

Maharaj's Kirtan in London

By Shubhendu Goswami

Swami Shivananda Giri Maharaj first visited London in 1975 and during his six-month stay, founded **Anandam London** in July of that year. What began as a single visit blossomed into an enduring spiritual legacy that continues to inspire seekers to this day. Thereafter, Maharaj returned to the United Kingdom almost every year until 1986, nurturing the growing spiritual community with his teachings, kirtans, and personal guidance.

Śrī Gauridas Pandit Thakur, the intimate associate of Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, spent his days absorbed in spiritual practice beneath a tamarind tree at his sacred seat (Śrīpāṭ) in Ambika Kalna. It was there that Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu came to meet him, and from that meeting blossomed a profound bond of friendship and divine love. Together they enacted many sublime pastimes, which continued throughout the early years of Mahaprabhu's life after accepting sannyasa.

Gauridas Pandit's earthly departure took place on the auspicious day of Jhulan Purnima. When Maharaj came to London on this occasion, I requested him to perform a kirtan at our home in observance of this sacred tithi, so that devotees could participate. The first Sunday following Jhulan Purnima, the 20th August of 1978, was chosen for the gathering. Our hearts overflowed with joy at the prospect.

The kirtan was scheduled to begin at half past four in the afternoon. Maharaj himself assumed the responsibility of ensuring that such a great Vaishnava's kirtan would be observed in the most befitting manner. He would often say, "Performing kirtan is important, but creating the proper atmosphere for kirtan is equally essential."

He gave us no indication of when he would arrive or how he intended to conduct the programme. Everything remained within him, nor did we feel any curiosity. The offering was his; we were simply grateful that we had been given the opportunity to make our humble submission and to surrender everything at his feet.



Maharaj arrived at our home an hour before the programme. The kirtan was to be held in a large hall on the ground floor. He quietly walked around, observing every detail. Then he stood by the entrance to welcome each devotee personally. His gentle humility and gracious reception deeply touched everyone who entered.

As the hour of the kirtan approached, Maharaj slowly emerged from one corner of the room with an expression of profound serenity upon his face. We watched the beautiful sight in silent admiration. Taking his seat, he cast a peaceful glance over the assembled devotees. Then, lifting the mridanga, he struck its first resonant beat. That very first vibration seemed to awaken something extraordinary within every heart present.

What followed was unlike anything I had ever witnessed. Seated before the assembly, Maharaj spontaneously composed and sang the entire history of Gauridas Pandit's divine pastimes through kirtan itself. Words fail me in attempting to describe that unforgettable experience.

The room was filled to full capacity. Everyone listened as though spellbound. Maharaj would alternately remain seated and then suddenly rise to his feet, continuing his narration with extraordinary fervour and devotion. It was a truly remarkable sight. His deeply moving exposition touched the innermost core of every listener's heart. Overwhelmed with spiritual emotion, nearly everyone shed tears. The entire gathering was profoundly transformed.

Even today, when I recall the immense blessing of witnessing that sacred occasion, my eyes fill with tears. After nearly an hour and a half of this vibrant and soul-stirring kirtan, having left the entire audience immersed in tears of devotion, Maharaj slowly ascended the staircase to the upper floor, enveloped in a serene and exalted spiritual mood. Never before had anyone in London seen him so deeply absorbed after a kirtan.

Upstairs, he sat motionless upon a blanket spread over the carpet, completely immersed in silent meditation. Meanwhile, many devotees remained downstairs, reluctant to leave. They wished to have one final darshan of Maharaj and receive the dust of his holy feet before returning home.

Since *Maharaj* was staying in our house, I went upstairs several times to see how he was. At last, he looked towards me. His face bore the same sweet smile, and his eyes radiated the gentle compassion found only in a great yogi established in perfect peace. I conveyed the devotees' longing to see him.

He replied, "Whoever wishes to come, send them all upstairs."

Thereafter, he began speaking continuously on the glories of God, answering countless questions with effortless grace. One thing puzzled me greatly that evening. *Maharaj* kept drinking glass after glass of cold water. I could not understand why. Was it a sign of an exalted spiritual state? I do not know. For a moment I became anxious. Gradually, however, his intense mood began to subside, and he slowly returned to his usual natural state.

One by one the devotees began to depart. *Maharaj* lovingly embraced each of them before bidding farewell.

The night grew late. Almost everyone had gone, except for a few close devotees. Yet *Maharaj* had still taken no food. By midnight he accepted only a little *prasad*.

Maharaj then came downstairs and sat quietly in a chair before the beautifully decorated altar. Leaning back, he gazed silently at the deities and sacred pictures. Occasionally he spoke a few words while turning the beads of his *japa mala*.

"The altar has been arranged beautifully," he said. "All those whose pictures you have placed here are truly present upon this altar. I feel immense joy simply sitting here."

At one o'clock in the night, *Maharaj* suddenly rose and went to bathe.

After returning from his bath, we assumed that he would now retire upstairs for some much-needed rest. Instead, he uttered words that completely astonished us.

"I wish to clean the carpet in your hall with my own hands tonight. Do you know why? All those who came today and listened to the kirtan with such devotion are true Vaishnavas. The dust of their holy feet has fallen upon this carpet. Please allow me to clean it." The carpet was covered with flower petals, crumbs of *prasadam*, and all the remnants naturally left after such a large gathering. *Maharaj* meticulously cleaned every part of the carpet with extraordinary care and devotion. When he finished, it was half past two.

Whenever we attempted to stop him, he simply brushed aside our objections, saying, "Koi baat nahi. I shall clean it all myself."

When everything had been completed and *Maharaj* was walking upstairs, he quietly remarked,

"You know, merely cleaning this dust was not enough. I should have anointed my own body with it."

His voice trembled with deep emotion and heartfelt longing. It was late, and we were exhausted—that alone had prevented him from expressing his devotion even further.

Once upstairs, he lay down upon the bed, smiling innocently like a little child and speaking a few gentle words. Then, within barely two minutes, all became silent. He had fallen fast asleep.

That night, for the first time in my life, I truly understood what it means to be a Vaishnava. What I had only read in sacred books, I witnessed embodied in *Maharaj*'s daily conduct. The teachings became permanently engraved upon the pages of my own life.

To regard oneself as humbler than a blade of grass—*trṇād api sunīcena*—is the foremost ideal of a Vaishnava. In *Maharaj*'s life, that teaching flowed naturally and ceaselessly like an underground stream.

Offering my final *pranam* to that supreme Vaishnava as he slept peacefully, I quietly closed the door behind me and descended the stairs.