



A Brief Introduction to ISKCON

What is ISKCON?

The International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), popularly known as the Hare Krishna movement, has been one of the more visible minority religions in the West. Followers, often dressed in saffron robes, weave through the streets near their temples dancing, chanting and making music in devotion to God in the form of Krishna. Through chanting, devotees hope to bring a constant consciousness of God into all aspects of their lives.

The founder of ISKCON, A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada (1896-1977), began a new movement by encouraging those outside India to join a form of devotion developed in medieval India. ISKCON also acts as a Hindu revivalist movement within India.

What do they believe?

Members of ISKCON are part of the Gaudiya Vaishnavism tradition, a reformation movement within Hinduism established in sixteenth-century Bengal (now West Bengal/Bangladesh) by Chaitanya Mahaprabhu (1486-1534). This tradition is monotheistic, asserting that there is only one God, with the goal of human life to develop a loving relationship with the single God. However, this one God can be worshiped by many names and forms. Gaudiya Vaishnavites believe that the chanting of God's name is the most efficacious method to achieve this goal.

Devotees believe that the soul is eternal, originally part of the Godhead, but at present it is under the influence of *maya* (illusion). Consequently, we forget our relationship to Krishna and seek gratification in the material world, while transmigrating from body to body in *samsara* (the cycle of death and rebirth). The practice of *bhakti* (devotional) yoga is believed to free the soul from bondage to the material world, returning it 'back to Godhead'. ISKCON considers Swami Prabhupada's translation of the *Bhagavad Gita* and the *Srimad Bhagavatam* as well as other traditional texts to be authoritative.

Who was ISKCON's founder?

The founder of ISKCON was born Abhay Charan into a Vaishnavite family in Calcutta. He studied Chemistry at university. In due course, he was married and supported his family with a small pharmaceutical business. In 1922, Charan met his spiritual master, Srila Bhaktisiddhanta Saraswati Goswami, who asked him to share Lord Chaitanya's teaching with the English-speaking world. Eleven

Inform
c/o Dept. of Theology
and Religious Studies,
King's College London,
Virginia Woolf Building,
22 Kingsway,
London WC2B 6LE

Telephone: **020 7848 1132**
inform@kcl.ac.uk
www.inform.ac

Inform is a registered charity (No. 801729),
incorporated as a company (No. 2346855)
limited by guarantee under the Companies Act

Patrons

The Right Reverend Graham James (Church of England)
The Reverend Dr Hugh Osgood (Moderator of the Free Churches Group)
Bishop Kallistos of Diokleia (Greek Orthodox Church)
Bishop Paul Hendricks (Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Southwark)
The Lord Desai of St Clement Danes
Baroness Sally Greengross of Notting Hill

years later, in 1933, Charan was initiated by his guru. In the 1940s, he began to publish material in English and was to author over 60 translations of Indian religious texts. In 1950, Prabhupada withdrew from his family and went to live in a temple. Later he was given the title of Bhaktivedanta, and he took full monastic vows in 1959. In 1965 A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada took a boat to New York to preach 'Krishna Consciousness'. The following year, ISKCON was founded in the United States. Prabhupada became associated with youth culture and the beat poet Allen Ginsberg, in Greenwich Village, New York City. The Haight-Ashbury district in San Francisco was also an early focus for ISKCON supporters among the 'hippies'.

How did ISKCON come to Britain?

Six American ISKCON members first travelled to London in 1968. The Beatles, particularly George Harrison, gave the group significant financial assistance and publicity during the first few years in Britain. Harrison financially backed the first British temple, produced an album of ISKCON devotees chanting, paid for the publication of books and donated Bhaktivedanta Manor, a large house and estate near Watford, just north-west of London. Harrison also used the ISKCON *mahamantra* in his song 'My Sweet Lord', and this publicity led to ISKCON devotees being invited to perform on the British television programme *Top of the Pops* on a number of occasions.

Who leads the movement today?

In 1970 Prabhupada set up the Governing Body Commission (GBC) to act as ISKCON's central authority, forming policies on economic, political and religious issues. In the months preceding his death, Prabhupada chose eleven of his senior disciples to carry on his spiritual role of initiating new devotees. However, many of the problems and scandals within ISKCON resulted from abuses of power by these gurus. Immediately after Prabhupada's death, many followers defected and the rate of conversion declined sharply. The governing structure of the movement has therefore since been changed.

The GBC currently has 34 voting members, known as Secretaries, each responsible for either a geographic area or function, such as communication. The GBC is administered by the executive committee made up, in 2020, of Chairman Ramai Swami, Vice Chairman Bhakti Caitanya Swami, and Secretary Bhanu Swami. These executive roles are held on one-year rotating positions, meaning that when the Chairman's term expires, the Vice Chairman succeeds the chairman, and the Secretary succeeds the Vice. Currently, there are also approximately 90 initiating gurus that are accepting disciples, and an additional 10 gurus who are not taking on disciples. Initiating gurus, who are elected by the GBC, travel the world preaching and initiating followers into the tradition. Each of the movement's centres is run by a temple president and a committee. The stated aim of the movement is that each temple should be autonomous, while respecting the ultimate authority of the GBC.

What do they practise?

When someone becomes a member of ISKCON they are introduced to the practice of chanting the *mahamantra*. Formal initiates agree to spend about two hours each day chanting sixteen rounds of the mantra on a string of 108 beads (1,728 repetitions), a process known as *japa*. Initiates receive a Sanskrit name with the suffix dasa (for men) or dasi (for women). Women, whether married or not, often have their names prefixed by 'mother', as a sign of respect.

Upon initiation, devotees also vow to abstain from intoxicating substances including alcohol, tobacco and caffeine and to abstain from all forms of gambling. Members follow a vegetarian diet (no meat, fish or eggs) with onions and garlic also prohibited. Food should be ritually offered to God before consumption in an act of loving devotion, thus making it *prasadam*. Sex is permissible only within marriage. ISKCON teaches that indulgence in the forbidden activities is detrimental to spiritual growth and causes anxiety and conflict within the individual and society.

In all temples and some devotees' homes, a daily ceremony (*arati*) is performed before images of Krishna and his consort Radharani (Radha) which involves offering incense, flowers, flames and food to the deities. Over 40 festivals are celebrated annually to mark the lives of great souls, incarnations of Krishna, and important dates in ISKCON's history.

How do they live?

As the ISKCON membership structure is largely informal, the movement claims that anyone who subscribes to their basic beliefs and accepts the teachings of Lord Krishna as presented by His Divine Grace A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, shall be considered as a general member. Congregational members are those members who practise their devotional *japa* at home, but visit the temples regularly. They live in their own homes and maintain jobs outside the organisation. ISKCON claim that there are around 8-10 million of these 'congregational members' worldwide. In Britain, there are over 15,000 people in this category.

A minority of members (approximately 10,000 worldwide) live in ISKCON temples as full-time clergy, or clergy in training. As many British temples are too small to house clergy it is difficult to pinpoint an exact number of these members. However, Bhaktivedanta Manor, in 2020, houses approximately 40-50 clergy. Married members who engage in full-time spiritual and missionary work generally live near a temple. Temple members wear traditional Indian robes: married men and those who are in training for the clergy wear white, and men committed to either temporary or permanent celibacy in orange/saffron; the women wear saris which are white if they are widowed or their husband has taken *sannyas* (renunciation). The devotees display the *tilak* marks made with wet clay to indicate their affiliation. While *tilak* markings can be ritually placed on twelve parts of the body, the three white vertical stripes on the head are the most visible. Men often shave their heads except for a tuft (*shikha*), signifying their surrender to Krishna.

Temple members begin their daily devotion at 4.30am, followed by approximately two hours of individual mantra-meditation, a scripture class, and finally a communal breakfast. During the day devotees perform individual duties, for example working at the temple, caring for congregational members or selling literature in the street. A small number of temple members work outside the ISKCON community.

Compared with ISKCON's early years, the movement now puts an emphasis on family life. Many children of ISKCON devotees who live near to a major temple centre, like Bhaktivedanta Manor, now attend schools based on a Gaudiya Vaishnavite ethos. There is an independent school based at Bhaktivedanta Manor near Watford and three Free Schools affiliated with the Avanti Trust which, though not formally affiliated with ISKCON, use many educational materials produced by ISKCON Educational Services.

Major festivals at Bhaktivedanta Manor attract large crowds, the majority with an ethnically Indian background. Krishna's birthday (Janmashtami) has been estimated to have drawn over 60,000 people over two days, while attendance at Diwali (the traditional Hindu New Year) has been estimated at 20,000.

Many ISKCON centres are also involved in local community work, often food relief programs. For example, the Radha Krishna Temple, Soho London, works alongside The Food for Life Global Charity and provides hot vegetarian food to the homeless in central London. ISKCON claims that Prabhupada believed no person in the surrounding areas of any temple should go hungry. Therefore, centres like the Radha Krishna Temple aim to provide thousands of free meals per day, six days a week, with an increase in these numbers during festivals such as Janmashtami and Diwali.

Where are they found?

The movement claims more than 500 temples worldwide, 61 rural communities, 50 schools and 100 restaurants. In the UK there are 12 centres/temples, however there are many more smaller gatherings that are not classed as official centres due to their size. Every year the GBC meets for their annual review at the international centre in Mayapur, West Bengal. Here the GBC discusses issues that have arisen over the past year, for example in 2019 one of these subjects included providing resources to leaders and managers about domestic abuse within their communities.

The UK headquarters is at Bhaktivedanta Manor, Watford. Bhaktivedanta Manor is open to the general public and provides tours for school groups and takeaway food from the Radharanis Cafe. Volunteers and clergy run Sunday schools and tours of the property all year round. There are also ISKCON temples located in other major cities around the UK: including Northern Ireland, Birmingham, Cardiff, Coventry, Leicester, Lesmahagow (Scotland), Swansea, Liverpool, Manchester, Newcastle, and Romford, as well as temples in south, east and central London.

The global centres directory for ISKCON can be found at <http://centres.iskcon.org>. This provides locational information on ISKCON temples, restaurants, schools, and communities.

Problems, controversies

Following Prabhupada's death, rifts stemming from leadership disputes began to appear in the movement and eventually gave rise not only to defections and expulsions but also to scandals involving allegations of drug dealing, sexual misconduct and murder. For example, at the New Vrindaban Community in Virginia, USA, a leading member was convicted of racketeering and another devotee was convicted of murder on the ashram's property. As a result, New Vrindaban was excommunicated from ISKCON in 1987. However, after major management restructuring and changes in leadership, the New Vrindaban Community was reaccepted by ISKCON in 1998. In the 1980s a Guru Reform movement developed aimed at limiting the initiating gurus' power and making ISKCON more democratic. During this period several splinter groups broke from the main ISKCON community.

Concern has been expressed over the length of time devotees spend chanting and selling the movement's literature on the streets - sometimes, at least in the past, deceptively. Former members have sometimes complained that personal autonomy was curtailed by the movement and some leaders acted manipulatively. Particularly in the early days of the movement, women's spiritual development was believed to be best achieved by assisting a husband in his spiritual life. This concept has changed

with time allowing women more autonomy in their own spiritual development. In June 2005 the GBC passed a resolution allowing women to become gurus. However, it was only in 2019 that this resolution began to be implemented fully.

The movement has also publicly admitted that widespread abuse, sexual and physical, was inflicted on children in its *gurukulas* (boarding schools), primarily in the United States and India during the 1970s and 1980s. In 1988 ISKCON created an Office of Child Protection to address past abuse and prevent future abuse. In 2000, a lawsuit was filed in the United States by 44 former members who claimed to have experienced abuse as children. The plaintiffs sought \$400 million compensation. In 2002, twelve temples in the USA filed for bankruptcy protection. ISKCON sought out additional abuse victims and a further 400 came forward. In 2005, the bankruptcy court approved ISKCON's plan to pay \$9.5 million to the 500 plus claimants. Additionally, ISKCON apologised to the claimants.

However, many who were abused at the *gurukulas* are not satisfied with this apology or the compensation offered. They argue that ISKCON still needs to do more to address the situation and put in place more protective, preventative measures for the future and that ISKCON still protects leaders who have acted inappropriately. ISKCON says that corrective action is taken, including expulsion in extreme cases. Online networking amongst those raised in ISKCON has created a forum where these young adults can discuss their ISKCON heritage as well as criticise the movement and call for reform where appropriate. Today many of the conditions that contributed to the abuse, e.g. the isolation of children from their parents, inexperienced school staff and impediments to nuclear family life, are actively discouraged.

While many concerns have been raised about ISKCON internationally, the UK-based ISKCON organisation has remained relatively free from public controversy. In the late 1990s, Bhaktivedanta Manor received media coverage as the growing Indian community increasingly attended the temple for annual festivals, creating road congestion due to crowds estimated at up to 75,000. Re-routing traffic away from local villages and the support of the greater Indian community for Bhaktivedanta Manor as a community resource has largely solved the controversy.

More recently, ISKCON has faced media scrutiny for their gatherings during the global Covid-19 outbreak of 2020. The funeral of the former president of Bhaktivedanta Manor, Srutidharma Prabhu, took place just weeks before the British Prime Minister Boris Johnson put the country into a national lockdown. The funeral, where over 1000 people attended, resulted in 21 cases of Covid-19 and 5 deaths of ISKCON members, according to media reports. However, it must be remembered that this gathering took place before any legal restrictions were placed onto the country, and therefore ISKCON did not break any laws.

Further Information

Prabhupada authored over 60 translations which include *The Bhagavad-gita As It Is*, *Elevation to Krsna Consciousness*, *Krsna Consciousness: The Matchless Gift* and *The Science of Self-Realization*. ISKCON also has several periodicals including *Back to Godhead* and *ISKCON Communications Journal*.

The movement's own websites include: <https://www.iskcon.org/>
<http://iskconuk.com/> and <https://www.bhaktivedantamanor.co.uk/>

For a critical approach:

Muster, Nori J. (1997) *Betrayal of the Spirit: My Life Behind the Headlines of the Hare Krishna Movement*, Illinois, University of Illinois Press.

For an academic approach:

Brooks, Charles (1989) *The Hare Krishnas in India*, Princetown: Princetown University Press.

Bryant, Edwin and Maria Ekstrand (2004) *The Hare Krishna Movement: The Postcharismatic Fate of a Religious Transplant*. Columbia University Press.

Dwyer, G. and R.J. Cole (2007) *The Hare Krishna Movement: Forty Years of Chant and Change*. London: I.B. Tauris.

Dwyer, G. and R.J. Cole (Eds). (2013) *Hare Krishna In The Modern World*. London: Arktos Media Ltd.

Rochford, E .B. (2007) *Hare Krishna Transformed*. New York: New York University Press.

Zellar, B.E (2012) 'Food Practices, Culture, and Social Dynamics in the Hare Krishna Movement' in Cusack, C.M. and A, Norman. (Eds) *Handbook of New Religions and Cultural Production*. Leiden: Brill Publishing, pp. 681-704.

HOW INFORM CAN HELP

- By providing reliable, up-to-date information about minority religions
- By putting you in touch with a nation-wide network of experts with specialist knowledge concerning minority religions
- By putting you in touch with people who can give counselling, legal advice - or just lend a sympathetic ear.
- By putting you in touch with former-members or families who have personal experience with a particular group.

New Religious Movements: A Practical Introduction (London: HMSO, revised 1995) has been written by Professor Eileen Barker to provide practical suggestions as well as general background information. It can be brought second hand from retailers including amazon.co.uk and abebooks.co.uk

Every care is taken to provide as accurate and balanced an account as possible, but we welcome corrections and comments.

© Inform October 2020

[Attribution 4.0 International \(CC BY 4.0\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)



