

order and totally dedicated his life to the mission of his guru. In 1959 he formalised that renunciation by accepting the order of sannyasa, forsaking the comforts of married life.

After many years of preparation, he left India on 13 August 1965 and set sail for the US with a free passage aboard the steamship Jaladuta. After a difficult voyage during which he suffered two heart attacks, he arrived in Boston on 17 September 1965.

The Counter Culture

Not knowing what to expect when he reached the US, upon settling in New York City, Srila Prabhupada came face to face with the famous counter-culture movement of the 1960s. The counter culture offered an alternative to mainstream American values, and its participants were commonly known as ‘hippies.’

While initially his spiritual discourses based upon the ancient spiritual texts of India attracted an attendance of older middle class women, a change in location to the Lower East side of New York City attracted a different audience. Disaffected American youths were questioning the material values that formed the basis of mainstream American culture and consequently attendance at his classes gradually increased. While his following was still relatively small, Prabhupada formalized his preaching mission by registering it as the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) on 13 July 1966.



Above: George Harrison of the Beatles chanting with devotees in London consecutuer adipisc-ing elit Aenean commodo ligula eget dolor. Cum sociis natoque penatibus et magnis dis partu

Exponential growth: 1960s–1970s

After its humble beginnings in 1965, ISKCON’s mission to give Krishna consciousness to Westerners flourished and expanded exponentially from 1966 onwards. With the assistance of his students, Srila Prabhupada rented various properties in New York City, the first location of note being a storefront at 26 Second Avenue in Manhattan.

In 1966 Srila Prabhupada’s students engaged in their first public chanting (kirtana) of the holy names of God, for which Hare Krishna devotees would later become famous worldwide.

ISKCON Press was established late 1966, with the aim of publishing translations of Gaudiya Vaishnava devotional texts.

Responding to an invitation from some of his students, Srila Prabhupada journeyed to San Francisco in 1967 to establish his mission there. There he led public chanting of the Hare Krishna mantra at the Mantra Rock Dance, a concert that featured some of the most popular American rock bands of the day.

In 1968 Srila Prabhupada’s mission spread to the UK when he sent three married couples to establish preaching centers there. Drawing upon a combination of ingenuity, bravado and determination, in 1969 they engineered a meeting with The Beatles, and George Harrison, who had already heard about the Hare Krishnas. Soon after they recorded a chanting of the Hare Krishna mantra with the Beatles, which was released by Apple Records, and sold

70,000 copies on the first day. Within a few weeks the devotees appeared on the popular TV show Top of the Pops, singing the Hare Krishna mantra. ‘The Hare Krishnas’ as they had come to be known, had become a household name.

In September 1969, Srila Prabhupada visited London to see the progress made by his disciples in establishing Krishna consciousness there. At that time he met George Harrison and resided at John Lennon’s country estate, Tittenhurst Park, where he engaged in discourse on spiritual topics with John Lennon and Yoko Ono.

ISKCON grew at a rapid rate in the early 1970s. By that time Srila Prabhupada had established centers all over the US as well as in the UK, Europe, India, South America, Australia, Africa, and Asia. Most of these centers included living quarters where full-time members could reside in order to serve the mission. By the early 1970s, his followers numbered in the hundreds, with most members being in the US and the UK.

The rapidly growing society needed a management structure to support it, and Srila Prabhupada had assigned a temple president at each center. However, due to the rapidly increasing size of the institution, in July 1970 he found it necessary to form a governing board, which he named the Governing Body Commission (GBC)

This governing body comprised 12 members who would assist Srila Prabhupada in managing the affairs of ISKCON. In the same month, Srila Prabhupada es-

How is ISKCON Managed?

The International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) is governed by a group of senior devotees, men and women, called the Governing Body Commission (GBC).

At the time of writing, the GBC body has 32 members who are individually responsible for overseeing the management and spiritual standards of ISKCON centers in assigned geographic regions. The governing body is administered through a GBC executive committee (EC) that consists of a chairperson, vice chairperson, and secretary. These executive posts are held for one-year rotating assignments after which time the chairperson’s term of office expires, the vice chairperson succeeds the chairperson, and the secretary succeeds the vice chairperson. The governing body then elects a new secretary to join the executive committee each year.

GBC members also supervise specific projects, initiatives, and ministries. Following the instructions of Srila Prabhupada, the GBC body convenes yearly in Mayapur, West Bengal, India, for its Annual General Meeting. During this period, they discuss proposals, specific issues and projects within ISKCON, and pass resolutions by way of a voting process.

Often working under the GBC are regional governing bodies (RGBs) comprised of GBC zonal secretaries and additional leaders within the region. RGBs undertake the supervision of ISKCON centers and projects on a region-specific level, such as Europe, South America and India.

According to Srila Prabhupada’s directions, all ISKCON temples are financially independent yet function under the ecclesiastical management of the GBC. A temple president, who is responsible for carrying out the mission, locally manages each ISKCON temple and goals of ISKCON as outlined by Srila Prabhupada. While working under the supervision of their assigned GBC zonal secretary, temple presidents are encouraged to act with local initiative and are responsible for overseeing all functions of a temple, including educational programs, Deity worship, congregational development, ISKCON events within the community, care of temple residents, building maintenance, and financial stability. Moreover, temple presidents have the responsibility of maintaining in their local center ISKCON’s spiritual standards as outlined by Srila Prabhupada.

tablished the Bhaktivedanta Book Trust (BBT), which became ISKCON’s in-house publishing entity, producing Srila Prabhupada’s translations and commentaries on Vaishnava devotional texts.

Back to India

In 1970, Srila Prabhupada returned

his focus to India when he visited his homeland with some of his disciples in tow, showcasing his success in convincing Westerners to take up the practice of Krishna consciousness. Two years later, he would take the first steps in the construction of temples on land that ISKCON had purchased in Mumbai

Timeline of Srila Prabhupada’s achievements in establishing ISKCON

- 1896** 1 September, birth of ISKCON’s Founder-Acharya A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Srila Prabhupada in Kolkata, India.
- 1922** Srila Prabhupada meets his spiritual master, Srila Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati Thakura.
- 1932** 21 November Srila Prabhupada receives spiritual initiation from Srila Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati Thakura at Allahabad.
- 1937** Srila Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati Thakura passes away.
- 1939** Srila Prabhupada receives the honorary title of ‘Bhaktivedanta.’
- 1944** February, Srila Prabhupada begins *Back to Godhead* magazine.

- 1953** 16 May grand opening day of Srila Prabhupada’s League of Devotees in Jhansi, India.
- 1954** Srila Prabhupada leaves his family to dedicate his life to the mission of his spiritual master.
- 1956** September, Srila Prabhupada moves to Vrindavana.
- 1959** 17 September Srila Prabhupada receives sannyasa initiation in Mathura.
- 1960** Srila Prabhupada publishes his first book, *Easy Journey to Other Planets*, in Delhi.
- 1962** Srila Prabhupada publishes *Canto 1, Volume 1 of his Srimad-Bhagavatam*, in Delhi.
- 1965** 13 August Srila Prabhupada sets sail for America aboard the

- steamship Jaladuta.
- 17 September Srila Prabhupada arrives in Boston.
- 1966** Fall/Autumn, Srila Prabhupada establishes ISKCON Press.
- ISKCON is incorporated 19 July.
- First hari-nama in San Francisco.
- 1967** January, Srila Prabhupada’s first airplane flight to San Francisco.
- 9 July, Srila Prabhupada inspires his disciples to perform the first Jagannatha Ratha-yatra in the West (San Francisco).
- September, Srila Prabhupada suffers third heart attack since leaving India.
- 1968** May, Srila Prabhupada’s first visit to New Vrindavana, West Virginia, US

- 1969** 23 June, Srila Prabhupada installs ISKCON’s first Radha Krishna deities, in Los Angeles.
- 11 September, Srila Prabhupada visits London, resides at Tittenhurst Park, John Lennon’s country estate.
- 14 December, Srila Prabhupada conducts grand opening of temple and installation of Sri Sri Radha Londonisvara, in London, England.**
- 1970** 28 July Srila Prabhupada forms the Governing Body Commission (GBC).
- 29 July, Srila Prabhupada establishes the Bhaktivedanta Book Trust (BBT).
- 29 August, Srila Prabhupada institutes the Life Membership Program in Kolkata, India.
- Fall/Autumn, Srila Prabhupada first tours India with American disciples.

- 1971** May, Srila Prabhupada signs contract with Macmillan Company to print unabridged Bhagavad-gita As It Is.
- May, Srila Prabhupada acquires first five acres of land in Mayapur, India.
- June, Srila Prabhupada visits Moscow, Russia, to plant the seed of Krishna consciousness there.
- 1972** 29 February, Srila Prabhupada conducts ground-breaking ceremony in Mayapur, India.
- March, Srila Prabhupada conducts cornerstone-laying ceremony at Hare Krishna Land, in Juhu, Mumbai, India.
- March, Srila Prabhupada acquires land in Ramana Reti, Vrindavana, India, and conducts cornerstone-laying ceremony.
- 1974** 10 November, Srila Prabhupada completes his

- translation and purports of Caitanya-caritamṛta.
- 1975** 20 April, Srila Prabhupada conducts grand opening of Krishna-Balaram Mandir in Vrindavana.
- Srila Prabhupada founds the Bhaktivedanta Institute, the scientific branch of ISKCON.
- 22 August, Srila Prabhupada meets with Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi.
- 1977** 14 November, Srila Prabhupada departs from this world & returns to Lord Krishna.

Right: Srila Prabhupada visiting his disciples in London
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 Aenean commodo ligula eget dolor.
 Cum sociis natoque penatibus et magnis dis parturient-
 natoque penatibus



(then called Bombay) and the holy sites of Vrindavana and Mayapur.

In May 1971, ISKCON signed a contract with the Macmillan Publishing Company to print an unabridged edition of the founder's translation and commentary of the Bhagavad-gita, entitled Bhagavad-gita As It Is.

A month later Srila Prabhupada visited Russia, and although his visit was tightly regulated due to the system of governance there, he was able to discuss Krishna consciousness with at least one academic and one young Russian man who became a disciple. This was a small beginning, but it later expanded into a movement that attracted many thousands of interested spiritual seekers in a country where formalised religious and spiritual practice had been suppressed.

Throughout the 1970s ISKCON continued to grow rapidly and although Srila Prabhupada remained very much involved in overseeing the affairs of ISKCON, he increasingly delegated the management of the society to his most capable disciples. This enabled him to work on translating and writing his commentary on the Srimad-Bhagavatam—a voluminous devotional text that is of central importance in the Vaishnava tradition.

Testament to his growing prominence as a spiritual leader in India, Srila Prabhupada met with then Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in August 1975. Also in 1975, Srila Prabhupada founded the Bhaktivedanta Institute, comprised of disciples who had PhDs in the sciences and other disciplines, the aim being to challenge mainstream scientific and intellectual paradigms that he argued ne-

gated the existence of God.

Preserving Prabhupada's Legacy

On 14 November 1977, Srila Prabhupada passed away in India at the age of 81 and ISKCON was thrown into a state of mourning and grief. For many ISKCON devotees, the thought of ISKCON without their guru was unimaginable. Nevertheless, they took it as their sacred duty to carry on in order to preserve his preaching mission.

Srila Prabhupada had named the GBC as the ultimate managing authority, and that governing body as well as the rest of the managerial structure that he had built since 1965, remained intact. This ensured that his mission would continue even in his absence.

Additionally, in accordance with Prabhupada's wishes, 11 of his most senior disciples assumed the role of guru in ISKCON, so that new members could have the benefit of a living guru. In the mid 1980s, after much debate about who was qualified to be a guru in ISKCON, more disciples were added to the list to give spiritual guidance to new members.

In the 1980s ISKCON transitioned from an ashrama-based institution to a community-based institution, as ISKCON devotees married, moved out of the ashrama environment, had children, and took up jobs in order to support their growing families. The 1990s saw a further change as more devotees returned to university studies, some to improve their job prospects, and others so that they could study the Gaudiya Vaishnava tradition academically. The latter change has given rise to a number of educational and academic initiatives in ISKCON, which have facilitated

devotees wishing to study and teach the tradition academically.

These initiatives include the founding of the Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies in 1997, which is now a recognised independent center of Oxford University, and Bhaktivedanta College in Belgium, which confers accredited degrees to its students.

Other initiatives include ISKCON Communications, which started as the public relations arm of ISKCON and which now serves as an interface between ISKCON and the media, organises interfaith forums, and addresses issues of religious freedom, among other things. These later developments are just a few highlights of the many activities that have been taking place in ISKCON, some of which will be covered in the remainder of this publication.

The Pivotal Person

Despite these recent developments, Srila Prabhupada has remained as the Founder-Acharya¹ of ISKCON, a position that will continue to place him at the authoritative, spiritual, and emotional center of all ISKCON's efforts, both for those who have personally met him, and those who have not.

It is in large part because of the organisational structure that Srila Prabhupada set up, his commitment to high spiritual and moral standards, as well as the efforts to keep him in the center that have ensured that the mission has not only survived, but also flourished.

However, it is also due to the ability of the disciples to self-correct in the course of overcoming the many challenges that they have encountered since Srila Prabhupada's departure that has ensured that ISKCON has not only survived, but also grown. As a scholar of religion, Thomas Hopkins—who met Srila Prabhupada in 1966 and who was the first scholar to study ISKCON—has pointed out, an institution that does not self-correct will not survive.

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