#MeToo

By Radha devi dasi

America’s Twitter feeds and Facebook pages are filled with #metoo in the wake of Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein’s dramatic fall from grace. Decades of sexual abuse and intimidation by Mr. Weinstein were revealed by a long list of Hollywood actresses, writers, producers, personal assistants and virtually every other woman who interacted with him. In an effort to demonstrate the reach of this problem, actress Alyssa Milano challenged women (and men) who have experienced sexual abuse or harassment to tweet or post “#metoo” on their social media accounts.

In ISKCON, there is a tendency to write off such phenomena as a result of degraded western culture. But the Facebook feeds of Vaishnavis also describe experiences of being groped, cat-called and assaulted in many countries (and holy places) in the world. Vrindaban itself has been not only a place of profound spiritual realization but also a place of traumatic sexual assault and even murder for some Vaishnavis. Sexual abuse is a worldwide problem.

Another tendency in ISKCON is to blame the victim for the abuse. Women who are sexually assaulted are often in vulnerable situations as a result of their own actions. Other women who are attacked, however, are in vulnerable situations over which they have no control. Why should this matter?

It matters because there will always be those who justify assault and harassment of women based on the women’s actions or characteristics. In fact, whether a woman chooses a dangerous method of transportation, dresses immodestly or behaves improperly is an entirely separate issue from sexual assault or harassment. The idea that “bad girls” deserve violence or intimidation is, frankly, not worthy of Krishna’s devotees. Moreover, a man seeking to escape the consequences of his crime will always characterize his victim as “loose,” “looking for it,” or in some other way culpable for the man’s assault. Blaming the victim turns into a “get out of jail free” card for the perpetrator.

A third tendency we have is to minimize the problem. Women are told we make too much fuss about “minor” sexual harassment. Both ISKCON and the larger secular society often respond to women’s complaints by making light of them. “It’s a compliment” when strange men yell offensive names. Women are “too sensitive” when they object to off color jokes. (And even devotees tell off color jokes.) The list goes on.

By minimizing the “minor” deviations, however, we are giving a green light to further abuse of women. A woman (and in ISKCON that means a Vaishnavi) becomes someone whom any man is entitled to comment on, criticize, touch, seduce, or assault. If she doesn’t like these behaviors, the thinking goes, she shouldn’t put herself in that position.

In essence, men are being socialized to believe that attraction to women is (a) completely under the woman’s control and (b) a force that they are powerless to resist. Thus, any attraction they feel is the woman’s fault and any action they want to take is justified. With this world-view, a woman might feel that the only safe place is her own home. Unfortunately, friends and relatives also assault and harass women – even at home.

The real solution to this problem is to educate everyone to respect others as Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu instructed. A Vaishnavi is Krishna’s servant, not someone to be exploited by others. The fact that a particular woman may not be manifesting her highest behavior at a given point in time does not change her role as Krishna’s servant nor the duty of Vaishnavas to protect her as they would their own mothers.

So #metoo is a reminder that we still live in Kali-yuga. But as Vaishnavas and Vaishnavis we have the opportunity to demonstrate a better culture where respect rather than exploitation is the basis of our relationships.
An incredible eight thousand devotees flocked to a small village on the Black Sea Coast near Odessa, Ukraine for the mega Bhakti Sangam festival during the first week of September.

A large percentage of the crowd hailed from Ukraine itself, where there are over 10,000 devotees. Others came from all over the world to see for themselves a phenomenon that has to be experienced to be believed.

Organized by ISKCON Ukraine regional secretary Achyuta-priya Das and guru Niranjana Swami, the annual event began in 1996 with an attendance of only 400 and an entrance charge to cover costs.

Since then participation has grown exponentially every year, and the festival was made free to all and remains so to this day.

“`It didn’t sit right with me that we were refusing devotees from participating,” says Niranjana Swami. “We did away with the festival fees, relying on voluntary donations instead. To reduce the overhead, all the festival’s hardworking staff stopped taking any compensation for their efforts. And all the senior devotees speaking at the event volunteered to cover their own travel expenses.”

This year’s festival ran for five days and included ecstatic kirtans, edifying seminars, delicious prasadam and stellar Vaishnava association, living up to the festival’s name – “Bhakti Sangam” roughly translates as “A meeting place for devotees.”

Each day began with a full morning program. After that, with three seminar “blocks” of six parallel seminars every day, participants had a lot of nectar to choose from. And the speakers were the cream of the crop, including Niranjana Swami, Krishna Ksetra Swami, Prahladananda Swami, Devamrita Swami, Chandramauli Swami, Sacinandana Swami, Subhag Swami, and Deena Bandhu Das.

Then there was the non-stop kirtan with Indradyumna Swami, Havi Das, Madhava Das, and many others.

“This year devotees chanted and danced in great ecstasy and relished each other’s association more than ever before,” enthuses Indradyumna Swami.
“Devotees come with a strong desire not only to hear and chant, but to serve each other,” says Niranjana Swami. “And it’s that spirit of service that really overwhelms me and predominates the festival.”

Many said the festival transformed the small Ukrainian village into “a second Mayapur.” Photographer Arjuna Bhattacharya, who captured a host of incredible moments, marveled at the ocean of devotees in a tent as big as an airplane hanger, “with hands raised, waving like a wheat field in the wind!”

Distributing prasadam to earthquake victims on a boat

Mexico City Devotees Feeding 2,500 Earthquake Victims A Day

By Madhava Smullen, ISKCON News, September 28, 2017

As natural disaster after natural disaster continues to pummel the Americas, an 8.1 magnitude earthquake struck the Southwestern Mexican state of Oaxaca on September 9th. This was followed quickly by a 7.1 quake on September 19th in Mexico City.

According to ABC News, the death toll from these disasters has now risen to 333, with 194 of those deaths in Mexico City. Five hundred build-
Earthquake victims line up for prasadam

While the earthquake victims in Mexico City may need to be pulled down or receive major repairs, fortunately, ISKCON Mexico City temple president Dharmaraja Das says that devotees in the region have not been injured or affected, and there is only minimal damage to the temple’s roof.

YouTube Star Inspired After Filming Sankirtan Devotee on Book Distribution

By Madhava Smullen, ISKCON News, October 12, 2017
http://bit.ly/2zi9Oig

Kevin Wu, a YouTube star with over 300 million views on his “KevJumba” channel, has been left feeling spiritually uplifted after following and filming sankirtan devotee Madhava Puri Das on book distribution.

Wu met Madhava Puri while staying at the ISKCON Los Angeles ashram, looking for spiritual answers during a difficult period in his life.

“I was seeking a sage or guru who could impart wisdom to me,” Wu says. “Madhava seemed so focused on Krishna consciousness; I think what attracted me was his dedication to Prabhupada.”

Despite Madhava Puri being a young man like himself and a devotee for just six years, Wu was so inspired by him that he decided to follow him on sankirtana to experience his traveling book distributor lifestyle.

Wu filmed Madhava for six days, for seven or eight hours each day to make his short film.

He captured the austerity of living on the road, and attached a mic to Madhava Puri’s shirt to pick up his interactions with people on the street.

Wu was inspired by Madhava’s explanation of the two types of monk: the bhajananandi, who renounces society and performs his worship in isolation; and the ghosti-anandi, who goes into society and braves disturbances to his worship so that he can teach others and guide them on the spiritual path.

“As a ghosti-anandi, Madhava’s form of renunciation is service to humanity,” Wu says. “My relationship with him inspires me because it challenges me to look at my own renunciation as service, not just focusing on my own meditation and happiness, but really going out there.”

Wu was particularly fascinated by the austerities of traveling sankirtan, including Madhava Puri’s ability to spend so much time alone – he distributes books by himself.
“You need to have a lot of faith in your spiritual master, and in your service, to be able to spend long periods of time by yourself and not fall into loneliness,” Wu says. “What kind of meditation must that take? That’s something that really attracts me.”

He adds: “It lifts me up spiritually to see someone like Madhava who has such a deep relationship with the teachings, and with the chanting; and to see how that can sustain someone emotionally and spiritually.”

Kevin Wu ends the film with a shot of Madhava Puri bowing down to Srila Prabhupada, with his voiceover saying, “If someone is sincere, then Krishna will send a guru to him.” The film is then dedicated to Srila Prabhupada.

Like thousands of other young people, Prabhupada’s teachings have touched Wu’s heart. “My family and community is Buddhist, and Prabhupada’s philosophy about Buddhism is so deep that I use it as the foundation to my approach to Buddhism,” he says. “The philosophy of God having different names and different forms in Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam – but a singular purpose to liberate people in a society of irreligiosity – I think that gives the foundation for spiritual life.”

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Watch Kevin Wu’s Short Film Below

ISKCON Italy Participates at a Conference in Parliament

By ISKCON Communications Italy, ISKCON News, October 28, 2017

ISKCON Italy’s Narada Muni Das (Fabio Pianigiani) participated at a conference held in the Italian Parliament celebrating the bi-centenary of Baha’u’llah.

After reading the message of greetings from ISKCON Minister of Communications Anuttama Das, in his presentation, Narada Muni Das elaborated on the importance of different faith groups’ celebrating together and sharing their goals.
He pointed out that discrimination is a problem for many of them. In April 2017, members of the Baha’i community were the subject of persecution and arrests in Yemen but these events had little prominence in the media, they were not considered to be important. “I believe each of us has the duty to demonstrate our solidarity, and in every way possible draw attention to the grave injustices in the world, whether they are religious, cultural or otherwise.” He also stressed the importance of solidarity for the oppressed on the part of the politicians and cultural leaders because, he said, “they are supposed to be the facilitators of peace and bearers of light in our confused society.”
Dear Friends,

Please accept my humble obeisances. All glories to Srila Prabhupada

Yasoda Finds And Catches Krishna — Challenging the intellects of great philosophers, the Supreme Lord runs in fear of His mother — and He’s not pretending.


Yasoda wiped her hands in the folds of her sari, and, creeping like a detective on the tips of her toes, she followed the path left by her son, step by buttery step.

0 great sages! 0 demigods! 0 perfected devotees! Meditate upon the ruby glow of the lotus feet of the universal mother as she balances on her soft petal toes!

At the top of the stairway leading to the back garden was a latticed window. Stealthily approaching it, Yasoda peeked out, and lo and behold, in the courtyard below she saw Him whom yogis fail to see in their hearts even after many years of penance.

Standing on a large, upturned wooden mortar, His lotus eyes rolling in agitation, Krishna was silently clapping His hands to catch the attention of nearby monkeys.

“I cannot believe it,” she whispered.

Balancing on the mortar, Krishna looked like a gopa-conductor bringing monkey-musicians to attention. Yasoda watched the monkeys fearlessly approach as Krishna sat down on the mortar, crossed His chubby legs in a svastikasana, and placed the pot in His lap.

“Where did He learn to sit like a yogi?”

The wind answered, “Mother! He is the guru of all yogis.”

Seeing all the monkeys heeding Krishna’s call, she added, “But it is all for naught. He is now transformed from the prince of yogis into the king of monkeys!”

Krishna kept the monkeys in order with clicking sounds while systematically handing yogurt to one after the other. Unable to suppress her joy, Yasoda covered her mouth to keep from laughing.

“No doubt they have a natural affinity for each other.”

As He fed the monkeys, Krishna repeatedly looked to the left and to the right. His lotus eyes dancing nervously on the stage of transcendental emotion, His mind echoed the cries of His every limb:

“When is she coming? From which direction will she come?”

Krishna’s plan was to disappear.

He thought, “Yogis who worship Me in My atomic form, pervading all subtle elements, fixing their minds on that alone, attain the mystic perfection of anima.”

Yet try as He might, Krishna was unable to accomplish His desire. Some invisible force restrained Him. Some force greater than His own kept Him from disappearing. But what power was superior to Krishna’s mysticism?

The power of Mother Yasoda’s love! And the wielder of that power was now tip-toeing down the palace stairs, planning to catch her thief son unawares as He pondered how He, of all beings, had fallen from the yogic path. Yasoda-devi had been looking through the latticed window into the courtyard below. Eager to play the role that Fate had scripted for her, she craned her neck, turning sideways to better see without being seen.

Then, slowly, with measured steps, she cautiously followed Krishna’s footprints down the stairs, halting inside the doorway to have another peek. Krishna mistakenly sat with His back to the house, giving His mother the added advantage of sneaking up on Him. Yet the monkeys were His sentinels, and facing her, they would react to her approach.

Queen Yasoda waited for the opportune moment, and when it came, careful not to step on fallen leaves or twigs, she moved forward.

As she took her first step, excitement so stirred Yasoda’s being as to challenge her balance. However, the birds on the balcony thought that restraining her laughter was an even greater challenge still.

Taking her next step, Mother Yasoda noticed her husband’s jewelled walking stick against the wall. “He must have forgotten it in the flurry of his departure. For unprecedented mischief, unprecedented discipline is required.”

She grasped the stick: As she did, the earth seemed to shake. What would happen to the creation and its residents if their shelter and support was beaten? “I will not hit Him,” she thought, “but I will give Him a good scare.”

Your servant,

Mukunda Goswami