

VNN News:
MOSCOW FESTIVAL 2001
WITH SRILA BHAKTIVEDANTA NARAYANA MAHARAJA

By Amberisha dasa of Tula, Russia

The second Russian Festival of Srila Bhaktivedanta Narayana Maharaja came out as a final accord in his triumphal round-the-world preaching tour this year. After visiting many countries of the western world and attending to a Guru-purnima celebration in his Matha in Mathura, where about 50,000 people came to offer their homage to His Divine Grace, Srila Narayana Maharaja arrived in Russia on the 16th of July.

Well over 600 devotees from all over the former Soviet Union as well as USA, Canada, UK, Finland and many other countries were eagerly awaiting him near the Russian capital which was to be graced by his holy presence for the second time after his historical visit last year. Many senior disciples of Sri Srimad A.C. Bhaktivedanta Svami Prabhupada, such as Srimati Jadurani Devi Dasi and Sriman Dristadyumna Prabhu, came here to join the 10-day festival. From Europe came Sripad Bhaktivedanta Aranya Maharaja after his successful preaching tour, bringing with him a dozen enthusiastic devotees.

Among the senior disciples of Srila Prabhupada and siksa-disciples of Srila Narayana Maharaja were Sriman Urukrama Prabhu and Sriman Jnana Das Prabhu, who have been traveling and preaching all over Russia for the last two years, instilling hope into the hearts of many devotees who, due to various reasons, had lost their faith and stayed away from devotional life for many years. We were honored by the presence of many old Russian devotees such as Sriman Rupanuga Prabhu and Srimati Purnamasi Devi who had been the front line preachers in the Soviet times and who went through jails and many other ordeals to preach the message of Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu in this country. Sriman Mamu Thakur Prabhu, the foremost preacher behind the Iron Curtain, and now a disciple of Srila Narayana Maharaja, also arrived from the USA to join the festival.

Many of the Russian devotees traveled several thousand miles, sometimes spending three or four days on trains, just to be with their Gurudeva who has become a symbol of good hope for them. Hundreds of Russian devotees now began to see Srila Narayana Maharaja as the head of a new wave of spiritual revival, after a period of decadence following a chain of calamities which have shaken the local devotional communities in the recent years.

Ananta Krsna Prabhu, presently one of the foremost preachers in Russia, said that, "The festival was wholly and solely Krsna's and Gurudeva's miracle. Moscow devotees tried their best to arrange everything properly, but due to financial problems they could not do much, and the festival was on a verge of failure. It was not until three days before the event that devotees managed to rent a beautiful summer camp on a bank of a river on the outskirts of Moscow.

In his arrival speech Srila Bhaktivedanta Narayana Maharaja pointed out that he came to the country with a mission to help devotees in their spiritual lives, following the request of ISKCON founder-acarya Srila Prabhupada. He said he wants devotees to be strong as in the times of Srila Prabhupada -- preaching boldly and powerfully "all over the universe", helping others to come to Krsna, and being very determined in their own spiritual practices. He made a statement that he came, "not to make disciples, but to make gurus". At the end of one of his evening classes he made all 400 devotees promise, in unison, in front of the Deities, that, "I will never give up krsna-bhakti, even if I am cut in thousands of pieces". He requested all to follow the example of Srila Haridas Thakura in this regard.

Srila Maharaja expressed his confidence in Russians because they "fly sputniks in the outer space" and do other wonderful things. He therefore encouraged the devotees to preach enthusiastically, distribute books, both Srila Prabhupada's and his own, and perform harinama-sankirtana in the streets of their towns -- even if they have to go out alone.

In one of the darshans, Srila Maharaja was answering a question about the attitude to ISKCON devotees and leaders. He expressed his heart by saying that he regards them as his dear children. He said that as a father does not feel offended if a child passes stool and urine on him, he does not take offence in their criticizing him and he is ready to help them anytime and in whatever way he can. He also requested his disciples to be respectful to them and to not criticize anyone, but to try to help all.

The main subject of his daily classes was the development of pure *bhakti* in accordance with the famous verse by Srila Rupa Gosvami, "anyabhilasita sunyam..." Srila Maharaja explained the importance of understanding what is real bhakti for those who want to progress on this path. He said that unless a devotee practices pure sraavanam and kirtanam in the association of suddha-bhaktas, sincerely follows the orders and serves a sad-guru, all his external activities like building temples, organizing farm communities and distributing books will not bring him to the level of loving service to Krsna even after thousands of births. Again and again he stressed the importance of sat-sanga and vishrambha-guru-seva, wholehearted service to the guru. He continued to describe the gradual progress of a devotee in his development of love of God, from sraddha to the highest stages of prema.