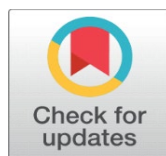


VAISHNAVISM BEYOND BORDERS: ISCKON MAYAPUR, WEST BENGAL, INDIA

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ABSTRACT

India which is a land of diversity has many religious sects harmoniously living together. Vaishnavism, an off-shoot of Hinduism treats Lord Krishna as the supreme authority. The Gaudiya Vaishnavism views Sri Chaitanya as an incarnation of Krishna. Srila Prabhupada established International Society of Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) in New York on 1966 with the headquarter being at Mayapur, Nadia west Bengal – the birthplace of Sri Chaitanya. The organisation with its clear and appealing spiritualism was able to garner innumerable local, national and foreign devotees and tourists. ISCKON, Mayapur has thus been able to carry Vaishnavism to the Western world efficiently and has emerged as a major religious tourism centre.

Keywords: ISCKON, Mayapur, Gaudiya Vaishnavism, Spiritualism, Religious Tourism

1. INTRODUCTION

India is a large and populous country with a great past and tradition. It boasts of some four thousand years of civilized life, with longstanding traditions. India is a land of diversities which is visible in the spheres of religion. The major religions are – Hinduism, Islam, Sikhism, Christianity, Buddhism, Jainism being the major ones. Vaishnavism is an offshoot of Hinduism, the Vaishnavas worship the Hindu God Vishnu and different subgroups worship his various incarnations. Bengali Vaishnavism or Gaudiya Vaishnavism trusts Krishna as the supreme deity along with the fifteenth century saint Sri Chaitanya who was believed to be an incarnation of Krishna. Nadia district, West Bengal is probably the most important destination for all Lord Krishna devotees as this is the place where Sri Chaitanya was born and the world headquarters of ISCKON (International Society for Krishna Consciousness) is situated in Mayapur. Thus, Mayapur is an important centre of cultural and religious tourism where all year round not only local but innumerable foreign devotees and tourists come for unique exposure and solace. This not only helps in expansion of tourism, foreign currency earnings but also in cultural exchanges.

2. OBJECTIVES

- Analysing the ideological base of ISKCON as a religious order.
- Judging the role of ISKCON Mayapur as a potential centre of religious tourism.

3. DATABASE AND METHODOLOGY

The study involves both qualitative and quantitative approach. Several literature and articles have been referred to understand the theoretical nuances of ISKCON which emerged as a champion of Neo-Vaishnavism. Secondary data has been collected from various ISKCON offices such as Mayapur TOVP Office, Services Office, Sankirtan Department, Food for Life Department, Goshala and Seva Office etc. Primary survey has been conducted at Mayapur, Nadia district, West Bengal - the main centre of ISKCON involving the devotees or tourists both national and international to gauge its potential as a religious tourism. The sample population for the study were 150 in number (75 tourists and 75 local residents) and the study was conducted in January-February, 2019.

4. STUDY AREA

Nadia district of West Bengal, India being the birthplace Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, the cult figure behind popularising Vaishnavism not only in Bengal but India, has always fascinated tourists and devotees from across globe. The two main centres of attraction in the district are – Nabadwip town as birthplace of Chaitanya and Mayapur. Mayapur came into prominence due to initiation of ISKCON's (International Society of Krishna Consciousness) main centre. ISKCON which was established in New York City on July 11, 1966 by Srila Prabhupada has a massive temple complex at Mayapur about 130 km from Kolkata opposite to Nabadwip at the confluence of Ganga and Jalangi rivers and functions as the organisation's world headquarter since 1972. The temple complex extends over a huge area and as a holy place it attracts swarms of local and foreign tourists which has helped in the development of adjacent region too. Prabhupada himself had defined the size and design details of the temple and gave his disciples the responsibility of realising his dream; the process of development and resultant urbanisation is still underway.

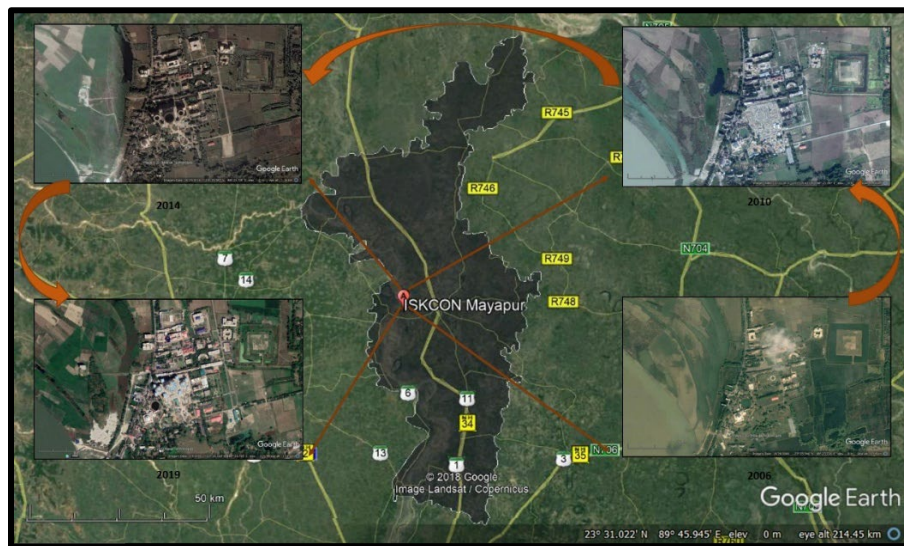


Fig 1: Study area and the temporal land use change

Sri Mayapur Chandroday temple is the main attraction alongside other temples. But presently, the main attraction is a 350 feet high temple and sprawling over six lakh square foot area designated as Temple of Vedic Planetarium will be ready by 2022. This unique temple, according to the President of temple construction - Alfred Ford will not only house the planetarium which would speak secret of Vedas but would also have a hall on 1.5 acre of land where ten thousand devotees can pay obeisance at a time.

5. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In the age-old tradition of Hinduism several religious movements with huge followings have cropped up from within, under the leadership of gurus who had their own unique beliefs and interpretation. Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902), the founder of Ramakrishna Mission was the pioneer in spreading Hindu religious philosophy in the West. Vaishnavism was another such off-shoot of Hinduism which shaped up during the Bhakti Movement and later was able to make a mark in the western world.

5.1. NEO-VAISHNAVISM MOVEMENT

In the early years of 16th century, during the earlier portion of Mughal rule, the Vaishnava movement inspired by Sri Chaitanya infused new energy in the social and religious life of Bengal.

The post-Chaitanya Vaishnava movement had two major centres – one at Nabadwip in Bengal and the other at Vrindavana in present Uttar Pradesh under the leadership of ‘Six Goswamis’. While the former viewed Sri Chaitanya as their guiding spirit, the latter emphasized Lord Krishna as their main centre of attraction. The lyrical writings of the Nabadwip followers highlighted that they believed Sri Chaitanya to be the incarnation of Krishna and Radha simultaneously.

In case of Bengal Vaishnav Movement, a clear division among the Vaishnavites can be noticed – the orthodox Vaishnav Goswamis who led a ‘pure’ life and was totally devoted in traditional Vaishnava practices; the Sahajiyas who are often referred as ‘perverts’ by the puritans were influenced by Tantric-Yogic cults became prominent in the 17th and 18th centuries. They believed that adulterous sexual union is the path which could lead to the supreme attainment. Though Vaishnavism was in favour of a classless society, Sahajiyas predominantly represented the lowest rung of the society. The third branch, involves the ISCKON sect.

5.2. BENGAL-VAISHNAVISM

The anthropology of Hinduism has amply established that Hindus have a strong involvement with sacred geography. Bengal similarly has a thriving culture of exalting sacred centers and pilgrimage places, one of the most important being the Nabadwip-Mayapur sacred complex, Bengal’s greatest site of guru-centered Vaishnavite pilgrimage and devotional life.

The Hare Krishna movement or ISKCON falls under the category of new “exotic” religions that sprung up in the West after World War II. It is rooted in the theistic Indian philosophy of Vaishnavism. The philosophical wisdom of ancient Indian scriptures such as Bhagavad Gita and Srimad Bhagavatam, interpreted by ISKCON’s founder, Shрила Prabhupada, constitute major philosophical foundation of the movement, as well as tradition of bhakti yoga, dance and singing tradition of sankirtana revitalised by Chaitanya in the beginning of the 16th century, and further interpretation and development of Indian tradition by its Western adepts in the 20th and 21st centuries. Adepts of Krishna Consciousness are called bhaktas for they follow the path of bhakti yoga which is rooted in the Vedic culture. Vedic’s culture main idea lies the knowledge of Absolute Truth and self-realization. Its major elements are: the knowledge about Vishnu (who is considered one of the forms of Krishna and is the sole Supreme God) and bhakti yoga path - the path of love and devotion to the supreme Lord which is a spiritual way to perfection (Kubiak,1997).

5.3. HISTORICAL BACKDROP OF ISKON

The International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) a product of Hare Krishna Movement is a worldwide confederation of over 400 temples, and is involved in innumerable community projects.

Primarily a religious organization, ISKCON has its roots in the Gaudiya-Vaishnava sampradaya (denomination), a monotheistic tradition within the wide Hindu religious spectrum and is based on ancient Vedic literatures like the age-old Sanskrit text Bhagavad-gita (“Song of God”), thirty volume Srimad-Bhagavatam and seventeen volume Chaitanya Charitamrita. ISKCON primarily reveres Lord Krishna as the supreme power and believes Shri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, as a 16th century incarnation of the God. Shri Chaitanya emphasized that the chanting of Hare Krishna would lead to a virtuous life for the followers and this has been the buzz word for ISKCON too.

Thomas Hopkins pointed out that the runaway success of ISKCON in the western world was paved by the openness created by Gaudiya Vaishnava preachers like Bhaktivinoda Thakur (1838-1914) and his son Bhaktisiddhanta Saraswati (1874-1937), who renounced the caste barrier.

Bhaktivedanata Swami (1896-1977) was one of Bhaktisiddhanta's disciples who worked relentlessly for the spread of Vaishnavism even in the western world. His Divine Grace A.C. Bhaktivedanata Swami Srila Prabhupada, one of the charismatic spiritual gurus of all times, was born as Abhay Charan De who continued spiritual and familial duties side-by-side from 1933 until 1959, when he embraced sanyas. At the age of seventy, Prabhupada travelled all the way from India to New York, America to spread the Vaishnava philosophy in the west and officially registered the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) in New York City on July 11, 1966. Srila Prabhupada is often said to have "saved the hippies and redirected their confused drug-spirituality into disciplined forms that transformed them into something completely different" (Bengtsson, 2014).

5.4. MEDIEVAL INDIAN BHAKTI MOVEMENT AND ISKCON

The primary similarity between the two is the unconditional love and devotion to the God. Another similar tenet of both is the consciousness of unity of devotee with the God. One of the front-runners of the Bhakti movement was Sri Chaitanya whose ideology and religious practices like sankirtana, are closely followed by ISKCON.

The rigid caste-divided society provided the historical backdrop of initiation Bhakti movement and the preaching of equality and egalitarianism invited resistance from orthodox society. The ISKCON, on the other hand was more international in approach in a globalized world, spreading the spiritual philosophy of the east to the western world. The propagators of Bhakti movement were liberal in approach and their kind of monotheism accepted God in any form or kind while for ISKCON the ideal form of God is Lord Krishna. Medieval Bhakti movement was able to draw followers across the socio-economic strata in India who looked for their personal salvation (Chandra, 2007); comparatively the reach of the ISKCON is limited socially but widespread geographically.

5.5. SPREAD OF ISKCON

ISKCON presently has a network of about five hundred centres, one hundred affiliated vegetarian restaurants under the brand name Govinda, thousands of namahattas or local meeting groups along with millions of congregational members worldwide. Though no official confirmation about the absolute statistics can be made.

Interestingly, there's hardly any statistics about the number of devotees around the world in any official ISKCON source. Some researchers use the data of 2009 which states there are 416 temples, 51 farms, and 100 restaurants, located in 97 countries (Ketola, 2014). Still around 2000, ISKCON would speak about 1 million followers. But Ukrainian-based researcher, Vyacheslav Ageev, 2015 mentions that in US and Europe ISKCON has almost vanished (Eastern Europe, Poland, and Hungary still being small strongholds), providing no statistics though, mentioning that ISKCON has stopped publishing their devotion statistics around year 2000. He claims that ISKCON has de facto transformed into predominantly Indian and post-USSR religion. Although, there is no official worldwide statistics, he provides some data on Ukraine and Russia.

5.6. TEACHINGS AND PRINCIPLES OF ISKCON

The teachings of Krishna consciousness cannot properly be classified as belief. The teaching is true eternal knowledge. According to ISKCON, belief may be either true or false, but it is still a belief. Truth may be believed or disbelieved irrespective of its factual nature. The eternal, knowledgeable and blissful nature of God is also a fact regardless of the belief or disbelief of anyone. It is this fact which is the primary concern of Krishna consciousness. This consciousness is the revival of the original consciousness of the living being which is the conscious awareness that one is eternally related to God or in this aspect Lord Krishna. The true self or soul of the individual is eternal, ever existent. Due to the ignorance of material contamination, the soul is forced to assume a continuous succession of material bodies. When one body dies, the soul immediately assumes another body and is born again. The individual forgets his past life and identifies with the present body, which is, in reality, simply a temporary covering for the soul. One must overcome the soul. One must overcome this false identification with the temporary body and realize his true position. ISKCON lays stress on the true realization of one's true position by being the loving servant of Krishna and also getting freed from the

cycle of birth and death and resuming the spiritual life which is an eternal life of the knowledge and bliss in the loving service of the Supreme Lord. This transcendental loving service is known as Bhakti.

Bhakti is treated as the goal of all religion and philosophy and of one's life itself. The process of the consciousness of Krishna is regarded as bhakti which is the ultimate goal. ISKCON regards Krishna as the Absolute Truth and focuses that the function of the living entity is to live in constant loving service to the Truth (Hopkins, 1962). This kind of love is reciprocal which means that whatever the devotee gives to the Lord is returned with love many times over. All living beings according to the exponents of ISKCON are already thought to be accepting love from Krishna in the form of their food and all material comforts, and in fact, life itself. The consciousness is treated as the process of becoming aware that each and everything is the gift of Krishna and living accordingly. All facilities and abilities at our disposal should be used in service to Lord. Thus, all the senses and faculties can be engaged in the transcendental loving service of the Lord. The necessity to wait for death to enter into the Kingdom of God is condemned because according to ISKCON one who is engaged in the transcendental loving service of the Lord is living in the kingdom before death. The continual service of Krishna makes one aware of his grace even in one's lifetime.

ISKCON views that the consciousness is experienced as a process of self-purification. Its means and ends are an open secret, and there is no financial charge for learning this consciousness or receiving initiation into the chanting of 'Hare Krishna'. Therefore, 'sankirtana', or chanting of the 'Hare Krishna' mantra in the city streets for the benefit of all citizens, is one of most important activities and means of propagating the Krishna consciousness and infusing it in the manifold of common people. 'Sankirtana' parties are frequently seen celebrating the holy name of Lord Krishna with dancing and melodious singing, accompanied with mridanga drums and pairs of karatilas or hand cymbals. The devotees are said to be experiencing by this joyous singing of the names of God, immediate feelings of ecstasy.

Vaishnava tradition believe that people are not their material bodies but are represented by eternal spirit or soul and all are related to the God. God or the supreme being can be known by many names but they stick to the name of Lord Krishna. The purpose of life is to have love for God and it can be realized only through bhakti-yoga (devotional service). The compassion for people is the essence of true spiritualism. There is constant chanting of holy names of Lord Krishna – 'Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna, Krishna Krishna, Hare Hare; Hare Rama, Hare Rama, Rama Rama, Hare Hare' for achieving Krishna consciousness effectively.

According to ISKCON the main purpose of the consciousness is to spread love of God to all people. Anyone can practice it by the process of chanting the holy names, but in order to teach and spread this knowledge it was mandatory to have a thorough understanding of the scriptures without any personally motivated interpretation. Bhagavad Gita is not the only scriptural text of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness. Other texts include 'Srimad-Bhagavatam', 'Sri Brahmasamhita', 'Sri Gaitan ya-Caritam'. 'Bhak Tirasimrta-sindhu', and many others. The texts that are studied are originally written in Sanskrit and Bengali and are presently being translated by the spiritual master of the Society.

Srila Prabhupada did not only limit his teachings within pure spiritualism but involved a whole set of cultural, moral and social values and principles. The seven main purposes of ISKON are -

- To systematically propagate spiritual knowledge to society at large for achieving real unity and peace in the world.
- To propagate a consciousness of Krishna (God), following the lines of Bhagavad-gita and Srimad-Bhagavatam.
- To bring the members of the Society together with each other by keeping Lord Krishna at the centre of their thoughts and serve humanity at large.
- To teach and encourage the naam-sankirtana movement or congregational chanting of the holy name of God.
- To set up holy places dedicated to Lord Krishna for ISKCON members and for society at large
- To bring the members closer together as a close-knit society for teaching a simpler, natural way of life.
- To achieve the goals set and to preach the ideals on large-scale regular publishing of periodicals, magazines, books etc. is emphasized upon.

5.7. PHILOSOPHY BEHIND

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ISKCON is based on Krishna consciousness. The philosophy accepts the existence of a supreme being i.e. God which is eternally related to Lord Krishna. It states that a spiritual life can only be attained when one enters the transcendental loving service or 'Bhakti' of the supreme Lord which is Krishna in this case. This love is mutual as the devotee in return receives material comforts and psychological wellbeing from Lord Krishna.

Ritual is a social act basic to humanity and that it designates a certain form or structure with unique relations among the elements of this structure. It is one of the best options to transmit cultural heritage, to adapt to the values of tradition. The way suggested by Sri Chaitanya to revive the love for Lord Krishna is by constant chanting of his holy name. There is constant chanting or sankirtana of maha-mantra or great prayer for deliverance of Lord Krishna – 'Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna, Krishna Krishna, Hare Hare; Hare Rama, Hare Rama, Rama Rama, Hare Hare' for achieving Krishna consciousness effectively. The word 'Hare' means the supreme pleasure potency of the Lord. The word 'Krishna' means the original name of the Lord (Edwin, 2013). ISKCON propagates that with this chanting the devotee is able to please the Lord and the senses of both the parties get merged providing immense spiritual satisfaction. This entire process of chanting is often associated with singing and dancing with indigenous instruments like khol (drums) and kortal (hand cymbals) taking shape of a celebration evoking ecstasy. All this helps the common man's mind to get away from material muck and helps in connecting with Him is a process of self-purification.

ISKCON firmly believes in the concept of 'One God' though its appearance and form might vary according to spatio-temporal contexts, following the ideals of Bhagavad Gita. Though in most cases, the Vaishnavites view Lord Krishna as the original form of the God from whom the other forms stems.

5.8. IDEAL LIFESTYLE GUIDELINES

The students of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness lead a completely regulated life, according to the injunctions of the scriptures. They eat only foods that are specially prepared according to scriptural directions. They have no sex life outside of marriage; they take no intoxicants, and they do not indulge in gambling or idle amusements, such as movies, televisions and so on.

Along with regular worship services, study of scriptures, narrations and sermons take place at ISKCON temples in addition to daily chanting and meditation.

The four principles of religion followed by the devotees are -compassion, truthfulness, cleanliness and austerity.

The four regulative principles followed by the ISCKON devotees are – non consumption of animal protein (meat, fish, eggs etc.) in addition to onion and garlic, abstinence from gambling, not indulging in illicit sex and avoidance of intoxication (through smoking, drinking or drug abuse and even tea or coffee). Anything that hinders the spiritual development of the devotees are to be avoided.

It is worth mentioning, that according to the Vedic scriptures, everything in the material world falls under the three modes or gunas: tamas (ignorance), rajas (passion) and sattva (goodness) (Bhagavat Gita, 14.6-14.8). The three gunas are responsible for the diversity of nature. This concept is applied to everything in the material world, including food. The above-mentioned prohibited products belong to tamaguna (ignorance) and must be avoided.

The theology insists that the sensory organs are involved in God worshipping: the eyes look for decorated altar, ears hear chanting, nose inhales flowers and incense while tongue savours the vegetarian bhoga (sanctified meal).

ISKCON especially commemorates certain sacred days of the Vaishnava calendar with special fanfare, like Janamastami (Krishna's birth anniversary) and Ratha Yatra (Festival of the Chariots).

5.9. ENSURING THE VIABILITY

To ensure the continuity of stable Chaitanya movement the ISCKON administration adopted a number of innovative programmes so that it remains attractive to the westerners and at the same it has economic viability to sustain itself (Rochford, 1985).

The avenues used were distribution of institutional journal “Back to Godhead” initiated by Srila Prabhupada in lieu of subscription, selling of religious texts through Bhaktivedanta Book Trust (Gallager et al, 2006).

Srila Prabhupada in 1977, before his demise established a Governing Body Commission (GBC) comprising of senior Krishna devotees to oversee the international society’s activities. Each ISKCON temple has its own local leadership which are collectively under the purview of GBC.

Besides, regular festivals, yoga seminars and public chanting are held from where fees are collected. It has also initiated schools, colleges, hospitals which generate revenue, alongside several eco-villages. All these endeavours indicate a practical approach in the path of devotional yoga.

ISKCON has over one million members worldwide. Some members live in ashrams (monasteries) as monks and nuns, but most of the devotees are greehi-bhaktas who are a part of general society, carry on their familial responsibilities and practise Krishna consciousness from home and attend temple functions regularly. Interestingly, participation in ISKCON is open to anyone, regardless of race, religion, gender, ethnicity, or any other factors.

Interestingly, there’s hardly any statistics about the number of devotees around the world in any official ISKCON source. Some researchers (Ketola, 2014) use the data of 2009 which states there are 416 temples, 51 farms, and 100 restaurants, located in 97 countries (Ketola, 2014). Still around 2000, ISKCON would speak about 1 million followers. But Ukrainian-based researcher, Vyacheslav Ageev, 2015, mentions that in US and Europe ISKCON has almost vanished (Eastern Europe, Poland, and Hungary still being small strongholds), providing no statistics though, mentioning that ISKCON has stopped publishing their devotion statistics around year 2000. He claims that ISKCON has de facto transformed into predominantly Indian and post-USSR religion. Although, there is no official worldwide statistics, he provides some data on Ukraine and Russia.

5.10. CULTURAL DIMENSIONS

- Traditional music and dance represent an important religio-cultural aspect. The kirtans or religious hymns with Indian instruments like khol, kartal are an integral part of Vaishnava practice. For intricate depiction the divine acts of the God and the devotees often classical dance forms like Bharat Natyam, Kathak and Odissi are resorted to.
- ISKCON temples across the world put forward superb examples of traditional and neo- Vedic architecture. The head quarter at Mayapur also bears classic architectural style.
- Often ISKCON’s sanctified vegetarian food service system is referred as “the kitchen religion”. It offers a varied menu with regional, national and even international varieties like pasta, pizza and delicacies like eggplant parmesan. ISKCON has a chain of restaurants an established temple offers visitors delicious sanctified vegetarian food, and host weekly Sunday open house programs that culminate in a free multicourse feast. The internationally inspired menu can range from Punjabi curried vegetables to better acquaint people with the benefits of a vegetarian diet, the Krishna movement has also established 100 vegetarian restaurants around the world. Food offerings, meditational cooking, cookbook publication, food pantry work, gardening, food sharing and festival organization are the ways that the devotees engage with food. For Krishna devotees food and its cooking, serving, offering and later sharing are not just mundane chores familiar to every housewife, but a way of service to the Supreme.
- To spread the profound Vaishnava culture and philosophy ISKCON affiliated publishing house Bhaktivedanta Book Trust (BBT) was established which prints and distributes periodicals, magazines, books etc.

6. POTENTIALITY AS RELIGIOUS TOURISM CENTRE

Mayapur in recent years has been a prominent tourist spot. As it is not very far from Kolkata megacity, it serves as a tranquil weekend destination even for those who are not much spiritually inclined. Besides, the devotees across the globe come to pay tribute to Lord Krishna in the 'holy land'.

6.1. ECONOMIC VIABILITY

All throughout the year there is a steady flow of tourists in Mayapur. Each year during the festivals like Janamastami (Krishna's birth anniversary) during month of August and Ratha Yatra (Festival of the Chariots) around June-July, the foreign devotees come in large numbers (ISCKON Seva Office, 2018). Some of the pilgrims stay in the Mayapur temple complex of a longer period from few months to several years as they want to serve the institute and feel the spiritual peace. Since, ISCKON is not limited only as a pilgrim site, it has its own business model like a tourism centre; the residents devotees have to pay rent or donate certain amount to stay in the premises and also have to work for ISCKON to earn their meal.

To run the huge show ISCKON authorities generate money from their agricultural activities through organic farming, dairy products from goshala, sale of periodicals, magazines, books. Apart from these, by running guest houses they earn a substantial part of their income. The donations from devotees from far (especially American and European ones) and near (Asian countries and from within India) is also significant.

As a large number of tourists and devotees with their family stays in Mayapur temple complex there are provision of school following the ancient Gurukul system and in-house hospital. To be precise, Mayapur complex is nothing short of a self-sufficient township.

6.2. AT THE CROSS ROADS: LOCAL VS GLOBAL

There is a palpable tension between people inside and outside ISCKON complex of the Mayapur; the division is along the religious and economic lines.

Mayapur residents outside ISCKON complex are less educated and economically weak so they are wary of the luxurious lifestyle of the ones who stay within the complex. But gradually the dissatisfaction level is coming down as the entire region is getting benefitted from the booming tourism industry centred around ISCKON headquarter. The local business of food stalls, transport thrive extremely well during the festival seasons and have a certain level of business throughout the year. Another problem that the locals reported during the survey was that due to the economically affluent foreign and national devotees of ISCKON the price of daily goods, room rent and land prices are going beyond the reach of the locals and they are feeling alienated in their own world. Few have even accused ISCKON authorities of acquiring land-plot through shady means for their temple complex expansion.

The religious difference is still there the local people are either mainstream Hindus or even if they are Vaishnavites they are mainly orthodox Vaishnava Goswamis who believe in age-old traditional Vaishnava practices and do not feel akin with the ways and means of ISCKON. The Goswamis believe that Nabadwip should be the main centre of attraction as it is the birthplace of Sri Chaitanya and are unhappy with the fact that Mayapur has stolen the limelight by having more connection with the western world.

ISCKON carries out several welfare initiatives worldwide like free education to the poor children, free food to the needy etc but they are comparatively ignorant to the needs of the local neighbourhood. If these two worlds can meet then the two centres together can create a grater impact by forming a circuit for the tourists offering religious heritage tourism in Nabadwip and westernised yet rooted modern version of Vaishnavism at Mayapur together.

6.3. FEEDBACK FROM THE TOURISTS

The local tourists who come over to Mayapur as a weekend destination are quite satisfied about the serene environment, healthy diet and reasonable pricing. Interestingly most of them practise mainstream Hinduism and are not very aware of the Vaishnava nuances. However, majority of the national tourists were ardent Vaishnavites, many were believers of ISCKON sect while a sizeable section was from the Vrindavana segment of North India who viewed Krishna as their guiding spirit but came in Mayapur to know more about Sri Chaitanya and this form of Gaudiya Vaishnavism.

They were also amused to see the vast compound, myriads of sustainable economic activities alongside rigorous spiritual practices. But few commented that the expected donation by the organisation from them in some cases were quite high to meet up. The international tourists with whom interaction was possible were mostly resident devotees having membership in the ISCKON community. They opined that ISCKON Mayapur offered them a surreal world which is entirely different from the materialistic westernised culture and for that peaceful spiritualism they have taken shorter or longer breaks from their work and have opted for a longer stay. Most of them are actively involved in the daily chores of ISCKON temple. During the major festival times many foreigners, who are unable to spend a longer time, join them here.

Though there are many branches of ISCKON worldwide, devotees across feel that more branches should come up so that more people get aware about this Vaishnava sect and the fan following increases more. A section of the tourists expressed a concern that ISCKON as an organisation has an inherent bias towards anglicised, educated wealthy section; devotees from the lower rungs of the society are conspicuously absent. They feel if ISCKON being an organisation popular in the West can also attract the common countrymen then its base would expand further and will become a stronger spiritual body to reckon with.

7. CONCLUSION

ISCKON as a religious order commands respect all over the world; how an off-shoot of Hinduism managed to set its ball rolling in the western world is nothing short of a fairy-tale. The stern yet ideal lifestyle guidelines attract many for their spiritual and physical wellbeing. The self-sufficient organisation though receives a lot of donation from across the world, it has its own business model which sets it apart from other such organisations. Last but not the least the note of peace, love, compassion and devotional services that it preaches going above the limited boundary of spiritual Vaishnavism has made it so popular. From a relatively obscure location of Mayapur where the head office of the organization is located, it is spreading its wing all over with the unique message of Krishna Consciousness and has become a thriving religious tourism hub.

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