



Spiritual Perspectives

June 2016

Seeing the World through Spiritual Eyes
For Friends and Followers of Mukunda Goswami

Changing Their Minds

By Radha devi dasi

Compassion can help to stop abortion. In one sense, this idea is simple enough. Those who become compassionate will refuse to kill their unborn children. However, if we seriously want to stop the current genocide, we have to expand our compassion to those who seek abortions as well.

Abortion rights are a perennial news topic as the debate on whether it should be legal continues in countries around the world. Brazil, where abortion is illegal, now faces the threat of birth defects caused by an outbreak of the zika virus in that country. Some Brazilians advocate for legal abortions to counter the zika threat. In the US, attempts to limit abortion rights in individual states have raised political ire among many. Women in England and Wales had a record number of abortions in 2015, leading to concern in those nations.

It may be a surprise to realize that one in four pregnancies ends in abortion worldwide; about 56 million abortions a year, according to the Guardian, citing figures from the World Health Organization (WHO). A more troubling finding is that criminalising abortion does not make it any less frequent.

New figures from the US-based Guttmacher Institute and the WHO show abortion rates were similar regardless of the legal status of the procedure. The rate was 37 per 1,000 women in countries where it was prohibited altogether or only permitted to save the woman's life and 34 where abortion was available on request.

If the legal system cannot effectively curtail abortion, how do we cope with the annual execution of tens of millions of unborn children? We must alter the underlying mind set that makes such killing possible. As Krishna explains to Arjuna in the *Bhagavad-gita*, failure to maintain religious principles causes unwanted children. Srila Prabhupada noted that the modern value of enjoying sex life for its own sake is rooted in selfishness and



An infant being immunized in Bangladesh

results in parents being happy to kill their children in the womb. While even animals have protective feelings toward their young, he wrote, Kali yuga is so degraded that modern men and women kill their children. (*Srimad-Bhagavatam* 7.2.55 purport).

Rather than seeking legislative solutions, opponents of abortion would do well to seek a spiritualization of modern culture. Helping others to understand how the soul travels from body to body and how each soul is a part and parcel of the Supreme Lord will do more to reduce such killing than the most rigorous legal prohibition. However, such an approach requires compassion for those who do not understand these spiritual principles and a commitment to helping them move forward on a spiritual path. So let's show our compassion to both the helpless children and their misguided parents by sharing the spiritual knowledge mercifully bestowed upon us.



Drawing of fetus in the womb

ISKCON to Open First Ever Temple in Guyanese Capital

By Madhava Smullen, *ISKCON News*, May 13, 2016
<http://bit.ly/1raITwA>



A computer rendering of the upcoming new temple in Georgetown, Guyana

Devotees are set to open their first ever temple in Georgetown, the capital of Guyana, this July as an offering to Srila Prabhupada for the 50th anniversary of his ISKCON. The temple, located in an extremely sought after area, will receive its grand opening during a five day festival beginning on July 13th, the day Prabhupada incorporated his society.

It's set to be a pinnacle for ISKCON Guyana, which is already one of the most active ISKCON congregations in the world per capita. "The country has a population of only 750,000 people, but we now have five temples and six annual *Rathayatras*," says temple board chairman Prabhupada Deva Das. Plans for the new temple began in 2005, when Prabhupada Deva and others began looking to establish a center in the most densely populated part of the country. They began by renting, then later purchased land, and in 2011 began construction on a custom building.

The new temple could not be in a more prime spot, just three minutes' walk from the University of Guyana campus, with Srila Prabhupada's emphasis on university outreach a major inspiration.

It's also close to the Guyana International Conference Center, the headquarters of the Caribbean Community Secretariat, the Ogle International Airport, and the site of Guyana's upcoming first hospital for specialized operations. The surrounding area, mean-

while, is an upmarket one, home to many dignitaries, ambassadors, and businesspeople.

The temple itself – still under construction, with external details to be made after the opening – is being built in a modern style, avoiding the typical Indian motifs so as to make the country's African populace feel welcome, too. It will include a temple room for the community's Sri-Sri Nitai Gaurachandra Deities, a Govinda's restaurant, dormitories, and a computer research and learning center to facilitate students. The grand opening festival will run from July 13th to 17th, and is expected to draw between ten and twelve thousand people. Among them, organizers have invited such luminaries as Guyana's President, Brigadier David Arthur Granger; its Prime Minister, Moses Nagamootoo; and its Indian High Commissioner H. E. Mr. V. Mahalingam. From ISKCON, Bhakti Vasudeva Swami, GBC Virabahu Das, and kirtaniya Agnideva Das have been invited.

The festival's first day – the 50th anniversary of ISKCON's incorporation in New York – will see the dignitaries and devotees celebrating that historic occasion with a full stage program of dramas, talks and more praising Srila Prabhupada and his contribution to the world.

On the second day, devotees hope to invite government officials to tie the temple opening and



The new temple in Georgetown, under construction

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ISKCON 50 in with the 50th anniversary of Guyana's independence, also happening this year.

"The politicians will be talking about Guyana's 50 years of independence from their point of view," says Prabhupada Deva. "And we will be presenting what ISKCON has done in Guyana since Prabhupada's only Guyanese disciple, Bhutadi Das, established the society here over forty years ago. These achievements include our village outreach program which contributes to nation-building, our weekly national television program Hare Krishna Today, our distribution of spiritual literature, and the different services our temples have been doing for people in general." The next day, July 15th, will be an Ekadasi. It will be dubbed Prabhupada Day, and will see senior devotees sharing their memories and realizations about the ISKCON founder alongside a six-hour *kirtan mela* and ceremonial bathing of Srila Prabhupada's murti form. Organizers also hope to plant an American elm similar to the tree Srila Prabhupada first chanted under in New York's Tompkins Square Park, as a way to commemorate ISKCON 50.

On July 16th, a major *Ratha-yatra* festival will be held in honor of Lord Jagannath, with the familiar red and yellow chariot parading through main Georgetown streets like Vlissengen Road and Railway Embankment Road, before arriving at the new temple. At last, the grand finale on

Sunday, the 17th, will include all-day kirtan in a separate pandal (tent). Meanwhile, in the temple room there'll be an *abhisekh* or bathing of Nitai Gaurachandra and a stage program featuring dance, drama and presentations about ISKCON Georgetown's vision. The festivities will conclude with a delicious feast served to all.

Looking past the opening, ISKCON Georgetown will be very busy. For ISKCON's 50th anniversary year, many devotees will be pledging to distribute fifty books each, and Padayatra walking tours will be held every month. The new temple will be equipped with a kitchen big enough to feed 5,000 people daily during food relief initiatives. It will also offer Gopal Fun School Saturdays for children aged 5 to 12 to learn Krishna consciousness in a fun way. And its Bhaktivedanta Hall will offer classes on vegetarian cooking, yoga, music, dance, and philosophy. Most of all, however, ISKCON Georgetown will focus on reaching university and college students. Its computer research and learning center will provide University of Guyana students with all the facilities for their regular studies, along with a full library of Vedic and Vaishnava texts to pique their interest. And devotees plan to hold many programs and festivals tailored to connect with the students. "The vision of this project is to bring spirituality to the Guyana's brightest young minds," says Prabhupada Deva.

Hindu Temples Must Be Open to All

By Anantanand Rambachan, *The Huffington Post*, April 4, 2016

<http://huff.to/1Ztkv1Z>

Christian churches in many European countries such as Sweden, Denmark, France and Belgium are struggling with the phenomenon of declining attendance. The same is true of England where less than one million attend weekly Church of England services. The trend in the United States is similar.

In India, on the other hand, the challenge is a different one. News reports remind us often that the doors of Hindu temples are not open to all Hindus. This is especially true if you are a Dalit (lit. broken), a member of India's so-called untouchable community, numbering over 170,000 million. Quite recently, violence erupted at the Basaveshwara Temple in Sigaranahalli, Karnataka, when upper caste Hindus sought to prevent the entry of Dalits, who wanted to participate in a Durga festival. Last year, Dalit

women were asked to pay a fine for entering the same temple. The temple was subsequently closed, and reopened only after the performance of purification rituals. Contact with Dalits is traditionally regarded as religiously polluting. Last year, an elderly Dalit man was killed for trying to enter a temple near Kanpur in Uttar Pradesh. In some cases, as in the Kariyamma Temple in Karnataka, Dalits were allowed to enter only with the help of state authorities and against the wishes of upper caste Hindus. The closing of temple doors to Dalits who wish to worship must be a matter of painful acknowledgement and concern for Hindus everywhere. Sadly, the voices of protest are still too few. We cannot blame those who interpret our silence as support for Dalit exclusion from our places of worship. Even more importantly, our silence and indifference give support to

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the mistaken impression that the Hindu tradition has no teaching for challenging the human inequality that is at the root of Dalit ostracization and oppression. There is a need for a sustaining will and resolve to repudiate and overcome this practice that violates the heart of Hindu teachings.

The beliefs about human inequality, purity and impurity, that explain this practice of exclusion need vigorous and unambiguous Hindu religious repudiation. The major traditions of Hinduism are unanimous in affirming the equal existence of God in every being. "God," the *Bhagavad-gita* teaches, "exists in the heart of all beings." This core teaching must become the basis for the equal dignity and worth of every human being and the motivation for challenging and transforming oppressive structures of inequality and temple exclusion. The shutting of temple doors to persons asking for equality to worship challenges, in a special way, the meaning and legitimacy of Hinduism as a religious tradition. If every human encounter is also an encounter with God, turning Dalits away from Hindu temples is the same as turning God away. We must commit ourselves with tireless determination to the work of ensuring that every Hindu temple is a hospitable space where every worshipper is joyfully welcomed. Such work must be seen as fundamental to the meaning of belonging to the community of Hindus. All Hindus who understand and are deeply troubled by the contradiction between teachings centered on God's presence in every human being and the exclusion of Dalits from places of Hindu worship must embrace this cause. We must lift our voices in protest against all practices in the name of our tradition that denigrate other human beings. We must ensure that Hindu leaders take a clear and forceful stand on this matter and repudiate injustice in the name of the Hindu tradition.

My concern here is not with claiming Dalits as Hindus. Dalits have a right to freedom of or from religion. My concern is with the fact that some Hindus still say "no" to Dalits wishing to worship in Hindu temples and believe that they have religious support for shutting the doors. This denial contradicts the most fundamental teachings of the Hindu tradition about God and the value of human beings.

The Constitution of India specifies, "The State shall not discriminate against any citizen on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex, place of birth." Constitutional and legal measures, as necessary as these are, have not and will not eliminate all forms of discrimination based on inequality and on superstitious beliefs about purity and impurity. Hindus need to affirm unequivocally the teachings of the tradition that complement constitutional law. These are the teachings that repudiate caste and commit Hindus to practices that testify to the equal worth of all human beings.

Hindu organizations in India such as the Hindu Dharma Acharya Sabha must make equal access to Hindu temples a matter of priority and stand in solidarity with those who are denied entry. Visits should be made to every Hindu temple with a history of denying entry to Dalits. Unambiguous teachings that explain why such practices are unacceptable must be shared. Hindu leaders, not state agents, should be walking with Dalits into temples and standing and worshipping with them. It is a shame on our tradition when Dalits are excluded or permitted to worship outside of the temple.

Opening the doors of all Hindu temples to Dalits is an important step, an urgent religious matter and an opportunity for the Hindu tradition to define itself by saying clearly what it stands for in the 21st century. The meaning of being Hindu must not require the oppression and demeaning of another human being.

Alachua Plans Intentional Community for Ages 55+

By Madhava Smullen, *ISKCON News*, May 5, 2016
<http://bit.ly/1UwTvh3>

Alachua, Florida is already home to the largest group of ISKCON members in North America, with some 500 congregational families. Now devotees are planning an intentional devotional community there for couples or

singles aged 55 and over. Prabhupada disciple Kirtiraja Das, who served as a GBC and regional secretary in the former Soviet Union before moving to Alachua with his family in 1991, is developing the project as its managing director.

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He has worked as a realtor for the past twenty years, and like many of the senior devotees who have relocated to Alachua, he wants to downsize and simplify.

“As we grow older, we love to spend more time chanting, reading, going to the temple, and getting as much devotee association as possible,” he says. “So our thought is that by creating this community, we can minimize the maintenance that’s required to live, and maximize time and opportunities for our spiritual practices.” The intentional community, dubbed “Bhaktivedanta Village,” will be set on a green, 25 acre wooded property on the southside of downtown Alachua that has already been procured by Ambarisa Das (Alfred Ford). Now Kirtiraja is looking for investors and residents to develop the property.

He plans for it to be divided up into quarter-acre lots, with private yards and concrete block homes of between 900 and 1,400 sq. ft, heated and cooled. The homes will be energy efficient and incorporate green building techniques, and will be very affordably priced for devotees to purchase.

“We want devotees to be able to live comfortably and practically, and not have to break the bank to do it,” says Kirtiraja. “So we’re shooting for a price range under \$100,000.” As well as these outright sold units, there will be rental homes, and some subsidized units for those who cannot afford to buy or rent.

The neighborhood will be peaceful, with no through traffic, and will have devotees living in close proximity to each other to facilitate lots of Krishna conscious association.

“In our current situations, if you want to go to a friend’s home for kirtan or prasadam after work, and you’re tired, you’ve still got to jump into your car and drive over,” Kirtiraja says. “In Bhaktivedanta Village, they’ll live right next door or two streets over.” Bhaktivedanta Village will also make life simpler by providing shared facilities including walking paths for chanting japa or just getting fresh air; mini parks; and a community center with a small temple room, a space for kirtan and programs, an exercise room, and a swimming pool.

There will also be a staffed kitchen and cafeteria where devotees will be able to purchase a reasonably priced prasadam buffet and have a



The green, wooded site for Bhaktivedanta Village

common meal with friends. Alternatively, they’ll be able to get takeaway to eat at home, or purchase a mealplan for anywhere from a month to a year. Kirtiraja feels that especially for the 55+ set, there’s a lot to be said for not having to cook.

“My wife Haripuja and I have been married for forty-three years, and with rare exceptions she has cooked at least once every single day,” he says. “She’s just tired of it! And she’s certainly not alone.”

Meanwhile, Bhaktivedanta Village staff will take care of other general maintenance issues of day-to-day life, to give its residents more time. Homeowner’s Association fees will cover regular lawn mowing and grounds-keeping, and either volunteers or staff paid by the individual will be available as caregivers, drivers, and home cleaners or cooks.

“We want to minimize those things, so that for example, when you come home in the evening you don’t have to mow your lawn for ages – your grass is already cut and looks beautiful,” says Kirtiraja. “And you can in effect go to a kirtan at a different person’s house every night!”

In addition, units will be set aside for hospice care. “Right now, devotees under care are in hospices out in Gainesville or Lake City, places that are hard to get to,” Kirtiraja says. “But in Bhaktivedanta Village, devotee association will always be right there with them.” With all these facilities, Bhaktivedanta Village will not only be a great opportunity for seniors, but also for devotees looking for employment or volunteer service.

The project, which Kirtiraja calls “long overdue,” has already drawn a huge amount of interest. Within just three days of posting about it on his personal Facebook page, he received 105 serious

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inquiries from devotees all over the world; and more keep coming in.

An office has already been opened onsite to field these queries, show prospective residents what's available, and plan out the development. Meanwhile, Kirtiraja and a team of local devotees he's gathering plan to break ground on the project in eighteen months. And with everyone onboard feeling a sense of urgency, construction is expected to move at a good clip.

"We're excited about getting the chance to serve the Vaishnavas in this way," Kirtiraja says. "As devotees, we consider association such an im-

portant thing throughout our lives, and as we get older we need it more than ever. So we feel that to provide a community where such association is readily available is so important."

* * *

To help Bhaktivedanta Village become a reality or just learn more about the project, please contact Kirtiraja Das.

Visit him on Facebook at Kirtiraja Jakupko.

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Newly Appointed Professor Talks Scholarship's Role in Vaishnavism

By Madhava Smullen, *ISKCON News*, May 20, 2016

<http://bit.ly/1UwSV2B>



Radhika Ramana Das

Professor Ravi M. Gupta (Radhika Ramana Das) is the newly appointed Charles Redd Chair of Religious Studies, and Director of the Religious Studies Program at Utah State University.

It's a presti-

gious position that brings to mind a gruff, silver-bearded elder. But Radhika Ramana flips that idea on its head. At a youthful 34, he's got a beaming smile of pearly whites and a full head of black hair. He's also disarmingly unpretentious despite his astonishing academic journey.

Homeschooled by his mother Aruddha Dasi at his home in Boise, Idaho, Radhika followed a highly unconventional curriculum based mostly on Srila Prabhupada's *Srimad-Bhagavatam*, from which he learned reading, writing, comprehension, grammar, and critical thinking skills.

It clearly worked. At 13, Radhika Ramana attended Boise State University. At 17, he received his Bachelor's degree in philosophy and math. At 22, he completed his PhD at Oxford. Immediately

after that, in 2005, he got his first teaching job. From there, it was moving up the ranks from assistant professor to associate professor to achieving tenure at the age of 29.

Now, as full professor, Radhika holds the highest rank possible in academics, signifying that he has developed an international reputation in his field of study, through his research, lectures, conference presentations and teaching. Moreover, as Charles Redd Chair of Religious Studies he is also an endowed chair in his field, an opportunity few in academia get. And as Director of Utah State University's fast growing Religious Studies Program, he is responsible for developing it into the future.

Simply put, he's ideally situated to make an impact. Here's the thing: he's not alone. A consistently growing number of brilliant Vaishnava devotee religious studies scholars, specializing in their own tradition, are coming up through the ranks.

Along with early pioneers like Hridayananda Goswami (Howard Resnick), Garuda Das (Graham Schweig), and later senior devotees like Krishna Ksetra Swami (Kenneth Valpey), these new young wunderkinds bring the total to about two dozen Gaudiya Vaishnava scholars.

"And all of them are getting very good positions around the United States and across the world," says Radhika Ramana. "It's very, very exciting and heartening to see." This is key, because according

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to Radhika Ramana, it's important to have both outsider and insider perspectives for a fully developed picture on any tradition. And academic scholarship on Gaudiya Vaishnavism has been dominated almost exclusively by non-practioners. Until now. So what do these scholar-practioners bring? For one, they can dispel long-skewed perceptions. For instance, academic literature has always praised Gaudiya Vaishnavism founder Chaitanya Mahaprabhu as a great mystic who brought the emotional intensity within Krishna Bhakti to new heights. Which is true. But it has consistently left the Gaudiya tradition out of any descriptions of India's intellectual heritage. "This despite the fact that Gaudiya Vaishnavism's 500-year history shows an incredibly high density of great philosophers, astute thinkers, and prolific writers and poets," says Radhika Ramana.

Radhika himself began remedying this with his PhD thesis and 2007 book about the philosophy of one of Gaudiya Vaishnavism's greatest thinkers, Jiva Goswami. Others have also made their own studies on towering figures of Vaishnava thought. Next, scholar-practioners can bring to light great texts that have been ignored. Despite sister epics the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* being studied profusely in the academic world, the *Srimad-Bhagavatam* has been left by the wayside for over a century. So in 2013, Radhika Ramana, with Krishna Ksetra Swami, published *The Bhagavat Purana: Sacred Text and Living Tradition* with Columbia University Press. The book features chapters by various specialists demonstrating the *Bhagavatam's* impact on numerous aspects of Indian and world history. And this October, a second book, *The Bhagavata Purana: Selected Readings* will follow. "Both will be marketed as a pair for use in university classrooms," Radhika says. "We feel that the time is ripe now for the *Bhagavatam* to be taken seriously in the academic world."

All these foundational studies on Gaudiya Vaishnava subjects by devotee scholars are important, because as Radhika Ramana says, "When you produce a foundational study on a subject that hasn't been looked at before, future studies will always refer to it as the basis."

As well as shining a light on these gifts from the Gaudiya tradition, scholarship is also essential to the health of the tradition itself. One of the services it can provide in this regard is to study both the short term history (Prabhupada's establishing it in the West) and the long term

(back to Chaitanya's time and beyond) so as to better navigate problems already faced in the past.

Another service of scholarship is to identify how to keep the tradition both faithful to its roots, and relevant to today's people. "We need to negotiate and be comfortable with both," says Radhika Ramana. "And we need to realize that innovation is not the enemy of fidelity and vice versa – as Srila Prabhupada so expertly proved."

There will always be a tug between relevancy and faithfulness in every world religion, Radhika Ramana says, but this is in fact a symptom of a healthy tradition. "Without that tug, the religion will either become so mainstream that it loses its roots and withers away," he explains. "Or so heavily stuck in the past, that no one can identify with it today, and it becomes inaccessible and irrelevant to people."

With all these services and more being provided by Vaishnava practioner-scholars, Radhika Ramana is glad that his new position as full professor allows him to mentor new generations and ensure that Vaishnava scholarship continues to thrive. Because even a small group can make a major impact, he says. "Scholarship is slow by nature, and its effects are not seen immediately," he explains. "But once it's developed, its effects are long-lasting and very powerful, changing the way the mainstream thinks on a fundamental level. Some of the biggest ideas that are now commonplace in the world, like the notion of equal rights for all human beings, began as 'crazy ideas' tossed around by thinkers." For his part, Radhika Ramana hopes to give the Vaishnava tradition 'a voice and an active seat at the table' when it comes to both public and academic intellectual discourse. "For me, that would be a measure of success for the type of service that we do," he says.

SPIRITUAL PERSPECTIVES

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