

O'hare Krishna airport



"Ladies and gentlemen, this is your captain speaking. We are about to land at O'Hare Krishna International Airport. Please fasten your seat belts and extinguish your incense. Thank you for flying Good Karma Airlines. Hare Krishna."

Such a scenario was envisioned by his divine grace, A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, founder-Acarya of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), more that a year ago when he instructed local devotees to ask airport officials to change the airport's name.

A friend, who is living at the ISKCON Temple in Evanston, called from O'Hare to say, "I just heard that Prabhupada wanted to change the name of this place to O'Hare Krishna International Airport."

"Funny, I never read about that in the papers."

"Well," replied my chum, who is preparing to become a devotee of Krishna Consciousness, "the airport said no. Would have been great though. O'Hare Krishna International Airport," he repeated reverently. "Wow, Hare Krishna!"

"Yeah, Harvey Christmas to you too. Now I know you didn't call me to talk about airport names. What do you really want?"

"Oh, well," he flustered, "Wow, Hare Krishna, we just got a brand new, er, fragrance of incense. It's even better than that cherry blossom I sold you last month. In fact, I've sold a lot here at the airport."

"No, old buddy, I'm pretty well fixed with incense. Look, I've got to be ..."

He persisted, "How about the latest magazine. It's got a full page color spread on Prabhupada."

"Read it at the doctor's office."

"Okay, how about some posters, man. We got a whole new line of them," my friend effused. "I've got a color glossy one

called Virat Swarup. It shows Lord Krishna at the battle of ..."

"Wonderful, just what I need for my basement. How about I buy one next time you're in the neighborhood?"

"Great, Hare Krishna," he said and hung up.

I stared at the receiver. "O'Hare Krishna International Airport?! That's wild!" I picked up the phone and punched out the information number. "Yes, do you show a listing for the City of Chicago's Department of Aviation?"

"Good morning, Department of Aviation, I'm calling about O'Hare's name being changed to O'Hare Krishna International Airport and am wondering ..." I was interrupted by the other party's raucous laughter. "Did I say something funny?"

When she stopped laughing, the Commissioner's secretary, Mrs. Lee Gallet, said, "We haven't heard of such a thing in this office. But then they often say things that aren't entirely true. But why don't you call our office at the airport and Govinda Das at the Hare Krishna temple. Let me know what you find out."

I called the Department of Aviation office at O'Hare and told my story. Officials there confirmed that "Hare Krishna types" had requested an airport name change, "but had not gotten past the first secretary."

"They're always asking for one thing or another," an official said. "We've been pretty good to them under the circumstances, but change the airport's name, are you kidding?"

"Hello," I said, "Is Govinda Das there?"

"No," a startled voice replied, "Can I help you?"

"Yes," I said and proceeded to ask questions about the O'Hare Krishna International Airport scheme.

Surprised at my awareness, the party to

whom I was speaking, a one Gopal Bhatta, demanded to know who told me about the name change attempt.

"Sorry, reporters don't reveal their sources," I stated flatly.

Gopal Bhatta sighed and admitted their unsuccessful attempt to change O'Hare to O'Hare Krishna. "We haven't been treated as nice as we would expect," Gopal Bhatta said. "I don't think they really want us out there (O'Hare)."

Bhatta explained that some devotees had been physically harassed while soliciting at the airport, but added that such incidents had been done by "just a few individuals."

"Some people are for us and some are against us," Gopal Bhatta continued. "We're involved in preaching religion ... our mission is to bring the ancient scriptures of India to the world. We have to sell books and incense to defray the costs."

Gopal Bhatta suggested, "There will always be that class of people who don't want religious proselytizing."

Asked why ISKCON members had shed their saffron robes and covered their shaved pates with wigs, Gopal Bhatta said, "People will always judge you by the way you look. To wear conventional clothes doesn't create that barrier—people will listen to what we're saying—people will look at us and say, 'He's not crazy.'"

I thanked Gopal Bhatta for his time and attention.

Back to the Commissioner of Aviation's secretary, "I thought it must have been something like that," she said. "Well, thanks for calling me back and thanks for bringing up the Hare Krishna people because that reminds me that I have to call them and remind them to clean up the mess they've been making at the airport. Hare Krishna, Mr. McKelvy."

"Hare Krishna, Mrs. Gallet." □

—charley mckelvy