kṛṣṇa, the Supreme Personality of Godhead*, a summary of the Tenth Canto from *Śrīmad Bhāgavatam*.)

The mailman handed us the package, and just seeing the Tokyo return address we knew what it was. The sensation was like learning the Allies had landed on the beaches of Normandy. "Reinforcements have arrived! The war [with *māyā*] will soon be won!"

We scuttled into the temple room, as everyone knew the deities should be the first to relish seeing the books. The wrapping came off, one layer at a time, until we were staring at something beyond imagining. The two hardcover volumes were huge, almost eleven inches tall, and the covers had been printed with day-glow silver ink. They glittered and gleamed like bars of solid silver, and when we held them up for Rādhā–London–īśvara to see, the books lit up the room like spotlights. We were mesmerized. Immediately, daily *Kṛṣṇa Book* readings began.

Whenever Śrīla Prabhupāda visited the UK, he took the opportunity to visit temples in Europe. An incident that humbled this young disciple occurred during a two-day visit to Paris in 1972, in between visits to London. I was his translator from English into French.

One morning, shortly after arriving at Charles de Gaulle airport, Prabhupāda's Sanskritist, Pradyumna, said to me, "The offices of UNESCO are here in Paris. Let's go there and see if we can get their seal of approval for Prabhupāda's books."

UNESCO — the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization — promoted world peace through education, arts, science, and culture. A small number of books were awarded the UNESCO seal, a prestigious recognition that these books authentically represented their country of origin. The seal also assured good sales to libraries.

The UNESCO office turned out to be a tiny room in the UN's Paris headquarters. The room was stacked to the ceiling with books that had been submitted for acceptance. Seated behind several of these huge piles was a tiny man with a big job: deciding which books to approve. For various reasons, Śrīla Prabhupāda's books did not receive the UNESCO seal, but as a thank you for our visit, the man handed us a book of poems by Bengali poets Caṇḍīdāsa (fourteenth century) and Vidyāpati (fifteenth century).

When we returned to the devotee house outside Paris, I gave the book to Śrīla Prabhupāda, who looked through it for a while, then asked, "Where did you get this?" I explained about the tiny room and the tiny man hidden behind tall stacks of books, and Prabhupāda said, "We have to be careful. Caṇḍīdāsa and Vidyāpati wrote for a very elevated class of devotees — for the *paramahaṁsas*, swanlike, self-realized souls who understand the true nature of Rādhā–Kṛṣṇa's loving affairs. Such poetry is not for neophytes. Listen to this . . ." And he recited the following poem:

> *Harshness at home hurts me like a burn.*
> *How long can I bear to be a girl in another's power?*
> *It is the sickness of love that has been my disease,*
> *And now it is the cure that kills me.*

"That 'other power' is Kṛṣṇa," said Prabhupāda. "This young woman is already married, and if we publish such poems, people will say we are hypocrites. We decry illicit sex, and yet we publish such poetry about Kṛṣṇa? No, that we cannot do. Where are the great souls who can understand such transcendental matters?"

"There is only you," I said, thinking myself quite crafty for having found a way to glorify him. Prabhupāda bowed his head, as though ashamed of himself. Then he lifted his hands as if silently asking me to stop. "No," he said. "I'm not so great." My grandiose gesture of glorification had only succeeded in causing him discomfort. I felt terrible.

Then he told me that his spiritual master, Śrīla Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī Goswami, had once asked his father, Bhaktivinoda Ṭhākura, for permission to publish a similar book of devotional poems, but Bhaktivinoda refused. Bhaktisiddhānta returned the following day and said, "There are important lessons in these poems," and again he asked his father for permission to publish, but Bhaktivinoda again refused. When Bhaktisiddhānta returned yet a third time, at last his father relented.

"Okay," he said. "You can print: *one copy for yourself*."

As if to make sure I'd understood the danger in publishing poems that most readers would mistake as materially erotic, during a massage later that day Prabhupāda called me to his room. I ran in, and as his servant vigorously massaged his back, Prabhupāda tilted his head, pointed to the book, and with a mischievous smile said, "Listen to this." And then he read aloud the following line: "If you really love me, wrap your legs around me."

Then he looked up at me with a sly grin, and said, "So, *paramahaṁsa* Yogeśvara, what do you think of *that*?"

My mind went blank. One line of poetry revealed how little I understood about love for Kṛṣṇa. What could I say? Either I had to invent some pseudo-philosophical analysis of the line — "What we have here is a metaphorical image of the soul's full surrender to God" *blah-blah-blah* — or else I had to admit these were two real people, Kṛṣṇa and a *gopī* (cowherd woman) lover, engaging in physical love play, which was something Prabhupāda was constantly warning us to avoid: "Do not think Kṛṣṇa's love for the *gopīs* is material." If wrapping his legs around a *gopī* wasn't material, and it wasn't metaphorical, then what was it?

There was absolutely nothing I could say to save myself from total embarrassment. So, slowly, I bowed my head to the floor and inched my way out of his room. I was literally crawling backwards, bumping into tables and chairs as I assumed as deeply submissive and self-effacing a posture as possible.

Prabhupāda laughed, slapped his thigh, watched me for a while longer, then laughed some more.

"*Paramahaṁsa* Yogeśvara," he said, wiggling his hands in the air, and then he again broke out laughing. Five minutes later, as I huddled in a cowardly ball under my desk in the room next door, I could still hear him laughing.

I can still hear him laughing.

Installation of Rādhā-Gokulānanda – "Lift off!"

Śrīla Prabhupāda arrived at the Bhaktivedanta Manor in 1973 and led the first *kīrtana* in his new temple. The *kīrtana* came to an end, and as was customary, Prabhupāda called out the names of great teachers from the past to whom we were indebted. *All glories to this great teacher, all glories to that great teacher!* Then he called out, "All glories to George Harrison!" because George had purchased the Manor for him. We had our heads bowed to the ground, and it was difficult breathing and laughing at the same time, but we managed.

Sometime later, temple leaders scheduled the installation of the beautiful marble deities known as Rādhā-Gokulānanda. Deities are one of the most difficult things for nondevotees to understand about Kṛṣṇa conscious life. The notion of grown-ups dressing "dolls" each day, offering them food on silver trays, and treating them as though they are alive — it just doesn't fit within the limits of a rationalist mindset. Nonetheless, *arcana-sevā,* or service to physical forms of God, is an effective way to remember that God is a person, and deity worship is at the core of devotional life.

When the day came to formally install the deities on their seven-foot-high altar in the Manor, three devotee photographers stepped forward, ready to capture the event for posterity. Yadubara and his wife, Viśākhā, took charge of immortalizing the moment on film, and I arrived with my Pentax K1000 to take 35mm still photos.

We positioned ourselves by the altar, so we could photograph Prabhupāda as he performed the inaugural *ārati* ceremony.

The temple room was large but not large enough to accommodate the hundreds of devotees and dignitaries who had come from all over Europe and North America for the occasion. The place was packed. Still, a mood of loving excitement allowed us to share the crowded space with nothing but feelings of good will and fellowship — actually, that's a lie. Everyone was fighting everyone else for a good spot down front near Prabhupāda, and if that meant stepping on a few toes, well, so be it.

The singing began, and that was the signal for attendants to bathe the deities, then dress them, then position them on the altar, which would be their new home. The lead-and-response singing was nice, but it was loud and defeated any effort at speaking to someone, so instead of trying to speak to one another, Yadubara and I invented an effective nonverbal way of communicating: we'd move our heads side to side, throw up our hands, wiggle our fingers, roll our eyes, or communicate with some other signal.

For example, I remember that the chanting during the installation ceremony was led by a devotee who had an overblown sense of his Indian-like singing skills. He'd throw out musical trills in fake accents and dialects like confetti at a Mumbai New Year's Eve party, while waving his hands as though controlling the movement of the planets. Then he'd "knurdle," meaning he'd over-squeeze his vocal cord, and do "runs" starting with a very low note — much lower than he could actually sing — and rise up and up and up, until he was hitting falsetto high notes.

In any case, because Prabhupāda was there, Yadubara and I were careful about appearing to make fun of the lead singer, or anyone else, for that matter. They were all his disciples and Kṛṣṇa's devotees, and so when one of them did something funny — like the lead singer — Yadubara and I would stifle our laughter and communicate in Vaiṣṇava sign language by rolling our eyes.

Sometimes we couldn't control ourselves and had to give a verbal response. If, for instance, the singer reached for an impossibly high note, Yadubara and I would nod our heads at the appropriate moment, then let loose simultaneously with an ear-piercing "HARIBOL" (an exclamation meaning "chant the name of Hari,

the Lord"), which got the whole room yelling out "HARIBOL!" The combined yelling completely covered the singer's voice. We outknurdled him.

When Prabhupāda came to the end of the *ārati* ceremony and all the objects of worship had been offered one by one — incense, camphor lamp, ghee lamp, water, flower, *cāmara* whisk — a change came over Prabhupāda's face. At first, he simply looked at us, clapped his hands, and smiled, perhaps appreciating the irony of British devotees worshiping deities of Kṛṣṇa. After all, for more than three hundred years, the majority of British missionaries, historians, and government officials had looked down on devotion to Kṛṣṇa as tribal ritual, idol worship, and the vestige of some less civilized time in India's history. When Prabhupāda installed Rādhā-Gokulānanda, in effect he reversed centuries of shallow, salvationist bigotry. From that perspective, the installation was an event of historic proportions.

Even more important, it was joyful. Śrīla Prabhupāda pulsed his hands up and down, encouraging his students to dance, and we all jumped high. Then Prabhupāda himself began jumping, and his energy lit a fuse under the whole room. We cried out in joy, began swinging one another round in circles, and stamped so hard that the strong marble floor was in jeopardy of caving in. Prabhupāda circled around the altar, pumping the air with his hands, smiling and beaming, and the chain reaction among attendees was unbelievable. It felt like the entire hundred-year-old Tudor-style manor was about to explode.

The world may have been going to hell, but life simply didn't get any better than what was happening just then at the Manor. Yadubara and I were beaming like twinned supernovae. If someone had strapped us into a McLaren M14-A and shot us around a Formula One racetrack at two hundred miles per hour, it wouldn't have been half as exciting as dancing around the deities with Śrīla Prabhupāda at that moment. Our feet barely touched the ground, and our hearts soared out of the material world and landed at the lotus feet of Rādhā-Gokulānanda in the spiritual world.

George Harrison was a doer. He wanted spiritual life to make a practical difference in the world, which helps explain his idea of recording the Hare Kṛṣṇa mantra and getting it heard on radio worldwide. "I can see it now," he told the London devotees in 1969, "the first Sanskrit song in the top ten."[3]

And he did it. The "single" — meaning the seven-inch record that sold in UK music shops for about seventy-five pence — was selling out everywhere, tens of thousands of copies in just the first few weeks. The record was in frequent rotation, as radio stations played it throughout the day, and the Radha Krishna Temple singing group was in demand at clubs and concert venues across Europe. Practically overnight, the popularity of the *Hare Krishna Mantra* turned our little London band of godbrothers and godsisters into a pop-music sensation.

I showed up at the London temple for the first time on December 26, 1969, which meant I missed being there when George recorded the *Hare Krishna Mantra* at the Apple Records studio earlier that year. But I had been the lead singer and keyboardist in a college band before joining the temple, and those were sufficient credentials to earn me a place singing and playing harmonium when we performed in public.

By early 1970, invitations to perform live were arriving almost daily. There was one show that marked me for life. It was at a nightclub in Piccadilly Circus coincidentally named The Temple Club.

The club was in a basement, and club-goers entered by descending a flight of stairs. I believe it was a Friday. We arrived for our performance around midnight — all those club dates seemed to take place at an ungodly hour when devotees were normally snuggled down in their sleeping bags. Carefully we descended the stairs. Mukunda cautiously cradled our fragile clay *mṛdaṅga* drum in his arms as he descended one step at a time. Yamunā climbed down sideways while discreetly holding the ends of her sari. I was carrying the heavy harmonium with both hands and climbed down while desperately keeping my balance by pressing my elbows against both walls. Without saying it aloud, we shared the same nightmarish

vision of falling down the stairs like a slapstick-comedy routine. Rock stars don't fall. They float.

We made our way into a small "green room" where artists waited for their name to be called. When our time came, we walked single file out into the club area. It was pitch-black, with only tiny beams of day-glow lights bouncing off the walls — and yet for whatever bizarre reason, everyone in the club was wearing sunglasses.

The voices of Mick Jagger and the other Rolling Stones singing "Can't Get No Satisfaction" blasted out of huge speakers hanging from the corners of the club, and the air was thick with clouds of smoke: cigarette and marijuana smoke, incense, candles, hookahs. The devotees looked at one another with a faint smile as several of us recalled similar aromas from our pre-temple days. (At least in theory, we were high now on a spiritual intoxicant — namely, the *mahā-mantra* — that supposedly delivered a stronger punch. At the very least, it was completely legal.)

We positioned ourselves on the nightclub stage, and I looked out at the audience. The smartly dressed young men and women looked like they were wondering, "What are these people doing in our club on a Friday night?"

Mukunda gave the audience a brief explanation of the chanting. "It's not really a pop tune," he said, "but an ancient form of meditation that puts you directly in touch with God." There wasn't a sound from the audience. Everyone just rolled their eyes and stood around, smoking and drinking and wondering when this part of the program was going to be over so they could get back to the Rolling Stones.

By now, we had performed in maybe twenty nightclubs around Europe. My way of dealing with the indifference of club patrons was simply to close my eyes and get into the chanting. It didn't really matter to me if the audience got it or not, and this evening at The Temple Club, things started as they always did. Yamunā sang prayers to Prabhupāda with the mystical melody she and I used when we put the deities to rest. Then we segued into the *mahā-mantra*, and slowly the pace accelerated until it came close to a dance rhythm. Even though I told myself it didn't matter to me if the club-goers were into it or not, it really did matter to me, and I opened my eyes to see what was going on.

It was amazing. A miracle. During the time my eyes were closed,

the audience had completely gotten into the groove of the chanting. They had all taken off their sunglasses, linked arms, and were dancing back and forth to the rhythm of the *mṛdaṅga* drum. The nightclub staff had turned on the house lights, and I could actually see people's faces. Everyone was laughing, having a great time, and when the *kīrtana* finally came to a rousing conclusion, the whole place erupted in applause and cheers.

"Yeah! Yeah! Yeah!" said a voice over the speaker system. "And you can be sure we're going to have the Radha Krishna Temple band back here very soon. This is George Harrison's latest rock find — our thanks to Georgie." The announcement sent the audience into another fit of applause and cheers. We collected our instruments and slowly made our way through the crowd and up the stairs to the exit. People were slapping us on the back, giving us thumbs up and high fives, and even a hug or two.

When we finally got to the top, it was about two o'clock in the morning. I turned around to see how the club looked in the wake of our performance — and it was as though we had never been there. The lights were again down low, the sunglasses were back on, smoke again filled the room, and patrons were once again dancing to Mick Jagger belting out "Can't Get No Satisfaction."

Amazing, I said to myself. It was as though, for a brief while, the spiritual world had descended into this little corner of London, and for that brief while people's hearts had been touched by the chanting of the holy names. Then the moment passed, and it was all back to the nightclub scene. For an hour or so, a window had opened onto the eternal world, thanks to George's devotional service. Then, just as fast, it had closed, and all was again as it had been before.

Except that it wasn't. For weeks after, young people came up to us on the street and said, "Hey, man! I was there at The Temple Club last Friday. You were fantastic, man! Are you going to come back? Hare Kṛṣṇa! Hare Kṛṣṇa!"

❧

RECALLING THESE MOMENTS is a bitter-sweet exercise, bitter because the world has become a darker place since then, sweet because it reminds me how effectively Śrīla Prabhupāda brought

light into the darkness. We were young, had no understanding of Sanskrit texts, and just as little understanding of the critical role Śrīla Prabhupāda's mission would one day play in human history. We had no qualifications for serving as missionaries of Vaiṣṇava culture — but he saw something in us, and he nurtured it with patience, wisdom, and humor. Grace is rarely displayed with such sensitivity and affection.

If these reflections offer some insight into the texture of those early days, their innocence and intensity, then they qualify as *véridique*, even if some details are not entirely *vrai* and cannot be proven. But ask yourself: what kind of poverty is it, to live only by what can be proven? The ground shifts, time devours all records, and the mind deceives. But emotional truths are also truths, often even more important than empiric truths, for the value of what Śrīla Prabhupāda accomplished resides less in perfect chronological recall than in the enduring impression of his presence and its impact on our hearts.

Endnotes

1 Charlotte Delbo wrote a trilogy that came to be titled *Auschwitz and After*, published by Yale University Press (1997). *None of Us Will Return* is the first volume.

2 Joshua M. Greene, *Here Comes the Sun* (Hoboken, New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, 2006), p. 146.

3 Ibid., p. 143.

JOSHUA M. GREENE (YOGEŚVARA DĀSA) is the producer of Holocaust-related films for PBS and Discovery and the author of books on Holocaust witness testimony — a half-million copies of his biographies have sold worldwide. He is a five-time recipient of *TV Guide*'s Best Program of the Year award. He earned his master's degree in Religious Studies at Hofstra University, where he taught Holocaust Studies and Hinduism from 2003–13. He was initiated by Śrīla Prabhupāda in 1970, in London, where he recorded with the London devotees on George Harrison's *Radha-Krishna Temple*

album. During thirteen years of temple life, Yogeśvara traveled with Śrīla Prabhupāda across Europe, served as the temple president in Paris, the director of ISKCON's French publishing office, the editor of the French *Back to Godhead* magazine, and the founder of Bala Books, a publishing office of children's books. His devotional books include *Here Comes the Sun: The Spiritual and Musical Journey of George Harrison*; *Gita Wisdom: An Introduction to India's Essential Yoga Text*; and *Swami in a Strange Land: How Krishna Came to the West*, a biography of Śrīla Prabhupāda. His next book is *Golden Avatar* (February 2027), a biography of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu. He serves as a mediator in ISKCON and recently compiled an ethical code of behavior for ISKCON members.

What Next-Generation Leaders Want: Solutions for leadership succession in North America

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Abstract

This paper examines the leadership succession challenges facing ISKCON as the next generation of leaders emerges in North America. Drawing on the author's doctoral research and her leadership experience within the organization, the paper highlights the concerns of the next-generation leaders. It proposes prosocial motivation as a guiding framework to address these issues. The paper offers ISKCON practical solutions for recruitment and retention within a faith-based institution. The discussion concludes with recommendations for future research and considerations for continued dialogue on sustainable leadership development.

Introduction

ISKCON is a global faith-based organization facing a leadership succession crisis. Like most faith-based organizations and nonprofit organizations (NPOs), ISKCON relies heavily on highly motivated volunteers to run and operate its hundreds of temples, centers, and affiliated projects worldwide. Like other faith-based NPOs, ISKCON also faces a mounting and critical need for leadership succession across all levels, especially among administrative leaders, which is the focus of my paper. These succession challenges are compounded by the organization's classification, among academics, as a "high-demand" movement (Hammer, O., & Rothstein, M., 2012), one that places exceptionally high expectations on its followers and leaders. This situation calls for ISKCON to critically rethink its philosophical outlook and organizational culture in developing a sustainable leadership succession and recruitment strategy. This article proposes a new approach to recruitment and retention: the prosocial motivation framework, designed to adapt to the changing values of next-generation leaders in ISKCON North America.

As of 2020, ISKCON comprised approximately one million members (Religion Media Centre, 2019) and about seven hundred temples and centers worldwide. Although it is a decentralized faith-based institution in which each temple or center manages its own daily operations and finances, ISKCON centrally standardizes certain practices. These include deity-worship protocols, temple-program schedules, registered trademarks, and the movement's philosophical foundations: its books, teachings, and related paraphernalia. Most ISKCON centers operate under a leadership structure comprising the temple leadership team, local department heads, and the international Governing Body Commission (GBC).

Although ISKCON is globally recognized as a leading institution within the Hindu tradition, it lacks a formal system for recruiting and retaining its administrative leaders. Over the past sixty years, its approach has gradually shifted from a proximity- and seniority-based model to one that emphasizes the training and skills of its leaders. Leadership-development initiatives now include the GBC College for Leadership Development, specialized training programs offered by various ministries, and religion- and philosophy-based

courses. Collectively, these training programs, delivered both online and in person worldwide, are comparable to, or even surpass, undergraduate-level programs. They have produced a capable, well-trained next generation of potential leaders. However, a disconnect remains: Few next-generation members in North America step forward to assume leadership roles, and no systematic process exists for identifying and inviting qualified candidates to fill these positions. Something in the recruitment pipeline is misaligned. The prosocial motivation framework is a starting point for engaging with the range of evolving values of the nonprofit sector and of next-generation leaders.

This paper begins by discussing the current challenges ISKCON faces concerning its next generation of leaders, followed by a presentation of the prosocial motivation framework as a potential solution. Next, the paper presents a high-level view of the context of next-generation leaders' employment-related needs. Finally, it offers specific remedies for recruiting and retaining next-generation leaders within this framework, drawing on current organizational leadership trends and the author's experience.

Limitations

This paper primarily focuses on administrative and managerial leadership roles, deliberately excluding spiritual leadership positions. However, given the intertwined nature of administrative and spiritual leadership in a faith-based organization, delineating between them can be complex and requires nuance in specific roles and situations. Additionally, ISKCON's global presence means that findings based on North American contexts may not fully apply to other cultural or regional settings. Nevertheless, because the research centers on next-generation leaders within global nonprofit organizations operating in North America — and given that the researcher herself is a next-generation ISKCON leader — the proposed recruitment and retention strategies are likely applicable beyond ISKCON North America.

ISKCON as a nonprofit organization

For the purposes of this paper, ISKCON is understood as a faith-based nonprofit organization. NPOs are self-identified organizations that are not profit-driven and are dedicated to a tax-exempt cause. ISKCON is registered as such in North America, where this research was conducted and where the author is primarily based. Faith-based NPOs were included in the quantitative study informing this paper, and findings remained consistent regardless of the NPO type (religious or otherwise) represented by the participating leaders (Sherreitt, K., 2024).

Leadership in ISKCON

This paper focuses on administrative leadership rather than spiritual leadership. Spiritual leaders, such as gurus (formal or informal), renounced traveling preachers (*sannyāsīs*), and GBC members, provide spiritual guidance and derive authority from their character, integrity, and the inspiration they offer in accordance with scriptural teachings. Administrative leaders, by contrast, serve as temple or center presidents, council members, department heads, board members, project leaders, and ministry directors. Their authority stems from their formal position within ISKCON's organizational structure and their responsibility for operational, financial, and community management. This paper specifically addresses administrative leadership roles that must be filled by next-generation leaders. The author recognizes that administrative and spiritual leadership roles occasionally overlap (e.g., a GBC member may also serve as a guru, or a *sannyāsī* as a ministry director), though such cases remain exceptions rather than the norm.

Next-generation leaders

In this paper, the term next-generation leaders refers to Millennials aged twenty-nine to forty-four. Millennials are those born between 1981 and 1996 (Dimock, 2019). This study follows the Pew Research

Center's generational definitions (Dimock, 2019), because year ranges for generations vary across the literature.

Leaders must be employed

ISKCON in North America is currently facing a leadership-succession stalemate. Next-generation leaders confront the previous generation's lack of engagement with generational gaps and shortcomings in its leadership culture. Meanwhile, ISKCON continues to grow rapidly and is therefore in desperate need of additional leaders. But not just any leaders. ISKCON, now entering its third generation of membership, must prioritize and insist on appointing trained leaders who possess a strong philosophical foundation as well as the soft skills to manage people and co-exist within the society. For ISKCON to continue for another fifty years, the next generation of leaders must avoid repeating the mistakes of their predecessors.

First and foremost, ISKCON must move away from its overreliance on volunteers for complex and critical leadership roles and begin employing leaders. To initiate such a recruitment and retention program, ISKCON temples and projects in North America must conduct an internal analysis to distinguish between leadership positions that can be filled by part-time volunteers and those that require full-time employees. At present, ISKCON relies heavily on part-time volunteers (often for very crucial and complex roles), resulting in partially fulfilled responsibilities and significant gaps in services and programs. Some ISKCON regions offer a stipend-based compensation model, covering room and board for key leadership roles. Other regions rely entirely on volunteers, often students, stay-at-home parents, or retirees. A person's life situation should not dictate one's eligibility for ISKCON leadership. Instead, such eligibility should depend on an individual's training, capability, and spiritual strength.

Recruitment and retention concerns in ISKCON — as a faith-based NPO — are amplified by its limited financial capacity to attract and retain employees (Ibrisevic, 2021). To understand faith-based NPOs, it is essential to clarify the distinction between volunteers and employees. Most faith-based NPOs primarily operate

with a small core of employees supported by a large volunteer base to deliver programs and services. NPO literature (Keshavarz, R., A., 2019) suggests that volunteers and employees differ in their motivation. Generally, volunteers are more motivated by both altruistic and prosocial motivators than employees, who tend to be primarily motivated by prosocial motivation (Pearce, 1983). (The distinction between altruism and prosocial motivations will be discussed further in this paper as this author believes it is key to unlocking the future of ISKCON North America's strategy for recruitment and retention of administrative leaders.) Additionally, beyond motivational factors, employees in faith-based organizations tend to demonstrate greater consistency than volunteers (Bassous, 2015).

The word "profession" originally denoted the vows made upon entering a faith-based order through public declaration (Encyclopedia.com, n.d.). Professionalizing ISKCON management and leadership should be encouraged, rather than being viewed as an attempt to make a personal living from the institution. Such a cultural shift would allow members to pursue ISKCON service as a profession or career, rather than juggling a full-time job elsewhere with full-time ISKCON leadership responsibilities. This would replace the current defunct and ad hoc system of seeking individuals who merely have the free time or personal life situation to fill vacant roles. Also, next-generation leaders must challenge the perception held by some senior members and newcomers that professionalism in temples or projects is overly corporate or insufficiently devotional.

Professional faith-based leadership has become standard in many religious organizations worldwide (Nesbitt, 2007), but ISKCON North America, and ISKCON globally, has not yet fully adopted this approach. Increasing pressure from donors and society to meet fundraising expectations, combined with the need for efficient use of technology and other resources, highlights the importance of adopting a professional leadership model. Implementing such an approach could provide ISKCON with the foundational shift to become a strategic, people-centered organization, rather than one primarily focused on projects and newcomer recruitment. It is also vital to consider how the criteria for selecting and training future leaders will shape the development of both the organization and its

spiritual tradition over time (Nesbitt, 2007). Currently, ISKCON risks ceding control over the future of its tradition by failing to actively guide and manage the recruitment of its next generation of leaders.

Who to recruit?

Who should ISKCON North America recruit for its leadership positions? As expected, faith-motivated NPO workers show the highest levels of altruism, whereas career-oriented NPO workers display the lowest (Ugar et al., 2024). However, NPO research (Lanfranchi, J., & Mathieu, N., 2012) indicates that paid NPO workers are already known to be highly prosocially motivated compared with workers in other sectors. Therefore, those who choose a career in ISKCON are already likely to be highly altruistic in their motivation to serve the organization.

Additionally, faith-based organizations are known for their low pay and stagnant career advancement, underscoring that those who work in leadership within this sector value prosocial causes over personal gain. Ugar et al. (2024) note that altruism levels are higher among workers in faith-based NPOs, reinforcing the idea that ISKCON's shift from altruistic to prosocial motivation is the right choice. Thus, this paper suggests that a recruited next-generation leader — someone who chooses ISKCON as a career, comes from a professional background, and has been trained within ISKCON — is likely to demonstrate greater leadership commitment and achieve more professional outcomes.

The length of membership in a faith-based organization has also been found to positively impact commitment (Dunaetz,D. R., 2012). Leadership research (Masoud, R. & Basahal, A., 2023) suggests that those who work in the nonprofit sector are primarily motivated by helping others and engaging in cause-based work, rather than merely by belief in or identification with a cause. Such people are also found in faith-based leadership across religious traditions, including within ISKCON. Identifying members in good standing — long-time members and next-generation devotees — is an effective approach to recruitment efforts.

In summary, ISKCON North America should launch a recruit-

ment strategy: first, by conducting an internal analysis, and second, by identifying members who align with the culture and values of next-generation leaders. Potential recruits will be working professionals. They would include long-standing members and those raised within the tradition. They may also be individuals who already work in the nonprofit sector or aspire to work in it. These are good starting points for recruitment criteria.

Prosocial motivation for faith-based organization employees

Because the employment of leaders in ISKCON remains a contentious issue, this section discusses it in greater depth, contrasting altruistic motivation — the movement's assumed operating model — with prosocial motivation, the model proposed in this paper. Research on NPO workers indicates (Gao, R., & Sawatsky, K., 2023) that assuming employees or leaders in faith-based organizations are solely driven by altruistic motivations in managing operations and administration overlooks the complex interplay of personal, organizational, and contextual factors influencing behavior. Again, when discussing motivation, it is important to distinguish between volunteers, who have income from other sources, and employees within a faith-based organization.

For employees, prosocial motivation refers to the desire and willingness to engage in activities that benefit others (Grant & Sumanth, 2009). In contrast, altruistic motivation is more nuanced in the context of work. Conceptually, altruism entails the desire to improve others' welfare at a net personal cost to oneself, a difficult demand to sustain among employees or volunteers. Behaviorally, altruism encompasses any act stemming from such motivation. However, altruistic behavior can also stem from self-interested motives, such as the desire to enhance one's reputation (Elster, 2006).

ISKCON's expectation that next-generation leaders continue serving as unpaid volunteers has become increasingly unsustainable. Volunteer leaders often face difficult trade-offs, sacrificing family financial stability and personal time to perform service (*seva*). This form of compelled altruism no longer accurately reflects the lived realities of next-generation leaders. Research on workplace

altruism (Weiss-Sidi, M. & Riemer, H., 2023) also indicates that the idea of "pure" motivation is difficult to sustain. Even religiously motivated volunteering is frequently linked to faith-based incentives, such as the promise of heaven or the afterlife, or is influenced by emotions such as pride and shame (Elster, 2006). Moreover, in the faith-based nonprofit sector, the strongest motivators for employees are intrinsic factors, nonmonetary incentives, and organizational culture; this is in contrast to and instead of "extrinsic or monetary rewards" (Bassous, 2015).

A clear understanding of intrinsic motivation is particularly relevant to this discussion. Intrinsic motivation refers to engaging in a task for the inherent satisfaction it provides (Herzberg et al., 1969). In ISKCON, professional employees may be motivated by the fulfillment derived from completing tasks well, putting in a productive day's work, or managing responsibilities effectively — all expressions of intrinsic motivation. In contrast, extrinsic motivation is driven by external rewards or pressures (Herzberg et al., 1969). Such rewards may include recognition or praise, opportunities for career advancement, professional development, or financial compensation as a means of livelihood. In faith-based organizations, extrinsic pressures may take the form of compliance with institutional rules, meeting social expectations, or adhering to spiritual injunctions. Importantly, both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations are not negative forces to be avoided but integral dynamics of any workplace, including faith-based organizations such as ISKCON. Both volunteers and employees are motivated by a combination of intrinsic and extrinsic factors, though in different ways. Prosocial motivation, often used interchangeably with altruistic motivation, reflects a genuine desire to benefit others without seeking personal gain (Eisenberg & Miller, 1987; Feigin et al., 2014).

In summary, the expectation that leaders continually risk their livelihood, especially their retirement security, for the benefit of ISKCON is neither a practical nor sustainable foundation for the growth of a faith-based institution. Although altruistic motivation is often regarded as the only pure form of motivation, this overly high moral expectation can deter next-generation leaders. The prosocial motivation framework offers a bridge for recruitment and retention, providing next-generation leaders with values-driven roles that

support both institutional goals and personal needs. Supporting prosocially motivated leadership enables ISKCON to evolve while upholding its core principles.

Understanding the needs of next-generation leaders

Millennials represent the next generation of leaders worldwide, having now surpassed Generation X (approximately ages fifty to sixty and older) in the workforce, particularly in management roles (Deloitte, 2025). Millennials are considered a highly prosocial generation (Sherreitt, K., 2025), and their organizational prosocial identity has been found to strongly correlate with commitment (Rani, N., & Samuel, A.A., 2019). Thus, they are a natural fit for future leadership roles in prosocial organizations such as ISKCON. However, ISKCON must address several key concerns to successfully recruit and retain next-generation leaders. The first concern involves the organization's reputation and its leadership culture, the latter of which often lacks transparency. The second pertains to the resource limitations and leadership-culture expectations of next-generation leaders. While some of these issues can be addressed through the prosocial motivation framework, others are more deeply entrenched and may require a generational shift in leadership to resolve. The key concerns are discussed below.

ISKCON's leadership culture

A major concern among next-generation ISKCON leaders is the poor reputation of the organization's leadership. High levels of discredited spiritual leaders and child-abuse cases unaddressed for years have led the next generation to distrust ISKCON's leadership. Additionally, upcoming leaders find it particularly challenging to navigate the perceived hypocrisy of leniency toward those who have wronged devotees or the institution.

The values of an organization's most influential members tend to represent its culture (Schein, 1992), often meaning that leaders embody and reinforce the organization's prevailing norms

and values to the rest of the organization. Across industries, the senior-most leadership positions today are still largely held by the Baby Boomer generation (ages fifty-five to seventy-three) (Dimock, 2019; Sibal, 2022), creating potential culture-fit challenges for younger employees who hold differing or conflicting values. Leadership literature (DeCarvalho, 2025; Mitchell, J., 2025) strongly suggests that next-generation leaders value authenticity and transparency as top leadership qualities, including within faith-based organizations. This implies that for next-generation ISKCON leaders to assume leadership roles, they must be truly committed to the tradition while being able to authentically express that commitment in their leadership roles. These concerns exacerbate the growing disconnect between the current leadership and the next generation's career and spiritual paths.

Resource constraints and organizational-culture expectations

The organizational-culture expectations of the next generation within both the nonprofit sector and ISKCON, I suggest, are largely similar. Across industries, next-generation workers (and leaders) often hold expectations that are at odds with those of previous generations. This generational disconnect, seen in ISKCON, is heightened in faith-based institutions, where social values are slower to change than in secular institutions (Pew Research, 2024). Within ISKCON, this disconnect leads to generational divides on leadership roles, organizational structure, and values. Without a major cultural shift or the old guard of leaders moving aside for the new leadership, ISKCON will continue to see limited interest among next-generation leaders in assuming the needed roles.

A first concern is the rising cost of living required to maintain the same standard of life enjoyed by previous generations. Today, two people in the family unit need to work to make ends meet. Adequate financial compensation is needed across all their professional roles to maintain lifestyles comparable to those of previous generations (Twenge, 2013). The rising cost of living and educational debt among Millennials (ages twenty-nine to forty-four) relative to earlier generations (Fry, R., & Bialik, K., 2019) help contextualize

their career choices. Pay-related issues are a significant factor driving Millennials to leave the nonprofit sector (AbouAssi et al., 2021). Compensation remains a concern in the nonprofit sector, which generally pays less than the private or public sectors (Brownell, 2019; Handy et al., 2007; Manzo, 2004; Salamon, 2020). Without the ability to offer financial incentives such as high salaries, bonuses, or stock options, ISKCON must instead leverage nonmonetary values that appeal to next-generation leaders to recruit and retain them.

Unlike previous generations, Millennials are the first to experience financial constraints that substantially limit their ability to volunteer freely, with 94 percent of Millennials citing financial concerns as a key barrier to increased charity (Angus Reid Institute, 2017, December 6). Although Millennials have less discretionary time for volunteering, they remain more likely than other generations to donate and volunteer (Kocin, M., 2025). ISKCON must leverage this highly prosocial generation for its workforce.

A second concern involves the redefinition of work within the platform economy, which is transforming traditional ideas of employment (Scully-Russ & Torraco, 2020). The workplace is increasingly moving toward online and flexible virtual spaces, particularly for non-people-focused workers (Scully-Russ & Torraco, 2020). Millennials value work-life balance, and seek roles that affirm their worth to the organization, but they resist letting work define them entirely (Freedman, M., 2022). It is essential for ISKCON to understand the changing nature of work (including gig and virtual work) and to recognize what work-life balance means to both Millennials and other generations who share this value (Egon Zehnder, 2019). It is also vital that ISKCON incorporate recruitment and retention development into a forward-looking strategy for future generations. Although Millennials value organizational culture and meaningful work as retention factors, in an uncertain economic climate even purpose cannot offset inadequate compensation (Johnson, M. J., & Ng, E. S., 2015).

Worldwide, faith-based organizations are facing generational transitions in leadership. ISKCON must adapt now or risk continuing the appointment of untrained leaders. Specifically, for ISKCON to survive, trained members must be recruited who view ISKCON service as their career.

These concerns are not taken lightly by next-generation leaders and must be addressed through the values they prioritize: transparency and accountability. A strategic approach to further this leadership transition would involve recruiting next-generation leaders to help lead, and, crucially, to allow the cultural shift to take place. ISKCON temples and projects may refer to the next section for incremental solutions to recruit and retain next-generation leaders.

How can ISKCON fund leadership positions?

As of 2025, ISKCON is a multi-million-dollar organization and growing annually. With India leading this expansion, temples and centers are opening worldwide. Although ISKCON does not systematically collect statistics on itself, at least one new million-dollar temple has opened annually over the past five years (*ISKCON News*, 2020–25). Funds come from donations, corporations, book sales, and other projects. In much of the ISKCON world, funding is not the primary problem. ISKCON's volunteer-based leadership model persists not because of a lack of funds but because of how the funds are prioritized. This approach originates in ISKCON's broader leadership culture. Current leadership expectations emphasize altruistic motivations to serve, rather than recognizing more practical prosocial motivations.

Other religious organizations in North America, by contrast, have at least one full-time paid leader for every seventy-five congregants (Hill, A.M., 2022). Applying this ratio conservatively, even the smallest ISKCON temples in North America would have at least two paid leadership positions. Paid positions in other religious traditions typically include key community-leadership roles: senior clergy or minister; program staff (youth, education); administrative or office manager; music or worship leader; outreach or social-services manager; head of finance or operations; and supervisor of facilities and maintenance.

It is noteworthy that youth ministers are typically full-time paid positions in religious organizations across North America (Gonzales, S., 2025). In Ontario (Canada), for example, someone in this role earns an average annual salary of CAD 55,000. This level

of compensation signals that religious organizations know how crucial it is for someone to devote time and effort solely to youth initiatives and services, including mentoring and program development. Investing in youth ministers for ISKCON's major temples and regions could be instrumental to its future success and leadership. While volunteer-based youth ministries can function, they are often unstable or constrained by time and capacity. Salaries for leadership roles in other religions typically depend on two main factors: church attendance and the church budget (Gonzales, S., 2025). ISKCON's main North America temples have both high attendance and substantial budgets, but not a single paid youth minister. Most do not even have a volunteer responsible for youth engagement (this does not include Sunday schools).

ISKCON's Youth Ministry in North America also serves as the Global Youth Ministry. This Ministry has been run on a voluntary basis by a married couple for more than twenty-five years. One essential project they run is an annual bus tour, often for fifty to sixty young people (ISKCON Youth Ministry, 2025), funded by donations and participant fees. A Go-Fund-Me project in 2025 raised a few hundred thousand dollars for a new bus. Often the bus tour operates at a net loss, covered by the couple, and usually consumes their whole summer vacation. The Youth Minister receives no salary from any local temple nor the regional governing body. If ISKCON's major temples in North America could make one strategic change, it should be to employ at least a part-time youth minister for their communities; the regional body should pay a salary to the Youth Minister, who also serves as a global representative and coordinator for youth events.

Most ISKCON temples, even smaller ones, now compensate a temple president, which is generally the principal local leadership role (even when no other leaders are present). This compensation may take the form of room and board or coverage of other expenses, if not in the form of a paycheck. Ideally, temples and regional or global bodies would prioritize funding key leadership positions with a living wage as part of their recruitment and retention strategy and their annual strategies for fundraising and key initiatives, just as they now fund new buildings and projects.

Currently, there are no formal funding mechanisms for staff pay

for a wide range of regional-level leadership roles, such as GBC members (the highest administrative role), zonal supervisors and secretaries, members of the Regional Governing Body, and ISKCON ministry leaders. Many GBC members are also gurus and receive most of their livelihood through donations or businesses unrelated to their administrative position. All undertake these roles voluntarily, with only irregular reimbursement of significant expenses (e.g., travel to conferences and meetings) when funds are available. While this expresses a deeply devout quality of their selfless service, the crossover between gurus and GBCs is part of a waning generation and unsustainable as a succession plan. In other words, future generations of leaders are most likely to serve only in administrative roles rather than as a crossover of spiritual and administrative leaders, and thus this funding method will no longer continue.

The GBC body is aware of this changing generational dynamic, though not yet publicly addressing it. In recent years, there was at least one discussion by the GBC at its annual meeting, entitled "Wages for Sages" by Pragosh Dasa, the GBC member for the United Kingdom. In this presentation, the idea of paying salaries to devotees in temple roles is specifically discussed. The first slide asks whether paying salaries to employees is essential for success in the twenty-first century? This paper would resoundingly answer yes, it is.

Pragosh goes on to mention one of the "cons" of paying devotees is their "unease with payment for devotional service" (Praghosa Dasa, n.d.). This statement showcases that it is not only the culture of ISKCON telling ISKCON workers that it is immoral to take a salary but their own moral compass telling them their motivations are impure. The real discussion needs to be around understanding motivation types and not a blanket approach of one-size-fits-all in terms of livelihood needs. It is time for ISKCON to make a clear distinction between those who take a salary for their livelihood maintenance (prosocial, motivated work) and those who would take money from ISKCON for solely selfish motivations (an entirely different discussion, but something that happens in a variety of areas). Prosocially motivated work is reasonable and necessary, especially given rising living expenses and the changing family dynamics in which two incomes are often required to meet basic needs.

Śrīdhar Swami, a former senior leader in ISKCON, observed in the first issue of the *ISKCON Communications Journal*: "In ISKCON at present [1994], we only reward quantity. . . . We strive for quantity and neglect quality" (Śrīdhar Swami, 1994). Now, some thirty years later, my experience suggests that the culture of success that Śrīdhar Swami warned about — "more versus better" — remains prevalent. With respect to leadership and leadership succession, it is evident that projects often take precedence over people, and that "more" (distributing more books, building more temples, making more devotees) remains the measure of success, outweighing attention to the quality of devotees and their experiences. Leaders stand at the core of this misplaced focus on "external" priorities, rather than on the internal development and betterment of devotee communities.

ISKCON's continued lack of formal, mandatory systems for administrative leadership training and recruitment is not simply a matter of funding. Funding is based on priorities. Priorities are based on organizational culture. And organizational culture is shaped and created by the current leadership. In essence, the crux of the problem lies in the current leadership's determination that future leaders should not be paid for their services.

It will take a cultural shift to move ISKCON into its next phase of leadership. In fact, ISKCON already has the capacity to fund leadership staff locally and regionally. Providing compensation to leaders is the foundation of building a career-oriented, professional workforce. In one sense, compensation itself signals that the roles have value and merit. Transitioning ISKCON to such a model will require a cultural shift. It is ultimately a matter of clarifying priorities.

This transition must be accompanied by a cultural shift which affirms that devotees in these positions have the right to lead with motivations, including both serving the temple and its devotees to their best ability and caring for themselves and their families. Embracing a mixed model of volunteers and paid employees needs to become the modus operandi for many mid- to large-sized temples in North America. Furthermore, salaries should be competitive with those in other religious organizations and NPOs to ensure sustainable recruitment and retention of qualified, dedicated leaders.

A key feature of this paper is offering some practical solutions and remedies that ISKCON could use in recruiting and retaining future leaders. First, ISKCON needs to allow a cultural shift toward the values of the next generation of leaders. Second, ISKCON needs to accept members with mixed motivations in its recruitment for leadership positions and adopt the prosocial motivation framework outlined in this paper.

What do next-generation leaders want from a career in ISKCON? Their expectations are very similar to those in the nonprofit and corporate sectors. They want to work in organizations that match their cultural values, to be paid for their time, and to have opportunities for career development. Because key Millennial values include a preference for market culture and high prosocial career motivation, ISKCON can look for ways to incorporate these values into its recruitment efforts.

Next-generation leaders tend to value a market-oriented organizational culture, one that emphasizes performance, results, and accountability (Sherreitt, K., 2025). At the same time, their prosocial career motivation reflects a commitment to helping others through the organization's mission and in their day-to-day work. These leaders also expect fair compensation for their time. ISKCON should reconsider its stance on paying full-time employees, focusing instead on attracting candidates committed to making ISKCON their career, despite modest pay. Compensation need not be high. It should be sufficient to cover basic living expenses, comparable to a lower-range nonprofit salary within the relevant region.

Next-generation leaders must be recruited, and effective recruitment is essential to developing this next generation of leaders. Without a formal system in place, these individuals rarely volunteer for leadership roles. There is no structured pathway to scout their potential through progressively increasing responsibilities. In contrast, many Jewish communities proactively place young adults in volunteer leadership positions, for example through board appointments. This approach creates a network of trained and experienced lay leaders who are deeply invested in the community and well-positioned to become its future organizational

leaders (Presidents, n.d.). Although this exact method may not work for ISKCON — owing to seniority norms and other concerns about young people taking on roles — there are opportunities for lower-tier leadership positions as stepping stones to higher-level positions, starting with project or festival management at local and regional levels, which already takes place. Of particular interest for next-generation members is the management of mantra-music events and groups, which could be treated as lower-tier leadership roles that lead to future positions.

ISKCON as an organization must also showcase its strongest prosocial values to recruit this generation. In purpose-driven organizations, the leadership should regularly integrate employer-branding efforts and other initiatives that highlight sustainability and inclusion, initiatives of interest to the next generation (Deloitte, 2022). Using a prosocial career-motivation screening tool in recruitment is one practical application that this research recommends to NPOs at all levels. Starting with prosocial career-motivation as a framework in recruitment, and including it — and highlighting it in organizational marketing — would be valuable for the sector to employ. Leader engagement, specifically in the organization's core work and mission, is also critical for promoting employee prosocial behavior and commitment among the next generation (Wang, R., 2022). Regular employee and leader engagement in the organization's purpose-based activities is a key mediator of leader retention (McKinsey, 2021).

Organizational culture is reflected both in how the organization treats its employees and leaders and in how it presents its brand to the public. Organizational culture can also build upon purpose-focused branding and employee and leader engagement. Employee-led engagement is crucial in a nonprofit setting. Ensuring that employees stay connected to the cause and purpose of the NPO (in this case, a faith-based one), is beneficial to their commitment and success (Wang, R. 2022).

There are a variety of low-cost ways ISKCON could do this. One simple option would be to offer one or two paid days off per year — beyond standard vacation — for major festivals on the ISKCON calendar. These days could rotate among leaders to avoid overloading those on duty during these peak times, and would give

leaders a chance to participate fully in the festival or even volunteer for non-leadership related services at their temple, center, or project. Another opportunity would be to encourage and reimburse, up to a capped amount, some volunteer days for leaders to serve outside their local temple — for example, visiting another ISKCON center or project, assisting at other faith-based institutions (such as joining a Langar, a free community kitchen, at a Sikh temple), or volunteering with non-faith-based organizations (such as the Humane Society). This could reignite, diversify, and reinvigorate their service mood.

Another low-cost but important value for next-generation leaders is flexibility in their work environment. This could mean greater autonomy is setting their own hours and more remote positions, where possible, based on the roles. Millennials also value using technology to work more efficiently and reducing meetings held merely for the sake of meeting. To enable this flexibility, ISKCON will need to develop key human-resources policies, work towards professionalizing the organization, and introduce dedicated roles in Human Resources. Incentivizing these positions with flexibility, remote work, adequate vacation time, and an emphasis on work-life balance can go a long way toward recruiting and retaining the next generation of leaders in ISKCON.

Although research indicates that the policies and training initiatives of NPOs may lag behind those of other sectors (Hwang, H. & Powell, W., 2009), faith-based NPOs also need to focus on policies that showcase their purpose-driven value and the values of those they hope to recruit. The preference for market culture of these Millennial leaders suggests that they are acutely aware of the faith-based NPO's failings as a competitive employer. Therefore, careers in faith-based organizations must be strengthened in the areas they can control and can provide, such as a shift in organizational culture, development opportunities, and meaningful work.

This paper recommends that NPOs recruit and promote not just Generation X leaders but also Millennials to leadership positions now. To further recruit and retain next-generation leaders in the sector, more Millennials need to be present to help build and curate a culture in which others in their generation will find value alignment.

In summary, the recruitment system that ISKCON North America can create should be focused on next-generation leaders.

ISKCON can offer specific value- and mission-based incentives in its recruitment efforts and align with Millennial values around organizational culture and workplace benefits. This means adopting a prosocial motivation framework that recognizes mixed motivations, ensuring fair (though modest) compensation, and providing opportunities for career development and leadership pathways. By embracing flexibility, professional human-resources practices, and purpose-driven engagement, ISKCON can create a sustainable model for recruiting and retaining leaders who are motivated both by their faith and by their professional aspirations.

Further discussion

This paper presents ISKCON North America with an opportunity for a philosophical shift in its leadership recruitment and retention practices and offers a potential model for the global ISKCON workplace. While ISKCON North America is neither the wealthiest nor the most systematically organized branch of the movement, such a shift could foster renewed growth and organizational health. Because this paper does not address systematic or strategic development, further discussion is needed on how ISKCON might implement these changes. First, an honest assessment of ISKCON North America's current state of leadership succession is essential. Second, the organization must consider what organizational and structural changes are necessary to support effective recruitment systems. Third, the institution's cultural norms and financial priorities may need to be revised to ensure that employees and leaders receive fair compensation.

The sitting leadership in ISKCON will wonder: What is the relevance of what next-generation leaders want (professional work, etc.) in terms of how it aligns with ISKCON and its founder's vision? The answer is that most of what the next-generation leaders want — transparency in their organization and from their leaders, the flexibility to change cultural norms based on the times, and efficiency of time and resources — are all fair expectations of a healthy and highly functional religious institution. This author suggests that these are reasonable expectations of people serving

in administrative roles, who are often leaders or individuals with a similar nature. And this author, a second-generation member of ISKCON, suggests that Śrīla Prabhupāda would want leaders to value and imbibe these qualities for the benefit of the devotee community.

However, additional exploration is also needed regarding how ISKCON's teachings address evolving generational values and how leadership fits within these changing values. Further study is also required to determine, based on Vaiṣṇava scriptures, whether ISKCON's literature can substantiate a prosocial motivation framework for administrative leaders. Finally, the question of compensating leaders or managers deserves careful consideration within this context. The author does not aim to address these concerns in detail but does suggest that ISKCON's growth may depend more on adopting these changes than on finding scriptural justification for them.

Conclusions

One of the most significant changes ISKCON North America could make regarding succession is to revise the philosophical framework it uses for its most important role: leadership. At present, leaders are expected to be motivated only by selflessness, with no safety net for their livelihood or retirement. Leaders across roles — GBC members, temple presidents, board members, project leads, ministry leaders — often perform their leadership services at a personal financial or time disadvantage. This approach is unsustainable and often leads to high turnover as well as unfinished projects and incomplete planning.

The prosocial motivation framework realigns ISKCON's philosophical approach to leadership to match the changing values and needs of the next generation. As a suitable leadership framework, prosocial motivation connects what next-generation leaders are seeking with the kind of flexible leadership a high-demand religious organization needs today. It encourages leaders to focus on shared values, moving ISKCON toward a more open, inclusive, and balanced environment that integrates tradition and change. While the prosocial motivation framework offers practical solutions to several

pressing challenges, more deeply rooted issues within ISKCON's leadership culture may ultimately require a generational transition to bring about lasting and meaningful change.

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Preserving a Sacred Land: The heritage of Braj and the challenges facing Mathura-Vrindavan

Chandru Ramesh
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In the sacred region of Braj (encompassing Mathura, Vrindavan, Govardhan and other surrounding villages), every place, name, species, and inch of earth intertwines with the ancient pastimes of Lord Kṛṣṇa. For many millions of Kṛṣṇa's devotees, Braj is not merely a mapped location south of New Delhi but the living setting of Kṛṣṇa's divine activities. The Gauḍīya-Vaiṣṇava community reveres the *Śrīmad Bhāgavatam*, which narrates how Kṛṣṇa appeared in Mathura thousands of years ago, then grew up in Vrindavan, spending his childhood in its pastures and forests. These narratives have inspired pilgrims for centuries to walk Braj's paths to follow in Kṛṣṇa's footsteps.[1] David Kinsley observes that this "spirituality is profoundly geographical and involves learning how to read the landscape."[2] The landscape "was given liturgical significance" on a par with the temple icons, for Kṛṣṇa's earthly and transcendental abodes are understood to be one and the same in Braj; so, its geography is regarded as worshipable in the same way as Kṛṣṇa and the temple deities.[3]

Now Braj faces unprecedented challenges as a thriving pilgrimage center. The region has been rapidly modernized and commercialized and placed under ecological strain during the past half

century. Braj's river, forests, and sacred ambience can be irreversibly damaged by unchecked catering to the roughly six million religious tourists who visit annually.[4] A combination of Indian and Western investments has increased the number of hotels and high-rises with modern amenities and has produced new roads, resulting in heavier traffic jams and worsening air pollution. Such developments can cause environmental degradation and a loss of Braj's heritage. As a preservation advocate, I state on my home page that Braj carries stories "thousands of years old. As modernity advances, our duty is to ensure that these stories are not buried under concrete, but rise again through evidence, devotion, and technology."[5]

I examine the situation in Mathura and Vrindavan from two angles. First, I recount their heritage and spiritual value by discussing historical records that span literature, archaeology, and lived tradition. Second, I explore contemporary challenges: explosive urbanization and booming tourism driven by the globalization of Braj's spiritual message; the pollution of the Yamuna River and the loss of forests and green cover; and tensions between development and preservation. About one hundred and fifty years ago, neglect was one of the problems, as F. S. Growse, a British officer, noted in the 1882 preface to his book *Mathura: A District Memoir*:[6]

> So much irreparable damage has been done in past years from simple ignorance as to the value of ancient architectural remains, that I have been careful to describe in full every building in the district which possesses the slightest historical or artistic interest. I have also given a complete resumé of all the results hitherto obtained in archaelogical research among the relics of an earlier age, and have added a sketch of the development of the local style of architecture, as it exists in the present day.

Mathura, the capital of Kṛṣṇa's clan

Both Mathura's antiquity and sanctity are attested in an extraordinary continuity of sources: the Vedic tradition, Buddhist texts, Greek chronicles, archaeological finds, medieval Sanskrit literature,

and the memoir of a British officer. All point to Mathura as a major cultural center for thousands of years and to Kṛṣṇa as "the tutelary divinity of the district." The word "tutelary" means serving as a protector, guardian, or patron, and Growse chose this phrase because he dwelt "at considerable length on the legends connected with the deified Kṛṣṇa . . . [which] have materially affected the whole course of local history and are still household words, to which allusion is constantly made in conversation."[7] Mathura is celebrated in the Vedic tradition as the place where Kṛṣṇa appeared in the world. The *Mahābhārata* and the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* describe Mathura as the Yadu dynasty's capital city, where Śūrasena, Kṛṣṇa's grandfather, ruled the Yādavas. The *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* (10.1.28) says that since ancient times "the city of Mathurā had been the capital of all the kings of the Yadu dynasty."

Other historical evidence corroborates Mathura's prominence. The Buddhist text *Aṅguttara Nikāya* (c. 600 BCE) lists Śūrasena (with Mathura as the capital) among India's sixteen great republics or kingdoms.[8] Greeks at the time of Alexander the Great knew of Mathura: the ambassador Megasthenes (c. 300 BCE) described a mighty Indian city named Methora on the Yamuna River.[9] Archaeological excavations in Mathura revealed settlement layers dating back to the Painted Grey Ware culture (c. 1100–500 BCE), followed by the Northern Black Polished Ware period (c. 700–200 BCE).[10] Beyond its urban core, greater Mathura has preserved traces of older habitation, for example, the Ghosna mound, associated with cultural layers dating back nearly four thousand years. Sites of the Indus Valley civilization along the west coast and in central India (Malwa) were also connected to Mathura in the north by trade routes on the Ganges plain.[11]

Over the centuries, Mathura experienced external imperial influences while maintaining its sacred status. Clear evidence exists that Vaiṣṇavism flourished in the second century BCE and that the Indo-Scythians conquered the city in the first century BCE. Sculptural finds and inscriptions depicting Kṛṣṇa's brother Balarāma and others date to the foreign Kushana period (c. 100–200 CE).[12] The Chinese pilgrim Fa Xian visited Mathura around 400 CE and noted Buddhist monasteries along with Hindu shrines, as did the Chinese monk Xuanzang in 634 CE.[13]

Mathura's prosperity and sanctity did not go unscathed. Periods of upheaval, especially during the medieval era, included Turkic and Afghan invasions in the second millennium. Mathura was sacked by Mahmud of Ghazni (1017–18 CE), leaving temples in ruins.[14] Around 1500 CE, the Delhi Sultan Sikandar Lodi earned the title "Destroyer of Idols" for his desecration of Mathura's sacred sites.[15] The Mughal emperor Aurangzeb also attacked temples in the Mathura region in the seventeenth century.[16] Despite these onslaughts, Mathura's spirit endured. Devotees rebuilt and preserved temples, and patrons from across India constructed new temples and *ghāṭas* (riverside steps). The city maintained its traditions. Devotees thus continued to visit Kṛṣṇa's birthplace through every century. By the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Mathura had reestablished itself as a major pilgrimage destination.

In summary, Mathura's history illustrates resilience and a continuous sacred heritage. Few cities in the world can claim so many layers of religious history: references in the *Mahābhārata* and Purāṇas; Buddhist (and Jain) accounts; classical Greek and Chinese writings; medieval devotional literature; and a memoir by an officer of the British Empire. My book *Mahābhārata: Myth or History?* further documents multiple independent sources on Mathura's historicity. Our generation needs to protect this well-known historical heritage in the region of Kṛṣṇa's dynasty. The question we face is whether Braj's physical sites and environment can survive the contemporary onslaught.

Vrindavan's landscape in the new century

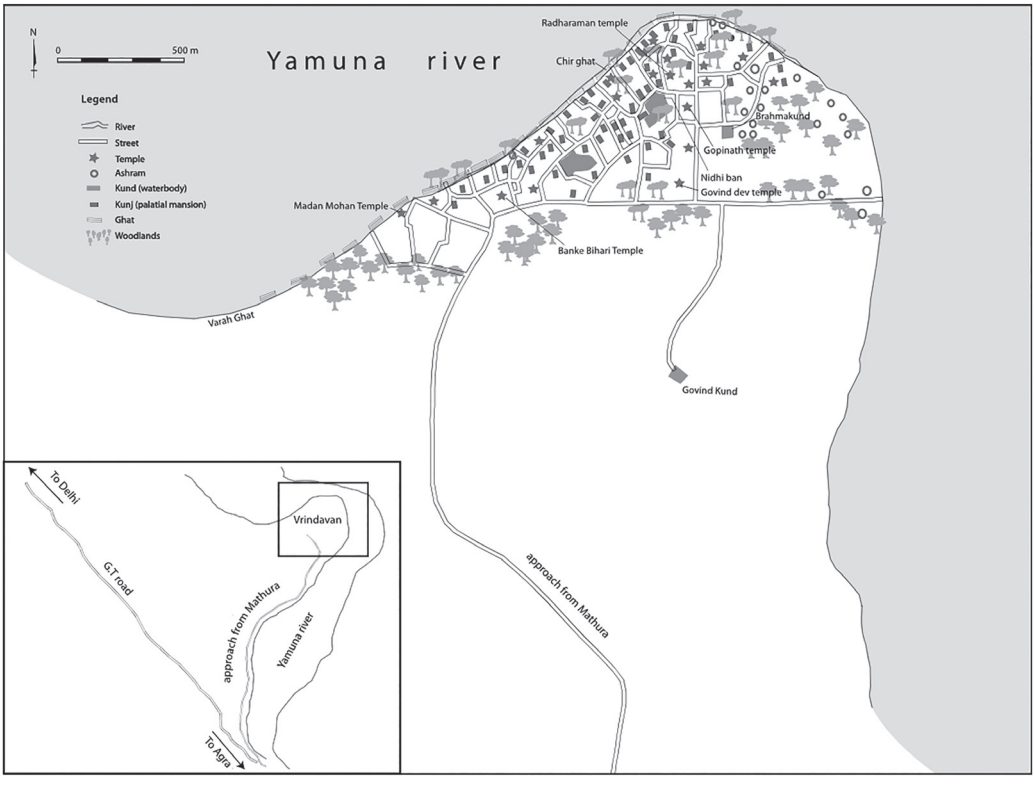
If Mathura is the royal city of Kṛṣṇa's birth, Vrindavan, ten kilometers away, is the village of his transcendental childhood pastimes (*līlās*). Vrindavan's woodlands are on the banks of the Yamuna. The Vaiṣṇava literary tradition tells us that Kṛṣṇa roamed the fields with friends and the village's calves and cows, enacting enchanting affairs. Pilgrims have always walked on Vrindavan's narrow lanes (*kūnj gallīs*) and along the river *ghāṭas* and recollected Kṛṣṇa's hallowed pastimes at the different spots. Vrindavan boasts thousands of shrines and temples dedicated to Kṛṣṇa and his playgrounds. In

devotional songs, Vrindavan is described as a timeless pastoral paradise untouched by the mundane world, a place of flowers, bowers, and Kṛṣṇa's flute music.

However, Vrindavan today is very much in the midst of a challenge. The town has been transformed by recent decades of development. The population swelled; the skyline rose. Where *kadamba* trees once lined the Yamuna, clusters of high-rise hotels and apartment buildings now stand. Since the 1990s especially, real estate prices have boomed, spurred by influxes of affluent devotees from metropolitan India and countries abroad who sought retreat and retirement. Gated residential colonies proliferate, marketed with spiritual-sounding names like Kṛṣṇa Vihar or Goloka City. Dr. Jack Hawley described some new temple-condo developments as having a theme-park feel. He described the specific area around ISKCON's Krishna-Balaram Mandir (a major hub for foreigners since 1975) as a mall complete with an anchor store, which, in this case, is the ISKCON temple.[17]

Critics worry that rapid urbanization will irrevocably alter Vrindavan's character as a sacred or transcendental abode (*dhāma*). Some scholarship on Vrindavan's transformation notes that religious tourism has rapidly urbanized the town's spatial and architectural character. Historic precincts gave way to developed zones. Urgently needed are conservation strategies that protect Vrindavan's ambience even while its infrastructure evolves. Hawley outlined changes in the region and noted two camps: Futurists, who think Vrindavan must develop, and Protectors, who worry about the impact. Protectors include resident saints, temple caretakers, environmental activists, and scholars who remark that it is Vrindavan's old-world, sacred charm that draws pilgrims: *ghāṭas* and temples, cow pens and wooded groves. Now the traditional pilgrimage practice of passing days or weeks circumambulating Vrindavan or the whole region is in decline, replaced by short package-tour adventures. One article on globalization's impact on religious tourism says, "The idea of a pilgrimage to Vrindavan has changed, moving away from its original meaning as a trek to the home of the gods and instead becoming more of a holiday and leisure destination."[18]

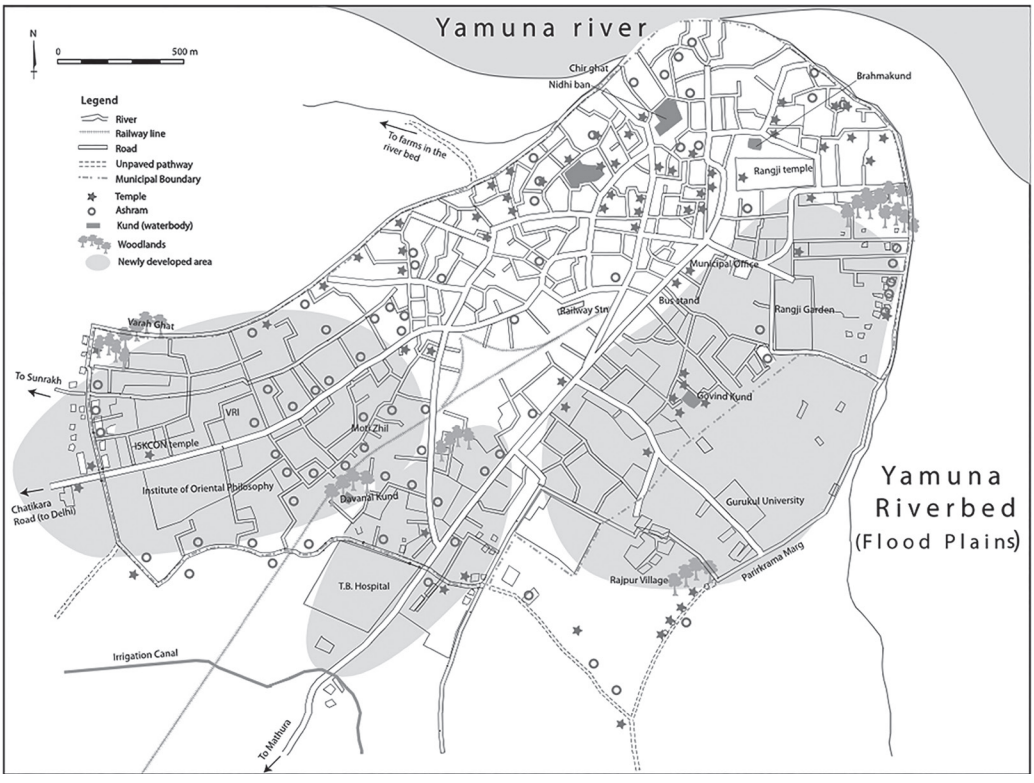
Vrindavan's transformation raises complex questions from a policy perspective. Improved infrastructure and modern amenities



MAP 1 *The settlement of Vrindavan in the late-eighteenth century.*

enhance the pilgrimage experience, while donations and the religious-tourism profits create capital for revitalizing heritage places. However, laissez-faire development led to unplanned urban sprawl on formerly open land, often with no regard for Braj's traditional architecture or environmental constraints. Long-time residents note that within a single generation Vrindavan's green cover and open spaces have drastically shrunk, as gardens, orchards, and forests made way for concrete structures. What was once literally Vṛnda-vana, a forest of *tulasī* trees, is at risk of becoming another urban jungle. The monkeys' habitats were greatly diminished, and now they aggressively steal food in town from pilgrims and shoppers.

Observers lament that deforestation and the loss of groves accelerates because of negligence and land misappropriation by commercial enterprises.[19] Also, the sacred ponds (*kuṇḍas*) that



MAP 2 *The urban expansion of Vrindavan, 1970–present.*

dot the area, each tied to pastimes of Kṛṣṇa, can dry up or can be encroached upon by developers.[20] Fortunately, the government has made recent efforts to rescue and restore *ghāṭas* and *kuṇḍas*. Yet the environmental erosion includes paving with tar the formerly sandy pilgrim footpaths (*pradakshina*), vehicle emissions and construction dust filling the air in places, and sanitation systems polluting the Yamuna.

Braj's subdued devotional ethos used to beckon pilgrims seeking simplicity, peace, and a connection to nature imbued with divinity. Nowadays, pilgrims are more likely to experience blaring loudspeakers, congested streets, and aggressive vendors marketing quick blessings and souvenirs. Sociologists have noted some of the types of transformed, commodified pilgrimage: a thriving market of Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa merchandise, a proliferation of VIP schemes for

viewing the temple deities, and the branding of temples to appeal to affluent visitors. Gupta and Gahalot found that since the 1960s, the entry of transnational chains and tourist enterprises profoundly disturbed Vrindavan's economy and land use.[21] They describe a decisive break from the customary practices of pilgrimage. The elements of austerity, reverence, and immersion in nature have diminished, and many visitors now expect convenient access and recreation. Long-time devotees worry that younger generations may miss the spiritual substance.

Of course, change is inevitable, and not all change is unwelcome. Positive developments in Vrindavan include better availability of *prasāda* (sanctified food), new museums or cultural centers celebrating Braj's heritage, and improved security and cleanliness thanks to government initiatives. The challenge lies in managing all the development with a deliberate, sensitive approach, so that it harmonizes with Braj's heritage.

Environmental challenges: the Yamuna and vanishing forests

One very critical crisis is the environmental challenge. Maybe nothing better represents the crisis in Braj than the polluted Yamuna River at Mathura–Vrindavan. The Yamuna is extraordinary for Vaiṣṇavas. She is Yamunā Māiyā, Kṛṣṇa's eternal companion. Scripture depicts her as lovingly participating in Kṛṣṇa's pastimes. For instance, Kṛṣṇa's father, Vasudeva, carried Kṛṣṇa across the Yamuna on the night of his appearance in the world. Years later, young Kṛṣṇa chastised and exiled the serpent Kāliya, who had poisoned the river and its environs, thus repurifying the water and the region. Devotees gather at Kāliya-ghāṭa to hear this pastime told by a guide. Some tie strips of cloth on branches of an old *kadamba* tree to symbolize their hope that Kṛṣṇa will remove the serpent of pollution from the Yamuna again. Kṛṣṇa's subduing Kāliya "highlights the pollution of Yamuna" and can remind us that cleansing the river is a devotional service, while other pastimes of Kṛṣṇa contain themes "that imbibe an agricultural sensibility."[22] Braj devotion is intertwined with the Yamuna. Pilgrims traditionally sip the sacred river water and bathe in it, while resident devotees perform

yamunā-ārati, an offering of worship at sunrise and sunset. So central is the river to local spiritual life that today's politicians have to pay homage to it out of respect for the people's faith.

Tragically, the Yamuna is in peril. By the time the river reaches Braj, about one hundred and fifty kilometers downstream from New Delhi, it is already heavily polluted. For much of the year, it is essentially a flowing sewer. Untreated domestic sewage from upstream cities, industrial effluents, and agricultural runoff fill the Yamuna with toxins. During lean seasons, up to ninety-five percent of the river's flow at Mathura consists of wastewater discharged from Delhi and surrounding regions. Most of the river's fresh water is diverted for irrigation before it even reaches Agra. Thus the water at Vrindavan's river *ghāṭas* often has foul odors, blackish coloration, and high levels of harmful bacteria and chemicals. Devout pilgrims may still take their dips as an act of faith that the river purifies all impurities, yet there is undeniable heartbreak among the faithful as they witness the Yamuna's distress. David Haberman chronicled the dire situation in *River of Love in an Age of Pollution*. Haberman and others documented how devotees launched campaigns to save the Yamuna — protest marches, petition drives, and public clean-ups. In 2015, for example, thousands undertook a Yamuna *pādayātrā*, walking from Vrindavan to Delhi to draw attention to the river's condition and to demand government action. They voiced their plea with the slogan "*Yamuna ko bhi jeene do*: Let the Yamuna also live!"

The government's response over the years has consisted of a mixture of plans and projects that have met with limited success. The Yamuna Action Plan, a multi-phase initiative begun in the 1990s with Japan's assistance, led to the construction of several new sewage-treatment plants in Mathura and other towns.[23] However, enforcement remains weak, and drains still pour raw sewage into the river. The National Green Tribunal and India's Supreme Court have passed orders — including a ban on industrial effluents and a requirement that upstream states ensure minimum ecological flow — but the implementation of these orders remains a challenge.

A creative, if controversial, proposal by developers in Vrindavan has been to recreate a clean Yamuna on a small scale within temple complexes. Some of the temples now being built in Vrindavan will include a manmade waterway dubbed "creek of the Yamuna," fed

with treated water so that pilgrims can symbolically bathe in pure river water without touching the actual river.[24] Such efforts amount to admissions that the Yamuna is unsafe. Critics of the program argue that this is a band-aid solution and that the real focus should remain on restoring the Yamuna to health.

Beyond the river, Braj's wider ecosystem has been suffering under increasing human pressures. Braj was traditionally celebrated for its twelve forests (*dvādaśa-vana*) where Kṛṣṇa's pastimes occurred. These forests — Madhuvan, Talavan, Kumudvan, Nidhivan, and others — are mentioned in the scriptures. Over the last few centuries, the forests dwindled due to agricultural expansion and the collection of firewood. Yet groves still remained into the mid-twentieth century. Since then, neglect and urban expansion have led to alarming deforestation. The expansion of the Mathura–Vrindavan agglomeration, along with the growth of other townships in the district, has encroached upon the remaining green pockets.

An even greater culprit has been the invasive *Prosopis juliflora* (locally called *vilāyati babūl*), a hardy mesquite tree introduced in colonial times. It has aggressively overtaken open areas, out-competing native flora and altering the ecology by turning once-diverse woods into thorny thickets that local wildlife cannot use. Environmentalists have pointed out that Braj's famous trees — the *tulasī*, *kadamba*, *tamāla* — struggle to regenerate in the wild owing to this invasive species and a lack of human protection.

Even Braj's ponds have suffered from decades of neglect. Many dried up when their feeder channels, small tributaries or springs, were disrupted. Others were used as garbage dumps or were illegally built over. Vrindavan had about thirty historic *kuṇḍas*, and most were imperiled by the year 2000.[25]

When forests are felled and water bodies vanish, the devotional practices tied to them also fade away. Elders in Vrindavan reminisce that just a few decades ago processions entered certain groves for special festivals, and pilgrims stopped at tree shrines (*vṛkṣa samādhis*) and ponds to sing songs. Such experiences are no longer possible, simply because the sites are gone or transformed. The quality of life for the residents of Braj has declined with the loss of the ecosystem. Summers are now hotter without tree cover. Air quality worsens with fewer trees to filter the air, and groundwater is

depleted when springs and ponds are not maintained. The need for ecological restoration is urgent.

Efforts to preserve Braj's heritage & environment

A variety of stakeholders (government bodies and courts, local saints, scholars, community groups) recognize that Braj's heritage requires proactive, long-term protection. Voices calling to save Braj grew louder in the first two decades of this millennium. Some steps toward preservation and sustainable development are now underway to ensure that Braj's cultural and environmental integrity is not lost to unchecked modernization.

Government initiatives

In 2017, the state government of Uttar Pradesh set up the Braj Teerth Vikas Parishad (BTVP), a board dedicated to developing Braj's pilgrimage sites. Its mandate is to improve tourist facilities and to "preserve, develop, and maintain the aesthetic and cultural heritage of Braj."[26] In practice, this involves projects such as beautifying major temple areas, building proper bathing *ghāṭas* along the Yamuna, and creating museums and similar centers. Another of its notable projects, approved in 2023 under the guidance of the Supreme Court, is an eco-restoration of Braj's forests. The BTVP, in collaboration with the Forest Department, launched an eleven-million-dollar initiative to rejuvenate thirty-six old forest groves across 487 hectares (1,200 acres) with native species. The project aims to systematically remove the invasive Prosopis juliflora and to plant native species integral to Braj's lore: Kṛṣṇa-kadamba (Neolamarckia cadamba), Tamāla (Garcinia xanthochymus), Pippala (Ficus religiosa), banyan (vaṭa; Ficus benghalensis), Pīlu (Salvadora oleioides), and nine others.[27] The fact that the Supreme Court had to authorize the cutting of invasive trees (because Vrindavan lies within the protected Taj Trapezium Zone) shows the level of oversight and commitment involved.

> Site-specific plans were prepared after detailed surveys and technical discussions with scientists of the

> Forest Research Institute, Dehradun. After the plans were approved by the Union government, soil testing was conducted across the 487-hectare landscape, leading to the development of a comprehensive blueprint and action plan. This is the first large-scale forest revival in the area. It is planned in three phases over three years, . . . the project aims not only to restore ecological and cultural heritage, but also to promote soil conservation, biodiversity, air quality, and eco-tourism, while supporting local livelihoods.[28]

Pilgrims in the near future may once again be able to experience something of the older Vrindavan if the project succeeds: walking under the canopies of native trees, hearing parrots and peacocks, and feeling the inspiration of loving devotional service to Kṛṣṇa (*bhakti*).

On the Yamuna front, governmental efforts include ongoing upgrades to sewage infrastructure. New sewage treatment plants in Mathura were recently completed to divert drains that previously flowed into the river. Additionally, a Yamuna Riverfront Development plan (somewhat akin to projects in Varanasi) calls for creating cleaner *ghāṭas*, greater sewage interception, and possibly dredging (to increase water retention). However, activists argue that without ensuring adequate freshwater flow from upstream, especially during the dry season, local efforts will not suffice. Thus, a fight continues in courts and tribunals to compel upstream states and the central government to release more water downstream of Delhi. There is also a proposal to link the Ken River to the Yamuna, which might augment water availability, though inter-basin transfers have their own environmental concerns. In summary, while the Yamuna remains critically polluted, awareness of and policy attention to the river are higher than ever — a necessary first step toward meaningful remediation.

Local and NGO initiatives

Long before government agencies awakened to these issues, local devotees and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) rallied in

Braj to protect their sacred land. One pioneer is Friends of Vrindavan (FOV), an NGO founded in the 1990s. FOV worked on everything from tree-planting drives to cleanliness campaigns. It was FOV that starkly warned in 1998, "Vrindavan is sinking beneath its own effluent"[29] — a reference to severe solid-waste and open-sewer problems — and pushed authorities to act on waste management. Another prominent organization is The Braj Foundation, established in 2005 and focused on restoring Braj's cultural landscape.[30] Led by philanthropist Vineet Narain, this foundation successfully restored over fifty sacred ponds and water bodies. It combines engineering (dredging, lining pond beds, creating filtration inlets) with cultural rejuvenation (reestablishing pilgrim access and installing informational plaques about each pond's role in Kṛṣṇa's pastimes). For instance, the revival of Brahmā-kuṇḍa[31] and Govinda-kuṇḍa[32] in Vrindavan is often cited as a success story. These historic ponds had become stagnant cesspools and garbage dumps, but after restoration they now hold clean water seasonally and again function as pilgrimage sites. Such important projects not only recharge the groundwater and beautify the area but also renew pilgrims' practices: circumambulating the *kuṇḍa* and using its water for purification. The Braj Foundation also undertakes planting projects around Govardhan Hill and various temples and reintroduces indigenous flora.

ISKCON, with a strong presence in Vrindavan, has likewise initiated environmental efforts aligned with spiritual values. One program, the Braj Vrindavan Act Now campaign, promotes a Green Pilgrimage that urges pilgrims to minimize plastic use, keep holy places clean, and take part in planting trees. ISKCON distributes cloth bags and organizes volunteers to clean up after festivals. An NGO-led effort to ban plastic bags even succeeded in briefly outlawing them, but it collapsed within a month because alternatives for vendors were unavailable and enforcement inconsistent.[33] That project at least highlighted the need for a systemic solution (such as providing affordable eco-friendly packaging). The growing discourse on making pilgrimage environmentally sustainable is a positive sign. Monasteries have begun collaborating with groups like the World Wildlife Fund on planting trees, a form of devotional service to Kṛṣṇa. Simple steps, such as better solid-waste collection during major festivals, which prevents litter from ending up in the Yamuna,

are gradually being taken by municipal authorities, often spurred by citizen activism.

Academic and international support

Scholars of religion and of the environment have brought global attention to Braj's situation by framing it as part of a broader effort to protect sacred landscapes in an era of climate change and rapid urban expansion. Conferences and journal articles — e.g., Haberman (2006), Lochtefeld (2009), and Kiran Shinde (2011, 2012) — and works like Religious Tourism in Asia (2018) emphasize that Braj's religious heritage and environmental stewardship must go hand in hand. Such academic attention often strengthens local causes by validating them in policy circles. Some experts have recommended establishing a Braj Heritage Village, or designating parts of Vrindavan as heritage zones with construction and renovation limits. For example, some NGOs opposed the state government's plan to build a corridor with integrated crowd-control features designed to reduce deaths and injuries to pilgrims during the most crowded festivals. They argued that widening Vrindavan's traditional narrow lanes for reasons of safety and mobility would deal a serious blow to the town's heritage.[34]

International organizations have also become involved. The World Monuments Fund listed Vrindavan's *ghāṭas* and historic structures as endangered cultural sites and has helped generate funds for their conservation. UNESCO (the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization) has been approached by advocacy groups to recognize Braj's cultural landscape on its World Heritage List, though the designation process is lengthy. The narrative is shifting from seeing Braj as a tourist destination to viewing it as a heritage landscape in need of safeguarding. Interfaith and interdisciplinary perspectives note that urban planners could study Braj to develop models for managing other pilgrimage towns, and that environmentalists might learn from Vaiṣṇavas how traditional reverence for nature can aid modern conservation.

How might the future look for Mathura–Vrindavan? Most analysts agree that a middle path must be charted. Braj will benefit neither from freezing itself as a medieval relic (people's needs and time's currents will not allow that) nor from blind commercialization, which frays or destroys the fabric of holiness that makes Braj special. A conscious strategy that marries development and preservation is needed.

- *Strict zoning and heritage regulations*

  Identify core heritage zones, for example, Vrindavan's riverfront, the vicinity of Govardhan, and the old city of Mathura around the Dwarkadhish temple, where new construction is restricted in style and height, and historical structures are protected and restored. This could prevent incongruous high-rises from overshadowing sacred sites. Local examples (such as the restoration of Kusum Sarovar's sandstone pavilions) show that heritage renewal boosts pilgrims' interest and residents' pride.

- *Infrastructure that serves pilgrims and residents*

  Improve basic facilities — clean drinking water and public toilets, waste management, parking — in ways that accommodate the pilgrim crowds without degrading the environment. For instance, build large parking lots on the outskirts of Braj and use electric buses or rickshaws for last-mile connectivity to reduce traffic jams and pollution in narrow heritage lanes. Some parts of Vrindavan already restrict certain zones to pedestrian use on busy festival days.

- *Yamuna's revival as the top priority*

  Because all efforts will ring hollow if the Yamuna cannot be revived, continue pressuring the government for upstream solutions and take local measures such as community-

managed wetlands to naturally treat wastewater, and rainwater harvesting to improve river flow in dry months. Apply cultural pressure to encourage pilgrims not to pollute the river with trash or detergent — a campaign some priests have already begun during rituals. The dream many share is to bathe in a clean, free-flowing river — a return to at least some semblance of the Yamuna's former glory.

- *Ecological tourism and education*

  Braj can be promoted not only for religious tourism but also for eco-tourism and heritage walks. Educate visitors about Braj's history and nature by providing tours of restored forests and *kuṇḍas*, bird-watching along the Yamuna (the wetlands near Mathura are a bird habitat), and interactive museums on Kṛṣṇa's life and Braj's culture. These initiatives provide economic incentives to keep the environment healthy and involve local residents in showcasing their homeland's story. Jack Hawley's observation of the Futurists versus the Protectors need not imply a zero-sum game (in which whatever is gained by one side is lost by the other). Braj can have responsible futurists who develop in the service of preservation, not against it. The regional mindset is slowly shifting in this direction. The recent forest-restoration project aims to "restore ecological and cultural heritage while promoting soil conservation, biodiversity, and eco-tourism."[35] This indicates an integrated approach, which was unimaginable a few decades ago, when development meant only concrete. It is a recognition that Kṛṣṇa's sacred land must be kept green and alive, not built over with concrete and marble decorated with neon lights.

Conclusion

Mathura and Vrindavan occupy a cherished place in the hearts of millions as the cradle and home of Śrī Kṛṣṇa. His story has shaped

art, culture, and spirituality on the Indian subcontinent for millennia. The land of Braj is a living heritage that inspires devotion and gives meaning to people's lives. In its lanes and temple courtyards, pilgrims hear songs at dawn and still feel a sacred mood (*bhāva*).

The task before administrators, residents, devotees, and scholars is to ensure that Braj's growth is wisely guided by respect for its unique identity. The voices from my review — that Kṛṣṇa's land has a real historical basis; that Vrindavan is sinking under its waste; that globalization is changing pilgrimage — all converge on one point: Braj is at a crossroads. The choices made now will decide whether, a generation hence, Mathura and Vrindavan retain the auras of Kṛṣṇa's birthplace and town — or become indistinguishable from any other crowded tourist town.

There is cause for cautious optimism. The increasing involvement of courts, the government's special board for Braj, and grassroots initiatives show that people have not become apathetic. Love for Kṛṣṇa often translates into passionate activism to save his land. One Braj conservationist said that this is not mere environmental work but devotional service, like decorating the body of Kṛṣṇa. Such an outlook, which blends *bhakti* (devotion) with *sevā* (service), may be Braj's greatest hope. If the stakeholders can agree that development must serve the divine legacy of Braj, then Braj will continue to enchant and spiritually nourish humanity for centuries. Preserving Braj is an act of preserving the collective spiritual heritage of all who find meaning in Kṛṣṇa's message. To "Preserve Now!" is to honor the past and ensure that devotion and history continue to dance together in an eternal Vrindavan.

Preserving Braj continues in the mood of Śrī Caitanya Mahāprabhu. In the early sixteenth century, Śrī Caitanya went to Vṛindavan with the mission to rediscover and re-sanctify Kṛṣṇa's pastime sites. With the deepest devotion, he wandered about and identified sites where Kṛṣṇa had enacted pastimes. Inspired both by his visions and by already preserved sites, the Six Goswāmīs of Vṛndāvana systematically built temples, wrote theology, and mapped Braj's sacred geography. They gave future generations a living spiritual and cultural heritage in which to experience Kṛṣṇa's eternal pastimes.

To continue this mission, the Historika Foundation draws on

contemporary technology. It aims to show how Kṛṣṇa's pastimes are spiritually eternal and historically rich. Through space archaeology — Light Detection and Ranging (LiDAR), Synthetic Aperture Radar (SAR), Ground-Penetrating Radar (GPR), and satellite multispectral imaging — the foundation plans to uncover ancient layers in Braj, from the Painted Grey Ware culture to possible Indus Valley connections. It also conducts seminars across India to raise heritage awareness, inspiring communities to see themselves as guardians of Kṛṣṇa's sacred land. For the Historika Foundation, education is essential for preserving holy places and passing on their meanings to future generations. By combining devotion with technology, the Historika Foundation helps safeguard Braj's heritage.

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Maps used

MAP 1 This map illustrates the lack of urban growth in Vrindavan more than two centuries ago. It identifies principal pilgrimage locations, such as the Yamuna riverfront and some *kuṇḍas*, *ghāṭas*, temples, and forests. It highlights a relationship between sacred geography and environmental awareness.

MAP 2 This map visually illustrates the encroachment on green cover and the two major zones of expansion in recent decades. It highlights large areas affected by pilgrimage-related development.

Endbotes

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