

Krishna Balarama Temple Vrindaban  
India; Hari Nama Initiation March 1976



In his initiation ceremony in 1976, Gary Roberts receives *japa* beads for meditating from Swami Prabhupada and adopts 'Mayesvara' as new spiritual name.



Mayesvara with his father in 1978, just before he left for India.

# OUR SON JOINED HARE KRISHNA

BY ELIZABETH ROBERTS



A float Mayesvara designed this past summer for a ceremony in Calcutta.

## But where other parents might have given up, the Roberts listened and wanted to understand.

IT WAS A SATURDAY morning—Oct. 18, 1975. The phone rang at 8:00, waking me from a sound sleep. I can still recall the shrill, incessant sound as it repeatedly pierced the morning stillness. Groggily, I lifted the receiver. A voice informed me that there was a package at the Greyhound bus station in White Plains. Without waiting for comment, the caller gave the name and state address of the sender. It was the name of our son.

"There must be some mistake," I said. "Gary is at college in Kansas."

"No mistake, lady," he droned. "This carton is for you and it is big and bulky. Come and get it as soon as possible."

I told my husband, Bill, about the call and he left immediately for the station. He was as curious as I about the unexpected delivery. When he returned, he was carrying a huge bundle wrapped in brown paper. The large inked letters of the address were printed in Gary's inimitable style.

As we unpacked familiar clothing, photographs and mementos, I kept asking myself why he had sent these things home. Bill, rummaging near the bottom of the box, mumbled, "There's got to be a letter in here somewhere." But there was no message.

A closer look at the return address revealed the name of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) in Florida. A heavy knot slowly tied itself in my stomach. One look at Bill told me he was feeling the same way.

We spent the remainder of the morning on the phone. ISKCON informed us that our son was living in a mobile *asrama*, a traveling temple bus that was moving west and distributing *Back To Godhead*, the magazine of the Hare Krishna movement. Since Gary had joined the group while the bus was in Kansas, the Florida members couldn't give us more detailed information.

Next we phoned Gary's roommate. John told us that the *asrama* had spent a week lecturing on campus. Gary had previously met some Hare Krishnas in 1974 when he took a year off from college to work and travel in Europe, and he had become so impressed with the philosophy of the members by the fall of 1975 that he joined the traveling bus in order to learn more about the movement.

Our despair and frustration must have been obvious because John added, in a compassionate voice, "Please don't worry. Gary will probably be back on campus next semester."

Our daughters supplied a little more information. Susan phoned from Ohio to tell us that Gary had sent her his art work. Nancy, in Pennsylvania, informed us that she had received his tape recorder. Neither package contained a note. The girls were as surprised to receive their cartons as we had been to get ours.

Since we couldn't reach Gary by phone, we decided to wait for him to contact us. There was never any doubt in our minds that he would. The question was when?

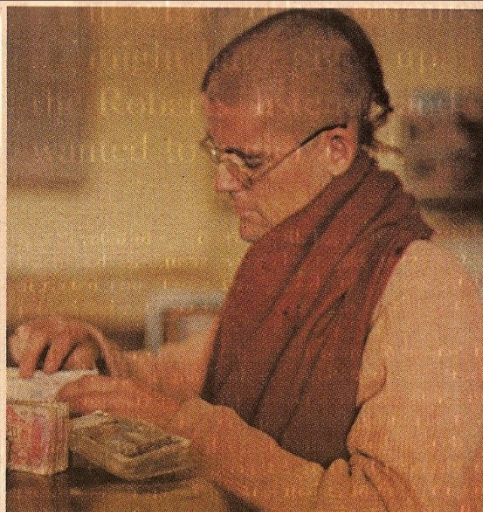
During the depressing days that followed, I often recalled Gary's early years. As a youngster in elementary school, he couldn't have been called a student. He had a good attendance record because he enjoyed gym and art classes and the fun of being with all his friends. Books and studying were incidental, so much so that by the time he entered 7th grade, he was in the bottom quarter of the class.

So Gary spent the two summers of his junior high years at Hargrave Academy doing remedial work, and there had been no problem in getting him to go. Classes were held every morning, but each afternoon

was devoted to sports. Baseball, basketball, football, track and swimming were the magic potions that attracted him. Those two periods of intense study proved to be the turning point and his marks started to improve.

Gary enjoyed his high school years. When not in class, he spent most of his time with the track team—or working on (or under) a vintage Sunbeam sports car that he had purchased with his first summer paychecks. His marks improved to such an extent that he was accepted at the University of Kansas as an Industrial Arts major. In the spring of 1975, during his junior year, he made the dean's list, and he was offered a job in design and construction, which would be available after graduation.

So why did he leave college the first semester of



Mayesvara at his desk in Calcutta.

his senior year?

Anxious weeks had stretched into mid-November when we finally received a long-distance call from Albuquerque, New Mexico. Gary was very enthusiastic as he told us in great detail about his daily activities. Then he stopped in mid-sentence and asked, "How come you haven't written? I wrote you an eight-page letter, with my itinerary enclosed, a week before I mailed the carton." (Thanks to the U.S. Mail we didn't receive it until six weeks after it had been posted!)

My stomach, which had started doing somersaults as soon as I heard Gary's voice, continued its activity by playing leapfrog hours after I replaced the receiver. Our college drop out had no intention of giving up "the chanting life!"

Again, my thoughts raced back—to the previous summer vacation. Gary had worked hard at his construction job. (With overtime, he quickly earned what he needed for college expenses.) When he returned home late each evening, he spent what little free time he had in his room. Bill and I noticed that Gary's hectic social life had almost come to a standstill. We attributed this to the fact that he had grown up and didn't need to always be with his group. When his resounding rock records and numer-

ous tapes changed to subdued classical music, we considered this further proof of maturity. There was still a constant stream of boys and girls flowing through the house, but as the summer progressed Gary went out with them less.

Sometime after he joined the bus in Kansas we cleaned his room and found several Hare Krishna tracts and pamphlets, evidence of a reading program we had never known about. They echoed our questions.

Why would a healthy, ambitious boy brought up in the Presbyterian church turn to an Eastern religion, one that is strict, severe and stoic—one that frowns upon simple pleasures such as movies and TV, hamburgers and coffee? Why did he, and hundreds of other girls and boys, choose to live in temples and work seven days a week without pay? Why do they arise at 4:00 a.m. and spend four hours devoted to prayer and study?

To say that Bill and I were concerned about our son's new lifestyle is an understatement. The knot in my stomach felt as if it had become the size of a golf ball. Constantly questioning ourselves and trying to remember Gary's past activities, we did recall that he had visited an ISKCON temple in Kansas the previous spring. He had spent his spring vacation at the temple and later described it as a wonderful spiritual experience. And during the summer of 1975 he and a large group of friends had attended a Sunday open-house at the New York temple. College students are curious and eager to learn about other cultures, I had thought as I had admired their broad-mindedness—but to join them?

Friends tried to comfort Bill and me by offering such remarks as: "It won't last..." and "He'll be back in a few months." But whether it was to be weeks or months, we decided we wanted to know—had to know—more about ISKCON, its beginning, beliefs and beckoning powers, in order to understand why our son had taken his giant leap onto Krishna's chariot. Other parents might give up on their children when this happened, but we wouldn't.

Searching in our local library, we found Dr. J. Stillson Judah's comprehensive book, *Hare Krishna and the Counter Culture* and were surprised to learn that people have been worshiping Krsna (the Sanskrit name for God) for 5,000 years. (Hare is an address to the Lord's devotional energy. Krsna means "the all-attractive one.") The Hare Krishna movement is based on Vedic scriptures found in the *Bhagavad-Gita*, India's most sacred book.

At the time that our son made his obeisances to Krishna, I was a "grandmother student" in the process of completing a B.S. degree, which had been interrupted during World War II. After Gary dropped his spiritual bomb, I chose electives such as psychology and sociology to try to understand what our son was doing and why. Ancient history was by far the most informative subject. Our class studied the *Upanishads*, *Vedas* and *Bhagavad-Gita*. These reveal ancient Hindu philosophy and theological teachings, such as the belief in reincarnation. It was comforting to learn that transcendentalists Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry Thoreau had been interested in the *Bhagavad-Gita*. (They, also, believed in minimizing the importance of sense experience.)

Gary, anxious for us to be informed, sent a subscription of *Back to Godhead*. His correspondence was always detailed and cheerful—even after the mobile *asrama* had been robbed. This happened one day when the devotees were out distributing literature.

Gary traveled with the temple bus till he sold enough magazines to pay for a passage to India. In March of 1976 he spent a few days in the New York

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Elizabeth Roberts lives in Hartsdale.

temple in preparation for his first pilgrimage to the sub-continent - and suprised us with a visit.

It was the first we had seen him since he had returned to college, in shoulder-length hair, the previous fall. Although the jeans were familiar (Devotees usually wear eastern-style clothing when in the temple or during outdoor religious festivals), the bald head and *sikha* (tuft of hair) took some getting used to.

Gary looked and seemed years older. There was no sign of a smile on his face. He obviously felt uncomfortable with us...and we with him. What does one say to a neophyte guru?

But if communication was difficult, the meal was even more so. Devotees have strict rules when it comes to eating. No meat, fish, fowl, eggs, onion or garlic are consumed. Menus consist primarily of fruits, vegetables, cereals, dairy products and nuts. The food I finally placed before my son consisted of two oranges and a plain tossed salad, as none of my dressings was acceptable. He topped off the meal with two apples and a handful of peanuts.

The thaw began after lunch.

Slowly, and with forbearance, Bill and I asked several questions about his decision and the Hare Krishna movement. When Gary sensed that we were genuinely interested in learning more about Krishna, he relaxed. The "added years" started to dissolve and a hint of a smile crossed his face as he began to inform us about ISKCON's various activities throughout the country.

And although we learned much about how he spent his time and what the other devotees were like, we never got a clear answer to why he joined. There was no bolt of lightning or sudden revelation; he spoke instead of finding their philosophy increasingly attractive, of being impressed with the great lack of anxiety and spiritual calmness that those in the movement experienced. It became attractive enough that he left college to join.

It was with a heavy heart, and the ever-present lump in my stomach, that I said good-



Gary built his own stereo set in high school.

bye to my bald-headed *bra-machari* (celibate student). As we returned to the house, Bill tried to make light of the tense situation by placing his arm on my shoulder and saying, "Well, you wanted him to cut his hair, didn't you?"

A month later, after Gary returned from India, he was assigned the task of constructing an addition to the Govinda restaurant in New York City and also designing an Indian boutique for the New York temple. Six months had passed since he had left Kansas. He showed no interest in returning to college. In fact, his main ambition and only thought was to return to India and participate in the building of an ISKCON city, which was in the initial stage of construction.

One Sunday in June, Bill and I were invited down to spend a day at the renovated temple. It is one thing to read about a different culture; it is another to experience it. Our first impression was the heavy scent of incense that permeated the air. Then we saw Gary. He was dressed in a dhoti, had painted-clay markings on his body and as a new recruit was carrying a *jabba*, a small cloth pouch that contains a string of 108 prayer beads. Recruits also receive new spiritual names; Gary is known to his friends as "Mayesvara."

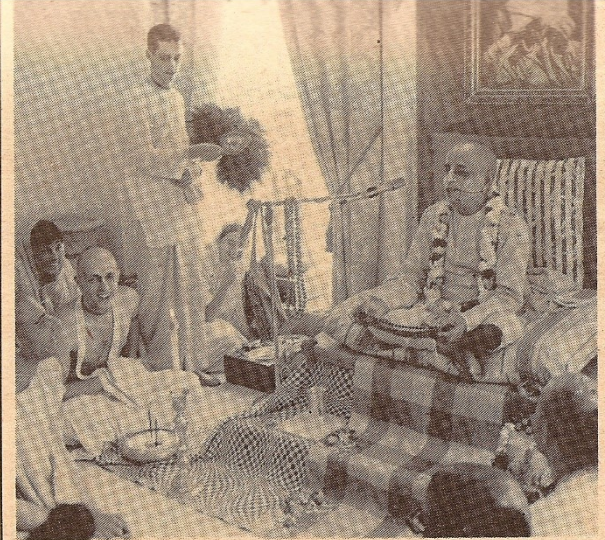
We were surrounded by male devotees robed in saffron or white, the latter sig-

nifying those who are married. (Krishna followers believe in sex for procreation only. Drugs, alcohol, tobacco, gambling and illicit sex are definitely taboo.)

Before I removed my shoes to enter the sanctuary, Gary presented me with a garland of red and white carnations which he placed around my neck. During the service, we were amazed at the exuberance of the dancing worshipers. Pulsating drums echoed in the incense-filled room as faithful members crowded the floor singing the 16-word maha-mantra "Chant of Deliverance." (Several months later, Gary phoned his civil-engineer father and asked him to come to the temple to check the beams under the sanctuary floor. Fortunately they still remained firm under the stomping and dancing feet of the enthusiastic crowds.)

After the ceremony, we were invited to the Sunday feast table. We took tiny samples as nothing looked familiar. Much to our surprise, the food was quite tasty. We discovered cauliflower, broccoli, eggplant, sweet potatoes and numerous other vegetables cooked in several different ways. Before that event-packed day ended, we had seen two documentary films about ISKCON and a musical that depicted one of the early stories of Vedic literature. The actors were quite talented and the dancers outstanding.

Summer arrived. It was at



Swami Prabhupada with devotees shortly before his death.

this time that we received the invitation to meet His Divine Grace Swami Prabhupada, who had come to town for the Ratha-yatra festival. "You don't realize what a great honor and opportunity this is," Gary said, "to meet the founder of the Hare Krishna movement." Gary had made the request that we be invited and it was granted. The movement welcomes parents who express an interest in learning about their children's activities; those who do are not that common.

Gary's enthusiasm rubbed off on me. I suddenly realized that I wanted to meet the octogenarian who had published 52 books on ancient Vedic culture. "Of course, we'll come," I replied.

The spiritual director's accommodations were on the top floor. Riding up in the elevator, Gary coached us on the proper protocol. A setting sun was painting the curtainless windows gold as Bill and I bowed, hands together in Hindu fashion, and placed fresh blossoms on a low table in front of the revered leader. In deference to our western ways, we were offered two straight back chairs, which were placed on the other side of the table.

Swami Prabhupada was ensconced, yoga fashion, on a large attractive cushion. Sitting on the floor, surrounding him in a semi-circle, were several devotees. The spartan room contained many shelves of books and an improvised flower-bedecked altar, which

held pictures of several former *arcayas*, teachers of Vedic knowledge. There were no other furnishings.

I had many questions. The swami fielded them beautifully. It was obvious that His Divine Grace was at ease conversing with people from all walks of life. He spoke perfect English and, in his quiet way, informed us that ISKCON is a program of practical spiritual training through the harmonious combination of knowledge, devotion and action.

He enumerated: "Books are the basis, preaching the essence. Purity is the force, utility is the principal."

We were told that part of the ISKCON action program is the distribution of food to hundreds of Indian families in Mayapur. Swami Prabhupada emphasized, "Any religion that cannot help feed the world's hungry people is not so substantial."

Our audience lasted about 20 minutes, but during that brief span of time, Bill and I realized we were conversing with a sincere, dedicated man. The Brahamanic scholar concluded our visit with these parting words, "As devotees of Lord Krsna, it is our duty to teach people how to love God and worship Him in their daily life."

In the years that have passed, we have had several big family reunions. Gary, who has lived in many types of ISKCON communities, has joined us when he has been

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# HARE KRISHNA

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within commuting distance.

At these times, in addition to playing with the grandchildren and getting caught up on current news, he has had several philosophical discussions with us, many of which have centered on sociology and theology. We always have questions for Gary and he always has answers for us.

Gary returned to India in January of 1978 after spending Christmas with the family at my daughter Nancy's home in Pennsylvania. In the spring, he was sent to Calcutta to supervise construction

of three 50-foot-high colorfully draped floats. These were built for the Ratha-yatra "Festival of the Chariots," one of ISKCON'S most outstanding annual celebrations. (Since then, Gary has returned to this crowded city every June to oversee this project, which attracts thousands of worshippers.) In November, Gary was on the move again—to Mayapur, to design a 10-foot-high fountain in the shape of a lotus flower.

Our son's home for the past two years has been in the area known as the "land of temples" just south of

New Delhi. As Director of Planning and Construction in Vrindaban, Gary is assisting in the building of a white-marble, multi-domed tomb that is being erected in honor of Swami Prabhupada, who "left his body" in 1977.

Every month, we look forward to the thick manila envelopes that arrive from India. Each contain a complete chapter about life in this legendary country. We have learned about foods, transportation, culture, entertainment, flora and fauna. Sometimes, in order to make the eastern experience more

vivid for us, Gary has enclosed peacock feathers, marble chips or newspaper clippings, along with his numerous blueprints.

Some people, unknowledgeable about our son's activities, have made statements such as "Be thankful he isn't a Communist..." or "It's not as if he is in jail..." or "At least he isn't dead!" The prize remark was, "Well, at least your daughters turned out all right."

After Gary responded to the call of Krishna in 1975, it took Bill and me several months before we were able

to completely accept his decision to wear a dhoti—instead of a business suit. But through study, observation and our many continuous visits and contacts with the Hare Krishnas, we have seen that they are leading respectable, busy and dedicated lives.

I am often reminded of Thoreau who said that man should step to the music which he hears, however measured or far away. The devotees of Krishna are dancing to different drums on six continents. Our son has heard the music. ■

GANNETT WESTCHESTER ROCKLAND NEWSPAPERS

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## A MOTHER'S TALE OF HARE KRISHNA

