



SRILA PRABHUPADA'S VOYAGE TO THE WEST – A Play by Sankirtana Das (ACBSP)

When I saw the recent article, posting the drama “Swamiji At Sea,” I remembered a script I had written back in 1985 of Srila Prabhupada’s journey to the West. The unique thing is that this play below can easily be performed anywhere as Reader’s Theater, with script in hand. It requires a minimum of three actors: one to play Prabhupada; another male actor to play – Godbrother, Choksi, Bhattacharya and CaptPandia; also a female actor to play Narrator, MrsMoraji, Mrs Naga, Reporter and MrsPandia. Of course, it can also be performed on a larger scale with a different actor playing each role.

When we first performed it in New Vrindaban, Srila Prabhupada was played by Lokamangala Das, I played the other male roles and Mother Hari Nam played the female roles. Brahmananda Swami was in the audience and later said that when he saw Lokamangala as Prabhupada, he felt he was looking at Prabhupada himself. Lokamangala’s mood and bearing was as if Prabhupada was appearing through his performance.

So even as a Reader’s Theater, the actors should still be sufficiently rehearsed to convey the characters in the drama. The actors should not have to rely on constantly looking at their scripts. They should know which way to turn and how to respond.

I personally lean toward a minimalistic style of theater, making due with the bare necessity in costumes, props and stage design. This script requires practically nothing.

Over the years two quotes have guided my approach to theater: Srila Prabhupada – “Just like your Shakespeare. Macbeth may be recited by two men, without anything else, and simply by their acting ability and the meaningful words alone, they can very easily capture the entire audience and give them real substance.” And the great director Stanislavsky echoes the same message – “If an actor’s inner life had been very rich, he would need neither make-up, nor costumes, nor sets. All that would be needed is the presence of the creative artist himself...” That was the type of actor Lokamangalaprabhu was. And this is the challenge for those who take up this script.

SRILA PRABHUPADA’S VOYAGE TO THE WEST

Written and adapted for stage by Sankirtana das (ACBSP)

Taken From Prabhupada Lilamrita by Satsvarupa Das Goswami

Standing on stage from left to right: actor playing Prabhupada, male actor, female actor. Three chairs might be behind them. Prabhupada is dressed in saffron w/chaddar. Others are dressed simply (i.e. Godbrother wears chaddar but takes it off to reveal vest underneath for Choksi character, Reporter character takes pen from pocket to indicate that character)

Scene 1

Godbrother: (to audience) In February, 1961, some of us disciples of Srila Bhaktisiddhanta gathered in Vrindavan on his Vyasa-Puja ceremony. An offering of flowers was made before a picture of Gurudeva. A humble gesture by a group of aging individuals, but Srila Bhaktisiddhanta had wanted more to spread Krsna’s teachings to the far corners of the earth. Practically there was no cohesive movement. Only disputes, rivalry, politicking. At that time, Bhaktivedanta Swami was a junior sannyasi. He had no temple, no followers of his own. But he had firm faith in the words of Bhaktisiddhanta and he expressed that faith in a poem:

Prabhupada: Even now, my God brothers, you return here on the order of

our master, and together we engage in this puja.

But simply a festival of flowers and fruits does not constitute worship. The one who serves the message of the guru really worships him.

Oh, shame! My dear brothers, aren't you embarrassed? In the manner of businessmen you increase your disciples.

Our master said to preach! Let the neophytes remain inside the temples and simply ring the bells. . .

But just take a good look at the terrible situation that has arisen. Everyone has become a sense enjoyer and has given up preaching.

From the seas, across the earth, penetrate the universal shell; come together and preach this Krsna Consciousness.

Then our master's service will be in proper order. Make your promise today. Give up all your politics and diplomacy.

Narrator: (to audience) The truth of his poem exploded in the midst of the gathering. Some nodded with approval, others became indignant. They were getting too old to make new plans. Some did not want to leave the shelter of the holy dhama. One of them even challenged:

Godbrother: Well if you think you can do something more, then go ahead and try.

Scene 2

Choksi: (to audience) It was the second time within a year that he came to my

office at the Scindia Steamship Building in Bombay. He was a

quiet man, noble, polite, scholarly. He had a specific glow about

him. I don't know why, but it was a source of great pleasure to

set my eyes upon him again.

Prabhupada: Mr. Choksi, my name is. . .

Choksi: Bhaktivedanta Swami. Yes I remember you. I remember you

very well. You were here last year to get a donation for your books. Is your work going well?

P: Yes, now first canto Srimad Bhagavatam is printed in its

entirety—three volumes.

Choksi: I'm so glad to hear of it. I imagine you've come for another donation.

P: Yes.

Choksi: To continue the printing?

P: No.

Choksi: No?

P: No, I've come for a ticket to America.

Choksi: To America! Good heavens, to America. Why Swamiji, I

don't think it will be that easy. First you need a passport and

also a visa, and then who will take care of you. Once you get there

you'll need money and a place to stay. It's not that easy.

P: Passport I have, and also sponsorship papers. One man, Mr.

Agarwal — his son lives in Butler, Pennsylvania with his wife and he will

sponsor me for one month. (Shows papers to Choksi)

Choksi: Indeed, indeed he will.

P: Now I need passage to America on one of your ships.

Choksi: Well please sit down and wait right here. I'll see what I

can do. I'll show this to Mrs. Moraji. Just wait right here.

(Turns to Mrs. M.)

Choksi: Mrs. Moraji.

Mrs. M: Yes, what is it?

Choksi: Well, that sadhu who was here last year. Remember the one.

He stood for hours on the front steps of the building waiting to see you. Well, he's back from Vrindavan and he's published that book with your donation.

Mrs. M: I suppose he wants more money for printing his books.

Choksi: Well, that's what I thought. But he. . .he wants passage

on one of your ships. . .to America.

Mrs. M: Now that's too much to ask. What does he expect to

accomplish? He's too old to go. It's out of the question. Tell

him I said no.

Choksi: I think that we should consider his. . .

Mrs. M: No! (Choksi turns back to Prabhupada)

Choksi: You won't like what I have to say — but she said no —

she said that you were too old to go.

P: Mr. Choksi, you must help me — please.

Choksi: But Swamiji. . .

P: Yes I am old, so I don't have much time left. Give me this

chance to spread the gospel of Bhagavad Gita in the west. You

must help me.

Choksi: What do you want me to do?

P: You go back to Mrs. Moraji, tell her this: I find this gentleman

very inspired to go to the United States. . .

(Choksi turns to Mrs. M)

Choksi: Mrs. Moraji, I'm sorry to bother you again. It's about

Swamiji. I just wanted to say, if I may, that I find this gentleman very inspired to go to the United States. He can preach to the people there about the glories of Bhagavad Gita and Srimad Bhagavatam. The message of the Vedas is in the hands of a very

expert person.

Mrs. M: Mr. Choksi are you finished?

Choksi: Ahhh. . .yes.

Mrs. M: Tell him my answer is still no. The Swami is frail. It gets very cold in America. He is a gentle man, and people will not be very cooperative. No one will listen to him.

(Prabhupada has followed Choksi into her office and steps forward. She sees him)

Mrs. M: Swamiji, Namaste

P: You have freighters going to America — Please give me one ticket.

Mrs. M: Swamiji tell me, how old are you?

P: Almost 70.

Mrs. M: And you are taking such a great responsibility. The

journey itself will last over a month.

P: Don't worry. It will be alright.

Mrs. M: Why don't you just remain in India and finish work on your books.

P: I must get passage to America.

Mrs. M: Swamiji, I'm afraid you will go and die in a strange land.

P: I must go. It is the order of my Guru Maharaj. Almost fifty

years ago, when I was a young man, I met him in Calcutta. I did

not know him, nor did he know me, but the very first thing he said

to me — "You are educated. Why don't you preach the message of

Chaitanya Mahaprabhu throughout the world." I could hardly believe

what I had just heard. After some time I asked him, "How can we spread

Indian culture if we are under British rule? First India must become

independent.” “No,” he said, “It doesn’t matter who rules. This message is so

important, so urgent, that it cannot wait. There is no social, or political,

or economic system that can actually help humanity. Be kind to others.

Give them real knowledge of the soul, and of our eternal relationship with the Supreme Soul of Souls — Lord Sri Krsna.” So you see, to this day I have never forgotten his words.

Mrs. M: (she has been listening intently and softens) All right — you can go. I’ll make arrangements to send you on our ship, The Jaladuta. And while you are in Bombay making arrangements, I’ll also get you a place to stay.

P: Thank you (turns to go) – O’ Guru Maharaj, thank you.

Scene 3

Mrs. Naga: (to audience) While he was in Bombay, he stayed at the Scindia Colony, an apartment complex for employees of the Scindia Company. His apartment

was small and unfurnished, only his trunk and a typewriter. Everyone there knew he was going to America. They were impressed. They heard how he was taking a trunk full of his books — but no money. He became a celebrity at the Colony. Some of the families brought him rice and fruit and different vegetables. He would take a little and give the rest to the children. He was a kind man, like a father, and he lived right next door to us. He made plans for his trip and plans to visit wealthy men in Bombay who might give some support. One day, when I went past his room, he was sitting by the window. (to Prabhupada) Swamiji, whenever I come past your room you are always writing. But today you sit quietly.

P: Yes, I was downtown wanting some government clearance for my

trip. But it did not go so well.

Naga: I'm sorry to hear that.

P: It's discouraging.

Naga: Swamiji, one day you'll achieve your goal. You'll see.

P: Yet the time is not right. It's still not right. But I

must continue. The people are without knowledge. They do not

understand this oppressive age of Kali. They must be helped.

Naga: Perhaps tomorrow you'll make some good contacts who can help you.

Why not?

P: You are like a daughter to me. Thank you for your concern. I think tomorrow Krsna will give more details.

Naga: Yes, it will go better, I'm sure.... Swamiji, what is it you are writing?

P: Here, if you read this book you will understand.

Naga: The Srimad Bhagavatam.

P: These books are especially meant for us to attain the real goal of life.

Naga: The real goal?

P: Yes, to go back home, back to Godhead. That is the real goal

of life. We have all come from God. But we find ourselves

embarrassed by material life. Birth, death, disease, old age — we

do not want these things but we are forced to accept. Ultimately,

death forces itself upon us. Now we have a chance to get out of

this entanglement. But if we miss it, if we simply remain bound

up by mundane desires, then it is a great loss.

Naga: Swamiji, surely your mission will succeed.

P: Thank you.

Scene 4

Choksi: (to audience) Mrs. Moraji knew that he had no warm clothing. So just

before he left for Calcutta, I took Bhaktivedanta Swami for

purchasing some items: a wool jacket, some other woolen clothes,

a few dhotis — and also 500 pamphlets containing the eight

verses written by Lord Caitanya and an advertisement for Srimad Bhagavatam.

On our way back, I asked him a question. (Turns to Prabhupada) Swamiji, is this the right thing?

P: What?

Choksi: I'm concerned for you. I mean, why do you want to go to America now, at your age?

P: Still I can do something good.

Choksi: But why don't you start something in Delhi, or Bombay, or Vrindavan.

P: Yes, in time I will start there also.

Choksi: (in teasing mood) Swamiji are you interested in seeing the States?

There are so many beautiful things to see. The Empire State Building –

it's the tallest building in the world. And Fifth Avenue is the

busiest street. So many shops, and everyone has lots of money in

their pockets. And a television at home.

P: What's the use. Materially they may be very well off. But

spiritually, they are lost in life. They do not know what is

right and what is wrong. Someone must teach them.

Choksi: But so many swamis want to go to the States. Because it's

nice. Don't you want to go there to make life easy and enjoy yourself?

P: (Laughs) What can I enjoy? what have I got to see? Hmmm. . . I

have finished my life. I go for them.

Scene 5

Mr. Bhattacharya: (to audience) He arrived in Calcutta only a few days before

theJaladutta's departure. Out of hundreds of people that he

knew, Bhaktivedanta Swami chose to call on me. Why? I don't know. I was not a relative or even a close friend, only a brief acquaintance. – (to Prabhupada) Swamiji, that you are leaving for the States should make such an important story for the newspaper.

P: Do you think so?

Bhat: You have left Vrindavan and now you are leaving India to

preach in a strange culture. Oh yes, come with me. (To reporter)

Excuse me, but we have a story for you.

Reporter: What type of story?

Bhat: Well, Swami Bhaktivedanta is departing for America to

preach this Vedic culture.

Rptr: The Vedic culture seems to be out dated and fatalistic. It

inhibits progress — On the other hand, just look at the progress

they've made in the West.

P: What is that progress? A dog is running here and there on four legs, and they run on the four wheels of the automobile. Is that progress?

Rptr: But I think history shows that many people have misused religion. Isn't that a fact?

P: These people have no conception of God, and they are preaching religion! It is artificial and it will only decay. That is the present condition. If we do not understand who is God and what is the order of God — then where is religion?

Rptr: It seems that religion is on the wane.

P: Yes, religion is on the wane. This is predicted in Srimad Bhagavatam. In Kaliyuga, religion, truthfulness, cleanliness,

mercy, duration of life, bodily strength and memory — these

things will all diminish.

Rptr: Thank you, but I don't think your story will be newsworthy

enough for us to print.

Bhat: Well, why not?

Rptr: There are wars brewing, riots, floods, rockets going into

outer space, the polo games. . . Swami, I'm sorry — there are

many people going to the States nowadays. We can't report on

everyone who goes abroad.

Bhat: (annoyed) But his mission is for the benefit of all mankind.

P: (calming Bhat) It is alright. I understand. Let us go.

Bhat: The day before his departure, he traveled north to Mayapur

to visit the samadhi of Srila Bhaktisiddhanta Saraswati.

P: O' my Guru Maharaj, everything is arranged. Your desire is now

being fulfilled. And Chaitanya Mahaprabhu's as well — that this

Krsna consciousness movement should spread all over the world.

You are always compassionate towards the suffering souls.

Please help me to repeat your message.

Scene 6

Bhat: (to audience) Then he returned to Calcutta. He was ready. It was August

13, 1965. He checked his essentials, passenger ticket, passport, visa, P form, sponsor's address. He had a suitcase, an umbrella, and a copy of Chaitanya Caritamrta. As we took a taxi down to the port, I asked him, "Is that all you are taking?"

P: I have also Srimad Bhagavatam, two hundred sets —Scindia Cargo is taking care of the shipping.

Bhat: So you are not going alone.

P: No, I have the books, and they give me great confidence.

Bhat: It will be different there. They cannot know how to respect a sannyasi.

P: Yes. Here I have gone to see millionaires, governors, even the

Prime Minister by showing up at their doors and simply waiting.

But in America it will be different.

Bhat: They do not know what is Krishna Bhakti, devotion to God. But

you can tell them.

P: Now the time is right. Hare Krsna.

Bhat: Hare Krsna – (Turns to audience) He was alone. A lone fighter. When he left there was no one on the shore to bid him good-bye. No friends, no supporter, no disciple, nobody. Even if you call me, I was not a disciple of his. I was a disciple of somebody else. So I was not his follower. But due to shared love, I had very much respect for him. So, I was the only person to say him good-bye. But still, even I could not know that it was such an important thing.... It was such an important thing.

Scene 7

Ms. Pandia: (to audience) The Jaladuta is a cargo carrier, but there is one

passenger cabin aboard. It was occupied by Bhaktivedanta Swami. When

we put out to sea there were heavy rains. Time and again, he experienced seasickness, dizziness and vomiting. Then, when we reached the Red Sea, he encountered great difficulty. My husband, Captain Pandia, and I went to see him.

Capt: Swamiji, how are you feeling?

P: A little better, but I tell you, last night the pains in my chest were so

sharp, I thought I would surely die at any moment.

Capt: You've had two heart attacks in two days. Swamiji, I'm afraid for you.

P: If I have another attack now, I will not survive.

Capt: Swamiji, my wife, she is clairvoyant, let her foretell your future.

P: All right.

Mrs. P: (closing her eyes) Swamiji, you will pass beyond this crisis in health. It indicates the good will of Lord Krsna. (opens her eyes) Krishna is sending you to America to spread His mission. The population is covered by passion and ignorance, filled of so many bad habits. – meat eating, intoxication, gambling, and illicit sexual affairs. But your words can change their hearts.... I foresee a calm voyage. The Atlantic will let you cross.

P: Mataji, you are very learned, I must confess, last night I had a dream. Lord Krsna in His many forms was rowing the boat. He has taken charge of the ship and has blessed the voyage "Don't be afraid," He told me, "I will help you."... So I will not turn back now. I have come so far just to execute the order of my guru. I have no qualification. I am not worthy or fit to do it, but I have taken up this risk just to carry out his order.

Capt: (turns to audience) Indeed, the ocean voyage of 1965 was a calm one for the Jaladuta. Never in my entire career, had I seen such a smooth Atlantic crossing. We reached Boston's Commonwealth Pier in the early morning of September 17. At that time Swamiji wrote a poem.

Scene 8

Prabhupada: O' Krsna, how will I make them understand Your message? I am

very unfortunate, unqualified, and the most fallen. Therefore I

am seeking Your benediction so that I can convince them, for I am

powerless to do so on my own.

Somehow or other, O' Lord, You have brought me here to speak about You. Now, my Lord, it is up to You to make me a success or failure, as You like. – O' Spiritual Master of all the worlds! I can simply repeat Your message. So if You like You can make my power of speaking suitable for their understanding.

Only by Your causeless mercy will by words become pure. I am sure

that when this transcendental message penetrates their hearts,

they will certainly feel gladdened and thus become liberated from

all unhappy conditions of life.

O' Lord, I am just like a puppet in Your hands. So if You have

brought me here to dance, then make me dance, make me dance,

O' Lord, make me dance as You like.

I have no devotion, nor do I have any knowledge, but I have

strong faith in the Holy Name of Krsna. I have been designated as

Bhaktivedanta, and now, if You like, You can fulfill the real

purport of Bhaktivedanta.... Your most unfortunate, insignificant beggar.

Prabhupada looks into the distance. Kirtana comes up. He beams. Lights fade.

Sankirtana Das is an award-winning author (see www.Mahabharata-Project.com), a recipient of a WV Artist Fellowship Award and an Ohio River Border Initiative Grant. He and his wife have resided in New Vrindaban for 40 years.