Serving *Gupta*-Vrindavan: Devotional Service in the Physical Place and the Workings of the “International Society”

INTRODUCTION: SERVING THE PLACE

Fieldwork in Mayapur was completely different from fieldwork in Navadvip. The people, the place, the kind of devotion—everything was starkly dissimilar.

In a series, along the main road which cuts across the small village of Mayapur, with stretches of agricultural fields on the other side, are large, sanitized temples and guest-houses built by Gaudiya Math. Like Navadvip’s *sahajiyas*, Mayapur’s villagers are poor and primarily live by farming. In sharp contrast to Mayapur’s rural background, however, the main attraction for pilgrims and my primary fieldwork site is 500 acres of enclosed land and a walled compound with the most modern, up-to-date facilities, unprecedented in any Indian village, within which approximately 500 Indian and foreign ISKCON devotees reside and worship. ISKCON devotees are mostly foreigners and professional, affluent, English-speaking middle-class or rich Indians, who offer financial patronage to ISKCON through unstinting donations and publicize the institution to their families and friends. Mayapur has one of the largest concentrations of foreign devotees in India.

The International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) was founded in New York in 1966 by A. C. Bhaktivedanta, known among devotees as Prabhupad (god’s servant), an English-educated man from Calcutta who became initiated into Vaishnavism and in his
later life preached Vaishnavism in the West to fulfill his guru’s wish of spreading “Krishna Consciousness” internationally. Over the decades ISKCON has established over 400 centers internationally, including temples, schools, and vegetarian restaurants. ISKCON’s headquarters in Mayapur, instituted in 1971–72, is central for devotees since ISKCON devotees believe that Mayapur is Chaitanya’s birthplace, that it has the highest standards of ritual worship, and that the regular lives led by Mayapur’s devotees are exemplary for others.

ISKCON’s establishment is the most influential presence in the village, since the massive pilgrimage ISKCON generates contributes toward many villagers’ livelihoods—with buses bringing pilgrims from Calcutta and districts in West Bengal, boatmen ferrying pilgrims from Navadvip to Mayapur, rickshaw-pullers taking them around, and shopkeepers selling deities’ idols, pictures, household puja goods, and kirtan CDs right outside ISKCON’s enclosure.

ISKCON’s separate enclave is distinctly different from the rest of Mayapur and from Navadvip’s temples. In contrast to Navadvip’s bustling town culture and general layout of devotional sites which are not centralized under any single administrative authority, ISKCON is highly organized. In the midst of an interior Bengali village it has made available to its resident devotees and pilgrims every modern facility, from pizzas and cybercafés to air conditioners, computers, and money-exchange bureaus. However, the predominant feeling one gets while walking through ISKCON’s spanking-clean enclosure is one of a modern yet spiritually maintained atmosphere.

After entering the main gate one sees a small hut which has been preserved since this was where Prabhupad lived in 1972–76, before other buildings were constructed. Here devotees sing Radha-Krishna’s names in rotation twenty-four hours a day. There are two massive, grand, well-maintained marble structures in the enclave: the Chandrodaya Temple, dedicated to Radha, Krishna, and Chaitanya, and Prabhupad’s shrine.

The larger-than-life-size, majestically dressed idols in these temples are offered grand pujas with plenty of food, amidst the loud sounds of conch shells and ecstatic kirtans by hundreds of devotees, four to six times a day. The most significant construction taking place, however, is of the Temple of the Vedic Planetarium. Funded primarily by an ISKCON devotee, Alfred Ford (currently one of the principal stakeholders of the Ford company), its total budget is close to USD 70 million. The 35-story temple is planned to be completely covered in gold and the
highest temple in the world. Inside, in a planetarium, devotees will be shown cosmic images as depicted in the *Bhagavata Purana*.

Apart from this, spread over ISKCON’s grounds are the *goshala* (cow-shed) occupying five acres of land, where devotees’ children bathe and feed cows, Krishna’s favorite animal; buildings assigned as residential ashrams for celibate devotees (*brahmacharis*); a large residential area with sophisticated accommodations for married devotees; two *gurukuls* (residential schools giving children spiritual training) and two other schools for devotees’ children; guest houses with modern facilities; large restaurants serving both Indian and Western food; and around six three- or four-story administrative buildings. There are also well-kept parks with benches, where pilgrims and tourists relax.

ISKCON is run like a commercial office. Devotees have designated hierarchized posts such as general manager, CEO, treasurer, or ordinary worker, and serve the institution’s maintenance from large numbers of offices, known as departments, spread across the administrative buildings. The big offices are expensively equipped, with marble floors, air conditioners, and computers. Since these offices conduct spiritual work, their atmosphere is equally spiritually maintained, with recorded chants of deities’ names playing in the background, the smell of incense, and large, beautiful paintings of Radha-Krishna in the celestial Vrindavan forests.
Navadvip’s Vaishnavas almost never visit Mayapur, but ISKCON remains an important reference point for them. They repeatedly told me that ISKCON is improperly obsessed with spending money on opulent, grandiose structures, and that ISKCON’s idea of devotion as effective management and embellishment of physical sites is superficial and not true devotional experience. Implicit in this claim is the understanding common to Navadvip’s Vaishnavas that religion is true when cultivated at inner devotional levels of the body or mind, rather than being limited to the veneration of external physical spaces.

I did my fieldwork in Mayapur after my fieldwork in Navadvip. So a problem was that I had partly internalized other Vaishnavas’ opinions of ISKCON, and in my initial observations I could not fathom what ISKCON’s lavish expenditure on temples, its official hierarchized structure, and its devotees’ modern lifestyles could have to do with Vaishnavism—till I realized that excellent organization, well-planned space and services, and a lifestyle which makes devotees productive are essential constituents of ISKCON devotees’ very different understanding of Vaishnavism.

Like other Vaishnavas, ISKCON devotees seek to realize their spiritual selves in Radha-Krishna’s abode through their daily religious practices. Their major difference from other Vaishnavas is that rather than interiorized spaces of the mind-heart or body, they identify and venerate only the physical geography of Mayapur as gupta (veiled) Vrindavan. They argue that every physical space is a potential veiled-Vrindavan and has the capacity to manifest Vrindavan if offered appropriate devotional services. Devotees embody an intimate, sacred relationship with Mayapur by offering seva, which they translate as “devotional service,” toward every element constituting its physical landscape, that is, the temples, the temple-deities, Mayapur’s organization, and the welfare of Mayapur’s people, and indeed as many people in the world as possible. Devotees agree that just as some day, after lives of spiritual perfection, they will serve the deity-couple and their devotees in cosmic Vrindavan, similarly, since Mayapur is indistinguishable from Vrindavan, their loving services there are spiritually as worthy as their services in celestial Vrindavan.

So, all the conditioned devotional senses remain engrossed in an affective rapture in ISKCON’s spiritually organized atmosphere: with the sight and feel of large, clean temples, the sounds of ecstatic kirtans, and the smells and tastes of incense and prasadam. Devotees’ “topophilic” response to Mayapur’s physical landscape, however, is simultaneously directed to its being a symbol of eternal Vrindavan’s transcendental import (Tuan 1974, 93, 150–53).
Thus, in this chapter I analyze another face of Vaishnavism and another specific dimension of the experience of place: one in which devotees conceptualize their entire life’s mission as serving the physical sacred place where the deity-couple reside in grand temples, and realizing their essential selves as Radha-Krishna’s servants. This commitment to devotional service involves a variety of activities, like financing, building, and embellishing temples; arranging the best possible administration and management for Mayapur; and serving the people who reside in Mayapur. ISKCON devotees unequivocally assert that rendering temple-deities the best possible seva—for instance, grand food, clothes, pujas, and most importantly love—is the best way to be a Vaishnava, rather than being improperly and prematurely concerned with divine sexuality, as practiced by other Vaishnavas.

There is a wide range of literature on ISKCON’s history, philosophy, and spread to different countries, and the devotional services organized in its international centres. What has however not been analyzed enough is the critical philosophy behind ISKCON’s veneration of physical sacred spaces, and the related issue of the development of its different international centers. ISKCON’s view of devotion, I argue, is intrinsically connected with its distinctive philosophy of place.

Unlike typical instances of South Asian populations moving westward in search of better life prospects, ISKCON has diasporic Indians who were initiated into Vaishnavism when abroad and chose to serve ISKCON there, or in Mayapur, or some other Indian place. Also, rather than Westerners only seeking “spiritual homes” in India (Khandelwal 2007), ISKCON has a combination of Westerners who serve ISKCON in the West, who have settled in India, especially Mayapur, and who switch between countries every year. ISKCON devotees’ mobility therefore does not have any predetermined pattern and is characterized by flux. While Khandelwal (2007) argues for a complete acculturation of “Foreign Swamis” in the Hindu culture in India, ISKCON devotees also do not necessarily dissociate themselves from any place. Their sense of the sacred place is essentially mobile since they say that every physical site where they offer devotional services transforms into Vrindavan.

While studies of diasporas and international migratory flows focus on ways in which people either carry their senses of place and religion from the emigration site or find new senses of place in the immigration site, ISKCON devotees embody a distinct sense of place: of discovering Vrindavan anywhere on the global stage where there is an ISKCON temple and where devotees come together to render devotional service.
Valpey (2006, 150) argues similarly that for ISKCON the entire world is potentially Vrindavan. This philosophy guarantees immense mobility choice for ISKCON devotees, since exactly where they are located becomes immaterial, if every physical site where they offer devotional services transforms into Vrindavan, as they say. This does not simply imply a post-national scenario of migratory “ethnoscapes” (Appadurai 1996) but follows a spiritual reasoning not bound by logics of nationality. Thus, I agree with Kokot, Tololyan, and Alfonso (2004, 4) that “diaspora” and “locality,” movement and fixity, may be interconnected at experiential levels. Casey (2001, 685) argues similarly that cosmopolitan mobility does not devalue the importance of experiencing a sense of place. Although the entire world is potentially experienced as Vrindavan by ISKCON devotees, Mayapur holds special importance for them, however, since it is Chaitanya’s birthplace.

Like other Vaishnavas, ISKCON devotees argue that the experience of Vrindavan is effective only when the devotee cultivates ego-effacement; however, by this they mean working as a _goshtibanandi_, one who derives pleasure from working collectively in an institution, rather than a _bhajanandanandi_, one who derives pleasure from solitary spiritual practices. ISKCON’s philosophy is therefore different from other modern religious movements popular among affluent Indian classes, as discussed by Warrier (2005, 15) for instance, which foster “private” and “inward-looking” faith.

One afternoon as I was eating lunch at Govinda’s, a restaurant in the ISKCON compound, I befriended a young boy of about 12 years. He had come with his parents, devotees from London, for a short stay in Mayapur. I asked, “Do you like Mayapur?” He replied confidently, “It’s very nice! It’s _gupta_-Vrindavan—everything is so beautiful, no one is hungry, and everyone is serving Krishna.” All devotees understand “Krishna Consciousness” as willing devotional service such that the place they reside in is rendered physically attractive and organized, and the people, contented. Thus, they say, _seva_ transforms any physical place into Krishna’s _dbham_ (sacred place). The other activity all devotees identify as most significant is preaching this message of Krishna Consciousness to people. They say that spiritual love must not be confined to pleasures of the interiorized self, for instance in solitary meditation and practice (as embodied by other Vaishnavas), but should reach out to others. Reaching out to others in the contemporary world implies making religion attractive, by which they mean redefining religion to suit peoples’ tastes.
Thus, ISKCON’s ideas of place and devotion are completely different from other Vaishnavas’. They realize Vrindavan by modernizing Mayapur, building grand temples, beautifying gardens, making wide roads for pilgrims, and serving Mayapur’s villagers, Krishna’s devotees, by giving them access to life’s basic facilities of food, health, and education. When temple-deities and devotees are served, the physical place becomes Vrindavan.

My main concerns therefore are to document the everyday nature of devotional services: toward Mayapur’s effective management, elaborate temple rituals, the basic welfare of villagers, and massive preaching ventures. Devotees of the “International Society” identify these services as chief components of Krishna Consciousness, which transform any physical location into Vrindavan. In order to employ members of the global society in these common spiritual purposes, devotees downplay all possible divisive binaries such as modern/non-modern, householder/renouncer, and East/West. Although ISKCON’s activities may seem similar to mundane work, devotees conceptualize these services as intrinsically spiritual and emotional, since they are directed with love toward Radha-Krishna’s pleasures.

Mohan, a Hungarian devotee who was teaching at the boys’ gurukul when I was doing fieldwork, said, “Our daily lives in Mayapur are such that everything we do is spiritual service.” Devotees rise before
four a.m., attend the grand morning arati in Chandrodaya Temple at four-thirty, chant deities’ names (keeping count on basil seeds) for two hours sitting in the temple, and listen to senior devotees explain verses from the Bhagavatam, then get ready and go off for their respective devotional services. For the entire day, every single person is extremely busy serving somewhere; how busy one is is an indicator of how much one loves serving Mayapur. Idleness, devotees told me, is the mark of devotional laxity. There are devotees cooking in the temple kitchens, serving prasadam to pilgrims, selling books written by Prabhupada, distributing pamphlets explaining ISKCON’s preaching programs, serving in the respective offices, assembling villagers and feeding them prasadam in villages close to Mayapur, and chanting to music on Mayapur streets. At six p.m. devotees assemble again in the temple for arati, listen to Gita explanations for an hour, and retire by nine.

ISKCON’s focus on devotional service as forming the crux of emotional personhood comes close to Heidegger’s idea of the work-world. He argues that one’s intimate engagement with the work at hand helps the individual grasp the sense of dwelling and meaningful relation with place (Casey 2001, 684; Gibbs 2008, 2010). Kovacs (1986) also says that work is intrinsically related to transcendence. However, many devotees corrected me when I referred to their activities as “work.” They are unwilling to call what they do “work”; it is simply seva toward gupta-Vrindavan. Material work and productivity become seva when practiced as embodiment of love for deities.

Routine execution of devotional services requires planned regimens of discipline and productivity. Devotees’ notions of discipline are related to their understandings of emotion. Unlike other Vaishnavas, who assert that their spiritual journey is from vaidhi bhakti to raganuga bhakti, ISKCON devotees spend entire lives perfecting disciplined devotion, since they say it is easily understood and practiced by neophytes, especially foreign devotees. ISKCON’s approach to devotion approximates Csordas’s (2009, 4) opinion about exoteric religions: their simplicity and portability indicate possibilities of globalizing religion. ISKCON devotees follow the five essential principles of vaidhi bhakti: chanting, remembering Krishna’s lilas by hearing verses from the Bhagavata Purana (these first two are discussed in chapter 6), worshipping temple-altar deities, serving them in association with other devotees, and residing in and serving spiritual places, in this case, Mayapur.5 Devotees additionally argue that passionate devotional excesses are detrimental to planned, industrious efforts and organizational seva.
So, while Navadvip’s Vaishnavas associate ISKCON’s splendor, huge monetary investments, and popularity among foreigners with a shallow, materialistic, and immature appreciation of religion, the emotional exuberance embodied by these other Vaishnavas is characterized by ISKCON devotees as a way of gaining cheap popularity among disciples and as a justification for sexual licentiousness (Swami 1998). A few ISKCON devotees, however, are dissatisfied in focusing exclusively on vaidhi and not being able to develop passionate relationships with deities, and have left ISKCON for goswami or babaji gurus in Navadvip or Vrindavan (see also Brooks 1989, 169).

However, ISKCON devotees conceptualize discipline itself as intensely emotional. One of my Bengali devotee friends had the service of helping the specialized cooks make the deities’ elaborate meals. Every day at around seven A.M. she would go to the deity-kitchen of Chandrodaya Temple to cut vegetables, prepare spices, and so on. I asked her, “Isn’t doing the same thing every day boring?” She smiled and said, “Prabhupad said every service must be instilled with humility and love—these are for Krishna’s pleasure! Without love, would we be disciplined?”

Devotees’ performances of emotions are strictly discursively constituted. ISKCON has a hierarchized structure, and devotees say or do as gurus teach them. Before saying anything, devotees add “as Prabhupad said,” or “as scriptures say.” ISKCON also has a thriving reading culture. Every devotee must thoroughly read books written by Prabhupad before gurus agree to initiate them. These Bengali and English books, and Sanskrit Vaishnava texts like the Gita and Bhagavatam, have been translated into many international languages. These books explain Vaishnava philosophy in simplified terms for all foreign devotees to comprehend. Thus, instances of individualized opinions are rare, and if devotees behave in any unwarranted manner, they are reported to higher authorities. Both disciplined devotion and deference to gurus are marks of humility, devotees argue, rather than cultivation of individual passionate states, which are intellectually precocious and presumptuous.

The devotees’ emotive approach to their service impacts their affective body language and behavior. They are always smiling and greeting each other vibrantly, saying, “Hare Krishna” (hail Radha-Krishna) even while engaged intensely in their devotional services. All devotees look forward to and despite their busyness attend the daily temple-aratis, when with raised hands and joyous faces they chant the deities’ names to music, and dance and jump in complete ecstasy. When devotees meet
outsiders they are unfailingly friendly, humble, and polite, since their gurus teach them to treat every person as a potential Krishna-devotee, and everything they say as a potential preaching message.

Thus, fieldwork with ISKCON devotees was easy in many ways. They were always welcoming, though at times expecting that I would finally take initiation from their gurus. I spoke to most of them, including Indians, in English, and there was an ease in our conversations since we related to each other’s social backgrounds. Since they are educated, some highly so, they immediately understood my project and said exactly what they wanted to be written about ISKCON, as that in itself is a kind of preaching. This was not a problem, since their descriptions of devotional services and self-representations as excellent organizers, public preachers, and servants of the institution constitute a significant part of my study. However, devotees are tremendously busy through the day. Thus, appointments had to be made for most interviews unless devotees invited me for lunches, snacks, or women’s meetings. I befriended many more devotees in ISKCON than among goswamis, babajis or sahajiyas, but these relationships were often semiformal and less intense. Also, since devotees have very synchronized opinions, our conversations were repetitive, and devotees’ narratives almost never contradicted each other. In comparison with my fieldwork in Navadvip, where I had to mostly rely on devotees’ narrativized experiences, my fieldwork in Mayapur entailed a lot more observations of the different kinds of devotional services devotees engage in throughout the day, and understanding through conversations with them what meanings they attach to these services in gupta-Vrindavan.

GLOBAL SPACE, PLACE, AND SERVICE

ISKCON’s philosophy and practice of devotional service question a number of binaries, such as West/East and modern/non-modern, to ensure the widest possible international participation in Radha-Krishna’s services.

On a hot summer day, Tulsi had given me an appointment and we chatted in her air-conditioned office, from which she then managed an NGO carrying out developmental work in Mayapur and adjoining villages. She was a young devotee from Atlanta, who had settled with her husband in Mayapur. At one point I asked provocatively, “Why do so many foreigners leave first-world comforts and settle in this small village? On hot days like this, don’t you wish you hadn’t come?” She
retorted softly but firmly, “Mayapur means much more than heat and dirt. Everything here is Krishna-conscious, everyone is a devotee, every work devotional service. This is our Vrindavan!” Tulsi’s response was similar to those of many other devotees who reside in and visit Mayapur from all over the world.

ISKCON devotees, participants of the global-devotional space, argue that any physical location is a potential gupta-Vrindavan and manifests their spiritual selves as Radha-Krishna’s servants, if offered devotional services. Devotional service is anything done with discipline and love toward deities. It involves no conceptual complexity—devotees stress that there should be no religious expression that cannot be preached to all.

Shyam was a middle-aged Indian devotee who along with his wife had organized a tourism bureau which preached massively about Mayapur throughout India in the previous decade and even began direct online transmissions of daily temple aratis and discourses by gurus for the benefit of international devotees. He said, “I do my devotional service with love. And the magic is that it is also a form of preaching, because more love means better services, means Mayapur’s better organization and attraction for others across the world.” Devotees in fact say that proper devotional service is in itself an effective form of preaching, and vice versa.

All devotees, including Indians, assert that they are not Hindus but Vaishnavas, since religions are divisive and not reflective of universal Krishna Consciousness. Devika, a Japanese devotee married to a Bengali, wore the sari since it is compulsory for all women devotees, although foreigners wear it slightly differently from Indians. Men wear dhootis and kurtas. All devotees wear tilaks on their foreheads and carry sling-attached cloth bags containing jap-malas on their shoulders. ISKCON’s dress code acts as an equalizer for devotees of different nationalities. One day, seeing Devika in a red sari with vermillion on her forehead, by mistake I asked, “Is this because your husband is Hindu?” She exclaimed, “No! We are only Vaishnavas. Vaishnavism means every person’s eternal relationship with Krishna and loving service toward him.”

De-emphasizing nationality and religion in defining Vaishnavism ensures large-scale international participation. Also, foreigners are not asked to leave their modern way of life but simply to realize their servitude to Krishna and dedicate their lives to ISKCON. Thus, Berg and Kniss (2008, 92) argue that Indians’ accepting Westerners as gurus
because they sense an essential sameness with them as god’s servants is unprecedented.

So, although similar to Hindu organizations which focus on seva as religiosity, for instance the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) or Ramakrishna Mission (RKM), ISKCON’s philosophy does not entail discourses of Hindu nationalism. I agree with Waghorne (2004, cited in Hancock and Srinivas 2008, 622) that new global religiosities are ushering in states of cosmopolitan, mobile spatial forms, which do not embody fundamentalist Hindu idioms.

Also, Brajesh, a British devotee and one of Mayapur’s earliest residents for over three decades, said, “We believe in practical devotion, not naive sentiment. True devotees know how to keep pace with the times.” For devotees, “keeping pace with the times” and “practicality” imply a mode of sociality which blurs the boundaries of traditional/modern, East/West and renouncer/householder, in addition to nations and religions, to reach out to the maximum number of people.

Various kinds of devotees reside in and visit Mayapur. There are foreign devotees who come for a substantial period annually, participate in the devotional life, and return to their home countries; foreign devotees who reside permanently and serve in various departments; Indian permanent-resident devotees; neophyte men who come for spiritual training and are later sent to serve in other ISKCON temples; sannyasis who come for few months between their preaching rounds throughout the world; and pilgrim-tourists who lead regular lives in Indian cities and come for spiritual vacations. ISKCON also has life-members in Indian cities, who may not be initiates but pay a handsome sum of money to gain membership and facilities like a few annual days of free stay in ISKCON’s guest houses.

There were approximately 500 resident ISKCON devotees during my fieldwork, among whom around 300 were brahmacharis and the rest householders. Very few single women, either unmarried or widowed, live in Mayapur, since ISKCON is careful to avoid scandals. Thus, apart from familial contexts, men and women have separate socializing situations. Brahmacharis live in exclusive buildings according to their particular service; for instance there are buildings for those serving in preaching activities, publishing, deity-kitchens, and so on. Their basic needs are provided by ISKCON. Householders are given a small sum for maintenance, and rent flats in an assigned complex. Those who are affluent or draw enough income from professions in the West buy housing in the complex, ranging from small flats to large, well-furnished...
houses. Devotees stress, however, that one must not spend on consumerism, which is thoroughly unproductive, although they may invest in modern accommodations, equipment, offices, and so on, if they are useful or productive for their devotional services.

Analysis of the life-history narratives of both foreign and Indian devotees offers distinctive insights into their devotional ethics and their negotiations between the global space and experiences of a sense of spiritual place. The narratives also help rethink binaries of West/East and modern/non-modern, when conceptualizing ISKCON’s philosophy of service.

Venu, who was ISKCON’s CEO during my fieldwork, said during a formal interview that the term “International Society” points to universal Krishna Consciousness rather than interaction among nationalities. Himself a Bengali, then about 35 and having lived in Mayapur for 27 years, he was trained in gurukul, and married to an American devotee. He spoke in a distinctly American accent, presumably due to continuous interaction with foreign children in gurukul since childhood. Venu added that the only important distinction is between the material and spiritual, not modern/traditional or West/East. ISKCON’s working/serving atmosphere, with its emphasis on productive principles, up-to-date infrastructure, huge monetary investments, and discipline, is deemed spiritual by devotees because it is dedicated to serving Mayapur. Devotees’ implicit suggestion therefore is not to conflate categories of the modern with the material, materialism being associated with selfish ego-gratification which does not care to serve deities. In other words, the modern becomes spiritual if used for devotional service; otherwise it remains material. Many devotees said that their services follow the principles of yukta-vairagya—“together-spirituality,” or the capacity to include modern facilities in Krishna’s service. Venu said, “If a materialistic person found a hundred-dollar bill in the street, he would keep it for himself. An ascetic would walk past it—but a Krishna-devotee would pick it up and use it in the deities’ service.”

This imagining of the Krishna-devotee as one who makes prudent use of money for spiritual purposes is the ideal for ISKCON devotees. This logic fits both “world-affirming” and “world-renouncing” philosophies. Thus, unlike the Jains described by Laidlaw (1995), for whom renunciation in the true sense is an “impossible ideal,” ISKCON does not view householders and renouncers, or even riches and renunciation, as starkly different. Both householder and renouncer devotees are assigned devotional services, which are considered equally important
for the institution’s maintenance, and devotees must be equally productive in preaching, although renouncers are expected to be preachers full-time, that is, available to preach anywhere in the world as and when necessary. Warrier (2003, 2005, 11–15) argues that although most scholarship on modern religious movements suggests that people join them because they feel disillusioned with modern living, her informants choose particular modes of religiosities because they are modern. ISKCON shifts the terms of this debate by insisting that the only important binary is that between materialism and spirituality.

Devotees serve in their specialized capacities from nicely decorated, often air-conditioned offices. Senior devotees’ and sannyasis’ offices have pompous decor comparable to corporate offices. Gauging my surprise at seeing his big room, late-model computer, and the number of helpers attending him, Madhava, a married devotee who then managed ISKCON’s treasury, said, “Don’t go by the room’s look. I sit here with no material attachment to comforts. But without basic facilities, I won’t be productive, and without that, no loving service to Krishna will be possible. You ask how we negotiate spirituality with modernity. But the word modern has no significance in spiritual life. Like Prabhupad said, I am dovetailing modern things in Krishna’s service.” Madhava’s diasporic biography testified to this critical balance. Educated in Patna, he moved to the United States and then to the Gulf, and served for 13 years as a fashion company’s CEO, but eventually decided to settle in Mayapur. He said, “Doha’s material opulence could not quench my thirst for a spiritual life.”

Similarly, I have seen householder devotees using modern facilities including microwaves, expensive furniture, and fancy children’s toys. However, a delicate balance is achieved since televisions, considered a consumerist belonging which cannot make devotees productive in any sense, are not allowed in devotees’ homes. Birthday parties (distinctly modern, Western phenomena) are held for children, but the children play only with Krishna-conscious games like puzzles, quizzes, and coloring books describing Krishna’s or Chaitanya’s life.

Shyamgopika, a Greek devotee who was doing her spiritual service by teaching in the international school for devotees’ children, lived alone in a small flat, since her husband was away serving in London’s Soho Temple most of the year. She exemplified a practical balance between traditional and modern ways of life. She wore the sari, put on vermillion, and took a dip in the Ganga every evening, but also used foreign household goods. Like other foreigner devotees, she prepared
trendy Western food items but consumed them only after offerings to Radha-Krishna’s and Chaitanya’s pictures at home. She said proudly, “My daughter studies in London and loves her life there, but, true to ISKCON’s philosophy, is never swayed by materialism.”

As to what attracted them to ISKCON, and further, to settle in Mayapur, there are striking similarities in Indian and foreign devotees’ accounts.

ISKCON puts primary emphasis on devotees’ preaching Vaishnavism to others by distributing and explaining Prabhupad’s books. Thus, they recruit mostly educated people. Generally people acquaint themselves with ISKCON by reading Prabhupad’s books and interacting with devotees. Many devotees told me that they had begun their spiritual careers by distributing books in public places like roads, airports, and parks.

Nearly all devotees said that association with ISKCON addressed their “search for meaning in life” and “search for true love (in God)” and helped get rid of material life’s boredom. Indulekha, a young devotee from Delhi, raised in Dubai, and married to Bihari, a South Indian devotee, studied medicine at elite, cosmopolitan Manipal University. She said with satisfaction, “I lost interest in TV, parties, movies, and boys, very early on in college. These material things stopped giving me inner happiness, and then by Krishna’s mercy I read Prabhupad’s books.”

Many devotees say that ISKCON helps them understand spiritual texts “as they are,” or scientifically.8 A devotee said, “We don’t give individual interpretations to texts. Prabhupad explained them as they are, and we follow him. But babajis and sahajiyas imagine what texts mean.” Devotees’ insistence on “scientific” religion, one which is objective, generalized, and predefined by Prabhupad, is thus linked to the understanding that proper devotion is disciplined rather than individualistic and passion-driven.

ISKCON’s various preaching media, such as the posters they put up during festivals, and their books, also highlight the idea that theirs is a scientific religion. The term has the connotation that since it is objective, it has palpable effects and uses in everyday life. This claim helps ISKCON address younger generations of devotees. Nandakumar, a Bengali devotee, a veterinarian by profession, balanced his life by working in a hospital and serving Mayapur’s goshala cows. He said, “Earlier I used to think science and religion are different. But Prabhupad said that a practical devotional approach is necessary for contemporary times. Now when I serve the cows, I think both about science and how happy Krishna is.”
Other devotees told me that their parents had shed their initial skepticism about their children taking up a full-time religious life when they found that they were learning practical, scientific procedures to spiritual truth rather than abstract philosophy (often associated with Hinduism), and therefore using their professional training productively in their spiritual lives. In fact, most devotees prefer devotional services which employ their specialized skills. Achyuta gave up his lucrative job as an electrical engineer in Melbourne in 1979 to dedicate his life to serving Mayapur. His professional skills had been aptly utilized, and during my fieldwork he was in charge of building the new Temple of Vedic Planetarium.

It is difficult for devotees to sustain relationships with non-devotees, because of ISKCON’s strict emphasis on “four regulative principles,” which devotees also call principles of “spiritual freedom” (from material life). These are no eating of meat (or fish or eggs), no illicit sex (including sex for non-reproductive purposes), no gambling (including gambles in thought—this refers to ISKCON’s “scientific” approach to religion, that is, accepting Prabhupad’s books “as they are,” or as non-debatable truths), and no intoxication. Along with these, devotees chant for a minimum of two hours daily. To ensure fidelity to these principles, devotees marry among themselves. Thus, cross-national marriages are common. Gurus and ISKCON matrimonial bureaus play significant roles in arranging marriages.

The “regulative principles” attract diverse groups of people, like many of my Indian friends who came from conservative Hindu vegetarian families, and Westerners who “were tired” of their shallow, materialistic lives. Weiss and Mendoza (1990, 181) similarly argue that acculturation into ISKCON brings greater senses of well-being to devotees. My American friend, Anangamanjari, then about 60 and a permanent resident of Mayapur, remembered how her life changed in the 1970s, when she was experimenting with Zen macrobiotic diets and Indian gurus, until she met ISKCON devotees in New York’s Central Park. Her practice of “regulative principles,” eating prasadam, and loud musical chanting with other devotees, leading to “inexplicable happiness and goose bumps,” helped her abandon earlier “highs” she associated for instance with drugs. Like other devotees, she called ISKCON a “spiritual hospital” which cures materialism. Anangamanjari’s experiences were common to other Westerners during the 1970s and ’80s. Pamphlets about chanting called *Stay High Forever!* and ‘*Finding Ecstasy*’ were distributed in New York streets, and a book called *Chant and Be Happy* (Prabhupad 1987) described chanting as being “sweeter than acid,
cheaper than pot, and nonbustible by fuzz” (53). Anangamanjari added, “Regulative principles are scientific—they regulate health and morality.”

Thus, foreign and elite Indian devotees embody ISKCON’s international spirit by being quintessential global citizens. Their educated backgrounds and philosophy of devotional service justify their mobility. Since any physical location may be transformed into Vrindavan by offering it devotional services, devotees’ travels and life-philosophies problematize East/West binaries. This also ensures that devotees of optimum international exposure and professional specialization serve in Mayapur. Devotees also question binaries between householder/renouncer, modern/non-modern, and so on, and argue that anyone and everything has the capacity to be spiritual, if stripped of materialism and dedicated to the deities’ service.

**ISKCON’S SOCIALIZATION**

Every ISKCON devotee living in Mayapur must be involved in some devotional service. Devotees do not waste time in “material” activities, and every person has a strict schedule which purports to serve Radha-Krishna through daily activities. However, devotional service begins only after the devotee has been adequately socialized into ISKCON’s spiritual ideologies.

Devotees’ lives are governed by ISKCON’s philosophical focus on *vaidhi bhakti*, since discipline and rules aid in routine *seva* and productivity. An evening program had been arranged one day by some of ISKCON’s women devotees, in one of their flats, to celebrate the initiation anniversary of the head *pujari* (priest), Brajesh. The host, a Westerner, baked a cake on the occasion. Before cutting the cake all the women discussed spiritual matters, as is usual during devotees’ gatherings. That evening’s topic was chanting. They were discussing what Prabhupad said about chanting, how they should try to chant for more than two hours daily, and so on. One of them, new to ISKCON, began saying that she “chants in relationship,” that is, feels passionate love for Krishna when chanting. All the devotees glanced at each other, and their faces showed thorough disapproval. The host explained: “Discussing these things publicly shows cheap advertising of spirituality. Only *babajis* do that. Prabhupad said we must only chant to pray to Radha-Krishna that they engage us in humble service.” But other Vaishnavas view ISKCON’s sole focus on rule-bound *vaidhi bhakti* and avoidance of *raganuga bhakti* as spiritual incapacity.
ISKCON centers all over the world are run on the basis of rules laid down by the General Body Commission, which is comprised of senior devotees (mostly sannyasis). To keep discipline uniform internationally, devotees are grouped according to traditional Indian varnashram (life-cycle) models. Thus, there are rules for children receiving initial socialization, brahmacharis (18–25 years old) who lead disciplined lives within ISKCON without interaction with the outside world, grhastyas (householders), and sannyasis, who either never married, or married and after fifty years of age have taken permission from their wives and dedicated their lives full-time to ISKCON’s preaching missions.

Devotees embody principles of ego-effaced devotional service through their different life-stages. They say their main responsibility is to serve Mayapur through concerted group activities. Socialization into ISKCON’s philosophy begins in the gurukul, the residential training school where male children are prepared for further life-stages. The gurukul was built around 1975. Within ISKCON’s enclosure but away from the everyday bustle, the school is surrounded by forest, and one can even hear jackals after sundown, echoing in the rural interiors. There are stony alleys all around the school built on traditional models, and the classrooms and residential buildings are made of bamboo, with clay walls. However, the benches and gardens inside are very modern, and the school’s look is an interesting combination.

One of the gurukul teachers, Mohan, also studied there. He said, “This is not just a school. It is called Bhaktivedanta Academy. An academy gives children culture—the complete vaidhi bhakti training for services they will later give to Mayapur.”

Mohan explained that rigorous discipline, self-sufficiency, non-materialist socialization, and modern values of time management and practical learning which will prove useful in devotional service—these are the gurukul’s central concerns. The children, mostly foreign and from 5 to an average of 18, start their days before dawn and go to sleep right after sunset. They have very basic facilities. They bathe in cold water, even during winter; their rooms do not have electric fans. Their belongings constitute of one locker per person, a few clothes, a straw mat to sit on, a blanket, and a mosquito net. They do all the cooking and cleaning on their own. Cooking is performed on clay stoves lit with cow dung; the vegetables are often grown in the Mayapur fields, in an attempt at complete self-sufficiency. The smallest children cannot cook, so they make juices, wash vegetables, and so on. The point is to engage every child in some activity or other. Sitting on a gurukul bench in the
cool forest breeze, I asked Mohan, who had his laptop open before him, “ISKCON gets so many donations, and devotees live in comfort. Why aren’t children given more comfort?” Almost as if he was expecting the question, he said, “If they grow without material comforts, only then they will know that modern facilities are for Krishna’s service, not ours.”

Highly trained teachers provide classical education in Sanskrit, Vedic mathematics, Vaishnava scriptures, mantras, deity-worship techniques, and so on, such that by the time the children graduate they have all necessary ritual knowledge. Venu, who was in the gurukul for 14 years, clarified that the gurukul also ensures very contemporary training. It focuses on practical specialization, so that devotees can serve ISKCON according to their personal interests. Thus, since his interests were in administration and music, he spent extra hours learning the sacred drum (mrdangam), rather than doing levels of math he would not need later. Venu was a suave speaker, very polite and helpful. So he was an effective administrator. Also, sometimes when his work as CEO was slightly reduced, he would play mrdangam during evening musical sessions before the temple-deities. The gurukul also has compulsory courses on public relations, media handling, public speaking, and administrative skills, each of which is necessary for successful devotional services and preaching.

There is a separate non-residential gurukul for girls. Girls are trained more in cooking, dressing deities, painting, and so on, rather than temple-rituals, mantras, or methods of fire-sacrifice.

Almost all gurukul graduates spend their lives serving Mayapur. They take up leading roles as priests or temple presidents, or significant administrative positions. However, devotees who want to give their children a more conventional education can send them either to the International School within ISKCON grounds or to the Bhaktivedanta National School just outside. An Indian devotee teaching at the International School said, “We aim to provide children with a balance of up-to-date international education, while being grounded in Mayapur’s spiritual culture by giving classes on Vaishnava scriptures, moral education, and deity-worship.”

Devotees’ children have the necessary training to serve Mayapur’s departments as soon as they leave school. In the gurukul, children receive two initiations which other devotees receive later.

Outsiders who want to join as brahmacharis enroll themselves in the New Bhakta Training Center, an office in one of the administrative buildings. While most aspiring devotees are educated, sometimes
less-educated people from Bengal’s towns and villages come for training, since a brahmachari’s life is provided for in ISKCON. But since every devotee will need to do seva and preach, an initial training is necessary. For three months they are educated in Vaishnava scriptures, etiquette, preaching techniques, and basic services like cleaning the temple before devotees arrive for the early-morning arati. They spend a year practicing what is called the ABCD—association of devotees, reading Prabhu’s books, chanting, and vegetarian diet—and finally receive their first initiation, harinam-diksha (vows to follow four regulations). Married devotees go through the same process and are recommended by temple authorities for initiation. First initiations are grand affairs: 500 people may be initiated at a time, when they take their vows before the guru and receive new Vaishnava names.

A few years after harinam-diksha, some want the second initiation, brahman-diksha. This initiation is not compulsory. It gives the devotee the right to touch and cook for temple-deities. During this initiation all devotees are given brahmanic sacred threads. This is a controversial issue among Vaishnavas (Das 1982, 599–602). While ISKCON views the distribution of sacred threads to all initiates as a democratic gesture which avoids caste hierarchies, babajis assert that a Vaishnava must condemn caste altogether by denouncing even its external markers such as sacred threads. A Vaishnava, according to them, should be known only as a Krishna devotee and not through any other social identity.

Third initiations are rare and given to sannyasis. As we sat in his massive room, with its sophisticated wood flooring, comfortable sofa set, and expensive paintings of Radha-Krishna, eating fresh fruit-prasadams served by his assistant-brahmachari, Swami, a Bengali, middle-aged, veteran sannyasi, offered an analysis of ISKCON’s view of renunciation. “Sannyasis are not mentally attached to any given residence. They always travel around, preaching. Although our lifestyle looks corporate—flying to different cities, lecturing in seminars, and living in posh arrangements—we do it with a different mentality: to preach Krishna Consciousness.”

Both householders and renouncers may be gurus, since the main use for gurus is preaching to as many people as possible. Swami, for instance, had been initiating for 30 years and had 30,000 international disciples. Ananta, head of the General Body Commission’s guru-selection committee, emphasized that who can be a guru is a practical decision. There are international jurisdictions within which devotees preach. A devotee’s capacity to be a guru is judged according to his popularity within
the allotted jurisdiction. Burr (1984, 122) argues that the leadership qualities being emphasized in choosing gurus reveal ISKCON’s “this-worldly materialism.” I argue, however, that she conflates pragmatism with materialism. Devotees clearly espouse a version of non-materialist but practical spirituality.

ISKCON sannyasis wear saffron robes. Navadvip’s Vaishnavas heavily criticize this practice, which they associate with arrogance, since only Chaitanya wore saffron, while his associates and disciples wore white. I never saw any goswami, babaji, or sahajiya wearing saffron. An ISKCON devotee said, “We are international preachers. Most foreigners associate saffron with spiritually elevated personalities. Everything we do is to attract more people toward Krishna Consciousness.”

Householders’ main service consists in socializing their children into ISKCON’s values (Judah 1974, 85). I heard many women say during women’s gatherings that they preach to children, since they don’t have time to preach outside. Thus, from a very young age, children are culturally well-integrated into ISKCON’s ideology of devotional service. I have seen children in traditional Indian dresses work intently at cleaning the temple, making flower garlands for deities, and so on. For games, they enact stories from Krishna’s or Chaitanya’s life, or play toy kirtan-drums. Even small children touched my feet when their parents introduced them to me, and I remember how a five-year-old girl uttered Vaishnava mantras before her family began a meal with me. During a festival in Mayapur, I met a couple of gurukul boys of about seven. I asked playfully what they wanted to become when older. One of them said, with a serious, convinced face, “I will remain a brahmachari and serve Mayapur.”

SERVICE AS DEVOTION, DEVOTION AS SERVICE

ISKCON devotees translate bhakti not as “devotion” simply, but as “devotional service,” since for them active collective service is more important than solitary worship. They differentiate devotional service from both work and social service. Serving deities and their devotees in the sacred place, Mayapur, with love and humility, is their significant embodiment of devotion.

Service as devotion has gained importance since the nineteenth century among many Hindu religious movements. This was when the foundations of Gaudiya Math and ISKCON devotionalism were laid. However, ISKCON, in drawing a distinction between social and spiritual service,
differs from RKM, RSS, and other religious organizations which foreground service as their devotional expression. Social service, as exemplified by RKM and RSS, views people themselves as expressions of divinity and service toward them as serving God (or nation). But ISKCON devotees argue that service toward people is nothing more than serving Krishna's devotees. Dualism between deities and devotees is conducive to a subservient subjectivity, contrary to RKM's monistic philosophy. Venu said, “The sense of doing social service brings pride to the servant, which is different from a Vaishnava’s mentality.”

Socio-religious service has been interpreted as a form of (Hindu) nationalism in many cases. But ISKCON, with its emphasis on devotional service as giving pleasure to Radha-Krishna and making a good Vaishnava, understands the social in social service as clearly spiritual.

ISKCON’s definition of devotional service includes any activity directed with love toward Mayapur. Thus, not only is service devotion, but devotion itself is also service. A gardener, a preacher, a publisher, an administrator, a cleaner, an author, a cook, a temple priest, and someone who simply chants all day are equally respected “servants.” During my fieldwork, Vinodini, a middle-aged woman, was engaged in a number of important services. She was researching the Bhagavatam’s 12th part; she had 40 lectures assigned to be delivered internationally; her third book was in press; and she was preparing a Gita edition with pictures for every chapter. Malati, an American devotee, was close to 70 and semi-paralyzed. Unable to perform any other service, she devoted all her time to painting deities’ portraits, which were proudly displayed by other devotees in strategic locations within ISKCON’s compound. Both Vinodini and Malati were highly esteemed devotees. Thus, ISKCON’s understanding of productivity is not limited to how much work one literally does but emphasizes the mentality one cultivates to serve with love, every element constituting the functioning and publicity of Vaishnavism and Mayapur to the world.

Service, devotees emphasize, is different from work, since it is not confined to a 9-to-5 occupation but is a permanent state of mind and body. When work becomes devotionalized, productivity increases, Malati told me, for “then there is no limit to how much we want to do.” In their discussions with me, married devotees were reluctant to use words like “salary” or “earnings,” and referred to the small sums of money they receive from temple authorities as “maintenance.” One of them said, “When I minimize my receipts, I maximize the amount available for deities’ services.”
There are more than thirty-five departments under which services are organized in Mayapur. Two factors determine which service one performs: ISKCON’s need and the devotee’s expertise. The point is “to build a knowledgeable, well-trained workforce with identifiable skills of use” (Knott 2000, 160). There are three main categories of services: for Mayapur’s temple-deities, for Mayapur’s maintenance, and for Mayapur’s devotees.

The Pujari (priest) Department is devoted to serving the idols of Radha, Krishna, and Radha’s eight main sakhis in one compartment and Chaitanya and his five associates in another, in the Chandrodaya Temple. The life-size idols of Radha-Krishna and the sakhis are six feet tall, and Chaitanya and his associates, seven feet, each most beautifully carved and dressed. The department conducts services for regular worship, including making deities ready with bright-colored, sequined, gem-attached, magnificent clothing and offering four elaborate aratis accompanied by a wide variety of food. Almost fifty items are offered on huge plates during meals, and this number approaches a thousand during Krishna’s, Radha’s, or Chaitanya’s birthday. The same spectacle is maintained in serving Prabhupad’s idol in his shrine-temple. Brajesh, one of the head priests performing the aratis, said, “I am addicted to my service. I conduct it in a humble mood. I don’t think that I am doing it, but that I’m assisting Prabhupad in serving Krishna.”

In the building next to Chandrodaya Temple, during my fieldwork, thirty devotees served for twelve hours daily, preparing clothes for deities. They already had seventy such sets, and three sets are prepared every year. Each dress is very expensive. Many devotees cite the idols’ magnificent size, their grand dress, and the splendor of the food-offerings as causes of their first bouts of devotion; and preaching to people by maintaining high standards of worship in Mayapur constitutes an important service. Every day, hundreds of pilgrims and resident devotees flock to the temple and sit for hours gazing at the gorgeous deities.

Brajesh, along with other senior devotees, since 2007, was also involved in the service of training devotees in skills of temple-worship, in the Mayapur Academy. In addition to details of how to bathe, dress, cook for, offer food to, and perform rituals toward deities, the Academy teaches them Vaishnava etiquette, most significantly, humility while serving.

The second set of services is rendered toward the dham’s maintenance and the welfare of the devotees residing in ISKCON’s enclosure. Departments supervising these functions have separate offices, for instance Treasury, which manages accounting; Foreign Currency and
International Devotee Care, departments which take care of foreigners’
needs; Housing, which distributes 120 flats at its disposal for rent or sale;
Community Sevaks(servants), which manages domestic issues like mar-
rriages and divorces; and the general manager oversees legal affairs, includ-
ing devotees’ conduct as prescribed by the General Body Commission.

The Tourism Department was established in 2007. It advertises
Mayapur internationally. Many brahmacharis serve the department as
tour guides for pilgrims. Some travel to Calcutta, Bombay, and other cit-
ies to participate in tourism fairs, where they sell brochures, posters, and
magazines explaining the spiritual importance of gupta-Vrindavan. I have
seen how urban Indian and foreigner devotees are greeted by English-
speaking brahmacharis, offered the best rooms in ISKCON guest-houses,
given temple-prasadam thrice a day, and taken around places associated
with Chaitanya’s pastimes, when they visit Mayapur. When pilgrims leave,
brahmacharis maintain relationships with them. Shyam, the department’s
head, said, “If they’re not already devotees, we ensure that their experi-
ences in Mayapur will give them the appropriate mentality.”

ISKCON’s most important source of preaching and income is the
Bhaktivedanta Book Trust (BBT), one of the largest religious presses
in the world. BBT Mayapur primarily publishes Bengali editions of
Prabhupad’s books. A common saying among devotees is that just
as the army cannot go without bullets, ISKCON cannot go without
books. Brahmacharis serve for more than twelve hours daily, produc-
ing thousands of books every month. Almost a hundred devotees travel
all over eastern India distributing books for nine months. While most
of the books are sold, some are distributed for free in schools and pris-
ons. During my fieldwork a South American group came to assist in
the book-distribution service. One of them was especially lauded as he
distributed 8,000 books in a month.

The third set of services is toward people and pilgrims of Mayapur
in particular, and people of the world in general, especially by preach-
ing to them. Prabhupad’s biographies state that he was once very upset
to see poor women and children fighting with dogs for leftover food in
Mayapur. He decided that within ten miles’ radius of any ISKCON tem-
ple, none would go hungry. When I asked devotees about ISKCON’s
philosophy, many of them narrated this story. To fulfill Prabhupad’s
mission, an NGO, SMVS (Sri Mayapur Vikas Sangha—development
committee), was established in 1998. Funded by foreign bodies, it car-
rries out developmental work in fifty Nadia villages. It has a food-for-life
program and feeds prasadam to four million villagers annually. It has
established a small poly-clinic and distributes water-filters and medicines to villagers at very low rates or free of cost. It also focuses on women’s and child-labor education and has set up eight schools. Additionally, it provides micro-credit to villagers setting up small businesses.

Tulsi, a fieldworker for SMVS, corrected me when I called this range of services “charity.” She said, “People who live in Mayapur or Vrindavan must have good karma from past lives. They are Krishna’s devotees, and we are pleasing Krishna by serving them. This is devotional service, not social work.” Tulsi was American, and her parents were also ISKCON devotees in the West. She came to Mayapur after completing college, and got married to Venu, a Bengali, and both of them actively dedicated themselves to serving Mayapur. She said, “I don’t think anything is more pleasurable than serving Krishna’s devotees in gupta-Vrindavan. I want to do everything to see them smile.”

Other departments carry out similar devotional services. The Harinam Department, which organizes collective chanting on Mayapur streets every evening, also distributes free prasadam in villages. After the prasadam is distributed, villagers are asked to chant with music along with devotees. Radhananth, a middle-aged Polish devotee, was living in the housing area in ISKCON’s compound during my fieldwork. He had recently developed some problems with other devotees but he continued his food distribution service without financial help from ISKCON. He said he had a wonderful rapport with villagers, and he carried big pots on boats across the river to village interiors, to cook for and feed villagers prasadam. This was not simply about feeding the hungry, he asserted, but more significantly, an important way to spiritualize peoples’ consciousness (see also Anderson 2007, 127). Radhanath said, “When cooking, I pray, ‘O Radha-Krishna, let me serve you the best food today, and please bless those who taste your prasadam.’ I face financial difficulties these days. But I will continue this service till my last breath. There is so much pleasure in serving others.”

There are three large kitchens within ISKCON’s complex which serve different classes of pilgrims: affluent Indians and foreigners, life-members, and ordinary pilgrims. They charge different rates, and have different kinds of food, but they ensure that all get their sumptuous prasadam-meals when in Mayapur. ISKCON also has an international chain of restaurants, which provide prasadam and preach vegetarianism. It has a large counterpart in Mayapur, which even serves Western food items like pizzas and pastries, and caters to affluent pilgrims. I have tasted prasadam several times in all these places, and each can
compete with the other in excellence. Serving good prasadam is an effective preaching technique, and all the pilgrims I know love ISKCON’s prasadam, and many come back for it. Once during a lunch invitation in Indulekha’s small flat, she offered the cooked items to her personal altar-deities, as all devotees do before meals, served me, smiled, and said, “When Krishna tastes something, it becomes nectar. Now when you taste the nectar, you will feel Vrindavan’s happiness and automatically become a devotee! You will return again to Mayapur.”

ISKCON’s aim in preaching is to introduce Krishna Consciousness to diverse groups of people: children, youth, young couples, senior citizens, corporate officers. Every devotee ought to be a preacher in her own right. Preaching can take place anywhere—in homes, roads, temples, schools, prisons, offices—and the preacher may choose to chant Radha-Krishna’s names to attractive music in strategic places, or distribute books to passers-by, and devotees whose specialized services lie in preaching offer discourses on Vaishnavism in cities and villages.

A five-story building right outside ISKCON’s compound accommodates seventy-five brahmacharis engaged in full-time preaching. It is called the Namhatta Building, namhatta literally meaning “selling deities’ names” in the spiritual market. The essence of namhatta—preaching the message of Krishna Consciousness, and missionizing and revitalizing the tradition of Gaudiya Vaishnavism through disseminating mechanisms—began in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and is attributed by ISKCON devotees to Kedarnath Datta (Swami 2009, 8, 10). However, ISKCON’s new form of namhatta began around 1979 to help householders practice Krishna Consciousness from their homes (Cole 2007, 52). The emphasis for householders is on chanting, practicing the four regulations, consuming prasadam, reading Prabhupad’s books, associating with devotees, and following practical devotion, that is, continuing professional work while dedicating it to the deities’ service. With literacy increasing in villages, preachers have recently introduced this system in rural Bengal and established 2,500 small groups in districts. During the winter months, preachers set up camps in cities and villages, where they conduct religious sermons and serve prasadam. I have seen thousands congregate during these programs. Bengali brahmacharis are especially employed in preaching activities since they can communicate with villagers.

Since 1996, the namhatta program has developed further and a bhakti-vriksha preaching method has been adopted. Bhakti (devotional service) now caters to specialized vriksha (branches) of devotees. Knott
(2000) and Rochford (1982) note that ISKCON’s preaching ventures adapt to different socio-historical contexts.

Most books, pamphlets, and posters distributed by the tourism and preaching departments are in English, since they mainly cater to affluent, educated Indians and foreigners. The books are of high publishing standards, with glossy paper and colorful, attractive pictures. Some devotees focus on preaching to children by designing 3D animation projects, coloring books, and cartoon films on Krishna Consciousness. Preachers focusing on services to youth have designed short courses, on completing which candidates become possible future initiates. Candidates are given the option of attending discourses by senior devotees in temples, or completing courses online. The courses are taught in contemporary, professional idioms. The course-books clearly mention that they are not esoteric texts but easy, quick, practical expositions of religion, which are compatible with present-day lives. There are journals called the Spiritual Scientist Series, for instance, and various books explain how Krishna Consciousness helps in personality development, mind control, stress management, overcoming loneliness, achieving successful relationships, and so on. Books addressing corporate executives similarly address themes like positive thinking, proactive leadership, and how to deal with recession. Apart from this there are books for novices, like Perfect Questions, Perfect Answers; handbooks for householders; basic philosophical books on Vaishnavism; and journals on congregational preaching for all sections of society.

During a house program in Calcutta arranged by a devotee working as a corporate manager, a brahmachari came to preach from Mayapur. The program had been arranged on the occasion of Radha’s birthday. After arati having been offered to Radha-Krishna’s idols, kirtan by devotees, and the brahmachari’s well-articulated discourse on the need for Vaishnava spirituality in contemporary times, a college student, deeply moved, went to touch his feet. He stopped her and said, “I am only God’s servant. . . . If you liked the program, come to Mayapur, associate with devotees, be a devotee and a preacher, and serve Krishna.” All the devotees shouted, “Haribol!”

CONCLUSION AND OTHER SENSES OF PLACE

ISKCON devotees embody a distinctive relationship with Vrindavan through their notion and practice of devotional service—disciplined, pragmatic services rendered collectively toward every element
constituting the physical sacred space of Mayapur, and through preaching missions organized for people across the world. ISKCON’s philosophy of place is therefore distinctly different from that of the other Vaishnavas.

*Goswamis, babajis, and sabajiyas* all articulate three parallel senses of sacrality and place: Navadvip, *gupta*-Vrindavan, where they reside physically; cosmic Vrindavan, where Radha-Krishna reside; and interiorized affective spaces of the mind-heart or body, where they cultivate senses of pleasure they will ultimately derive from being in celestial Vrindavan.

ISKCON devotees espouse a more complex soteriology, which I argue is due to their principal emphasis on physical spaces as sacred. They do not approve of preaching about esoteric forms of religiosity or interiorized experiences of place. Also, very few devotees told me that they *want* to go to Radha-Krishna’s celestial abode after death, although that is conceived of as the ultimate destination. They had interesting responses about this paradox.

Shyam said, “A true devotee does not *want* anything. It does not matter whether I go to eternal Vrindavan after death, or come back life after life to Mayapur. Mayapur is Lord Chaitanya’s birthplace and he was Radha-Krishna in the same body. Mayapur and Vrindavan are the same. What is important is that I serve the deities wherever I am. If we think too much about our after-death destinations, we will lose focus on our present life’s services.”

Swami said, “What are we doing in Mayapur? Serving deities and devotees. What will we do in Vrindavan? Serve deities and devotees. Service always needs organization, whether here or there. Then, what is the difference? Why want something when you have it?”

ISKCON devotees, I argue, have a complicated sense of place. Since they are Vaishnavas, they believe they will ultimately travel to celestial Vrindavan after lives of spiritual perfection. But their focus on disciplined services toward the physical place engenders a strong sense of the here and now, of presentness, thus making the issue of their after-life imaginings ambiguous.

However, the similarity among all Vaishnavas is regarding the intrinsic proliferative possibilities in senses of place. Thus, while the sacred place is fixed in physical geography, it also travels in every instance. *Goswamis* and *babajis* carry Vrindavan in their imagination, and a *sabajiya* carries it in her body. Similarly, ISKCON devotees agree that, as Anangamanjari put it, “Wherever we preach is Krishna’s *dham*. 
Wherever we offer devotional services together is Vrindavan.” Thus, while Mayapur is venerated by devotees all over the world, every international site where ISKCON has a temple, and where devotees render devotional service, is also gupta-Vrindavan. Similarly, a devotee writes that Prabhupad, who spent a great part of his old age in Vrindavan, left Vrindavan and set out on his preaching mission to the West, when he was 70, while ordinary people wish to retire in Vrindavan at that age. She says that this was possible because a “truly Krishna Conscious” person “carries Vrindavan with him” (Dasi 2006, 96).

Srinivas (2008, 13) argues similarly that complex spatial experiences are common to many new religious expressions. She quotes Roberts and Roberts (2003, 239), who say, in their study of Mourides, a Sufi movement based on a saint whose mausoleum is in Touba, that “any notion of Mouride travel is complicated by the idea that despite being somewhere else in the world—Amsterdam or Jidda, say—Mourides are still at home because in some sense ‘Touba’ has travelled too.”

This experience of place as travelling with and manifesting wherever a practitioner experiences his devotion is also central to kirtan musical practices. All Vaishnavas claim that Vrindavan is apparent to them wherever they chant the deities’ names or sing their glories. It is to the description of these musical practices, and analyses of how they manifest Vrindavan distinctively to different Vaishnavas, that we now turn.