

## 1 Introduction and Historical Origins of the Hare Krishna Movement

The Hare Krishna movement has been most easily identified by the sight of young men dressed in orange or white robes and women dressed in colorful saris singing and dancing on the street. The Hare Krishna movement was established when the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) was founded in 1966 in New York City by A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada (1896–1977), hereafter referred to as Prabhupada (see Figure 1).<sup>1</sup> Prabhupada was an Indian *sannyasi* who arrived in the United States in 1965 for the purpose of spreading “Krishna consciousness” in the West (Satsvarupa das Goswami, 1993c, p. 5).<sup>2</sup> Krishna consciousness refers to meditation on Krishna, the deity of the monotheistic Gaudiya Vaishnava tradition.

Although ISKCON is a modern Western organization, it belongs to a broader and older religious tradition since it is an outgrowth of the Brahma Madhva Gaudiya Sampradaya in the Gaudiya Vaishnava tradition. A *sampradaya* is a religious community, and so the Brahma Madhva Gaudiya Sampradaya is the religious community or the broader religious tradition to which the Hare Krishna movement belongs, and dates back to the sixteenth century. It is within this community that the line of gurus – the *parampara* – passes on the teachings of Gaudiya Vaishnavism to the next generation of students.

Gaudiya Vaishnavism was established in West Bengal, India by the Indian saint Chaitanya in the early sixteenth century. Chaitanya is believed by Gaudiya Vaishnavas to be an incarnation of Krishna. After Chaitanya, the tradition continued by being passed on through a line of teachers (*parampara*) and communities until the late nineteenth century when Bhaktivinoda Thakura (1838–1914), a Bengali civil servant and magistrate, converted to Gaudiya Vaishnavism. Bhaktivinoda introduced innovations in the propagation of Gaudiya Vaishnavism, including the use of the printing press to make Vaishnava scriptures much more widely accessible. He focused his proselytizing efforts on the administrative and intellectual class (*bhadraloka*), which greatly increased the spread of Gaudiya Vaishnavism in West Bengal (Fuller, 2005). His efforts were continued by his son, Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati Thakura (1874–1937), who formed a monastic mission called the Gaudiya Math in Bengal in 1920 for the purpose of building on his father’s propagation of Krishna consciousness throughout India.

<sup>1</sup> Prabhupada means “The feet of the master” (Tamal Krishna Goswami, 2012, p. 22). It is an honorific title his disciples used to address him.

<sup>2</sup> A *sannyasi* is a man who has formally accepted the renounced order of life, or *sannyasa*, which entails renouncing wife and family and paid work in order to focus on spiritual practices.

### Prabhupada and the Founding of ISKCON

Prabhupada was born Abhay Charan De in Kolkata in 1896 and was a practitioner of the Gaudiya Vaishnava tradition, taking initiation into the Brahma Madhva Gaudiya Sampradaya from his guru, Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati Thakura, in 1932. Bhaktisiddhanta told Abhay Charan that he should spread the teachings of Gaudiya Vaishnavism in the English language (Rochford, 1985, p. 10). This instruction implied spreading the teachings in the West, and had its roots in Chaitanya's vision that Krishna *bhakti* (devotion) would be propagated all over the world (Tamal Krishna Goswami, 2012, p. 33). Abhay Charan followed this instruction by engaging in proselytizing efforts independently due to the splintering of his guru's mission, the Gaudiya Math, over internal leadership disagreements after Bhaktisiddhanta's death (Satsvarupa das Goswami, 1993a, pp. 139–40, 222). In 1959, Abhay Charan entered into the life stage of *sannyasa* in the *varnashram* system.<sup>3</sup> At his *sannyasa* ceremony he was given the name Abhay Charanaravinda Bhaktivedanta Swami and shortened it to A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami (Satsvarupa das Goswami, 1993a).<sup>4</sup> He would later be given the honorific title “Srila Prabhupada” (Ravindra Svarupa Dasa, 2014), often shortened to “Prabhupada.”

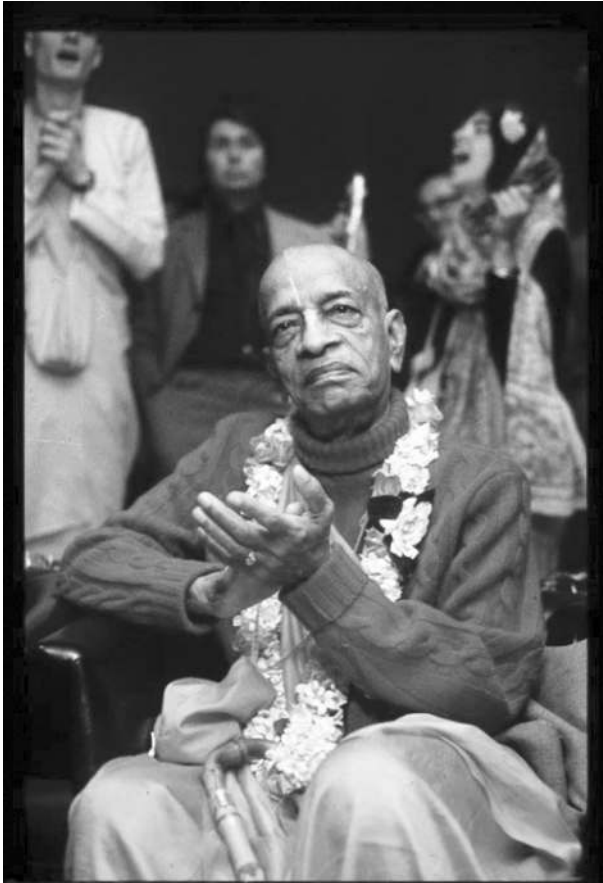
In 1965, Prabhupada obtained a free passage to the United States on a ship called the *Jaladuta*. He arrived in September 1965 and traveled to New York City where he gave regular lectures on Krishna consciousness. Prabhupada's classes attracted older, middle-class women and counterculture youth.<sup>5</sup> However, a move to the Lower East Side of New York City meant a new audience consisting mostly of youth who had an interest in spirituality. His following increased slowly but then picked up momentum, and in July 1966 he gave his preaching efforts institutional status by registering an entity called the “International Society for Krishna Consciousness” (ISKCON) (Satsvarupa das Goswami, 1993c).<sup>6</sup> While institutionalizing his new movement through the legal process of registration was in itself an important step, the significance of Prabhupada's charisma in his role as the founder of ISKCON should not be overlooked (Ketola, 2008, pp. 42–3). Prabhupada's ability to attract increasing numbers of followers over the coming years would appear to support this conclusion. In 1967, Prabhupada traveled to San Francisco and established

<sup>3</sup> The *varnashram* system is a social system of *varnas* or social classes based on occupation and ashrams or stages of life. The four varnas are: *brahmanas* (priests and teachers); *kshatriyas* (warriors and administrators); *vaishyas* (farmers and merchants); and *shudras* (laborers). The four ashrams are: *brahmacaris* (celibate students); *grihasthas* (married householders); *vanaprasthas* (retired married couples); and *sannyasis* (male renunciates).

<sup>4</sup> Sanskrit is an historical Indo-Aryan language.

<sup>5</sup> The counterculture in this context means, “an alternative culture that differs from the predominant American culture” and refers primarily to “hippiedom” (Judah, 1974, p. 98).

<sup>6</sup> Krishna consciousness refers to constant remembrance of Krishna as the supreme God.



**Figure 1** A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, New York, 1972. Courtesy Bhaktivedanta Book Trust International. Photo by Bhargava das, used with permission.

a following there, and the movement then spread to other parts of the United States at a rapid rate during the remainder of the 1960s (Satsvarupa das Goswami, 1993b). In 1969, he sent three married couples to the United Kingdom to open a center. The enterprising couples managed to meet with the Beatles and, soon after, they recorded the chanting of the Hare Krishna mantra with the group, which was released by Apple Records and sold 70,000 copies on the first day. Soon after, the devotees appeared on the popular television show “Top of the Pops,” singing the Hare Krishna mantra and bolstering awareness of the movement (Satsvarupa das Goswami, 1980a).

In the early 1970s, ISKCON grew at a rapid rate and centers were established in many parts of the United States, the United Kingdom, several other European

countries, India, South America, Australia, New Zealand, Africa, and various parts of Asia. Most centers included living quarters where full-time members could live in order to serve the mission. In November 1977, Prabhupada passed away in India at the age of eighty-one. While his death threw the movement into a state of shock, the institution carried on under the leadership of disciples who had already been acting in that capacity for some years; this will be discussed in detail in Section 3.

### ISKCON in Context: Hinduism, Gaudiya Vaishnavism, and New Religious Movements

The International Society for Krishna Consciousness is a modern Western institution that is part of the Gaudiya Vaishnava tradition that dates to the sixteenth century. While many scholars of South Asian studies categorize the movement as part of the Hindu tradition, members of ISKCON generally self-identify as “Gaudiya Vaishnavas” or “Vaishnavas,” rather than as “Hindu.” However, some members of ISKCON also identify as Hindu to align with an established world religion. Similarly, some members of ISKCON reject the “new religious movement” label as inappropriate since the Gaudiya Vaishnava tradition extends back to the sixteenth century.<sup>7</sup> Knott (personal communication, 2006) argues that although the broader Vaishnava tradition of which ISKCON is a part dates back thousands of years, ISKCON as an institution is new, founded only in 1966. Melton makes this point in a more nuanced fashion, arguing that recognizing the roots of new religions contextualizes them within the movement of world religions to the West, and understanding the modern diffusion of the world’s religions helps us understand the seemingly sudden emergence of “new” religions in a Western context (Melton, 2007a, p. 31).

To add another layer of nuance to an already fraught exercise in categorization, Haddon (2013b) argues that the attempt to categorize ISKCON is further complicated by the fact that there has been continual cross-cultural traffic between India and the United States as well as other Western countries since the movement’s inception in the West. For this reason, the transnational Hare Krishna movement today cannot be understood entirely with reference to a Western sociological frame (see also Burt, 2013), or essentialist, ahistorical notions of Indian tradition. Haddon proposes a more sophisticated understanding of ISKCON's cross-cultural development.

Introvigne (1997) argues that the use of the new religious movement label is better than the label of “cult,” which can be used as tool of discrimination. Nevertheless, the former can still lead to misunderstandings about movements

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Mukunda Goswami (1995).

such as ISKCON, which are new only in the West and represent much older traditions in their countries of origin. The most neutral term in his opinion is “religious minorities” because it avoids judgments about whether a group is acceptable or connected to an old tradition. Vande Berg and Kniss (2008, p. 100) suggest that new religious movements are often not all that new; rather, they may combine and adapt previous religious forms to create something that becomes innovative and new.

Therefore, while the label “new religious movement” is an easy categorization, the presence of “new” in that label may gloss over the fact that a modern organization like ISKCON is a development of a much older tradition. Such a tendency can prevent a deeper understanding of a tradition and its rich history. This author takes the stance that while ISKCON can be categorized as a new religious movement, since it was founded in 1966, this movement is part of a religious tradition that dates back to the sixteenth century. Many new religious movements take a syncretic approach, borrowing aspects of various religious traditions and merging them into a new form. However, ISKCON represents a movement that has essentially imported a religious tradition in its totality, with adaptations for a modern Western following. A key theme running throughout this Element is the idea that the Hare Krishna movement can be simultaneously thought of as the continuation of a 500-year-old religious tradition and a new religious movement (Melton, 1987, 2004, 2007a, 2007b), although, as the movement ages, the label becomes less applicable.

While the Hare Krishna movement is a rubric for an array of groups, on an institutional level the largest of these organizations is ISKCON. Until the death of ISKCON’s founder in 1977, the Hare Krishna movement and ISKCON could be considered one and the same. However, ISKCON faced factionalism and schism in the late 1970s, resulting in the emergence of several social movement organizations within the broader Hare Krishna movement (Rochford, 1989, p. 163). Since the lines between these different groups are sometimes sharply drawn and sometimes not, it is not always possible to make neat distinctions between them, and between members, former members, and apostates, for reasons that will be discussed in Section 3. In addition, ISKCON as an institution is more than the institutional structure of its corporate form. The historical fact of ISKCON as key to the genesis of the Hare Krishna movement cannot be ignored. As ISKCON is often thought of as synonymous with the Hare Krishna movement, ISKCON devotees are known as Hare Krishnas, both internally and by the wider public. Consequently, the two terms are sometimes used interchangeably and sometimes a distinction is made between them. For these reasons, this Element will embrace both terms as part of acknowledging the

history and the lived experience of current and former members, while noting the context-dependent differences that exist between them.

### Previous Scholarly Work on the Hare Krishna Movement

A number of monographs published in the 1970s and 1980s provided scholarly analyses of the Hare Krishna movement that considered the prevailing social and cultural contexts shaping the movement's expansion in the West. The most recent monograph that looked at the movement as a whole was published by E. Burke Rochford (2007a). Two edited volumes comprising interviews with academics were published by Dwyer and Cole, the last in 2013 (Dwyer and Cole, 2007, 2013). Monographs from the early 2000s are focused on particular aspects of the movement. For example, Fahy (2019) takes a look at the community in Mayapura, and Karapanagiotis (2021) focuses her analyses on the evolving outreach programs within the movement. Therefore, a monograph is needed that addresses the multitude of issues facing the movement, that takes into account major social and cultural upheavals that have taken place since the scholarly analyses of the early 2000s, and that draws on recent scholarship. This Element aims to fill that gap.

It is important to acknowledge that much of the scholarly work on the Hare Krishna movement to date is based on fieldwork in the United States in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. Most noteworthy among this scholarship are works by Judah (1974); Daner (1976); Rochford (1982, 1985, 1988, 1989, 1998, 1999); and Rochford and Heinlein (1998). Knott (1986, 1993, 1994, 1995a, 1995b, 1995c, 2004) carried out her fieldwork in the United Kingdom, and Hopkins, whose early work was based in the United States, reflected upon the movement as a whole in his later work (Hopkins, 1989, 1998, 1999). More recent scholarship based on fieldwork in the United States in the early 2000s includes Rochford (2007a, 2007b, 2009, 2016, 2018, 2020); Vande Berg and Kniss (2008); Lucia (2015); and Karapanagiotis (2021). This focus on the American experience is justified to some degree since the movement was founded in the United States and from there spread globally with an American influence. However, it needs to be borne in mind that the conclusions from this research do not entirely represent what is going on in the movement globally or in other Western countries. For this reason, the Element will draw on recent scholarship that is based on research conducted in other parts of the world in an attempt to provide a more nuanced understanding of the movement.

My encounters with ISKCON communities have indicated that Rochford's findings, for example, are generalizable to some extent.<sup>8</sup> Regional differences

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<sup>8</sup> Rochford's work is noted here because he is by far the most prolific scholar of the Hare Krishna movement.

where the Indian cultural influence is greater than the Western influence can be seen, for example, in Fiji, which has a large Indian and Hindu population. In fact, ISKCON membership is almost 100 percent Indian in Fiji. The same may be the case for other countries where local and Indian cultures have more influence. This, of course, indicates the need to increase research in locations outside of the United States, including Europe and Australasia, but also to extend it to areas neglected by research, including Russia, Ukraine, Africa, the Middle East, Asia, and South America. Fortunately, there has been a variety of research since the beginning of the twenty-first century based on fieldwork addressing different aspects of the movement in the United States, Europe, India, South America, Australia, and the Middle East. This Element aims to bring this scholarship together in one volume for a twenty-first-century audience. Of note is anthropological fieldwork in Australian Hare Krishna communities by Haddon (2013a, 2013b, 2013c) and an ethnographic study of the ISKCON temple community in Mumbai by Robison (2016). Anthropological fieldwork has been conducted in ISKCON's flagship temple community in Mayapura, India by Fahy (2017, 2018, 2019b, 2019a) and Mitsuhara (2019). Čargonja (2022) has studied Hare Krishna devotees' religious experience of a personal relationship with Krishna by conducting research at communities in Croatia, Germany, Belgium, the United Kingdom, and India (Vrindavan, Mayapura, and Jagannath Puri).

My own fieldwork consisting of interviews for the ISKCON Oral History Project in the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, India, Australia, New Zealand, and Fiji has involved interviewing members from across the globe. American devotees are highly represented in this cohort – largely because the movement started in the United States. My research has focused on the early members in order to capture the history of the movement from its inception. The need to interview them was pressing due to the rapid attrition of this cohort as they approach their seventies and eighties.

### Theoretical Lenses

This Element's analysis of the movement engages Stark's (1996) model of ten propositions that outline the conditions necessary for a religious movement to succeed or fail. This serves as a useful framework by which to assess the Hare Krishna movement's success so far and to predict future success or failure based on its current trajectory. Key to this theory is tension – “the degree of distinctiveness, separation, and antagonism between a religious group and the ‘outside’ world” (Stark and Finke, 2000, p. 127). This tension has characterized the movement's relationship with its host communities since its inception and it



will be unpacked with reference to some of Stark's propositions. Stark's model emphasizes the importance of cultural continuity with the host culture and we can observe varying degrees of cultural continuity of the Hare Krishna movement with its host cultures throughout its history. This model will be used as a theoretical lens throughout this Element.

The model of alignment processes (Snow et al., 1986; Bromley and Melton, 2012; Eidson et al., 2017) provides a useful theoretical framework for understanding the movement's path since its inception in 1966. Frame alignment has been used by scholars of religion to understand the ways in which people become and remain members of religious organizations. Snow et al. (1986, p. 464) defines frame alignment as the phenomenon of congruence and complementarity between individual interests, values, and beliefs, and social movement activities, goals, and ideology. The term "frame" is derived from Goffman (1974, p. 21) who defined it as "schemata of interpretation" that enable individuals to identify and label occurrences they encounter and thereby render them meaningful. In this way, frames organize experience and guide action, on individual and collective levels. Frame alignment is necessary for participation in a movement; a movement's members work to align the interests, values, and beliefs of potential recruits with the activities, goals, and ideology of the movement. Ideological work by movement members and leaders that sustains the interest and participation of potential recruits results in successful frame alignment, which is necessary for expanding the movement's membership (Rochford, 2018, p. 36). Put another way, a social movement needs to link its master frame with the frames of potential adherents so that they may identify with the movement and participate in it (Vande Berg and Kniss, 2008, p. 90).

Frame alignment provides a way of understanding changes in the Hare Krishna movement from the 1960s up to the present in terms of the movement's placement within broader cultural contexts. It also allows us to think about the possible future paths that it may take, given the crossroads it is currently at in terms of the cultural choices being made by its membership. These choices involve those based on Indian cultural traditions as well as Western cultural expectations that are being driven by movements for equality and social justice. A number of scholars have identified the importance of the concept of frame alignment for understanding ISKCON's evolving trajectory in a changing world (Vande Berg and Kniss, 2008; Rochford, 2018; Zeller, 2021). Stark's model of cultural continuity and the frame alignment model are complementary in this analysis of the Hare Krishna movement. Frame analysis (Goffman, 1974; Snow et al., 1986; Eidson et al., 2017; Persson, 2019) will also be useful for understanding the movement's development since its inception.



Resource mobilization theory (McCarthy and Zald, 1977; Jenkins, 1983; Zald and McCarthy, 2017) also provides a useful theoretical framework for understanding the movement’s changing fortunes. Resource mobilization is the process by which a group secures collective control over the resources needed for collective action (Jenkins, 1983, p. 532). Assets frequently mobilized by movements include money, facilities, labor, and legitimacy (McCarthy and Zald, 1977), as well as land, capital, and technical expertise (Tilly, 1978, p. 69, cited in Jenkins, 1983, p. 533). Tangible assets such as money, facilities, and means of communication have been distinguished from intangible or “human” assets that include specialized resources such as organizing and legal skills and the unspecialized labor of supporters (Freeman, 1979, pp. 172–5). The major issues regarding resource mobilization are the resources controlled by the group prior to mobilization efforts, the processes by which the group pools resources and directs these toward social change, and the extent to which outsiders increase the pool of resources (Jenkins, 1983, pp. 532–3).

In addition, the Element will utilize the theoretical frame of lived religion (Hall, 1997; Orsi, 2002), which aims to capture followers’ everyday experiences of their religious tradition, acknowledging that religious experience often defies categorization (McGuire, 2008). To that end, emic language and spelling of unique words will be used, rather than the language of the disciplines that study the Gaudiya Vaishnava tradition, to accurately reflect the experience and practice of Hare Krishna devotees. The emic perspective is an account of the informant’s own descriptions, while the etic perspective is the observer’s attempt to redescribe that information (McCutcheon, 1999, p. 17). The Roman transliteration of Sanskrit terms will reflect popular pronunciation within the movement, and avoid the use of diacritical marks in Sanskrit terms, to make the Element accessible to a nonspecialist readership. It should be noted that there are variations in Roman transliteration of Sanskrit terms and one variant for each term has been chosen for consistency, except in the case of direct quotations. Hare Krishna devotees who have taken initiation receive a “spiritual name” with a suffix for men – *das* (servant) – and for women – *dasi* (servant) or *devi dasi* (divine servant). There is variation in how each individual spells this suffix – i.e. *das*, *dasa*, *Das*, *Dasa*, *dasi*, *Dasi*, *devi dasi*, *Devi Dasi*. The name will be spelled in the way that the name holder spells it and this will give rise to some inconsistency in spelling. In addition, in-text references will include the name plus the suffix, to honor the convention that Hare Krishna devotees always add the suffix when using their name – an acknowledgment that they think of themselves as a servant of Krishna. The same is true for names of renunciates that end in the suffixes Swami and Goswami, which indicate one who masters their senses.

## Overview of the Element

This Element discusses the movement's history and early challenges as well as those that the movement currently faces against the backdrop of social, cultural, and political changes that are taking place globally. It has been constructed to give the newcomer the best possible understanding of a diverse and constantly changing religious movement. In pursuit of that goal, Section 2 discusses the beliefs and practices of followers of the movement while acknowledging the many and varied ways in which devotees follow the precepts of the tradition. Section 3 examines institutional and community dynamics and the impact these have had on the trajectory of the movement. Section 4 looks at controversies, issues, and challenges that have beset the movement since its inception as well as the ways in which members of the movement have responded to these challenges. Finally, Section 5 concludes by drawing together the main themes, reflecting upon the state of play in the movement, looking to future paths that the movement may take, and what that may tell us about its fate. I will now turn to discussing the beliefs and practices that form the bedrock of the Hare Krishna movement, while taking into account the ways in which these practices have changed to adapt to an ever-changing global context and digital world.

## 2 Beliefs and Practices

In this section, the main theological beliefs of the Gaudiya Vaishnava tradition that underpin the Hare Krishna movement are discussed, as well as the practices and rituals that support and enact these beliefs. It is important to note that not all devotees in the movement follow all the practices all the time. In these cases, conceptualizing adherents as participants in a movement rather than as members of an institution allows us to comprehend the different types and levels of involvement in this tradition. While these practices form the core for serious practitioners within the Gaudiya Vaishnava tradition, the reality within the Hare Krishna movement is that they will be practiced with varying degrees of regularity and strictness or may not be practiced at all by some participants in the movement. For this reason, this section adopts a lived religion approach (Hall, 1997; Orsi, 2002), which aims to understand the way adherents live and experience the tradition in their everyday lives and acknowledges that they do not always fit into neat categories (McGuire, 2008). In this way, in addition to presenting the ideal according to the tradition's precepts, the reality of adherents' lives is interrogated. With this caveat in mind, I will explore the beliefs and practices of participants in the Hare Krishna movement.

The geographical diversity of ISKCON centers also undermines broad generalization. The movement has a presence in North America, South America,