

Krishna *Prasadam*: The Transformative Power of Sanctified Food in the Krishna Consciousness Movement

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ABSTRACT: In the Hare Krishna movement ritually sanctified food (known as *prasadam*) lies at the heart of key religious and ceremonial activity, and has progressively become the main rallying point for the movement's preaching strategy or mission in the West. This article examines the experiential and doctrinal import of *prasadam* in the lives of adherents of the Krishna Consciousness movement and discusses its role as a preaching or proselytizing tool. As a means by which the movement today seeks to recruit new followers into its fold, the article looks at the movement's programme of taking sanctified food to the public, with a particular focus on Hare Krishna Food for All missionary activity in London.

KEYWORDS: Hare Krishna movement; Krishna Consciousness; mission; *prasadam*; ritual.

INTRODUCTION

The Hare Krishna movement first appeared in the Western world in 1965, the year the movement's spiritual leader, His Divine Grace A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, travelled from his homeland of West Bengal, north-east India, to America. Prabhupada was 69 years old when he made the long ocean crossing on board an old cargo steam vessel called the *Jaladuta*. But within one year following his arrival in the West he had not only gathered around him

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an increasing number of followers; he also established in 1966 the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON). Indeed, before his demise in 1977, the 11 years that he spent building up and nurturing this Society saw the founder-*acharya* attract an impressive 5,000 disciples as well as tens of thousands of followers worldwide (Rochford 2007: 13).

From the very beginning of Prabhupada's proselytizing work in the West, the distribution of *prasadam* or sanctified food was a central preaching tool. '[F]ood', Kenneth Valpey (2004: 51) says, became 'a major vehicle for missionary activity in ISKCON', an activity that centred upon 'vegetarian food offerings to the temple deities' that would be transformed ritually into 'good tasting Krishna *prasadam*' and 'then distributed to the public'. In addition to the giving of free sanctified food to the public at large as a means of gaining new recruits or spreading the message of Krishna Consciousness, two other approaches were also employed to attract followers and to increase numbers of converts, namely, *hari-nama sankirtana* (chanting the names of God in public locations) and the distribution of Prabhupada's books, including his own translations of key Vaishnava scriptures. As Mukunda Goswami (2001: 21), one of Prabhupada's early disciples, as well as a widely respected current ISKCON leader, states: 'Srila Prabhupada gave great emphasis to distributing three features of Krishna's mercy: his books, the holy name through *hari-nama sankirtana*, and *prasadam*.'

Today, however, of these outreach activities, which in ISKCON are also frequently and explicitly referred to as forms of *preaching*, only the last of the three appears still to remain strong and continues to grow. In terms of the practice of street chanting, for example, Mukunda Goswami ruefully bemoans the decline that has occurred here. He says,

ISKCON's daily or weekly *hari-nama sankirtana* in many parts of the world...has not seemed to have kept pace with...book and *prasadam* distribution. The number of devotees who participate in *hari-nama*, and the quality of most of the [*sankirtana*] parties, needs addressing (Mukunda Goswami 2001: 21).

Yet, in drawing attention to the fall in the number of devotees or groups of ISKCON adherents one finds chanting in public places today, Mukunda Goswami highlights only one area of weakness that has occurred in ISKCON's missionary programme. How *hari-nama sankirtana* has atrophied is the sole focus of Mukunda Goswami's lamentations. There is, however, a good deal of evidence that literature distribution, too, has substantially reduced over the course of the last two or three decades. For example, E. Burke Rochford Jr, who has been researching and writing about the Hare Krishna movement for over 30 years, points out in his recent study of ISKCON (Rochford 2007) that income obtained from book distribution in North America fell dramatically in the year 1980 and has since continued upon a downward slope, a problem that has forced ISKCON leaders to seek alternative ways of fund-raising. Rochford (2007: 185) says, 'Hindu contributions quickly became critical as book distri-

bution revenues dropped precipitously in 1980 and continued to slide thereafter'. Rochford then adds:

[F]acing financial crisis, ISKCON's communities shifted their priorities to serving the religious and ethnic needs of Indian congregations. What this meant was that ISKCON's temples emphasized deity worship at the expense of preaching (Rochford 2007: 197).

A similar pattern in Britain, and indeed throughout the West, has also been identified in the collection of essays which I edited with Richard Cole (Dwyer and Cole 2007a). In the 'Introduction', we contend that ISKCON has changed from being a temple-based, communal organization to one that is essentially a householder movement, with emphasis now being placed upon 'congregational activities and...[importantly, on] the cultivation of practices that increasingly embrace the Hindu diaspora' (Dwyer and Cole 2007b: 1 and *passim*). Ross Andrew's essay in the same collection makes it abundantly clear with reference to ISKCON's UK headquarters at Bhaktivedanta Manor that loss of revenue generated from book distribution has been remedied directly through donations made by Indian patrons. Andrew (2007: 55) says: 'the economic dependence on...temple residents, through book sales...has been replaced with programmes seeking support from the ethnic Hindu community'. And he emphasizes that this development has not only been crucial for the economic survival of the movement but seems to be progressively leading to what Andrew, following Carey (1987), calls 'the process of Indianisation' (p. 55).

But, although preaching through book distribution as well as through street chanting parties has suffered major decline (with concomitant attention increasingly focused on ethnic Hindus as the main financial supporters of ISKCON temples today), *prasadam* distribution shows no signs of weakening at all, and indeed seems to have emerged as ISKCON's greatest missionary triumph in the West. It is noteworthy that the work of devotees in the Hare Krishna movement here often is greatly favoured by, and receives much applause from, many people in wider society, particularly as the distribution of free vegetarian food is frequently used to feed the homeless as well as those who are in situations of extreme poverty.² Indeed, based on my own research

2. Although sanctified food is widely distributed without charge, it should be noted that at temples like Bhaktivedanta Manor, bread, cakes and biscuits, and other types of confectionery, are also often sold. *Prasadam* that is sold at the Manor's shop is itself an important source of revenue for the temple. Indeed, as a way of generating income, the sale of *prasadam* appears to be gaining increasing success in a number of new ISKCON projects. For example, in the *Bhaktivedanta Manor Newsletter* (August 2009: 1), it is reported that ISKCON Wales has opened a factory called Govindas Foods Ltd. One of the factory's *prasadam* food lines is vegan and gluten-free cheesecakes. According to the *Bhaktivedanta Manor Newsletter* (p. 1), 'The cheesecakes will be available in 415 Holland and Barrett health food stores across the UK'. It then states (p. 1): 'The initial production will be around 6,000 cheesecakes every week', and further adds that Govindas Foods Ltd has put in place plans soon to have quiche and lasagne products available for commercial distribution.

with devotees responsible for preparing and distributing *prasadam* to the public—research that was carried out at Bhaktivedanta Manor and at one of its linked centres in King’s Cross, London—it seems that growing popular support for this work is one key reason why this aspect of ISKCON preaching has been and still remains especially successful. But to explore this matter in greater depth, as well as to appreciate the success of *prasadam* distribution as a missionary endeavour, some discussion of how *prasadam* itself is conceptualized and ritually celebrated in ISKCON is in order, as is some discussion of devotees’ testimonies about the role it is said to play in religious life and in spiritual experience.

SANCTIFIED FOOD: ITS PURIFYING EFFICACY AND ITS SPIRITUAL POTENCY

The term *prasadam* (Sanskrit *prasāda*) means ‘grace’ or ‘favour’, a term which Sanskrit scholar Will Johnson (2009) points out expresses theologically ‘the free choice, or action, of a deity...to favour a devotee with the means of liberation’. In terms of broader and widely shared Hindu theological ideas about *prasada*, Johnson says,

[T]he deity’s...favour, or *prasada*, is materially conveyed to the devotees through the distribution...of food...and other previously made offerings. Because of their proximity to the deity, such left-overs...are considered to be ‘blessed’—that is to say, imbued with the deity’s power and grace. It is these qualities which are then physically transferred to the devotees, bringing about their temporary identification or merger with the god (Johnson 2009).

Such food offerings in the Hindu tradition, as John Bowker (2000) also notes, are, therefore, held to carry with them a ‘spiritual effect’ and are thought to bring ‘[p]eace of mind...without effort, as a gift’.

These broad Hindu theological understandings about *prasada* are expressed in religious discourse in the Hare Krishna movement too. ‘Honouring *prasadam*’, as ISKCON devotees denote the eating of food previously offered to Krishna, is said to be an act of receiving ‘the grace of the Lord’, though one more commonly hears devotees talk of receiving ‘the mercy of the Lord’ when speaking about the taking of sanctified food.

The pure vegetarian food that is offered to the deities in ISKCON temples must be *sattvik* and is thus only lightly spiced, containing no onion, garlic or mushroom.³ Six meals every day are prepared at Bhaktivedanta Manor, as at all

3. *Sattva* (light, goodness, truthfulness) is one of the three *gunas* or ‘strands’, the other two being *rajas* (activity, passion, energy) and *tamas* (darkness, inertia). *Sattvik* foods in the Krishna Consciousness movement include a wide range of vegetables and most varieties of pulse, as well as bread, rice and dairy products. Onions and garlic, which fall into the *rajasik* food category, are not permitted because they are said to create excitation (sexual energy or passion in particular) and thus from the perspective of ISKCON have an undesirable effect

other ISKCON temples which have fully installed deities.⁴ At large temples, such as Bhaktivedanta Manor, the organization of all these food offerings (*bhoga*) is carried out by priests (*pujari*) in kitchens reserved solely for the deities. After the food is prepared it is then offered on the altar directly in front of the images (*murti*) of the deities and is later distributed as *mahaprasadam* ('great' *prasadam*). Larger quantities of food cooked and eaten by the many visitors to the temple are prepared in a separate kitchen and are offered to a picture of Krishna located in the kitchen itself before the *prasadam* is finally distributed to devotees.

The spiritual efficacy of such sanctified food (*mahaprasadam* and *prasadam* being philosophically the same in terms of spiritual potency, according to devotees) is identified directly with Krishna Himself. Prabhupada, in fact, teaches that '*prasadam* is nondifferent from कृष्ण' (Bhaktivedanta 1974: Antya-Līlā 11.20, Purport). Members of ISKCON often talk about the transcendental qualities of sanctified food and emphasize how the consumption of it serves to counteract material contamination affecting the soul (*ātma/jīva*). At Bhaktivedanta Manor, Jagat Priya Devi Dasi, an informant who sometimes serves on the altar and who became a resident there in 2003, told me during an interview in July 2009 that ISKCON doctrine explains that the soul is pure in its original state but becomes tainted by material interests and desires, such as selfish interests and concerns driven by the ego (*ahaṁkāra*). Eating sanctified food works against this contamination by removing the many layers of dirt that adhere to the soul. Jagat Priya stated that the soul can be likened to a mirror that is bright and shiny, and just as the mirror loses its brightness when layers of dust gather and accumulate on it, eventually becoming unrecognizable, so too the soul covered in material consciousness remains hidden and lost. However, by continually eating *prasadam*, material consciousness is progressively cleansed and is thus replaced by a spiritual consciousness. This process, Jagat Priya stated, can also then be likened to a mirror that is repeatedly wiped, eventually revealing its true brightness. By taking sanctified food

upon the body and the mind, causing the devotee to experience unwanted distraction, especially when chanting and when performing other devotional activities. *Tamasik* foods, like meat, fish and eggs, are strictly forbidden in ISKCON. Abstinence from the eating of mushrooms, which are also said to be *tamasik* because they grow or are cultivated in environments shaded from light, is of lesser importance compared with the rule against eating meat, fish and eggs, but the abstinence is still nonetheless considered necessary for a committed Hare Krishna devotee. For further helpful discussion of the three *gunas*, which are widely considered by Hindus to be the three fundamental constituents of nature (*prakṛiti*), see Brockington (1991: 101) and Flood (1996: 234–36).

4. The six standard food offerings and the times when they are given are: Balya Bhoga (4.30 am), Upalaya Bhoga (7.45 am), Raja Bhoga (12.30 pm), Vaikalika Bhoga (4 pm), Sitala Bhoga (7 pm) and Ratrikalini Bhoga (9 pm). The first food offering of the day (Balya Bhoga) is primarily a sweet preparation and includes items such as *halva*, *sabji*, *puri*, milk and fruit. As the day progresses the food offered becomes increasingly rich and more savoury, with the lunch-time offering (Raja Bhoga) being the biggest meal put before the deities.

the soul's purity is restored; material consciousness is removed to reveal spiritual consciousness. Jagat Priya further clarified the distinction between these two opposing modes of consciousness, commenting that:

whenever one thinks in terms of 'I want such and such an object', or thinks 'this is mine', the material consciousness is manifested; however, when one thinks about what Krishna would enjoy or how Krishna could be best served, then, alternatively, spiritual consciousness or Krishna consciousness comes to the fore, and the taking of *prasadam* helps Krishna consciousness to emerge and flourish.

Taking *prasadam* is thus seen to purify consciousness. Moreover, similar or related teachings about the spiritual efficacy of sanctified food are equally emphasized by other members of ISKCON, as is apparent in the words spoken by the guru of Jagat Priya:

Whatever consciousness we put in food has an effect on that food. We're not only eating the physical thing but we are also eating the consciousness within it. The physical food may affect our physical body but the consciousness that's within the food affects our emotional body. When food is cooked with love, with concern, with care, that food will actually nourish [us] on an emotional level. It will affect us. When food is cooked with passion or with greed, that's also going to affect us. So we [in ISKCON] try to cook our food in a spirit of love and devotion. But when that food is offered to God as an expression of our love, we [correctly] offer our food to the Lord. [With one voice we will say] 'I'm cooking it for you my Lord. Please accept it.' And we say certain mantras to that effect. Then we understand that the Supreme Lord, who is absolute and unlimited, will accept the love of that offering, and when He does, that food is blessed, and it becomes spiritually surcharged. So the ingredients of the food may affect our physical body; the spirit in which it's cooked affects our emotional body. But when it is actually offered to God—on [the] level of real devotion—then there is a spiritual potency that manifests in that food, and that awakens the love of the soul when we eat it... It brings us closer to our essence, to God, to the all-attractive Person who is the ultimate object of our soul's love (Radhanath Swami, 2008, interviewed in Aaltonen and Dwyer, forthcoming).

In addition, in a number of discussions with a range of senior or long-serving devotees at Bhaktivedanta Manor, I was often told how *prasadam* has not only had a powerful, transforming effect upon consciousness but also plays an important role in terms of conversion or in terms of the development of devotional commitment. Radha Mohan Das, secretary of ISKCON's communications department at Bhaktivedanta Manor, for example, gave the following testimony:

For me, taking *Prasad* is the highlight of the day because not only do I enjoy eating *sattvik* food...but I do really taste the difference... It feels wonderful that you can somehow 'eat your way' closer to God! After the first time I took *prasadam*, when I was a student in Manchester, it had a profound effect on my consciousness. From that day on I became a vegetarian and began chanting quite seriously (personal communication, 9 June 2008).

In yet another testimony, Gauri Das, former temple president at Bhaktivedanta Manor, said:

Once I received a package from the temple through the post. Inside were some books I had ordered. With the order there was a small package which said 'Prasad, sanctified food'. 'Wow', I thought... I then offered my prostration to this Hare Krishna communion and kept it in a special place. Each day I would nibble on a little and reflect, [saying] 'Wow, this is Krishna Prasad'.

Back then in 1983 I received that Prasad with such reverence, and I believe that it really did its work on purifying me... Slowly I began to offer my own food to Krishna, while meditating on Him eating it...

Well cooked Prasad is enlivening to...consciousness. It does give life... When honouring Prasad, I know that I am eating spiritual food and feel it. All other food, no matter how well it may be prepared, has lost all its appeal. To eat any other type of food is an absolute no no...[and] it's just my personal choice. All other food dulls consciousness and consolidates one's identification with matter. It is food with no meaning and karmic repercussions... (personal communication, 11 June 2008).

RITUAL DIMENSIONS OF PRASADAM

An understanding of the meaning and centrality of *prasadam* in the lives of devotees, as well as of its purported purifying efficacy and its spiritual potency, would not be complete without some discussion of ritual. And in order to make sense of ritual dimensions of *prasadam*, a recent essay by Anna King (2007) is both helpful and particularly instructive. In 'For Love of Krishna: Forty Years of Chanting', King's analysis of ritual is also at the same time an analysis of deep devotional sentiments and feelings of love for Krishna. She points out that in ISKCON there is a dialectical tension between what she calls the '*bhakti* of love' (*rāgānuga bhakti*) and the '*bhakti* of ritual' (*vidhi bhakti*). The former, she indicates, is esoteric and marked by spontaneous emotion, an ecstasy of devotional love for Krishna; whereas the latter involves rule-governed ceremonialism. However, King makes it clear that the *bhakti* (devotion) of love and the *bhakti* (devotion) of ritual cannot easily be distinguished:

Love of Krishna cannot be expressed except in intentional, meaningful activities, which give delight to Krishna... [O]ne cannot easily separate...rule-governed *bhakti*...and...emotion-governed *bhakti*... Even... 'pure' devotees who enter ecstatic or mystical states are believed to maintain exemplary standards of [ritual] practice so that neophytes do not 'fall' (King 2007: 135).

Importantly, in highlighting the dialectic of love and ritual, King draws attention to much-ignored aspects of ritualism in ISKCON, aspects of daily regulated practice which serve to cultivate spontaneous love for Krishna and express it in the daily process of ceremonial action itself. Indeed, King (2007:

138 and *passim*) goes on to emphasize how ‘Prabhupada proclaims that after Krishna’s advent and the coming of Chaitanya ([a fifteenth-sixteenth century Vaishnava saint held to be] an incarnation of Krishna and Radha), the essence of religion no longer lay in *brahmanical yajnas* [or rituals], but in the loving response to the full presence of God.’ At the same time, King (p. 138) says, ‘Yet it is the exoteric, prudent path or *sadhana bhakti* [or rule-governed, regulated ritual], preaching and outreach projects that Prabhupada advocates for his movement as a whole’.

These same dialectical principles are equally found in devotees’ words about, and actions surrounding, *prasadam*, as well as apparent in their distribution of sanctified food to the public, ISKCON’s triumphant preaching arm. On the one hand, honouring *prasadam* is a daily regulated and ritual occurrence, as well as the focus of special banquets and festival events, and is central on ISKCON’s Sunday feast day. On the other hand, it is simultaneously a profound act of reverence and transcendence, understood as involving direct communion with Krishna, who is held to imbue the food with His own divinity, food that is quite literally non-different from the Lord Himself.

Interestingly, in conversations with devotees, one discovers that it is not only sanctified food from the temple that is ‘honoured’ in this way, but one also finds that many devotees prepare food in their own homes and offer it to Krishna themselves, a practice made simple with the aid of accessible, easy-to-read ritual manuals. In one pamphlet authored by Bhakti Vikasa Swami (2002), for example, an inexpensive paperback text available at ISKCON temples, including Bhativedanta Manor, key daily rituals are outlined in simple steps and stages, including instructions on how to set up a temple in one’s home, as well as instructions on how to offer food to Krishna. Given that ISKCON has become a congregational, householder community today, the ritual process of preparing food for the deities and having ready-to-hand *prasadam* means that a devotee can act in the manner of a priest. Even though in recent years ISKCON has hugely expanded the number of trained priests to serve and to minister to its large householder community, formal initiation into the priesthood is not a requirement for this purpose; neither is expertise in mantra recitation needed. Although mantra is employed, and indeed is considered to be a *sine qua non* of the offertory process, technical expertise is not essential, the accent being upon devotional attitude. As Bhakti Vikasa Swami (2002: 60) stresses: ‘This system of offering, although simple, is acceptable to Kṛṣṇa if everything is offered with love.’

The presence of love here is, therefore, given precedence but requires the vehicle of ritual to make it possible. While it is said that love should be at the heart of ceremonial action, it takes its very expression through it, through the process of preparing the food and offering it to Krishna, as well as when it is later taken or honoured as *prasadam*.

Now, as I have indicated, the preparation of food, and the taking or honouring of *prasadam*, is a major feature of loving devotion and service in the

temple setting and in the homes of Hare Krishna adherents, and is so central to religious life and experience that many devotees I have interviewed proclaim that it is the only food they will accept. This is evident from the testimony of Gauri Das quoted earlier. In one conversation in August 2008, Gauri Das stated that even on long journeys or when travelling abroad in the service of Krishna he would rather do without any sustenance at all than partake of food that had not been sanctified. He refuses to eat in any restaurant or in any other similar setting unless the food has previously been offered to Krishna. Such behaviour, however, is neither extreme nor unusual for devotees and is directly in line with the prescriptions and teachings of Prabhupada. On this point, Prabhupada writes:

[P]rasadam...[is] on the...spiritual platform. One should never consider *prasadam* to be like ordinary hotel cooking. Nor should one touch any kind of food not offered to the Deity. Every Vaiṣṇava strictly follows this principle and does not accept any food that is not *prasadam* (Bhaktivedanta 1974: Madhya-Līlā 11.209, Purport).

Again, Prabhupada says, ‘The functions of the tongue in devotional service are to chant the Hare Kṛṣṇa *maha-mantra* and [to] eat *prasadam* that is offered to the Lord’ (Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada 1974: Ādi-Līlā 8.16, Purport).

The importance of *prasadam* in ritual action and in devotional discourse, as well as its centrality in terms of beliefs about its avowed purifying efficacy and spiritual potency, all converge in devotees’ minds in such a manner that the power of sanctified food is not only considered to be a major way of realizing Krishna Consciousness in their own lives but is also seen as an effective means of bringing Krishna Consciousness to the whole world. And *prasadam* as an essential ISKCON preaching tool is the subject to which this article now turns, with a major focus on an established but still evolving outreach programme responsible for bringing *prasadam* to the public in London.

SANCTIFIED FOOD AS A PROSELYTIZING STRATEGY

As mentioned in the introduction, the distribution of sanctified food to non-devotees as a conversion strategy has always been at the heart of ISKCON’s missionary endeavour. Prabhupada writes:

[O]ne seriously eager to achieve transcendental perfection, Kṛṣṇa consciousness, must eat Kṛṣṇa-*prasādam*. Such food is *sattvika*, or in the material quality of goodness, but when offered to Kṛṣṇa it becomes transcendental. Our Kṛṣṇa consciousness movement distributes Kṛṣṇa-*prasādam*, and those who eat such transcendental food are sure to become devotees of the Lord (Bhaktivedanta 1974: Antya-Līlā, 1.92 Purport).

The doctrine that sanctified food transforms consciousness and brings non-believers who consume it back to God is the main reason why *prasadam*

is distributed to the public; and, according to the overwhelming majority of devotees I have interviewed, the welfare aspect of this work, although critical, is of secondary importance. When such holy food is given to non-devotees, ISKCON members comment that it makes no difference whether or not they believe in or understand the sanctity of that food, as it is said to purify the consciousness of the recipient, irrespective of his or her lack of faith. It is held to do its work without the need of other forms of preaching, such as the imparting of Prabhupada's teachings or the distribution of ISKCON literature. On this point Krishna Dharma Das says,

As we are satisfied that the taking of *prasadam*...in itself [brings] purification, we do not have to feel the need to overtly preach at the same time. We can simply hand out *prasadam* and let that do the preaching from within... *Prasadam* is therefore a secret weapon, with the power to neutralise the enemy without their even knowing how it has happened (Krishna Dharma Das 1993: 3).

Indeed, as a preaching tool, the distribution of *prasadam* was initiated by Prabhupada in ISKCON's nascent days with the specific intention of spreading Krishna Consciousness, though Prabhupada always emphasized its need for purposes of welfare too. As indicated by Mukunda Goswami (2003), to whom reference has already been made in this article's introduction: 'One of his mandates for the project was that "no one within ten miles of [an ISKCON] temple should go hungry"'. Commencing in the early 1970s, therefore, Prabhupada instituted the ISKCON Food Relief project, which later expanded into the worldwide Hare Krishna Food for Life programme under the stewardship of Mukunda Goswami. Today, Mukunda Goswami, as the Director of Food for Life, continues to preside over this part of ISKCON's growing missionary work, work that has also led to the development of related projects, such as the Hare Krishna Food for All initiative (also known simply as Food for All), designed to further the mission of the Krishna Consciousness movement in London, as well as specifically to help alleviate poverty.

Food for All is now an independently run organization, and is also a registered charity (Charity Number: 1077897). It was established by Parasuram Das, a 46-year-old devotee who was born in Dublin but who now lives close to the temple of Bhaktivedanta Manor. Throughout a day-long observational excursion with him and his team in July 2009, I documented Parasuram's activities, and also conducted an interview with him, the results of which can now briefly be summarized.

First of all, Parasuram informed me that he became a member of ISKCON in the early 1980s and today manages an ISKCON centre on Caledonian Road in London's King's Cross area, a centre where the distribution of free vegetarian food and clothes is organized and also where free computer training is given to local people, most of whom are poor and who do not have ready access to computers. Furthermore, this centre offers help to people seeking counseling, and gives advice about support with drug rehabilitation. The centre has

its own website (matchlessgifts.org.uk), providing information about Food for All, and how to donate money to the charity, as well as information about ISKCON festivals and other ISKCON activities. Parasuram and his team additionally help disadvantaged people in the area with the preparation of curriculum vitae in order to support their efforts to enter the job market.

Parasuram, who single-handedly set up the Food for All project in 1998 as a non-religious charity, stated that he has been engaged in the distribution of *prasadam* for a full 26 years. Before 1998 he reported that he played a key role in the work of Food for Life at Bhaktivedanta Manor but felt the need to establish Food for All as a replacement for it, and specifically in order to attract funding from secular sources, and also to ensure that people from all faith communities and backgrounds (whether religious or non-religious) could take advantage of the free vegetarian food that he and his team prepare and distribute, as well as take up other types of help available at the King's Cross centre.

Although the charity run by Parasuram has independent status and is thus technically separate from ISKCON, Parasuram's work is nonetheless viewed by him, and by other devotees in the team he heads, specifically as a Krishna Consciousness missionary project. It is supported by ISKCON devotees in a variety of ways, as well as attracting some support from helpers who are not affiliated to ISKCON, the latter claiming that they want simply to be involved in what they see as Parasuram's valuable charity work. The vast majority of his team stay in accommodation close to the temple of Bhaktivedanta Manor and some of them reside at the King's Cross centre itself.

For six days a week (Monday through to Saturday), Parasuram and his team collect food stuff from commercial organizations, such as Costco in Watford and the Flamingo Company in London, as well as occasionally from Tesco and Sainsbury's food stores. Food from these providers otherwise destined for landfill sites is freely donated, and Parasuram informed me that he collects some nine tons of it every week. The food that is collected includes vegetables and fruits, bread and dairy products. It is cooked or prepared and offered to Krishna in the early part of the morning (commencing at 5 am) in Bhaktivedanta Manor's kitchens, and it is then loaded on to a van, which sets off from the temple on the distribution round at 11 am. The van later returns to Bhaktivedanta Manor, usually around 4.30 pm, having visited distribution sites in King's Cross, in Kentish Town and in Camden. Cooked food from the van is also put on to cycle rickshaws at the King's Cross centre to be distributed by Hare Krishna adherents at the London School of Economics (LSE) and at the School of African and Oriental Studies (SOAS). Parasuram stated that some 600 *prasadam* plates are served on each of the six days food is taken out, and that this increases to 800 *prasadam* plates during university term.

Hare Krishna devotees engaged in this work as their main devotional duty or service (*sevā*) not only help to prepare and distribute the *prasadam*, but some of the devotees, according to Parasuram, donate their own money to the

project as well. But major financial support comes essentially from donations made to the Food for All programme through its website, and the programme also receives grants provided by outside bodies, such as the Greater London Authority, which recently awarded a grant of £27,000.

Parasuram describes his charity work as *paraupakāra* (which he translates as the 'highest welfare'; it could also mean 'help for others'). However, while he emphasizes that this means helping to alleviate poverty, it is not correlated in Parasuram's mind simply with the notion of social welfare. On the contrary, according to Parasuram, his work is fundamentally a spiritual endeavour and is viewed by him as an explicitly missionary enterprise. Thus, although easing suffering and feeding the needy are seen by him as crucial acts of charity, for this Hare Krishna devotee what matters most of all is that he is involved in helping people to achieve Krishna Consciousness through the transcendental transforming power of the sanctified food distributed. Indeed, this is the reason why, with the support of his team, he not only feeds the homeless and the poor but also insists that sanctified food should be taken to the LSE and to SOAS. Parasuram stressed that the many students who receive the *prasadam* will be the future leaders, the future teachers and government heads, as well as the ones who will influence and shape the future of what happens throughout the globe. Giving *prasadam* to them, he claimed, will ensure that they become spiritually motivated and, in turn, this will help to make the whole world become Krishna conscious.

Now, as I discovered while observing the work of Parasuram and his team, the activities of Food for All appear, in general, to be very well received by members of the public. Those with whom I came into contact expressed high praise for this programme and some even came forward to donate money on the distribution round. The homeless and the destitute who received *prasadam* were undoubtedly delighted to be offered free food and drink, and some of them were clearly regular recipients of the food and drink given, as members of the Food for All team addressed them using their names. Addressing them by name also added a crucial humanizing element, which the homeless readily responded to with smiles and appreciation.⁵ Similarly, praise for Food for All was also expressed by students and even by some scholars at the LSE and at SOAS.

5. Comparison of ISKCON's proselytizing-cum-welfare work with the work of other evangelical groups which have traditionally placed great emphasis on helping homeless people and those who are poor—most notably the Salvation Army—is especially inviting, a point that has not escaped the attention of some ISKCON members themselves. On this point of comparison Priyavrata Dasa clearly takes delight in quoting the words of one respected Christian church minister:

One well-known reformer, Revd. Ted Noffs, commented during a...television interview: 'I think that the Hare Kṛṣṇas will fulfil the role that the Salvation Army fulfilled in the nineteenth century... [Food here is] not just a hand-out, it's a hand-out with something else—human compassion—and it gives welfare a human face' (Priyavrata Dasa 1994: 2).

Expressions of public support or praise, however, tend to be focused on the charity work of Hare Krishna Food for All, and no one I met seemed to be troubled about its association with ISKCON or mentioned concern about Hare Krishna devotees' religious affiliation. Equally, the food suppliers, such as Costco and the Flamingo Company, as well as Tesco and Sainsbury's, seem to be very positive about allowing food they cannot sell to be redirected to the Food for All project, and indeed appear to be highly supportive of Parasuram's welfare efforts, which have recently been awarded prizes, including Winner of Novelis Community Recycler Award 2008 and Winner of Sustainable City Award 2007. Having started the project a little over ten years ago, building on and extending the Hare Krishna Food for Life programme, which first started in the King's Cross area as early as 1978 (cf. Priyavrata Dasa 1994), Parasuram reported how it has gone from strength to strength. From the standpoint of missionary strategy, this is seen as Krishna's blessing and as an achievement in the spreading of Krishna Consciousness. But whether the distribution of sanctified food is viewed by the public at large as an honourable and valuable way to alleviate poverty, or simply as a means by which ISKCON has been able to maintain and expand public support for its presence and practices, it is clear that such missionary work is an achievement. When compared with other declining ISKCON preaching approaches discussed in this article, *prasadam* distribution is undoubtedly a major success; and, given that public support seems to be ongoing and shows no signs of slowing down, it seems likely that this success will continue into the foreseeable future.

CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

In discussing the three major ways in which ISKCON has traditionally sought to recruit new followers and increase its membership, this article has drawn attention to key changes that have impacted upon ISKCON's overall proselytizing strategy in the West, a strategy that in spite of the changes nonetheless still involves retaining and building upon its successful *prasadam* distribution work. It has been argued that preaching by means of street chanting parties, and by means of book distribution, has declined largely because of two significant developments. The first of these is ISKCON's shift from being a temple-based organization to one that is now a largely householder movement, with energy focused upon cultivating a stable congregation at the expense of concentrating on chanting in public locations. The second is the trend towards Indianization, which since the early 1980s has been coupled increasingly with ISKCON's policy of seeking financial support from the Hindu ethnic community as a response to a collapse in income from literature distribution. The pattern of decline in these particular areas of preaching, as this article has argued, has been demonstrated in the study by Rochford (2007), as well as highlighted in the work of Dwyer and Cole (2007a). For Rochford, in the USA

the accommodation of Indian interests or concerns has far-reaching implications. He writes:

Once a radical and controversial new religion, ISKCON in North America has evolved into a new denomination in order to survive. ISKCON's Indian-Hindu congregation has clearly helped rescue a failing religious organization. In pursuit of needed financial resources in the face of decline, Prabhupada's movement is steadily advancing toward becoming a Western sect of Hinduism. Today ISKCON provides temples, leadership and religious specialists for a sizable number of Indian Hindus throughout North America. In so doing, however, ISKCON has progressively aligned itself with the religious orientations of its Indian supporters and negotiated away elements of its traditional religious culture. By compromising...ISKCON has lost the basis for generating member commitment and loyalty... In this form, ISKCON appears unlikely to attract significant interest among a new generation of Americans seeking alternative religious paths (Rochford 2007: 200).

However, Rochford's argument seems to be somewhat overstated here, not least because the crucial factor of *prasadam* distribution as a preaching tool is missing from, or is underplayed in, his analysis. That ISKCON has increasingly moved towards mainstream society over the last two or three decades, involving a shift away from its earlier radical and controversial beginnings, means that, at least potentially, ISKCON could attract new converts who previously may have been put off by accusations that it engages in brainwashing tactics or is a dangerous cult, as media reports have sometimes alleged and as anti-cult organizations have typically proclaimed. The cultivation of ever-closer links with mainstream culture and society in the West involves a shift that still retains Prabhupada's principal teachings and ritual practices at the forefront of ISKCON's activities, even though ISKCON has undergone necessary change both to achieve respectability and acceptance from mainstream organizations and institutions, as well to accommodate some non-sectarian trends present within the ethnic Hindu community. Accommodating Indian-Hindu interests has neither detracted from, nor has it undermined, the programme of *prasadam* distribution as a rallying point for ISKCON's proselytizing strategy, and *prasadam* distribution not only continues to be marked by success but is often now the first point of contact a potential convert has with the Krishna Consciousness movement. Considered in such terms, ISKCON has not lost the ability to reach as well as attract new converts. If one considers *prasadam* distribution as an outreach project in its own right, for example in terms of Food for All in London, a campaign that enables members of the public to gain an introduction to Prabhupada's movement on the streets and also at its King's Cross centre; or if one considers the work of Food for Life, which spreads the Krishna Consciousness message of salvation throughout the West as well as further afield, distributing in the process some '50,000 [*prasadam*] plates per day globally' (Cole 2007: 47), then ISKCON undoubtedly still has the ability to continue to recruit new members into its fold. Even

in spite of reduced concentration on *hari-nama sankirtana* and on literature distribution, ISKCON's traditional approach to the spreading of Krishna Consciousness through *prasadam* distribution remains vibrant. It appears still to be an effective ISKCON proselytizing tool and one that has progressively become its triumphant preaching arm in the West today.

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ABBREVIATIONS

ISKCON	International Society for Krishna Consciousness
LSE	London School of Economics
SOAS	School of Oriental and African Studies

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