

Drums Along the Amazon...

Part One – Arrival in Manaus

“Of the splendid I am the splendour. I am victory, I am adventure, and I am the strength of the strong.” This is the declaration of Krsna in Bhagavad-gita. When I think of the Amazon and preaching where no other devotee had been before; and how Krsna took control and gave us all facility and protection, this sloka comes alive for me.

I had been a travelling sannyasi in the Krsna consciousness movement for eight years and had just completed a preaching tour of the United States of America. The time had come to make a decision where to go next. A number of options were open to me but I was still undecided.

In a discussion with Hridayananda Maharajah he suggested my going to Brazil. “Although there are thirty-eight temples and hundreds of devotees, sanyasis rarely get there. I think the devotees would be in ecstasy if you went.”

“Brazil” I thought. “I never thought of going to Brazil.” The idea began to attract me. “Do they speak English?” I asked.

“No. Portuguese, but some people speak English and there are devotees who will be able to translate for you.”

It’s appeal was increasing and after more discussion I agreed to the proposal. The necessary arrangements were made and soon I was boarding a plane for Rio de Janeiro. As I fastened my seatbelt, I noticed a pamphlet on Brazil in the pocket of my seat. I saw on the map that the top of Brazil was coloured a lush green. In the middle of this area I read the words, “Amazon.” A thought passed through my mind. I wondered if anyone had ever been there to preach Krsna consciousness?

Upon landing, I was met by Isvara Maharajah who was in charge of the Bhaktivedanta Book Trust Publications for Brazil. It was in his association that I began my tour of the temples in Brazil. We started with the southern temples gradually making our way north. As we got closer to the equator, I again reflected on the idea of preaching in the Amazon. This idea intrigued me, as I had never heard of anyone doing it before.

Upon our arrival in Recife, Maharajah suggested that next I visit a preaching centre in Manaus. It had been two and a half years since the devotees in Manaus had seen any other devotees. They hadn’t been out and nobody had been in. I decided to go.

Flying into Manaus was like flying back in time. Everything there was thirty years behind America, and the tropical heat of the jungle hit us like a wave. As we drove to the temple I asked the devotees if anyone ever preaches out of the city. “Oh no,” came the reply. “It is too dangerous. Just out of the city begins the jungle.”

Due to their limited interaction with anyone outside Manaus, the devotees there were very poor and so was the temple. In fact it was so poor, I realised that there was no way they could finance a preaching trip up the Amazon River. I was disappointed but concluded that it wasn't Krsna's desire.

The Sunday Feast was only kichari and apples but the kirtana compensated for this. The Brazilian people love to dance and the vibrant rhythm of the mrdanga and catchiness of the mantra saw them whirling in a cascade of the holy name. My eye was caught by a big aristocratic looking woman, dancing enthusiastically at the back of the crowd. It seemed obvious she was a person of some importance yet nobody seemed to pay any attention to her. When it came to prasadam she accepted with the eagerness of a devotee. I couldn't quite believe her. I turned to the temple president and asked. "Who is this woman?"

With a shy look he told me "Oh. She's Mrs Mendez, the wife of the Governor of the State of Amazon." "Why didn't you tell me that before?" I exclaimed. "I could have preached to her." "Oh we don't preach to her," he said dryly, "She's the Governess."

Eventually an arrangement was made for me to speak with her. During our conversation we discussed the situation of the devotees in Manaus. "They really need a break," I told her. "This is a missionary movement but these devotees haven't been out of the city for years. What do you think of us going into the Amazon Jungle?"

"I think that's a wonderful idea," she responded. She had a sincere appreciation of the philosophy and the importance of the sankirtana mission. "Is there anything you would be able to do to help us?" I asked. "Anything you need," she answered. I was speechless. And so was the temple president!

As our conversation continued I discovered that the Governess was a bhaktin. "I know Swami Bhaktivedanta," she said. "He came to the west and preached vigorously, living in the Bowery in New York. I have read many of his books. Yes, we should go to the Amazon and preach to the Indians."

"Maybe we could go by jeep," I suggested.

"Jeep? But there are no roads in the jungle. The road ends about two miles out of the city. You can't go there with a jeep." So I said, "OK. How about we fly in, in a plane?"

"Oh Americano. You do not know. This is the last frontier. You can go by boat, a good boat. If you don't get a good boat then it's not worth the risk. It's far too dangerous. I will get a good boat for you."

The phone rang two days later. What started off as a mild suggestion began to look like a possible reality. On the line was Mrs Mendez, who told us to come to the docks. She had a surprise for us.

Part Two – Preparations

Chapter One Continued

As we reached the river we noticed many different boats all of them old river boats. Scanning those in front of us, we began to speculate as to which boat it was she could be offering us. At the end of the line

we noticed a beautiful vessel. I nudged the temple president and said jokingly, "wouldn't it be funny if that was the boat?" Everyone had a good laugh. Just then, from that very boat, Mrs Mendez popped her head out of one of the portholes and called "Swamiji! Swamiji! Come come! Here's your boat!"

We walked along the gangplank onto the thirty meter long boat. It was a sight to behold. The railings were made of brass. The interior was furnished with mahogany and teak wood. The dinnerware and chandeliers were made of crystal. Oynx and marble beautified different parts of the walls and floor.

"This is my husband's boat," she told us, "He uses it to show the Amazon River to important visitors to Brazil. A Middle Eastern sheik gave it to him. Now my husband is letting you have it for two months to go and preach to the Indians." "This is very nice," I was thinking. But I spoke aloud, "We don't know how to drive this boat." "Do not worry about that," assured Mrs Mendez. "My husband is arranging for the military to send six men to drive the boat for you." Six men! Incredible! As it turned out, the boat's captain had twenty years experience sailing the Amazon River. To have such a veteran guiding us was quite a comfort. Since this problem was very easily solved I thought I may as well voice my next concern.

"How will we run this boat? It obviously can't run on nothing and we can't possibly afford two months' worth of petrol." At this point that good lady pulled from her wallet ten one hundred dollar bills and said, "This is a donation from my husband."

A mild tremor shook my foundations as I realised I was witnessing Krsna organising this entire preaching venture through a certain Governess. "Who is this woman?" I found myself asking again. "Maybe she's empowered by the goddess of fortune." I thought that I may as well ask all of my questions.

"What are we going to eat?" We followed her to the hold. She opened the door to reveal one ton of grains inside. There was rice, barley, corn and more. "This is for prasadam distribution." "Now for the devotees...." She took us to the kitchen which was complete with electrical appliances and walk-in-cooler stacked to the ceiling with milk, cheese, yogurt and more. "This is enough for six weeks," she told us. We could barely believe that such a kitchen was going to take us up the Amazon River!

When the crew arrived the next day we had a meeting with them. We explained that since the deities of Gaura Nitai, Laksmi Nrsimhadeva and Govardhana Sila would be on board, there was to be no meat-eating on the boat. They didn't like that at all. The captain said, "What do you expect? I've been eating fish from the river for the last twenty years. You want me to stop now? What am I going to eat? I refuse to go." The rest of the crew agreed that they also would not go if they could not eat fish from the river.

Not knowing what to do I called up the Governess and said, "Mrs Mendez, I have a problem. I don't know if we will be able to go on this trip." To my surprise she was angry. "What do you mean you can't go? You have to go. You have to preach and distribute prasadam!" "But Ma'm," I interrupted, "the crew doesn't want to be vegetarian." "What nonsense! I'll be there in twenty minutes!"

Sure enough, about twenty minutes later, Mrs Mendez arrived in a jeep, complete with guards with shotguns. At this point, the crew got a little nervous. A guard accompanying her, she alighted from the jeep and ran up the gangplank. Without saying a word to anyone she produced from her bag a sheet of

paper which read, "I Mr Mendez, the Governor of the State of Amazon, hereby decree that the crew of the Piraiba taking the Hare Krishna devotees into the Amazon Jungle for six weeks, will be vegetarian."

They had nothing to say. As they looked sheepishly at the floor it seemed they had accepted their lot in life for the next six weeks. In the course of our journey, however, they became completely addicted to the offerings the deities would receive each day and were just like little children waiting for the plate to be washed as they could take prasadam. To coin a phrase, we "ran a tight ship"; we were in a very dangerous area. Everything was very suci and organised. Every day we made seven offerings of food to the deities. The crew quickly became attached to the Lord's maha. One of them would wake up very early in the morning so he could get all the mangala-arati sweets. Then along came another one for the eight-thirty breakfast offering. Some of the crew members liked the lunch offering. One of them was completely addicted to the cake which we offered at four o'clock.

They became very respectful to prasadam. This they learnt from association with devotees. We saw it as our duty to teach them about various aspects of our cultural heritage. The captain had brought his wife along and they also became enthusiastic recipients of maha-prasadam. The captain's wife was quite a character. She ran the ship actually. The captain thought he was in charge. I thought I was in charge, but actually his wife ran the whole ship – including the sankirtana.

Part Three – Dangers in the Amazon river

Chapter Two

After a week of preparation we set sail from the Port of Manaus deep in the Amazon Jungle. As our majestic boat was plying through the waters, my heartbeat rose in anticipation of the adventure ahead. Adventure is also there in the service of the Lord and somehow by the mercy of Lord Caitanya we had been given this wonderful facility in service by taking the first sankirtana party into the wild Amazon Jungle.

Everything just seemed to have fallen into place. All we actually did was desire a program, preach to the wife of the Governor, and then almost magically we were setting sail. Just as surprising was the fact that our hold was full to the top with a ton and a half of grains for prasadam distribution. Mrs Mendez had even purchased a smaller boat with a fifteen horsepower engine so we could go ashore in difficult areas where our big boat could not reach.

As we neared the conjunction of the Amazon and Negro Rivers, I saw how the whitish-brown water of the Amazon did not mix with the darker waters of the River Negro. Almost mysteriously they ran side by side for many miles without mixing. Finally as we rounded a bend, the Amazon River seemed to overpower the other as the water became decidedly whitish-brown.

Disaster almost struck when a huge sandbar loomed up just ahead of our bow. We were going straight for it at full speed. The captain suddenly noticed it and, just in time, made a violent turn to avoid it. We were thrown off our feet. With the river being so low, this was actually the most dangerous time of the year to travel. The rains come in January and last till March, but in October there are many sandbars, old

trees and logs sticking up everywhere, making traveling very precarious. The captain told us that was the last time we would risk traveling at night.

That first night we had another meeting. The captain gathered us together and said, "While traveling on the river, there are certain rules that one must follow. The first rule is – don't go too close to the rail because if you fall in, there is nothing I can do."

I said, "I can swim."

He said, "It's not a question of being able to swim. It's a question of the piranhas. The piranhas swim in schools and you don't always know where they are, but they can scent flesh. Although they are generally along the river banks or small tributaries, if you fall into the river, there is every chance that a school of piranhas will devour you."

After the captain's speech, I found that the piranhas were constantly in the back of my mind as I trod through the water from the boat to the shore or put my hand in the water to cool off while traveling by the river on a hot day.

Later in our journey, as we were cruising along we saw a little tributary stream coming into the river. As we were passing it, a wild pig crossed the stream.

"Oh look at the pig," someone on the boat cried.

As we turned to look at it, it was attacked by a school of piranhas. They pulled him under and the water turned red. Then they just disappeared, and all that was left of the pig was a clean white skeleton. This had all happened in the time that our boat was passing that tributary.

The famous anaconda also lives in the Amazon and is a water dweller. It is the largest snake in the world, growing up to twelve meters in length. The anaconda is not usually a threat to man, and will only attack when provoked. His prey is the caiman, a relative of the crocodile. He will often wait underwater, and when an animal comes to drink at the water's edge, he quickly strangles and eats it.

And of course we should not forget the electric eel, which can release up to four hundred volts in the water. The electric eel has very poor vision but used its electric sense to stun and kill prey. There have been cases of men losing consciousness from its shock, and then drowning.

Interestingly enough, many people in the Amazon die from trees falling on top of them. Due to the silty nature of the soil, a tree's roots grow out rather than down. Therefore it doesn't take much to topple one over. All the man on the ground will hear is the swirling of wind in the canopy of the tree and then the tree falls down – unannounced.

Part Four – Dangers on the land

September 7, 2009

Chapter Two – continued

In our travels we frequently heard of the many mysteries of the Amazon. The sightings of unidentified flying objects are a daily occurrence. Everyone seemed to have a friend or relative who had seen one. Particularly common is a cluster of thousands of little stars moving together that hover just above the river. It travels along in the shape of a flying saucer. Many people have reported being guided to safety by this particular U.F.O. The Governess herself has said that this U.F.O. once saved the lives of her and her husband when they were traveling up the river during a violent storm.

Apart from the mysteries, there are the realities of the dangers of living on the river. The very name of our boat, "The Piraiba," means the great fish big enough to swallow men whole. Many people warned me of the large carnivorous fish that have sometimes eaten those unlucky enough to have fallen into the river. The piraiba weighs up to three hundred and fifty pound, has a huge mouth and likes to swim along the shore. They are particularly nasty fish.

A relative of the piraiba is the candiru, a tiny catfish, with a snout like a corkscrew. He swims into a human's orifices and because of barbed gills, lodges until removed surgically. These are quite common.

The Indians taught us how to walk in the jungle to protect us from snake bites. The forest trails are narrow, so groups of people have to walk single file. A sleeping snake may be disturbed by the first person in the file. The second person passes by but the third person often gets bitten. So we would walk one person. another person, a space, and then the third person. Since I was the leader of the group, I was the third person in the party. On three occasions that I can remember, I saw a coiled snake ready to bite.

There were some creatures that we never really saw but we heard about, such as the big lizards. I never had any real proof of them but in over half of the fifty-eight villages we visited, we heard talk about the big lizards. They would warn us to be careful if we were going to where the big lizards were. The nomadic people of the Amazon River estimated the big lizards were about seven feet high and fifteen feet long. These people travel into the jungle to areas where the white man has never been. The jungle is very very vast and very deep. The lizards are reputed to be able to eat big plants and trees at one time.

When I first heard these stories I thought, "O this is just the Indians. They are only simple people and these are merely folk tales." But so many people told us about the lizards. They were nice, very simple and God-fearing people who lived close to the land. Generally there was no corruption and people mostly spoke the truth. We never had an instance of being tricked, so I had no reason to disbelieve that dinosaurs were existing somewhere in the Amazon.

By eight-thirty that first night we were all asleep, except for our captain who steered our boat quietly through the water as we headed west up the river and into the unknown.

Early the next morning I entered the temple room and was amazed at the beauty of the deities in this wonderful setting. There were windows all around the boat and as the sun rose I saw the jungle scene around us for the first time.

I wrote in my diary, “We seem to be in a swamp with thousands of different types of insects everywhere. One amazing thing that I am experiencing here on the river is that I’m seeing so many species of wildlife that I’ve never seen or heard of before. It seems odd that I’ve never seen any of these animals, birds, or insects in any of the books that I’ve read throughout my life. Even in the zoos of America or Europe I never saw them, yet here everything is just outside your window when you wake up. And I don’t feel any fear. It all seems to be orchestrated in a natural way and being right here in the middle of the jungle has a calming effect on me. I seem to be in a bygone age – Satyayuga or Treta-yuga or, in modern scientific estimation, pre-historic times. Nothing has changed in this jungle in thousands of years. The penetrating arm of civilisation is far away from here.....

As I began to dress my deity I felt particularly dependent upon Him, The risks are obvious here in the jungle and I know I need His mercy. As the boat is drifting down river, I am awed that I am dressing God in this scene.”

After class I had a long talk with the devotees, “If we are to be successful,” I told them, “we must work like a military crew.”

After two and a half days, the reality of what we were doing became apparent to us. We had come to the Amazon to preach and when we left Manaus we left civilisation behind, that is, we knew that there was no law and order in the jungle. When we visited the villages, we knew that there were going to be no policemen to protect us, no army, nothing. Of course the Indians were not like the Indians of hundreds of years ago because many ships have gone down the Amazon and traded with the people. Many of them even wore Western clothing. But there’s a saying, “You can take the man out of the bush, but you can’t take the bush out of the man.” Their contact with the Western world had been minimal. So generally speaking they have remained as they were for thousands of years.

Part Five – I’ve never seen devotees chant so sincerely

Chapter Three

Three days into our journey, we noticed some smoke coming from the river bank.

The captain informed me, “That’s an Indian village.”

I immediately went to tell the devotees that we were going ashore. We had reached our first village! We cast anchor in the middle of the river and about nine of us got into the smaller boat. We took with us a pot of *kichari* and some books.

We started the engine and headed toward the shore. We noticed some faces looking at us from out of the jungle. As we got closer, some village men slowly moved to the river bank to watch us. We must have looked as strange to them as they did to us. I had been told that many of these people had never seen a white man, what to speak of a white man with shaved head, *tilaka* and saffron robes. I took my *danda* just for security.

The people on the shore were motionless and I knew this was making the devotees nervous. Generally you can understand somebody’s intention by looking at his face and the way he moves. But there was

no motion. They just stood there, about fifteen of them. And I prayed, "My dear Lord, please protect us."

In Amazonian history there has been some violent conflict between the villages. Stories of tribes parading with the shrunken heads of their foes, flutes of their victim's leg bones and necklaces of their teeth, must have been running through the devotees' minds at this crucial stage. When I looked at the other devotees I could see how scared they were. After some minutes the thought occurred to me, "After so many years of training I can't remember what I'm supposed to do!"

"Let's chant, Prabhus!" But there was silence. "CHANT!" I can honestly say that I've never seen devotees chant more sincerely. They were really chanting from the heart. "Hare Krsna Hare Krsna Krsna Krsna Hare Hare Hare Rama Hare Rama Rama Rama Hare Hare!"

With the nectar of the holy name, the tense atmosphere and fearful situation quickly dissolved. As the holy name permeated the air, it also touched the hearts of the Indians on the bank and they started to move. They could see that we weren't coming to take anything from them. After all, what kind of thief, dacoit or rogue, comes to your village chanting and dancing? They felt the non-envious spirit of the *vaisnavas*

They began to dance. As we came closer we could see them swaying back and forth in time to the music. By the time we arrived at the bank; it was just like we were meeting old friends.

As we entered the village the devotees were ecstatic. They realised that we were preaching in a village where *sankirtana* had never been. I reminded them that Bhaktivinoda Thakur had said that if someone takes *sankirtana* to a place where it has never yet been, he personally accompanies them.

The village was poor, with only two streets. Needless to say, everyone saw us and the devotees seemed to be distributing a book to almost everyone. We also brought candy for the children. I spent time taking videos and pictures.

To try to teach these people about Krsna was very interesting. Krsna, the Supreme Personality of Godhead, is the ultimate understanding in Vedic literature. But how could I introduce the conception of God as a cowherd boy, the transcendental flute player, and the beloved of the *gopis*, to these village Indians who didn't know anything but worshipping trees, rivers and stars? After thinking for some time, I came up with an idea. In the Amazon River there are many huge snakes. So I thought to tell them the story of Aghasura.

I told them, "There once was a snake as big as the river."

"Ohhhhhh....."they all gasped.

"His name was Aghasura. And Krsna, God, is the name of the person who killed that snake."

Then they got some idea of what was God.

"God can kill a snake as big as the river!" They had some appreciation now.

I asked them, "can anyone in the village kill a snake that big?"

“Oh no. We can not kill a snake that big.”

“So who can kill the snake as big as a river?”

“Krsna can.”

Later that day, we went to meet a Christian priest living in the next village. As we approached his hut he came out to greet us. He had left America as a young man to come to the Amazon to preach. That was thirty years ago. He impressed me as a real missionary. He was dressed in some type of robe that was full of holes. He wore sandals that were practically worn off his feet. He had long hair and a long beard. He was holding his rosary beads. My first impression of him was that he was a sincere and honest devotee of the Lord. When he saw me, there was no hint of surprise on his face. Yet he had probably never seen or heard of a devotee of Lord Krsna.

Very nicely he said to me, “So you are a man of God?”

I said, “Yes father.”

He said, “Please sit down.”

I took a seat and we began to discuss our religions and how in many ways they were alike. There was no envy or aggression on his part and we spent quite some time together. It was a wonderful experience. He was the first of many priests we were to meet on the journey.

Part Six – It took six men to pull me out of the quicksand

Chapter Four – Part One

Before taking rest that night I wrung out my muddy *dhoti* and reflected on the latter part of the days activities. I’d certainly had a close call that afternoon.

Since some of the villages were not along the river bank, it was often necessary to go up the tributaries. It was difficult to work out our directions because the tributaries were very swampy. On this day, the captain had said that he would take us up the tributary in the small boat but we would have to stop *sankirtana* at a certain hour so he could guide the small boat back to the big one in the light.

We had left the boat in the afternoon, crossed the river, gone up a small stream and found ourselves in a huge swamp. A swamp is a pretty amazing place. There are stumps sticking out everywhere. Sometimes there is water, sometimes muck and you don’t know really what’s happening. But we crossed this area because we could see the smoke of the village and we knew in which direction to go. Finally, after some difficulty we arrived there. This village was very receptive to Krsna consciousness. We had a big pot of *kichari* to distribute. We had three devotee women with us, all good cooks, who prepared nice *prasadam* every day.

Well you know how it is on *sankirtana*! Sometimes it is so ecstatic that one just can’t stop. That’s what happened that night. We stayed too long. It was dark and the captain was furious.

“How do you expect me to take this boat back through the swamp to the main river?” he roared.

By this time the mosquitoes were out. They attacked in hundreds. As soon as you lifted your sleeve up, they blackened your arm. Not only that, these mosquitoes carried many dangerous diseases, such as malaria, dengue fever, and yellow fever and we had forgotten to get any shots. We had to get back to the boat. We were very tired and the humidity was high. We hadn't eaten *prasadam*. We'd given it all out. This was the scene at about eight o'clock in the evening as we drifted further into the swamp.

We were still in the swamp one hour later, and the captain informed me that we were lost. You don't know what that means when you're in the middle of a swamp in the Amazon Jungle. Not knowing what to do I said, "Just go that way." But it was pitch black and as we travelled in the direction I had suggested, the swamp was getting thicker. We weren't escaping at all. The boat stopped. We were motionless.

The captain announced, "We're stuck. Somebody has to get out and push us off this sand bar."

I answered, "OK. You're the captain. You do it."

"I'm not getting out there," he said.

Understanding what was expected of me I put my right foot over the side. As soon as I put it in I could feel it being sucked under. In my mind it was like a demon sucking my foot. After a few seconds I realised that I had stepped into quicksand. Everything happened very quickly and so it is quite hard to describe. In my hasty effort to free myself I put my right hand in. But just like a fly caught in a spider's web, where every effort he makes to free himself results in him becoming more entangled, everything I did in those few short seconds just pulled me deeper and deeper into the quicksand. The left side of my body was in the boat but the right side was being sucked under with a force that I knew I couldn't resist.

With a voice loaded with panic, I began to scream out to the devotees.

"HARE KRSNA! PRABHUS! HARI BOL!"

It took the devotees a few seconds to figure out what was happening. As soon as they realised, they began to pull. It took six men to pull me out. I was trembling and broke out in a cold sweat.

"It's okay, Maharaja. You're all right. It's all over." I could hear the devotees comforting me but I was in a mild state of shock and could not respond.

The force of pulling me out of the quicksand resulted in the boat becoming free and we started drifting away.

I asked the captain for his penlight and shone it in the direction of the quicksand. Have you ever been driving down the road at night when the light of the car shines in a cat's eyes? They flash. The same flashing was seen that night as I shone my flashlight on the water.

I asked, "Captain, did you see that?"

"Do it again," he said.

As I shone the light I heard the captain mutter, “Ah, *jakara*.”

Jakara means alligator in Portuguese. On either side of the boat were two alligators.

The captain joked, “O Maharaja, you are a big devotee you would have made a big feast for the jakaras.”

I wasn't laughing. He continued to explain that the alligators stake out near the quicksand which is usually near the side bank of the swamp. When an animal comes down to the water to drink, it will often fall into the quicksand. It is then that the alligators come. Their tails make them very powerful swimmers. They can kill just with their tails. They glide across the quicksand and bite their victims, taking them with them as they go. I wouldn't have had to worry about going under the quicksand. I would have been eaten by the *jakaras*.

Part Seven – He was cracking under the pressure

Chapter Four – Part Two

By Krsna's arrangement we eventually made our way back to the boat at eleven o'clock that night. Needless to say I had a pretty good sleep.

Some days into the trip, one of the devotees decided that he wanted to go back. He wanted to leave the boat immediately. He was cracking under the pressure. I spoke with him briefly but didn't try to force him to stay. I had learnt from experience that you can't force in a situation like that. We had organised a tight program and it was difficult for some of the devotees to maintain it. No one missed *mangala-arati*. Everyone went to the full morning program and chanted all their rounds. Then each person did his duties and went out on *sankirtana*. But the pace had already proved too much for him. He first caught a ride on one of the villager's canoes. He then jumped aboard a passing river boat that took him back to Manaus.

The next day I woke up with dysentery. All night I had cramps in my stomach, the kind I get in India when the same dysentery comes. As I was walking from the washroom I mentioned it to another devotee who thought that the cause of the dysentery was the old *prasadam* we ate the night before.

“Things tend to rot quickly in the hot sun,” he told me.

But I blamed the river water. The one thing we overlooked bringing was a water tank. The water we used for bathing, cooking and drinking came directly from the river. It was another risk we took while travelling in this wild Amazon Jungle.

Our voyage to the next village took us twice as long as we planned. We didn't arrive until two o'clock in the afternoon. When I asked the captain why it took us so long, he said that every few months the river changed. Sometimes there were new islands, new swamps and changes in the course of the river. I realised that to be a captain of a ship on the Amazon requires a lot of experience. You have to know the river and also how to read it when it changes. Otherwise disaster can result. He told me that one technique the “old salts” use is to follow behind the local villagers paddling their canoes. The local villager knows the shifting of the river in his area. This explained to me why we took the erratic course

we did the first night. I had been wondering why we were going here and there; the captain explained that he had no understanding of that area and we were simply following a small boat.

He also told me that going up the river as we were doing, was not as dangerous as coming down. If going up the river we hit a sand bar, the flowing current going downstream would push us off. But if we hit one going downstream the force of the current might embed us in the sand with no way of escape.

He went on to describe how last year he'd seen several ships stuck on sand bars during the low water season. They had to wait six months until the high water season came to get the boats off. They took advantage of that time to make small repairs on their boats but the fact remained that they were stuck on the river for six months. The water rising helps the boat off the sand bar.

Even I could see that the river was changing. Huge trees were constantly floating by with large pieces of earth. The big river eats at the side of the bank relentlessly, tearing huge pieces of it away, including enormous trees.

This was one reason why the banks were bare. The other reason was man. During the last forty years he had ravaged the banks of the river, cutting down trees, and floating them downriver as logs. It was easy picking. Even in the wild Amazon Jungle man has taken his toll and as a result, a lot of wildlife has retreated inland.

Part Eight - It was so wonderful to bring Lord Caitanya's sankirtana to this village

Chapter Five - Part One

After the first few days, we noticed that as we were going up river, we would hear drums, "ding boom tic a tic boom boom...ding boom tic a tic boom boom."

I asked the villagers, "Do these drums mean anything?"

One man told me, "Yes. That is how we communicate between villages."

So I asked him, "What does this drum beat mean?"

To my surprise he said, "Big white ship coming with white man giving good food."

As word went up the river that we were coming, people with canoes would sometimes come to meet us. As many as ten to fifteen canoes would circle our boat asking for food. They also asked for medicine which we gave.

One village we went into was very small with no more than thirty-five houses, all made of wood. Somehow they reminded me of houses in America's old south – all up on stilts to protect them from flood. The people in the village were stunned as we came off the ship, chanting and dancing exuberantly. Some people stopped dead in their tracks. Others shut the shutters in the windows and locked the doors. Little children ran home. Only a small crowd awaited us, as we jumped and twirled in blissful *kirtana*.

The women devotees distributed books. I had never really expected anyone here to be able to read, but the Christians had seen to that. In each village there was a small little hut which served as a church and

sometimes a school. Sometimes there was an American priest, or even a nun, living there. They also wondered who we were and were generally very kind and courteous to us.

As our *kirtana* continued, we noticed that the villagers became more inquisitive than scared. In just a few minutes many children gathered around and followed us as we chanted down the villages' two streets. Despite me still having dysentery and feeling weak, I couldn't help but take lead of the *kirtana* for a few short minutes. It was so wonderful to bring Lord Caitanya's *sankirtana* to this village. After some time I sat down with the devotees and all the children, and told them stories from Krsna Book.

As we left the village I began to feel exhausted. I was actually very sick. The temperature was 45 degrees and I had no covering. Because of my dysentery I had been fasting and everything combined caused me to collapse in my room, to awake three hours later. My ill health did not, however, seem to affect the spiritual taste I was getting from this preaching mission which I continued to organise with much enthusiasm.

We arrived in the next village at dusk. As we alighted from the boat, we begun our *kirtana* under a huge pole. Suddenly we were frightened by hundreds of huge bats that came out of the top of the pole. One after another they popped out of the top and spread their three foot wide wings, flying off into the night. It gave me the creeps. Looking across the river, I could make out the village graveyard. I remembered what the priest from the last village had told me. He said that many of these people say that they know something about Christianity, but they strongly believe in black magic and ghost worship. I tried to concentrate on the Hare Krsna *maha-mantra*.

"Hare Krsna Hare Krsna Krsna Krsna Hare Hare Hare Rama Hare Rama Rama Rama Hare Hare."
The *kirtana* relaxed the atmosphere both for the villagers and for us. Books went out, children took candy and, after a few hours, we headed back for the boat.

Still the dysentery continued; that night I went to the washroom every fifteen minutes.

Part Nine – Death is all-pervading in this jungle

Chapter Five – Part Two

The next day was Govardhana Puja. I fell out of bed to attend *mangala-arati* after which I lay down on the floor on the second deck. The captain's wife brought me a jungle brew to drink. She promised me that the hot and salty drink would cure my stomach. I wondered where in the world she had gotten the ingredients, but in desperation I drank it down. Half an hour later I woke up. I felt no more burning or cramps. It occurred to me that the Amazon must hold the key to curing many diseases and wondered if anyone had ever seriously investigated this.

While the devotees were preparing the feast, I heard a big commotion coming from the deck. The devotees were throwing pieces of *bhoga* into the water while fish with vicious sharp teeth were jumping out and catching them. The captain told us that these fish are a deadly cousin of the piranha.

The devotees really threw themselves into preparing a wonderful feast for Gira-Govardhana. The women devotees started cooking before *mangala-arati* and the men took over at eight o'clock in the morning. At the offering, Gira-Govardhana looked especially blissful while all the devotees enjoyed dancing around the hill.

Just as we finished the feast, a boatload of about twenty people passed by. I told the devotees to call them over, to tell them that we had free food. They paddled over immediately. They were completely at ease in accepting *prasadam*. We handed out one plate after another of the Gira-Govardhana Hill and all of the *maha-prasadam* that He had eaten. It was really Govardhana Sila's mercy. One lady in particular just kept laughing and laughing as she ate more and more *prasadam*. *Prasadam* has a naturally intoxicating effect.

Two more boatloads came by, the people also receiving Gira-Govardhana's *prasadam*. It was incredible distributing *prasadam* out there in the middle of the Amazon River. One lady came in a boat simply to ask for medicine for her dying child. We only had the medicine of *prasadam* which she readily accepted. When I asked her if she wanted more to take with her, she said, "As much as you give, that much I will eat." She left with ten plates.

When we came upstairs the captain's wife was frantically chasing some insect out of her room. Finally she succeeded and trapped it in a plastic bag. I was standing by wondering, "What is all the fuss about?"

She brought it before my nose in the plastic bag, crying, "Tiranobia! Tiranobia!"

It was an ugly looking creature, something like a moth, but with a big stinger and a pouch on the front of its nose. I thought it looked more like some kind of monster. She explained that it was a deadly killer. One sting and you die within three minutes. I nervously asked her if there were more around and she said, "Yes. This is one of the reasons for the high death rate in this area."

I thought, "My dear Lord Krsna, there's danger in the air, land and water. Death is all-pervading in this jungle."

Because the Tiranobia were attracted to light, at night we couldn't light anything. And when we woke up in the morning, we found them on the floor and on the way to the bathroom. Sometimes we had to remove them from the bathroom. Getting rid of tiranobias became part of our devotional service for the day.

After Gira-Govardhana's feast, everyone washed pots and then took rest for a few hours. Around four-thirty we left by the small boat in three different trips to a village along one of the tributaries. It took about twenty minutes to get there. It was a beautiful ride across very pretty lagoons. When we arrived we started chanting as we walked into the village. It was a very charming place with wonderful people. As we started going down the main street, literally hundreds of children appeared. They seemed to come from everywhere. Soon they were singing and dancing along with us. It was so different from the village we had been to the night before. Everyone here was bright-faced and happy. Most people came out to embrace Krsna consciousness. Like the Pied Piper, we chanted and danced down the street, with

what seemed like thousands of children following us. It was a transcendently wonderful experience and I again related it to the special nature of the day – Gira-Govardhana's Appearance Day.

Part Ten – It was the most incredible experience of my life

Chapter Six – Part One

One morning as I was washing my deity's paraphernalia, I glanced out at the small boat floating next to the ship. The devotees had left some of their clothes inside it and I also noticed some small fish that must have jumped inside the boat as it had sped back and forth bringing devotees from shore. Upon closer inspection I noticed that they had very sharp teeth. The captain's wife came along and pointed to them.

"Piranhas," she said.

As we were going along, I remembered how last night I was trying to be merciful to these fish by throwing them back in the water when they jumped in our little boat. She told me that if you pick one up the wrong way and it's alive, it can easily bite off your finger. Hare Krsna!

The fresh water dolphins were always around the ship. One could see them coming up for air almost everywhere on the river. They were very graceful and pretty. As they came out of the water they made a loud blowing noise as they cleared their blowholes to bring in air. There are two kinds of dolphins here, black and red. They are archenemies and often fight. By nature's arrangement there are the good ones and the bad ones. The red ones will attack swimmers in the water, but there are many stories of the black ones coming to the rescue of people in the water in distress.

The local villagers related a recent event concerning the dolphins. One of the small village boys had fallen off a boat the week before our arrival. Not knowing how to swim, he was drowning. Suddenly a black dolphin came and pushed him towards a floating piece of grass and earth. Then she nudged him towards the shore. Meanwhile her mates chased away the red dolphins, who wanted to attack the boy.

Often you'll see paintings in the people's houses of dolphins. They worship the dolphin here.

The villagers in these towns are very inclined towards helping each other. Life is a struggle. There is not the competition for sense gratification there is in the big cities. To survive they must co-operate. I noticed that the children were also very well behaved. When we distributed *prasadam* they didn't push and shove, but waited for us to give an order as to how they should receive it.

One morning I saw two children coming past us in a small boat with a little engine. As they were chugging along they happened to pass an old man rowing his boat with great difficulty up the river. As they passed him the smaller of the boys reached out spontaneously and grabbed the rope that was attached to the old man's boat. Holding on to the rope, they pulled him up the river.

The captain and his wife were noticeably becoming more favourable. When I met him one morning, he greeted me by saying "Hare Krsna." And the day before his wife had commented that the *prasadam* they had eaten at the feast was the best food they had eaten in their lives. After

Govardhana Puja feast, they both came on *sankirtana* with us, clapping, chanting and dancing. I asked him later what he thought of his first taste of *sankirtana* and he told me, “It was the most incredible experience of my life!”

One morning I noticed the hospital boat anchored near us. There are no hospitals for thousands of miles and the villagers don’t really have doctors. There are old traditional jungle doctors and witch doctors with the ability to cure many diseases. However the sort of emergency that requires surgery, a person has little chance of survival. For other matters, the hospital boats come through periodically. If someone with serious injury can wait till the next boat arrives, he will receive treatment.

I wondered what would happen if one of the devotees needed emergency care. The chances of needing such treatment are greater in the jungle than back home.

Then I thought to myself, “Where is home for me? And where is a safe place in this material world?”

Srila Prabhupada said that a *sannyasi* should travel alone, even to dangerous places, to spread the *sankirtana* movement and learn how to depend fully on Krsna. He should never feel alone, knowing that Krsna is always with him. And he should always feel protected by the Lord. If Krsna is providing for all living entities, then why won’t He provide for and protect His fully surrendered devotees? I admit that I am not fully surrendered but I am trying to please Srila Prabhupada by taking this *sankirtana* movement to this remote region of the world.

Part Eleven – This is how it must have been when Lord Caitanya introduced the chanting to the streets of Bengal

Chapter Six – Part Two

A few days after Govardhana Puja was Srila Prabhupada’s Disappearance Day. During the morning class, I spoke about the importance of accepting a spiritual master. I related some of my own experiences with Srila Prabhupada. The devotees were transfixed and I realised that talking of Srila Prabhupada was as potent as having physical association with him. So many times I had been with him, but talking about him was like having his association again.

Later that afternoon we went on *sankirtana* in the village we had been docked at since morning. “Docked” is not really the right word. There were no ports or landing places along the Amazon. The boat just comes to the bank of the river and lets down the plank. Then we descend into the mud and walk up on to the shore.

This village was wonderful. It reminded me of Bengal, with palm trees everywhere. On the outskirts we noticed many cows, Indian looking cows. As we chanted down the dirt trails leading to the heart of the village, I thought that this is how it must have been when Lord Caitanya introduced the chanting of the holy names to the streets of Bengal. It was ecstatic. We passed mango trees, jackfruit trees, vanilla trees, cashew nut trees, and coconut trees. There was so much opulence.

Upon our arrival, the whole town came out to receive us. They all followed us down the winding trail as we passed house after house. We chanted for one and a half hours. When we stopped to rest for a

moment, the leader of the community came over. He requested that we address the whole community that evening on the purpose of our visit.

He said, “We are a small village, but very concerned with ideals.”

Many of the village elders came back to the boat with us. Spontaneously they followed us, asking us questions, finally sitting with us on the front deck of the boat.

We discussed many basic aspects of Krsna conscious philosophy. In the course of conversation, the talk turned to the politicians in Rio de Janeiro. They saw we had come in the Governor’s boat, the same boat he had campaigned in the year before. Some of the elders present said they had voted for him but afterwards he had forgotten about them. They had requested some medical facilities at the time he had come, but nothing had arrived, not even a word. In recent weeks, a number of children had died from various diseases and accidents. They desperately needed some medical facility. I asked them what they did when there was an emergency. They said that they take the person by boat to the next village, five hours away, and try to obtain help. If there isn’t any, then the person could easily die.

They acknowledged that this simple life was better than life in the big cities, but after further discussion I realised that they didn’t even know what a big city was. Most of them had never left the village itself. When I mentioned the sense gratification in America, I saw that many of them didn’t even know what America was. But still their simple life, cultivating the land and living off the river, showed in their features. They were healthy and not in anxiety. Life was slow here and everyone worked only for the basics of life.

That evening on the way to address the town at the local school, I was wondering what to say to these people. I couldn’t give my usual presentation: “Life is not meant for sense gratification” There was hardly any sense gratification here – at least not in the way we know it. And I didn’t have to remind them of the miseries of material life. They knew better than I. And how could I have told them not to eat meat? For generations they have been living off the river, eating fish. They weren’t about to stop just because I told them to.

I decided to speak about the *maha-mantra*. “Just chant Hare Krsna Hare Krsna Krsna Krsna Hare Hare, Hare Rama Hare Rama Rama Rama Hare Hare. And your lives will become sublime.”

Part Twelve – It felt good to work hard for my spiritual master all day long

Chapter Seven – Part One

The next day, the devotees pointed out a tributary where gold is mined some hundred kilometres into the jungle. Indian legends in the area talk of a huge city made of gold that was built as far back as the beginning of their ancestry. That city is supposed to be protected by large birds and not just anyone is permitted to enter. I immediately thought of Ravana, who, Srila Prabhupada said, had gotten all of his gold from Brazil. He had mentioned that he transported it in an underground tunnel that went from Brazil to Lanka. In Rio de Janeiro there is a famous mountain with a head like a man. It overlooks most of the city. It is very high and difficult to ascend. The two ear holes are caverns that go down at a great

distance. The mouth forms another cave. The scientists are yet to understand how deep it is. The local people say that it leads to the hellish worlds. If you go into its mouth and walk for about ten meters, you will come to a huge drop. We actually went there once. We took a big stone with us and pushed it off the edge. For some time we waited for it to hit the bottom but we never heard anything.

“Could this possibly be the tunnel to which Srila Prabhupada was referring?” I wondered. Turning to the devotees, I joked,

“Anyone want a cheap ticket to India?”

When questioned about the mouth of that mountain peak overlooking Rio, Srila Prabhupada said that it very well could be Ravana’s tunnel. I couldn’t help wonder if the city of gold down the river was once his kingdom. Even in current times, the devotees told me, there is no law and order in that region. Neither the police nor the army even go near, as it is too dangerous. There are many miners there and the gun is the law of the land. Many people are killed every day and although the United Nations itself has ordered investigations into the corruption, nothing has ever been done.

We were working really hard on this journey. On that day we went on *sankirtana* for nine hours. It was no easy thing, taking this boat and all the devotees up the river, going from village to village. We really gave it our best effort, trying to knock on every door in every village we went to. We didn’t know when the next lot of devotees would bring Lord Caitanya’s *sankirtana* to this remote area, so we wanted to make sure that everyone received the opportunity now.

In this particular village the chief took a *Bhagavad-gita*. He was a simple man and kindly took a big book. They were not at all proud like many rich people in the United States or Europe. They appreciated us coming by and were genuinely curious.

That day we also took a large wheelbarrow of *prasadam* door to door. At least three hundred children followed us and when some people saw our efforts, they came from their houses and pushed the wheelbarrow, helping us fill the plates as devotees gave them out at each house.

Back at the boat, I collapsed in complete and satisfying exhaustion. It felt good to work hard for my spiritual master all day long. I knew the other devotees felt the same.

Srila Prabhupada ki jaya!

Walking through the jungle on the way to the next village that evening, I suddenly felt an intense pain, a burning sensation on my bare back. It felt as if someone had poured acid on it. It was so painful that I was screaming. I fell to the ground trying to take it off.

The devotees looked very closely to see what it was but couldn’t see anything. They were wondering if I had been attacked by a ghost because of the many ghost worshippers in the area. They thought that maybe I was a victim of some voodoo. Then one devotee very intelligently scratched my back. Looking into his fingernails, he saw many little mites. Each of these mites had the sting of a wasp, and I felt I’d been stung by a hive of wasps. My whole back started puffing up like a hunchback, becoming like liquid inside.

The devotees managed to scrape the mites off but, while they were doing that, they broke the big blister on my back and all the liquid poured out. It was horrible. I was in indescribable pain, so when we reached the village they took me to the witch doctor, who put this green sticky stuff on my back. As soon as he put it on this cooling effect came over my bites. The pain disappeared. I put this “cream” on for four days and there was no scar left from the attack, although it had been one huge blister.

Part Thirteen – The devotees’ only concern was to save my life

Chapter Seven – Part Two

Quite often we had to walk from the bank of the river to the village. The trails were difficult to distinguish because they were not used that often. We had to be very careful of snakes and the most venomous creature on earth, the arrow poison frog.

This frog produces a liquid so deadly that one drop of the poison it produces from its skin is enough to kill several people. To extract the poison from these frogs for use on arrow tips, South American Indians hold the frogs over flames until the poison oozes from the skin. This poison, called batrachotoxin, acts on the heart and nervous system.

These frogs were everywhere, hopping here and there, so we had to be very careful.

Unfortunately my experience with dysentery was not yet over. Another incident occurred in relation to this, about three quarters of the way into our journey:

Sometimes we had to visit one of the jungle doctors. Of course in the Amazon there are no Western doctors or hospitals. The hospital ship, owned by the Red Cross, visits each village only every six months or so.

I was not only losing water but blood also and had become very skinny. A high fever broke out and rashes appeared on my body. After a week of suffering, the captain’s wife, who had some experience with first aid, came to see how serious my condition actually was. With an alarmed voice she told me that if I didn’t get medical attention within three days, I would probably die.

The devotees met and decided that they would take me to the jungle doctor. Picking me up on a mattress, they carried me into the village. I had a raging fever and kept losing consciousness, so this whole experience was like an hallucination. I remember being in the doctor’s hut hearing the devotees explaining to him what I had.

I heard him say, (as translated through them), “This is no problem.”

Despite the fact that I was nearly unconscious, I have a most vivid memory of when he put the medicine he intended giving me, under my nose. Try to imagine the most obnoxious smell in creation – that’s what that was. In his hands it looked disgusting – all gooey and chunky, and black. When he put it before my nose, I thought,
“Is this vegetarian?”

But the devotees' only concern was to save my life, so they made me eat it. They stuffed it in my mouth. Just the smell of it made me want to vomit but there was no other choice if I was to live. I passed out.

After two hours I woke up.

I felt great! I felt like a fourteen year old boy ready for a football match. And I wanted to eat. The doctor gave me a little soup but I was ready for a Sunday Feast. Of course he wouldn't allow that and he instructed the devotees that I should rest for three days.

But I was ready for action. Not only had he cured me but the potion I drank gave me a lot of energy.

Some months later when I was in Rio de Janeiro, back from the Amazon trip, I went to see a doctor because I had a purple like tattoo and I was thinking, "Am I going to look like this my whole life?"

Because I had been up the Amazon and has contracted several diseases, I was a case study. They wanted to take my blood, look in my eyes, etc When I told them that I had had a particular type of dysentery, they were immediately able to identify it. They said that this dysentery takes anything from six weeks to three months to cure. When I told them that one of the jungle doctors cured it in a matter of hours, one of them said,

"Don't you come into my office and speak all this rubbish."

I said, "Doctor, its not rubbish, its actually a fact. I was about to die."

"He said, "I don't want to hear these old wives' tales. I'm a doctor. Do you think I'm going to believe these old jungle tales?"

To this day he probably doesn't believe.

Part Fourteen – "Please, stay with us"

Chapter Seven – Part Three

We continued on for many weeks in this way, going from village to village. In one of the last villages we visited, the elders came to see us as we were leaving. We had been in that village for about three days. The spokesman for the group implored us,

"Please, stay with us. We have decided as a village that we will adopt your way of life. We will sing the name of God as you are doing."

At first I didn't take him very seriously. But, as the conversation progressed, I could see that he was very sincere. He told me that, by our coming into this village, everything had changed. They really wanted us to stay. He said that they were prepared to do whatever we asked. With much regret I had to explain that this was not possible, and he accepted it with silent submission.

He went to tell the people that we weren't able to stay and as we were leaving, all of the villagers came to stand at the river bank. They were so sad to see us go. We'd had some really ecstatic *kirtanas* there. The Amazonian Indians love to dance. We would have *kirtana* for hours and hours. But it wasn't only the *kirtana* to which they were attracted. They loved *prasadam*. They loved the Krsna Book stories. They loved everything. Somehow Krsna consciousness had captured their hearts. And at this stage they were ready to change their lives.

They were able to accept Krsna consciousness so readily because their lives were relatively free from sense gratification. Of course sense gratification is everywhere in this material world, but compared to what was available in America or Europe there was very little in the Amazon. We should take a lesson from this. The pure souls see sense gratification as poison because it destroys our determination to become Krsna conscious. It covers our intelligence. It puts us into illusion so that we can not appreciate the most precious gift that we have received from Srila Prabhupada. So we should appreciate that sense gratification is our greatest enemy because it destroys our precious love for Krsna.

As we left that village in the evening I had to literally pull the devotees away. They had formed a very strong bond with these people and were reluctant to leave them.

As we walked up the gangplank, and pulled it up along with the anchor, we started drifting back into the river. All of the devotees were standing on the rail watching the people and all the people were standing on the river bank watching the devotees. We gradually drifted further and further away until the people appeared tiny. No one had moved. As we rounded the bend they disappeared from view.

It reminded me of the story in Krsna Book when Krsna goes off to Mathura. The *gopis* stood motionless watching Him leave. The last thing they saw was the top flag of His chariot as it went over the horizon.

Part Fifteen – “The devotees I was traveling with had become very determined preachers”

Chapter Eight – Part One

We continued going up the river in this way, until we came to Venezuela. At that point the captain announced that we had to go back. He had a deadline to meet and if it wasn't met, he would lose his job, because they wanted to use the boat for another purpose. It was timely actually, because by that time our stock of grains was finished and our own *bhoga* was also nearly finished. Some of the devotees were getting sick and I had my purple skin disease which was getting out of hand. Our razor blades had all rusted in the humidity of the jungle which had prevented us from shaving. We were sunburnt and skinny.

Yes, it was time to go back. I remember the day we stopped going up the river and turned around. Going up that river was like drinking hot sugar juice. It burnt so much it was painful but it was irresistibly sweet.

As we turned the boat, I think at about four o'clock in the afternoon, I'm sure I heard the devotees heave a big sigh. It was a mixed sigh of relief that it was nearly over, and disappointment.

That last village we visited was five days from any other village. Therefore, after leaving it, we had a few days to rest and feel a fresh surcharge of energy.

During our journey, I had seen such a change take place in the devotees I was traveling with. When we first started out they were not so strong in their devotional practices. But by the time we turned that boat around, they had matured. They had become toughened and seasoned, very determined preachers, having faced so many difficulties. As I mentioned earlier, there was death in the air, death in the water and death on the land. And they had taken the risk to go out and preach for Lord Caitanya. It reminded me of when someone enrolls in the army. They begin as recruits but with time they become fully seasoned soldiers. They were risking so much for preaching and they could see that so many people were taking to Krsna consciousness, so preaching became their life and soul. They had gone through the fire of ordeal.

Part Sixteen – “They desperately wanted the association of the devotees”

Chapter Eight – Part Two

We had turned around and five days had gone by. On the evening of that fifth day, we heard a familiar sound “ding boom tic a tic boom boom... ding boom tic a tic boom boom..” We were approaching the village we had most recently visited, where they had asked us to join them.

These drums reminded us of *mrdangas*. Bhaktivinode Thakur said that whenever he heard the sound of the *mrdanga* he felt transcendental bliss. Now as I looked upon the faces of these devotees, or seasoned soldiers, I saw expressions of eagerness to preach. They were strong expressions, fearless faces. For one and a half hours we heard those drums and finally as we rounded a hair pin bend, we saw almost the whole village standing on the banks of the river. When they saw us, they broke into a loud *kirtana*.

The devotees were stunned. At first the villagers kept their singing together. They had no melody, but they were chanting, “Hare Krsna Hare Krsna Krsna Krsna Hare Hare Hare Rama Hare Rama Rama Rama Hare Hare.” In their enthusiasm they got all mixed up. Then they put their arms up in the air like we had taught them one week before. They desperately wanted the association of the devotees.

And they had their best clothes on. They didn’t have suits and ties of course, but they had washed and were wearing whatever they had that was nice. The women had adorned their hair with beautiful jungle flowers; the men wore garlands of Brazil nuts, signifying a great occasion. But the captain did not look at any of this. He was heading home.

I said, “Captain look at these people!”

He said, “I don’t want to lose my job. I’ve got to get back on time. I won’t turn this boat around for anything.”

And the boat chugged on. Again I implored him. “Captain, look at these people! Can’t you hear them?”

“I don’t hear anything,” came the response.

We started to pass the bank. They were about fifty feet away. Their chanting was deafening. When they saw we weren't going to stop they became anxious, extremely anxious, almost frantic.

In desperation I turned to the captain and said, "Captain, look! Will you?"

Slowly then he turned his head and looked in the direction of the shore. There is a phrase used by the devotees here to describe the *sankirtanadevotees*. They are called *sankirtanerius*. I had never heard the captain say this before, but he looked at the villagers, he looked straight ahead, then he cried, "*Sankirtanerius ki jaya!*" And he turned the boat around.

As we turned, you couldn't imagine how those Indians responded. They reminded me of little children. All heaven broke loose. As we headed toward the shore the devotees started to cry. The excitement was such that the devotees didn't even wait for the gang plank to be let down. Jumping down into the knee deep water they ran to join the villagers in their *kirtana*. The villagers embraced the devotees, and the inclusion of *mrdangas* and *karatalas* made this *kirtana* one of the most ecstatic of the journey.

Part Seventeen – "This was the perfect ending"

Chapter Eight – Part three

A shortage of time made our visit short lived, and soon we had to again bid our enthusiastic hosts farewell.

We stopped at a few more villages like that on the way back, but saying good-bye to the people in them became too much of an emotional experience for the devotees, so we passed the rest without stopping and went straight back to Manaus.

As we approached Manaus, we noticed that the villages were situated closer and closer to each other. Through various means of communication, they became aware of our location on the river and could with accuracy estimate how long it would be until our arrival. And guess who was there to greet us as we arrived? You guessed it, the Governess. And she was just as enthusiastic as ever. As soon as we docked, she walked onto the boat and inquired about our trip. She looked in the hold and noted with pleasure that since there was nothing left, huge quantities of *prasadam* must have been distributed. She was also interested to know how many books had gone out. I kept thinking in the back of my mind that Lord Caitanya must have sent her.

Although the devotees were in many ways relieved to get back to civilisation, in other ways it was like a void, after a big adventure like that. For three days after our return, I stayed in the temple. Although everyone continued to go to the program, we were hankering to get back on the river. We had received such a taste for preaching in one of the most remotest places on earth.

The day before I left, we were invited to the Governor's house, along with the captain and the crew. The captain was feeling very depressed as he was sure he had lost his job. However when we put on one of the videos we'd taken of the trip, the governor watched the distribution of *prasadam* to the Indians and turned to the captain and said, "Don't worry about your job. You still have it."

This was the perfect ending. I had really become attached to the captain. He was an “old salt”, and in the beginning I never thought that he would be able to make any spiritual advancement. He had been a big fish eater, pot bellied beer drinker, with a vulgar vocabulary. But he had become a gentleman and attached to the devotees. So had many others by the grace of Lord Caitanya and the mercy of Srila Prabhupada.

That afternoon, as my plane circled over Manaus on its way back to Rio, I looked down at the vast green jungle. Reflecting on the last few months of adventure, I looked forward to returning there once again to spread Krsna consciousness amidst the drums along the Amazon.