

ISKCON'S CONTRIBUTION TO SOCIAL WELFARE: AN ANALYSIS OF ITS HUMANITARIAN EFFORTS

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Abstract:

This article explores the role of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) in religious movements and its impact on social welfare. ISKCON's initiatives and activities have contributed significantly to spiritual growth, community development, and social service. Through its humanitarian aid. This article examines the ways in which ISKCON's efforts have positively influenced individuals and communities, fostering a sense of unity, compassion, and service. By analyzing .

Keywords:

Iskcon, Social Impact, Religious Studies, Spirituality.

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Introduction

ISKCON Stands for the international society for Krishna consciousness. It is a global spiritual organization founded in 1966 by A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada in York City. It is popularly known as the “Hare Krishna movement” and is part of the Gaudiya Vaishnavism tradition, which worships Lord Krishna as the supreme God. If we talk about Iskcon in Simple and easy language then it is a religious organization that propagates Hinduism at an international level, which is especially known for propagating Bhagwat Geeta and Lord Krishna associated with it. Through the ISKCON organization, people associated with it get knowledge of Vedic culture, religion, yoga Bhagwat Geeta, ancient Puranas and principle of devotion. Along with this ISKCON inspires devotees to become guides of life and and contribute to works of social utility.

ISKCON’S core philosophy revolves around Krishna consciousness, which emphasizes the importance of developing a personal relationship with Lord Krishna, the organization’s teachings are based on the Bhagwat Gita, a sacred Hindu scripture that explores the nature of reality, duty, and spiritual growth. ISKCON encourages devotees to engage in various devotional practices such as chanting, singing and serving Krishna with love and devotion.

ISKCON’S spiritual principles

ISKCON’s spiritual principles are based on the Vedas and Puranas. Here are some key principles:

Supremacy of Krishna

ISKCON believes that Lord Krishna is the supreme personality of Godhead, and he descends to rescue all living beings:

Bhakti yoga

ISKCON emphasizes Bhakti yoga, which involves attaining Krishna through love and devotion.

Important of Scriptures

ISKCON recognizes the importance of scriptures like the Vedas, Upanishads, and Puranas, and strives to live according to their teaching.

Nature of the living being

ISKCON Believes that the living being is eternal and conscious, and its goal is to establish a loving relationship with Krishna.

Maya and Liberation

ISKCON emphasizes the need to transcend Maya (material attachment)and attain liberation through Krishna devotion.

Role of the Guru

In ISKCON, the Guru plays a crucial role in guiding the disciple towards Krishna.

Sanatan Dharam

ISKCON Works to revive and propagate Sanatan Dharam, which is based on Vedic culture and traditions.

Love and service

ISKCON emphasizes the importance of love and service, including serving Krishna and all living beings.

These principles guide ISKCON’s spiritual practices and provide a framework for devotees to cultivate devotion and spiritual growth.

Global Impact and Continuing Legacy Since its inception, ISKCON has evolved into a global movement with hundreds of centers and temples across more than a hundred countries. Its approach to spirituality—combining philosophical depth, communal worship, and practical ethical guidelines—resonates with a diverse array of followers. ISKCON’s emphasis on direct, personal experience of the divine has spurred a cultural and religious renaissance for many who seek meaning beyond the material world. Beyond the confines of traditional religious practice, ISKCON has also influenced art, music, and social activism, reflecting its commitment to spreading love, compassion, and understanding in today’s interconnected world. SKCON’s journey from a small group of Western seekers to a worldwide organization exemplifies how ancient spiritual wisdom can be dynamically reinterpreted to meet modern needs. Its practices, deeply rooted in devotional service and community life, continue to inspire individuals to lead lives marked by simplicity, kindness, and a profound sense of purpose. There’s so much more to explore about how devotional practices like kirtan and community outreach adapt to contemporary life. Would you be interested in diving deeper into any specific aspect of ISKCON’s philosophy or its global cultural impact?

SKCON’s core beliefs are deeply rooted in the ancient tradition of Gaudiya Vaishnavism, which emphasizes a personal, loving devotion to Krishna, regarded as the Supreme Personality of Godhead.

Objectives:-

- 1. To spread Krishna consciousness :** To propagate the teaching of Krishna and promote spiritual awareness globally
- 2. To promote Vedic culture and values :** To share the wisdom and values of the Vedic tradition with people worldwide.

3. **To support personal growth and self-realization:** To support individuals in their personal growth and self-realization journey through spiritual practices and guidance.
4. **To provide spiritual education and guidance :** To offer spiritual education, guidance, and support to individuals seeking a deeper understanding of themselves and the universe.

Challenges and Legitimacy

ISKCON has navigated a complex landscape marked by both deep internal debates and external legal challenges—all of which have influenced perceptions of its legitimacy as a modern spiritual movement.

Internal Theological and Leadership Disputes

A central point of internal contention is the method of initiation and leadership succession following the passing of its founder, A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada. Before his departure, Prabhupada appointed 11 disciples to perform initiations on his behalf. Over time, some groups—most notably ISKCON Bangalore—have adopted what is known as the “Ritvik” system. In this model, while new disciples are initiated in the name of Prabhupada, they do not receive a personal initiation from a living spiritual master. Critics argue that this diverges from the traditional guru-disciple relationship, which is fundamental in Gaudiya Vaishnavism. They contend that true spiritual guidance requires an active, living guru who can interact dynamically with disciples, adapt teachings to contemporary challenges, and provide ongoing mentorship. Supporters of Ritvikism, however, maintain that it adheres strictly to Prabhupada’s instructions, preserving the purity of his teachings by directly invoking his authority. This ongoing debate has created divisions within ISKCON and spurred broader conversations about the evolution of spiritual authority in a modern context

Legal and Administrative Challenges

Externally, ISKCON has also faced significant challenges concerning the governance of its properties and the management of its organizational structures. A prominent example is the prolonged legal battle between ISKCON Bangalore and ISKCON Mumbai over control of the Hare Krishna Hill temple in Bengaluru. This dispute, which spanned decades and required intervention by the Indian Supreme Court, centered on which group held legitimate legal title to the temple and its associated assets. Court cases have scrutinized not only property rights but also the legitimacy of the governing bodies and the methods by which leadership was established within the respective branches. Such legal contests underscore the difficulties inherent in managing a global movement that operates through multiple,

sometimes competing, administrative bodies. They also reflect the broader challenge of maintaining a unified identity in a decentralized organization, especially when foundational directives from a revered leader remain subject to differing interpretations by various factions.

Impact on Organizational Legitimacy

Despite these challenges, ISKCON has grown into a worldwide movement with vibrant cultural, educational, and humanitarian initiatives. Its widespread influence in promoting devotional practices, vegetarianism, and community service adds to its legitimacy in many eyes. Yet, the internal debate over leadership and the external legal disputes serve as reminders of the complexities involved in sustaining a religious movement over time. The manner in which ISKCON addresses and resolves these issues will continue to shape its narrative, both for devotees and for external observers scrutinizing its operations under modern legal and cultural standards.

Further Reflections

The debate around Ritvikism, leadership succession, and property rights is not unique to ISKCON. Many religious and spiritual organizations wrestle with questions of how to honor foundational teachings while addressing the practical challenges of governance, legal accountability, and evolving spiritual needs. In ISKCON’s case, these challenges are intertwined with the desire to maintain spiritual purity and communal unity, even as the organization adapts to diverse cultural contexts worldwide.

Would you like to explore further how these internal debates have influenced ISKCON’s devotional practices in different regions or perhaps dive deeper into how legal rulings are reshaping the governance of other modern spiritual movements?

General Overviews

ISKCON was by no means the only Hindu-oriented organization appearing in the West in the mid-1960s, yet it received attention from the public and from scholars as a strikingly visible mission that the media began to label as a “cult.” Bromley and Shinn 1989, aiming to offer a scholarly counterbalance to a negative “cult” designation, has several articles focusing on the Western context of ISKCON, in contrast to the very short dictionary overview provided in Gietz 2006, which touches on five of the society’s most essential features. Somewhat dated but still useful and very readable is Knott 1986 for a short book-length overview that gives attention to ISKCON’s Indian/Hindu roots, to be contrasted with the three-page representation offered in Lundskow 2008 in the context of globalized religion. Rochford 1985 represents a relatively early sociological study of ISKCON in America that gives attention to gender issues, whereas Squarcini and Fizzotti 2004 offer a

broader and later survey that is quite insightful with respect to changing membership and organizational dynamics. One example of an evangelical Christian representation of “Hare Krishna” (ISKCON) is seen in Yamamoto 1998.

Knott, Kim. My Sweet Lord: The- Hare Krishna Movement. Wellingborough, UK: Aquarian, 1986.

This work seeks to differentiate the Hare Krishna movement from the common stereotypes associated with “New Religious Movements” in Britain during the mid-1980s. Despite its historical focus, it remains a valuable resource for understanding ISKCON’s core characteristics and self-perception. Additionally, it provides insight into an initiative aimed at establishing a non-monastic community, known as “Friends of Lord Krishna” (FOLK).

Rochford, E. Burke, Jr. Hare Krishna in America. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1985.

This study examines the early years of ISKCON in America, with a particular focus on individuals who became dedicated members. It explores the movement’s growth, organizational trajectory, and the wider social environment that shaped its expansion. A case study in Chapter 4 highlights the experience of a female recruit, followed by an analysis of gender differences in the recruitment process.

Bromley, D. G., and L. D. Shinn, eds. Krishna Consciousness in the West. Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 1989.

This volume brings together scholarly articles originating from a 1985 conference held at ISKCON’s New Vrindavan community in West Virginia. Titled *Krishna Consciousness in the West: A Multidisciplinary Critique*, the conference aimed to provide a more comprehensive and balanced perspective on ISKCON (Pg. 14) than was available at the time.

Lundskow, George N. The Sociology of Religion: A Substantive and Transdisciplinary Approach. Los Angeles: Pine Forge, 2008.

Within the chapter *Religion and the Forces of Globalization*, this three-page discussion presents the Hare Krishna movement as an “alternative religion” rather than a “cult.” It characterizes ISKCON as a variation of mainstream Hinduism in India (Pg. 347), highlighting its critique of American consumer culture while acknowledging its role in the broader dynamics of multiculturalism and globalization. For further exploration, see *Hare Krishna: Indian Religion Arrives in the United States* (Pg. 346–349).

Squarcini, Federico, and Eugenio Fizzotti. Hare Krishna. Salt Lake City, UT: Signature Books, 2004.

This work offers a concise overview of ISKCON’s early history, outlining three distinct phases of its development. It examines the movement’s practices and rituals, followed by an exploration of its doctrines and theology. The final chapter discusses *directions, developments, and areas of controversy* (Pg. vi). Additionally, the book includes several black-and-white photographs, along with well-researched notes and references.

Gietz, Karl-Peter. “Hare Krishna Movement (ISKCON).” In *The Brill Dictionary of Religion*. Vol. 2. Edited by Kocku von Stuckrad, 831–833. Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2006.

Despite its brevity, this article provides a clear and concise overview of ISKCON, structured into five sections. It covers *History* and *Ritual Practice and Manner of Life*, presenting a largely accurate depiction, though some details may be somewhat outdated.

Baird, Robert D. “ISKCON and the Struggle for Legitimation.” *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester* 70.3 (Autumn 1988): 157–170.

This work examines ISKCON’s efforts to establish legitimacy in North America through legal battles, engagement with scholars and academics, and a broader shift toward inclusivity and acceptance of other faiths and the wider society. It highlights the movement’s gradual transformation from a sect into a denomination, illustrating its evolving identity and integration within the religious landscape.

Basham, A. L. “Interview with A. L. Basham.” In *Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna: Five Distinguished Scholars on the Krishna Movement in the West*. Edited by S. J. Gelberg, 162–195. New York: Grove, 1983.

This interview with the editor features Basham situating the Hare Krishna movement within the broader migration of Eastern thought and religion to the West. He emphasizes ISKCON’s strong focus on explicitly religious ideas and practices, distinguishing it from other mystical traditions that tend to be more subdued and demand less commitment.

Hopkins, Thomas J. “The Social and Religious Background for Transmission of Gaudiya Vaisnavism to the West.” In *Krishna Consciousness in the West*. Edited by D. G. Bromley and L. D. Shinn, 35–54. Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 1989.

This work traces key social and religious currents from 19th-century Bengal that laid the intellectual and societal groundwork for ISKCON’s missionary efforts. It examines the historical influences that made the movement’s emergence possible. Additionally, it includes two insightful charts: one depicting Bengal’s social structures and another outlining significant leaders and movements of 19th-century Bengal.

Rosen, Steven J., ed. *Vaigavaism: Contemporary Scholars Discuss the Gauṛya Tradition*. New York: Folk, 1992.

This book presents twenty-five interviews with leading scholars of Vaigava traditions, including Gauṛya Vaigavaism. It serves as a *reader-friendly* introduction to various aspects of the broader tradition to which ISKCON belongs. However, at least one reviewer cautions that the book may contain notable alterations from the original interviews.

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

This volume brings together twenty-four authors—mostly current or former ISKCON members—who examine various aspects of ISKCON, primarily in the American context, twenty-seven years after Swami Prabhupāda’s passing. The contributors present diverse perspectives, including opposing views on controversial issues, particularly regarding the continuation of ISKCON and the broader Caitanya Vaigava tradition within contemporary, multicultural settings.

Cole, Richard J., and Graham Dwyer, eds. *The Hare Krishna Movement: Forty Years of Chant and Change*. New York: I. B. Tauris, 2007.

Includes ten articles by scholars and ISKCON members. A retrospective look at ISKCON forty years since its founding, focusing on its history, changing demographics, its Western context, members’ dreams of Prabhupāda, ritual and chanting practices of devotees, ISKCON’s search for identity, and the place of feminine theology in the tradition.

Das, Sulocana. *The Guru Business*. 1986.

This work is a deeply personal and emotional exposé by a former ISKCON member who became disillusioned with the movement’s leadership. The author, now deceased, was particularly critical of Kirtanananda Swami (1937–2011), whom he blamed for the dissolution of his marriage. His critique aligns with the grievances expressed by other disaffected members during the *zonal ācārya period* (1977–1987), a time marked by significant internal tensions and leadership disputes within ISKCON.

Hubner, John, and Lindsey Gruson. *Monkey on a Stick: Murder, Madness and the Hare Krishnas*. San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1988.

This work, purportedly based on interviews and court trial transcripts, presents *reconstructed dialogues* to depict various conflicts and challenges faced by ISKCON communities in the United States during the early 1980s. It offers insight into the *zonal ācārya* era and the emergence of the *guru reform* movement in 1986,

making it a potentially valuable resource for studying this turbulent period in ISKCON’s history.

Conclusion

This passage highlights ISKCON’s gradual shift in membership focus—from attracting young American followers to engaging more with Hindu-Indian immigrants. Members were encouraged to embrace traditional Indian customs, including wearing dhotis or sarees, following a vegetarian diet, and learning classical Hindu languages like Sanskrit. Despite this shift, Western involvement in ISKCON persisted, though it initially raised concerns among some Hindu members who questioned the legitimacy of Western devotees worshipping Hindu deities (Berg & Kniss, 2008). Over time, however, these perceptions evolved, and Western members became more accepted within ISKCON’s framework.

The movement has experienced significant fluctuations throughout its history—from its founding by an Indian immigrant spreading devotion in the U.S., to being labeled a cult and facing decline, and later resurging with the support of Indian immigrants. ISKCON has left a lasting impact as a religious movement, introducing a way of life centered on kindness and non-materialism. Today, it stands as a testament to how devotion and meditation can shape one’s life and guide the path to transcendence.

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