

NIGHT IS DAY

DAY IS NIGHT

The life of the introspective devotee is empty and dry for a materialist...and the so-called wakefulness of a materialist is deepest night for a devotee. On the appearance day of Srila Prabhupada, the Grade 11 boys from the Sri Mayapur International School offered a unique perspective on these parallel yet opposing realities.

2AM: SPEAKERS AND SUBWOOFERS RELENTLESSLY thud the techno beat deep into the cement block basement of a Calcutta nightclub – and deep into the numbed minds of its gyrating mass of guests. As the vinyls spin under the masterful hands of the slick-haired DJ, men are urgently diving and springing, women writhing erotically, all bent on unleashing the week’s frustrated passion. Swilling sour ale, onlookers leer at the pumping flesh, lit spasmodically by the watchful eyes of the psychedelic spotlights. Beams leap erratically, fighting the pounding rhythm, over the shadowy, windowless cavern of a room. The air is thick, damp,

cigarette-smoky. Stale sweat-scents ooze from the glistening skin of bodies driven by chemicals and the all-engrossing thought – ENJOY!

Night is day, day is night...

5am: In Māyāpur, a few hours’ drive north – yet surely a different dimension altogether – another master of music holds captive the energy of dancers. He laughs and roars, sways and spins, his once-crisp kurta now bathed in perspiration. Blurs of creamy marble floor and gilt chandeliers loom in and out

of his vision; swirls of saffron and a sea of glistening heads revolve in a great, careening wheel about him. Frankincense, sweet as the surging melody that drowns all stray thoughts, wreathes swinging loops of marigolds in the lofty dome above the reeling dancers. All eyes alight with the single flame of devotion; all hearts awash in waves of ecstasy. Welling emotions rise like melodies; first delicately, then powerfully, as the empowered maestro plays their hearts like stringed instruments. His voice rises, hoarse above the crescendo of drumming, “JAYA PRABHUPĀDA! JAYA PRABHUPĀDA!”

Day is night, night is day...

6.30am: A bony-limbed child gingerly picks his way in the cold dawn light along a path only he can see, through blackish gritty mud, between oily puddles, and over a heap of fly-blown filth. The railway sidings are his workplace; it's waste, his life. A rusty wire worth a few paise to the scrap merchant, a paan-stained rag to bind the cuts under his toes; perhaps even a cracked earthen pot with a smear of yesterday's pasty dahl within. After an hour of rooting, rubbing, he raises his dusty mop of a head and arches his small back. In his stiff, grimy shirt are wedged two plastic bottles and a torn, spindly kite; in his hand is a syringe, crusted with blood. He traces the letters on its label without comprehension, until his attention is drawn briefly back to the ramshackle shanties he came from. A woman's guttural scream has just announced the arrival of another forlorn life in Howrah...

Night is day, day is night...

8am: A tiny starched *dhoti*, tight over chubby legs; two gold-trimmed twirling skirts matched with cut-down gauzy veils (having seen better days upon Their Lordships); three sets of peach-cheeks shining beneath smudged *gopī* dots and crooked *tilak* (applied “Myself, Mata!”). This breathless trio, laden with favorite paraphernalia – mini *mṛdaṅga*, wispy peacock fan, and blue-black *Kṛṣṇa* doll – push and squirm eagerly around pillars and over prostrate legs towards their goal: a front row view of Śrī Śrī Rādhā-Mādhava in Their festival dresses. Their childish yet absorbed, round-eyed glances are met for a few still moments of communion before they hasten off again. Searching expertly through the

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reverential crowd, these purposeful little bhaktas fly to take charge of caranamṛta spoons, Prabhupāda's *cāmara*, and a giant slab of half-ground sandalwood paste. Having poured heart and soul in to their respective services, the tots suddenly bustle off (as if rehearsed) to meet hopefully about the slim, saffron-clad legs of Prabhupāda's *pūjārī*, who is now offering a huge ghee lamp in flowing arcs of golden light...

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10.30am: The cramped, budget room of Sudder Street's Hilson Hotel is heavy with the odour of sizzling eggs, lamb curry, and cold, tough toast, now being shuttled in by the trayful. Shaking off a hangover, one of the unshaven occupants grunts in satisfaction, shoving into wakefulness the others sharing his rumpled bed, despite their sullen protests. Hands soon fly, teeth tear, and lips smack in this outrageous feast, as rejected morsels are smuggled away to the quick jaws of the wiry terrier secreted beneath the covers. The scene is a madhouse: sheet-tangled limbs, unwashed singled torsos, a mismatched collection of stained crockery, grimy glasses, and loose tumbling knives and forks. At last, sliding their aluminium tea-trays down amongst the empty whiskey bottles of the night before, the breakfasters fix blank eyes upon the cluttered brown carpet with its ground-in crumbs, strewn sheets of newspaper, and cigarette burns. Somewhere in the disturbingly silent room is the TV's remote...

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12 Noon: A tranquil woman, her braided hair still damp from the shower, bends down to slowly place a heavy plate of ornate, spotless silver upon a marble plinth, then leans back from the effort, arranging the silky folds of her cloth to cover her feet. She softly invokes auspiciousness through timeless mantra, focusing her mind, body, and soul upon the Supreme Lord, drawing His attention by the melodious tinkling of her tiny brass bell. His *rāja-bhoga* is offered exactly as the wall clock chimes twelve – one of the seven daily presentations, the loving labor of cooks and cutters, shoppers and drivers, sponsors and cleaners. Light, puffy lemon rice garnished with cashews is in a central golden

sea, unaware of passing hours, a solitary figure sits in his chair, tossed about and swamped by his own thoughts. He gazes dully into nothingness, sometimes guzzling deep draughts from the bottle by his side, as he crawls back through the cobwebbed tunnels of time to those magic days, when each moment seemed a glimmering jewel. There were colors then, like the chestnut of her hair, and joy that seemed far from the clammy grasp of misery. But that was before the lies began – the jealousy, the bruised, tearful reproaches, the paralyzing guilt; that was before the madness. Blind to the lengthening shadows sliding over his still form like a thick winter blanket, he seems to merge into the room’s gloominess, like a man deeply concussed. Only confusion and regret stir...blur...warp...as he falls, inexorably, into that black pit of ignorance from which there is so seldom escape...

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8am: Śrīla Prabhupāda’s clear, grave voice rings out in the hall, his morning lecture near its close. All eyes behold his intense gaze, exhorting the audience to throw off its mundane limitations and embrace the mission of Caitanya Mahāprabhu. All ears drink in that nectarean message; it is a bold challenge to mediocrity, a daring chance for victory! But piercing the pin-drop silence that follows, his next statement sends shivers down their spines – “I am an old man who may die at any moment.”

The softly-spoken words continue to echo around the room as devotees look sidelong at one another in absolute shock. Slowly their eyes return to their spiritual master, whose transcendental form seems to be radiating invisible energy. He does not speak, does not move, does not breathe; he is communicating with Kṛṣṇa. His spellbound disciples find their ears ringing despite the quiet, and they have the strange feeling that Prabhupāda is no longer on the *vyāsāsana*, but has crept into their hearts like the early morning mists of Māyāpur in the fields around the temple...and then, suddenly, he is back before them, bashful, with tears in his eyes. “JAYA PRABHUPĀDA!” 🌸

pile, surrounded by succulent *sabjis*, steaming buttered *capātīs* and crisp paneer *pakorās*; nestled in at the edges are small bowls of vanilla-wafting sweet rice and tender apricot *halavā*. Completing the opulence of the tray is a fluted cup of creamy mango *lassi*, the soft hues of garlands and floral vases reflected in its polished surface. Each preparation has a *tulasī* leaf atop, whose fragrance blends with the aromas billowing up toward Kṛṣṇa’s smiling, compassionate face...

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4pm: Like a sailor lost in the relentless waves of the

