

The Jaya-Haya Letters

Correspondence between Jayādvaita Dāsa and Hayagrīva Dāsa
about the editing of *Bhagavad-gītā As It Is*, 1970–71

With an introduction and annotations by Jayādvaita Swami

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Intro

In October of 1970, production of the first unabridged edition of *Bhagavad-gītā As It Is* was in full swing. The entire manuscript had been edited for English and Sanskrit, and the book was in the midst of typesetting, proofreading, and layout.

In the course of producing the book, I, as the production manager, exchanged letters with Hayagrīva Dāsa, the editor, about various editorial questions. Some of those letters I saved, and here they are.

By making these letters available, I hope to provide for interested readers some further historical insights into the production of the book.

The letters show young followers of Śrīla Prabhupāda working together to serve him. Hayagrīva, then thirty years old, was employed at Ohio State University as a lecturer in the English department. I was twenty-one and working at ISKCON Press (the forerunner of the BBT), located in the ISKCON Boston temple, a big house at 40 North Beacon Street in Allston, a Boston suburb.

Apart from serving as a production manager for editing, typesetting, proofreading, and the like, I was also serving as a fledgling editor. Satsvarūpa dāsa Goswami (then “Dāsa Adhikārī”) was doing the “first edit” for the Third Canto of Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam, and I was doing the second edit. After we had both worked on a manuscript, we would send it to Hayagrīva, who would further refine it, usually making only minor revisions.

While heading up production for *Bhagavad-gītā As It Is*, I brought to Hayagrīva various questions about the book, and that was the main subject of our correspondence.

History

Hayagrīva had edited the entire Gītā manuscript in 1967. But in October of that year, influenced by his close friend Kīrtanānanda Swami, Hayagrīva for some time left ISKCON. So after Śrīla Prabhupāda, in December of 1967, signed a contract with the Macmillan Company to publish the

book in an abridged edition, the abridgement and final editing were done by another devotee, Rāyarāma Dāsa. The abridged Gītā was published in the fall of 1968.

Also in the fall of 1968, Hayagrīva and Kīrtanānanda Swami resumed their connection with ISKCON. And in the summer of 1969, Rāyarāma left Śrīla Prabhupāda’s service.

Meanwhile, Śrīla Prabhupāda wanted to publish the book in a complete edition. As he wrote to his disciple Līlāvātī Dāsī on July 31, 1969, “We are planning to print an enlarged edition of this book, with purports to each and every verse. The book was abridged due to the request of the MacMillan Company, but I am not satisfied with this, so we will print the complete work in an unabridged edition.”¹

On December 3, 1969, Śrīla Prabhupāda received word that Macmillan was enthusiastic to print the unabridged Gītā. On December 24, he entrusted the project of editing this complete edition to Hayagrīva.

While the complete edition was in production, the 1968 abridged edition was the only one in print. So when our letters here speak of “the Macmillan edition” or “the Macmillan version” or simply “Macmillan” or “Mac,” this abridged edition (“Macmillan 1968”) is the one they’re talking about.

Hayagrīva’s methodology

As mentioned before, Hayagrīva had already edited the complete manuscript in 1967. It was done. So he didn’t edit it anew. As I recall, he went over the purports lightly, revising and polishing here and there. He sometimes did consult some of the older manuscripts, but he mainly relied on his own edited manuscript of 1967 and the abridged edition of 1968. As he wrote to Jayādvaita and Satsvarūpa on December 12, 1970:

I have some of the earlier manuscripts here. They appear to be pre-Rayarama, so in some instances I am consulting them. But in the majority of cases they require such extensive revisions that it is easier & generally better to consult the Macmillan version rather than get in a tangle of manuscripts. Srila Prabhupada stated that the Macmillan version is all right; we simply have to revise for grammar.

The translations, however, were another story. These Hayagrīva worked on extensively, sometimes leaving them as they were but often revising them or redoing them entirely, pasting new versions over the older ones, especially from the middle chapters onwards.

¹ Earlier, on March 6, 1969, Śrīla Prabhupāda had written to Rāyarāma, “[I]n future I am thinking of publishing a revised and enlarged edition of Bhagavad-gītā As It Is. You know that we have to cut short the book because the MacMillan Company wanted within 400 pages. So you know that the majority of the verses in the back portion of the book were not given purports. Therefore in our next publication we shall give purport for all the verses.*” (The asterisk leads to this footnote: “As well as word to word meanings.”)

Gītās Hayagrīva consulted

In editing the translations back in 1967, Hayagrīva had often drawn upon other published translations of Bhagavad-gītā. As Hayagrīva relates in *The Hare Krishna Explosion* (Chapter 12), Śrīla Prabhupāda himself had suggested this. In July of 1967, while staying for about two weeks in Stinson Beach, California, in the aftermath of a heart attack, Śrīla Prabhupāda called for Hayagrīva to join him to work on the manuscript. But as Hayagrīva writes:

Swamiji finally tires of my consulting him about Bhagavad-gita verses.

“Just copy the verses from some other translation,” he tells me, discarding the whole matter with a wave of his hand. “The verses aren’t important. There are so many translations, more or less accurate, and the Sanskrit is always there. It’s my purports that are important. Concentrate on the purports. There are so many, nonsense purports like Radhakrishnan’s, and Gandhi’s, and Nikhilananda’s. What is lacking are these Vaishnava purports in the preaching line of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu. That is what is lacking in English. That is what is lacking in the world.”

“I can’t just copy others,” I say.

“There is no harm.”

“But that’s plagiarism.”

“How’s that? They are Krishna’s words. Krishna’s words are clear, like the sun. Just these rascal commentators have diverted the meaning by saying, ‘Not to Krishna.’ So my purports are saying, ‘To Krishna.’ That is the only difference.”

Accordingly, in 1967 Hayagrīva consulted and borrowed from other translations. We’re not certain which ones, but surely he drew upon Radhakrishnan’s. And from the letters I exchanged with Hayagrīva in 1970 we know that for the 1972 edition he went back to his 1967 manuscript and worked on the translations further, again often borrowing from other versions. Once more we don’t know for sure what all these versions were, but three we can be confident he drew upon: the editions of Radhakrishnan, Swami Nikhilananda, and Sri Swami Sivananda. This we see from language that found its way from their translations into Hayagrīva’s manuscript and about which I raised questions in my letters.

Radhakrishnan’s edition was first published in 1948, and Śrīla Prabhupāda himself said the translations were mostly all right. Swami Nikhilananda’s edition was first published (by the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center) in 1944. The edition by Sri Swami Sivananda, founder of the Divine Life Society, is now available on the internet in an edition that bears no date but includes a Preface by the author dated 4th July, 1942.

Radhakrishnan’s edition is available at

<https://archive.org/details/BhagavadGitaRadhakrishnanS.1949U35T>

Nikhilananda's edition:

https://archive.org/details/BhagavadGitaSwamiNikhilananda_201802U35T

Sri Swami Sivananda's edition: <https://archive.org/details/BaghavatGitaSwamiSivanandaU35T>

In the annotations I provide for the letters exchanged between me and Hayagrīva, I compare some of Hayagrīva's translations with their counterparts from these editions. Sometimes the translations match exactly. More often, the comparisons are suggestive, showing sources Hayagrīva might have drawn upon but not serving as proof.

When Śrīla Prabhupāda entrusted the editing of the complete *Bhagavad-gītā As It Is* to Hayagrīva in December of 1969, he did so during a conversation between himself and the editors of BTG—with Hayagrīva and me both present—in a house where Śrīla Prabhupāda was staying in another Boston suburb, a long drive from the Allston temple.

Charged with producing the complete edition, Hayagrīva asked Śrīla Prabhupāda about the translations:

Hayagrīva: I know the translations themselves, they were somewhat changed in *Bhagavad-gītā As It Is* as it came out in Macmillan [1968]. Did you like those translations?

Prabhupāda: Whichever is better, you think. That's all. You can follow this Macmillan.

Hayagrīva: . . . They're good. I think they're very good.

Prabhupāda: Yes. You can follow that translation. Simply synonyms we can add, transliterations.

Hayagrīva added: "And we have all the purports. We can include everything. Nothing will be deleted. Everything will be in there."

Prabhupāda: "That's all right."

Some of the translations published in the 1972 edition differ from those published in 1968, and as you'll see from the letters, Hayagrīva also proposed to change still others. In the above conversation, I don't think Śrīla Prabhupāda was insisting on the 1968 translations, only agreeing that Hayagrīva could use them. As Śrīla Prabhupāda said, "Whichever is better, you think."

An overview of the letters

Now, to the letters themselves.

With the first letter, from Hayagrīva to Jayādvaita on October 15, 1970, we arrive in the middle of the correspondence, with Hayagrīva answering a letter from Jayādvaita we no longer have, concerning specific translations, one line in a purport, and some missing purports in chapter nine.

The next letter, from Jayādvaita to Hayagrīva, November 9, raises questions about the translations of the eleventh chapter. “[R]eally in almost every verse,” Jayādvaita writes, “there is something that just doesn’t sound right because it is so far afield from the original ms.” He suggests that Hayagrīva could perhaps go through all the translations, comparing them to Śrīla Prabhupāda’s original manuscript, and perhaps do them over.

In the third letter, dated November 26, Jayādvaita says that Satsvarupa has asked him to review the translations in the other chapters as well for inconsistencies. The first seven chapters seem fine, Jayādvaita says, but he raises questions about specific translations in chapters eight through thirteen (except for ten, which is “in the composing room”).

The fourth letter, dated November 30, again from Jayādvaita to Hayagrīva, raises two questions concerning chapter one. Jayādvaita also includes seven pages of text he has retrieved from the manuscripts for chapters eleven and twelve, and one page retrieved for the purport of chapter twelve, verse one, from the 1968 abridged edition.

For the fifth letter, from Hayagrīva to Satsvarupa and Jayādvaita, our copy is missing the top of the page, where the date would have been, but the letter includes replies to points raised in Jayādvaita’s letters of November 26 and 30, and so it must have been written later. Hayagrīva says he is enclosing revised translations for chapters eleven through fifteen, in response to Jayādvaita’s suggestions. He comments humorously about the “now infamous” manuscript of 1967. He responds to issues raised about chapters eight and nine, as well as chapter one. And he mentions that the translation of *śrī-bhagavān uvāca* as “the Blessed Lord said” is “stylically [sic] more appealing” and that Śrīla Prabhupāda approved it.

In the sixth letter, Jayādvaita to Hayagrīva, December 1, Jayādvaita asks questions about translations (and one purport) in chapter two. On a separate page, he writes notes to himself (not sent but included here) about one of the verses he asks about, 2.59.

In the seventh letter, December 2, Jayādvaita asks questions about chapter three.

In the eighth letter, December 3, Jayādvaita asks questions about chapter four. He also discusses production of the Index, which Hayagrīva is to create.

At the bottom of the eighth letter, Jayādvaita writes a note to himself saying he wrote to Hayagrīva on December 4 with questions about chapter five. This would have been a ninth letter.

In the tenth letter, December 7, Jayādvaita asks questions about chapter 6. Hayagrīva responds by writing answers on the letter itself.

In the eleventh letter, from Hayagrīva to Jayādvaita and Satsvarūpa, December 12, Hayagrīva responds to Jayādvaita’s letters of December 1, 2, 3, and 4. He also speaks for doing the work

“immediately perfectly”—that is, not rushing so quickly that “we do an imperfect job.” He discusses his methodology with regard to older manuscripts and Macmillan 1968. He responds to questions from chapters two through five. And he offers delightful alternative translations for verse 4.40.

In the twelfth letter, December 12, Jayādvaita acknowledges receiving new translations for chapters eleven through fourteen. He mentions a need for most of the verses in chapters eight and nine to be redone. And he talks about old manuscripts that are missing.

In the thirteenth letter, December 18, Jayādvaita discusses production and raises questions about the eighth chapter. Most of the translations, he says again, will need to be redone.

In the fourteenth letter, March 26, 1971, Jayādvaita writes for the first time from ISKCON Press not in Boston but at its new location, 32 Tiffany Place in Brooklyn, New York. He sends Hayagrīva photocopies of chapters two and five (and perhaps four) for checking and indexing. He asks a few questions about specific issues in the text. He writes about a picture index, with copy written by Jadurani. He says he wants to have the book ready for when Śrīla Prabhupāda next comes to New York. He mentions he has received from Śrīla Prabhupāda the missing purports for chapter nine. And he brings up various other matters unrelated to *Bhagavad-gītā As It Is*.

In the fifteenth letter, Hayagrīva to Jayādvaita, July 9, 1971, Hayagrīva notes various minor errors and a passage where some text has been left out. He reports, also, that the Index is just about finished.

In summary

Looking again at these letters, I see myself back then trying to hold off from being uppity, self-righteous, and challenging towards Hayagrīva, my senior. And I see that I sometimes failed. Yet Hayagrīva, I see, was consistently unruffled and good-natured, taking my letters in stride.

More important, these letters allow us to see more closely what went into producing the first complete edition of *Bhagavad-gītā As It Is*. In particular, we see that the translations didn’t simply flow from Śrīla Prabhupāda onto the final page. Rather, the translations arose in part from Śrīla Prabhupāda’s words—sometimes preserved verbatim, sometimes edited and refined, sometimes misheard and corrected, sometimes misheard but not corrected—and in part from words borrowed from other translators: Dr. Radhakrishnan, Swami Nihkilananda, Sri Swami Sivananda, and others. Some translations Hayagrīva at first reworked on his own and later reworked again when I raised questions about them.

In short, the translations were the outcome both of Śrīla Prabhupāda’s writing and dictation and of a multifaceted editorial process. And that made the difference between the 1972 *Bhagavad-gītā As It Is* and the many possible versions of *Bhagavad-gītā As It Might Have Been*.