

“In this age, Kali-yuga, to kill the demons means to stop their demonic activities by the weapon of kirtan, Hari-sankirtan, which is spread by Lord Caitanya's associates.”

Srila Prabhupada in London, March 10, 1975

Nov/Dec 2021

A LEGAL JOURNEY OF RECOGNITION FOR LOR KRISHNA

By Krishna Kirtan das

The following is an account of Krishna Kirtan's valiant fight to have the Vaisnava Holy days recognized in his institution.

Hare Krishna! Vaishnava pranam! Jaya Srila Prabhupada!

Let me first state that I take no credit for any success I may have had. I'm less than a grain of sand on all the planet's shores. All glories to my spiritual master, Sarva-Drik dasa, our Universal Shiksha and inspiration, Srila Prabhupada, Lords Gaura-Nitai, and our beloved and wondrously sweet Gopala.



And of course, Jaya Bhakti-lata Mataji, who watered the vine of devotional service within my atma. Starting in 2007, Mataji and I began a fourteen-year written correspondence. I've never met her in person, but she has always been there in writing, inspired by Srila Prabhupada. Over kala [time], she's watched the tribulations...along with the miracles I've experienced practicing our faith.

The Federal Bureau of Prisons isn't a great environment to begin an Eastern, spiritual practice to say the least. Lord Chaitanya though, continues to work miracles for His devotees no matter where they are living.

In 2011 after a rocky start in the B.O.P., I was transferred to the Federal medium security institution in Petersburg, Virginia and met supervisory chaplain, Juan Alba. This was obviously where Krishna had meant for me to be. Chaplain Alba allowed me to fully equip our service with devotional items (incense, mrdangas, kartals, harmoniums, deities, Gangajal (Ganges water), tilak, and a bunch of other devotional items.) The sanga grew and many, many inmates got to hear the Holy Name for the first time. I shaved my head, grew a sikha [tuft of hair in the back of the head] and tried to be a good brahmachari and practice all 4 regs while chanting 16 rounds a day. Kirtans got LOUD! My Gurumaharaja began visiting our group on a monthly basis and in 2012, on Srila Prabhupada's disappearance day, I received initiation with the BOP's first Agni-Hotra, out behind the chapel. Those who attended were blessed to see Tulasi and Shalagram Shila. I was given the name *Krishna Kirtan* for obvious reasons (I love kirtan). Kirtan could be heard OUTSIDE the chapel.

Tuesday night it was the place to be. Nearly twenty inmates regularly attended our services, and we had many inmate visitors who partook of our uninstalled deity's prasad of cheese quesadillas offered to Prabhupada, Lords Gaura-Nitai and Sri-Sri Radha-Krishna. It was wild. It was ecstatic. It was sublime.

Krishna embraced me tightly and tested my faith. I was shipped to a low security prison in Elkton, Ohio which was awful. Bliss reigned supreme though and I was transferred back to Petersburg six months later by the mercy of Sri Radha and Lord Nitai.

Now, though, back at Petersburg, I had to deal with the "Ravana" of BOP chaplains. Alba was gone and a mlecca [low-class man], a true *duskritina* [the lowest of mankind] of a BOP staff member, Supervisory Chaplain Christopher "Ravana" Houston had built himself an oppressive command and control center in the chapel. He took one of our worship rooms for his office even though he had a perfectly acceptable one with the rest of the chaplains. And thus, my epic, seven-year battle with him began.

Ravana did everything he could in his infinitesimal power to break the spirit of our sanga. He moved our service time to early Saturday morning; he moved our study time to an hour frequently interrupted by compound closures; he confiscated our entire library of Hare Krishna DVDs under the guise of investigation for "risk relevance" (six months later, the Associate Warden ordered him to give us back our movies); he refused to fulfill liturgical order requests while supplying his command and control center with the latest spy tech; he constantly interrupted our services and studies (one time, storming in because he thought the word "chit" as in "sat-**chid**-ananda" was a swear word); he wouldn't process change of religion forms when an inmate changed from protestant to Hindu; and, finally —among a long, continuing list of discriminatory injustices— refused to acknowledge our Holy days by NOT providing fast replacement meals in the same manner in which he provided them to all the other faith groups.

Lord Narasinga and Ananta Sesa are tattooed on my arm, and it was with Their shakti that I fought every injustice with administrative remedies. Ravana's connection with the BOP Region and Central Office asuras were strong and the remedies were denied all the way up the chain of command. He even allowed one of his rascal chaplains to lock me up for a contrived reason. The Associate Warden who had ordered Ravana to give us our movies back was the same who sprung me from the SHU. Ridiculous charges expunged.

With administrative remedies exhausted, it was time to go to District Court. Let's see how the U.S. Attorney and the Judges feel about this. I wrote all the temples up and down the East Coast, requesting help to find a Pro Bono civil rights attorney. ISKCON of Washington, D.C. stepped up and referred us to a native Indian associated with the Hindu-American Association, the eminent Harsh

Voruganti. (Incidentally, *Harsh(a)* in Sanskrit means jubilant. A VERY good sign!) He was IDEAL. Located in Alexandria, Virginia, Harsh was right in the beltway, positioned close to the BOP central office apparatus. He filed a "Complaint for Injunctive Relief" in March of 2017.

Our sanga was saddened when we heard Harsh had taken a position with the U.S. Government and had to give up the case. Nitai's mercy again reigned supreme. Lord Chaitanya knew we had come so far, He wouldn't let us down. Talk about divine reciprocation. Harsh got the preeminent and well-known Washington, D.C. law firm of *Clinton and Peed*, known for their outstanding Civil Rights litigation, to represent us. Our noble esquire attorney, heroic in his ability, is the renowned Greg Lipper. A legal mind blessed by Sarasvati. After my first 3-hour legal call with him, I knew the government couldn't hold a candle to him! The devotional service Greg has rendered to our group is nothing short of stunning. Heroic, Supra-Intellectual, Amazingly Personable, Supremely Communicative —these are just a few of the superlatives associated with this amazing individual.

We began litigating a few months ago. I was deposed on April 12th, and on April 19th, the entire day was spent on a legal call for a Settlement Conference with the Assistant U.S. Attorney, Greg, a magistrate judge, myself, and a court reporter. By the end of the day the government agreed to pay

Greg's substantial attorney fees and to recognize the 15 main Gaudiya Vaishnava Holy Days as listed on the BBT calendar. They will now be required to provide fast replacement meals for each of those days. Even though they may still be considered "personal" fasts according to B.O.P. policy, they'll be treated as "public" fasts. We compromised an actual change in the listed policy for a guarantee that we win on the accommodation and recognition of these fasts. The settlement may not be considered "precedential" yet, according to Greg, can be used by —any—inmate bhakta as "evidence" that the B.O.P. is required to provide accommodation for the Holy Days to each inmate bhakta who requests such.

If any inmate bhakta is having trouble with his institution's supervisory chaplain recognizing and accommodating our faith, step-by-step instructions for navigating the BOP's administrative remedy process and templates for Civil Injunction complaints are available for the asking. **[just write the IPM office to request the details]**. If you have faith, Krishna will reciprocate your devotion and clear away obstacles to worship Him. I'm living proof of this.

Take no credit in your victories though. They all belong to our beloved Gopala.

All glories to Sri Guru and Gauranga! Haribol! Jaya Srila Prabhupada! 🌸



A Successful Gamble

By Bhakti-lata Dasi

From time to time I send books to inmates who haven't contacted us. I never had a response but I still try once in a while. Back in February 2018, I saw a documentary entitled *Death Row: Inside Indiana State Prison*. One inmate in particular caught my attention. His tiny cell was packed with books and he had written thoughtful words on his walls, such as: *Industry, Perseverance, Frugality*. In this documentary



You can view this 2-part documentary on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7tqypS2cm0g> and https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0_XpC6c-bQ

he also said, “Those books allow for a great escape, to be able to leave the confines of the walls.”

It seemed to me that there was a great chance of him appreciating the Bhagavad-gita As It Is, so taking a chance I sent it to him, along with other titles and a letter. As usual, I didn’t get any response and I forgot about him. Then, last July 2021, I received this email:

“I am wondering if you could help me. My loved one is incarcerated in Indiana State Prison. His name is Ronald. In 2018 you very kindly sent him the ‘Bhagavad-Gita As It Is’. He has read this book countless times and is continuously returning back to it for inspiration. He loves to read and this has really helped his mindset. Last week at the prison, there was a purge on inmates’ belongings and the book was taken away from him, along with many others. He asked me to contact you to see if there was any chance you could send him the book again, please? He is a little lost without his books. Kind Regards, Helen”

Well, you can just imagine how overjoyed (and surprised) I was. This made my year! 😊 Since that time, Ronald has received and read many of Srila Prabhupada’s books.

Following are some excerpts from a few of the other emails Helen sent me in the following months.

“Thank you so much for your wonderful reply. I hope you’re well. It was so heartwarming to hear that Ronald stood out to you from the documentary you saw. I just spoke with him on the phone and told him about your reply. He said he’s just now written a letter to you, so that should be on its way. He was so thrilled that you had replied to my email and offered to send him some books. Reading is what he spends all his time

doing. His thirst for knowledge is insatiable. The sentence he was given at the age of 15 was 170 years with the possibility of parole at the age of 100.”

“As soon as I said you’d offered to send me a copy of the Bhagavad-Gita, he excitedly said ‘SAY YES!! SAY YES!! Then we can talk about it!’ Hehe 😊 That’s wonderful. Thank you so much Bhakti. I’m eager to learn.”



*“Ronald said he had received the materials you sent him. He was so thrilled. He has been reading his Bhagavad-Gita and he was thrilled with the newsletters because they were in **color** and most things he*

receives are in black and white. Thank you once again.”

“I just wanted to say thank you very much. I received four books today, including the Bhagavad-gita. I am very excited to start reading them.”
[Since Helen lives in the UK, Mother Amala Manjari Dasi, from UK (who does prison ministry service over there) kindly sent Helen some books and also stays in contact with her.]

So my transcendental gamble was successful and not one, but **two** more souls have started their journey back to Godhead! I will continue to gamble in this way, from time to time, and see what other surprises Kṛṣṇa has in store.

I am so tremendously grateful to be given a small role in assisting Srila Prabhupada with his most glorious mission and am constantly astonished that I was offered that mercy. I am extremely thankful to my husband, Mukunda dasa —for always encouraging me and allowing me the free time to engage in this service—and also to all our other well-wishers who, by their hard-earned money, and/or encouragement, keep this preaching program going. Thank you all! 🙏



Inmate Letter Excerpts

[This inmate came across a book and wrote to the BBT India address he found in the book. His letter was then forwarded to us.]

I am sitting in the Linn County jail. I came across a book with your address in it, "Elevation to Kṛṣṇa consciousness." For a man, age 57, what books would you recommend me to learn more. Could you send me some?

Michael M. —Cedar Rapids, Iowa

Thank you for the books. Even the Christians and Odinists are attracted to Kṛṣṇa's magnificence and are studying the books you sent me!

Jeremy B. —Arcadia, Florida

I especially like the section titled *The Origin of the Hare Kṛṣṇa Movement* in [the booklet] *On Chanting Hare Kṛṣṇa*.

I've always liked history so this appeals to me. I'm also a fan of pop music and pop-culture, so the book *Chant and Be Happy* appeals to me.

In *On Chanting*, I can relate to the topic of māyā, as I struggle with materiality. But it's great to know that māyā 'can at once be stopped by "Revival of our Kṛṣṇa

Consciousness.' I also like that anyone can take part in this. Even me! ☺

Adrien E. —Florence, Arizona

I have received the BTG magazines and books. I am beyond grateful for this Spiritual Knowledge and it is very overwhelming because of how much I need to study to perfect this knowledge. I sincerely want to take on the Spiritual path but am in dire need of a spiritual master. I do continue to chant and it has a profound effect in raising the frequency of my consciousness. I will be in Central Florida near Orlando for my release and I intend on going to a Krishna temple in my local area, to chant with people who are Krishna Conscious. The environment I am in is not the best place for Spiritual enhancement yet does help me realize more about the lower material nature. I am very intrigued by Krishna Consciousness and I am

spreading the word to those who have ears to hear and are receptive to the knowledge.

This Transcendental Knowledge has had a major impact on my perspective and has enhanced my awareness on Spirituality. I will be in perpetual study until I perfect the Knowledge and chanting is such a beautiful method for Self-realization and attunement with God (Krishna). Thank you again for everything and I will keep in touch with you for further Spiritual growth. Hare Krishna,

Vincente R. —Lake City, Florida

I have received your monthly newsletter *Freedom Newsletter* [this newsletter is sent to 160 inmates].

It was wonderful to read, thank you. I especially liked the letters from other inmates in prison. You

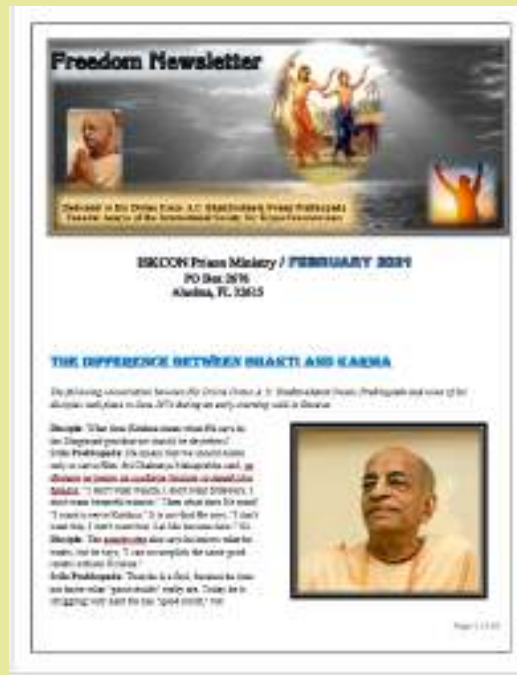
all are providing such a wonderful service to us.

I can't describe to you how much it means to get a letter, book, or magazine in the mail from a devotee of Lord Kṛṣṇa. Bless you all. I have also introduced

my cell mate to Kṛṣṇa consciousness; he seems to appreciate it. If he is further interested I will give him your address. Thank you for your help.

May this letter find you in the best of health, blissfully chanting the holy name. Hare Kṛṣṇa! Your servant,

James W. —Susanville, California



Thank you so much for the books and brochures you sent. They are helping me so tremendously. Please send me more. I am coming to such a clarity of who I truly am, and what I am capable of. Thank you, not just for what you are doing for my life, but for all you have touched throughout these years. May Kṛṣṇa bless you! Hare Kṛṣṇa. With regards,

Kashif R. —Los Angeles, California



POEM CORNER

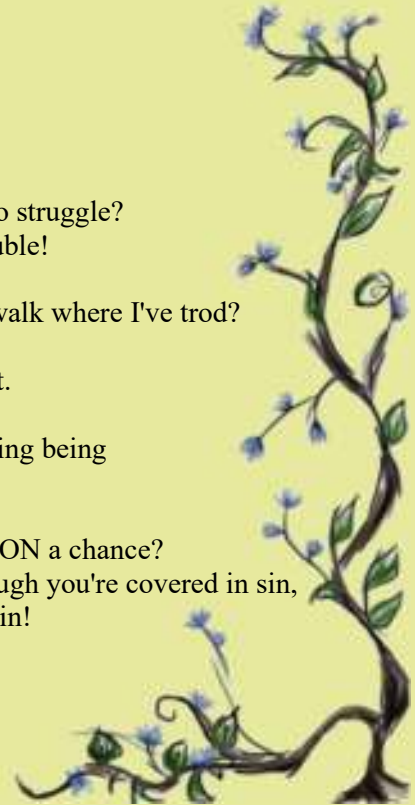
KRISHNA SAID TO ME

How much longer are you going to struggle?
You should turn to Me, on the double!
Do you really think you are God?
Can you lift Govardhan hill, and walk where I've trod?
If you turn to Me, this I promise
I will give you bliss, in the highest.
So turn to Me, without waiting
I will make you happy, you suffering being
So turn to Me, turn to Me.

THE MAN SAID TO ME

When are you going to give ISKCON a chance?
If you come home to Krishna, though you're covered in sin,
pray to Him and He will take you in!

Unknown Author



Inmate Art!

LEFT: Drawing of Lord Krishna
—by inmate Narayana Barbour,
Portsmouth, Virginia

THANK YOU to ALL our SUPPORTERS!

Your generosity is what keeps this program going! ☺ Because of a senior moment, I may forget someone, so please forgive me, and let me know so I can include your name in the next IPM NEWS.



Our donors since last newsletter:

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Inmate Jeffrey Hoke



And our monthly Donors:

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Anonymous (you know who you are:
thank you!)

4 Donation Options:

- 1) Send a check or postal money order to: **ISKCON Prison Ministry, PO Box 2676, Alachua, FL 32616**
- 2) Donate through PayPal at: www.paypal.me/IPM or look for IskconPrisonMinistry@gmail.com
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