

The Hare Krishna movement

(ISKON _ International Society for Krishna Consciousness)

Brindavan, a town of 30,000, 90 miles south of Delhi, is the central magnet of worship of Krishna in all India. According to tradition, this is the place where Krishna passed most of his boyhood.

During the last few years a new temple has been added to the scene. It is the "Hare Krishna" temple or the "foreigners' temple," located at the edge of town. (This is symbolically the right spot as the Hare Krishna is at the edge of Indian Hinduism.)

These Western devotees keep mostly to themselves and live in a well-regulated world of their own. What startles the Indian pilgrims, writes John Stratton Hawley in his article *Pilgrims' Progress Through Krishna's Playground*, is "the extraordinary lifelike, indeed ghostlike, statue of the founder that was erected at the temple after his death there two years ago (1978). His looming, supervising presence competes for attention with the images themselves in a way that our pilgrims find strange; it symbolizes the sectarian aloofness of the movement."

The Founder

The Hare Krishna cult was founded by A.C. Bhaktivendanta Swami who was born in Calcutta, - India, in 1896. His original name was Abhay Charan De. He majored in philosophy, economics and English at the University of Calcutta.

Before he become a Swami he was a political activist, a husband and a father. A position as manager of a successful pharmaceutical firm was his career. He became disenchanted with politics and turned into a disciple of Saraswati, who introduced Abhay Charan De into the Caitanya sect of Krishna worship. A few days before he died. Saraswati told his disciple to spread Krishna Consciousness to the English speaking world.

Who was Caitanya? Some 500 years ago he was the key figure in a religious revival which took place in Bengal. He believed that one should call upon the name of God as much as possible in public and in private conversation. His devotional method involved chanting and ecstatic dancing.

In 1965, Bhaktivendanta Swami came to New York; an old man, dressed in a saffron robe, begging in the streets and looking for disciples. In 1966 he founded the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKON). Since 1968, over 30 books have been written by "His Divine Grace A.C. Bhaktivendanta Swami Prabhupada," which is his full title.

The Swami moved to San Francisco with 15 of his disciples. The mass media discovered the old Indian man and provided ample free publicity. Beat poet Allen Ginsberg's conversion from Zen Buddhism to Krishna Consciousness greatly aided the

cause. George Harrison's Hare Krishna song "My Sweet Lord" became a top hit and greatly contributed to the spread of the movement.

The Swami claimed that he stood in the line of unbroken disciplic succession - going back to Saraswati, Caitanya and from him back to the god Krishna. The Swami was his representative on earth and had to be accepted as Krishna himself. Krishna devotees must surrender themselves completely to his desires and teachings.

The Organization

ISKON publishes the *Back to Godhead* magazine, which is peddled in the streets by Hare Krishna devotees. It describes itself as "the only magazine in the Western world to present the authorized transcendental science of God realization, known only to the saints of India's unbroken disciplic succession."

Members are developing a network of temples and ashrams (communes) in urban America and various countries around the world. There are now some 100 temples. The Swami personally controlled the movement. He appointed 12 male devotees to the Governing Body Commission (GBC). Under the GBC are all the temple presidents who in turn have unquestioned authority over their temple devotees.

Money appears to be in abundant supply. Temples are often in valuable locations. In Germany ISKON possesses a castle. In the U.S. the society owns and operates 6 large farms and other properties. Its wealth has come through street and airport solicitations and handing over of personal possessions by Hare Krishna's "blissed out" followers.

They have been accused of harassment of the public, high pressure tactics and fraudulent misrepresentation, while seeking donations or selling merchandise. In the mid seventies the Taunus Mountains headquarters in Germany produced a monthly income of \$90,000 by book sales, incense peddling and begging. Each month \$2,000 of the income was forwarded to the Hare Krishna headquarters in Bombay.

Recruits

Where do the Western Hare Krishna recruits come from? Centres are found in such cities as Amsterdam, Edinburgh, Frankfurt, London, Paris, Rome, New York and Toronto. Leaders have played on the secular spirit of our age. The German leader Srila wrote: "in many places we have bought churches that were practically closed because no one was going there. In London I saw hundreds of churches that were closed or used for mundane purposes."

Many recruits come from the drug culture of the sixties and its exploitation of mysticism as a means to achieve a drugless high. Many devotees are casualties of the pressure of our secular technological and materialistic society. The Swami promised them: "Don't worry about school or your job. It doesn't matter; Krishna will take care of everything."

Krishna devotees are extremely zealous in winning souls. Converts are sought through literature, testimony and the advertisements of "free Indian banquets with music and dance" on college campuses. Their zeal has carried them away at times. In Chicago O'Hare Airport alone, over fifty Krishna-associated assault and battery cases were reported to the airport police within the span of four months.

Lifestyle

In the early days of the movement, the young Hare Krishna devotees were noted by their outlandish style of dress and behaviour. They wore saffron coloured robes, had painted faces and shaved heads, with the exception of a pigtail; and extended their begging bowls to passersby.

Their Sanskrit songs were unintelligible to the public. This has changed in recent years. ISKON has ordered that all propagandists wear regular American clothes when they are out on evangelistic assignments.

The devotees' lifestyle is severely restricted, tightly scheduled and well-defined. Few decisions need to be made. Anything to do with science, violence or carnality is taboo. Sleep is limited to no more than 6 hours. Devotees rise about 3:30 a.m. Before breakfast they go through a series of worship ceremonies. They are kept busy all day, which gives them no time to think.

Parents have accused ISKON of brainwashing their youngsters, isolating and alienating them from their families. A former Hare Krishna member testifies: "I read no literature except that written by cult leaders ... The sect was telling me what to think ... You had to follow the orders of the spiritual master submissively and without mental speculations, without using one's mind to think of good and bad. To do that would hamper your spiritual progress ... The monotonous and repetition of mantras was a self-hypnotizing means much used by the Krishnas," "The Hare Krishna movement strictly opposes any way of life that appeals to materialism or to the senses. They have a low opinion of the body. One of their magazine articles says: "Our present 'materialistic civilization, is being primarily based on eating, sleeping, sex and defense. It is an existence on par with the lives of lower animals like dogs, hogs, camels and asses. Human society has developed into a polished animal existence. The Vedic school for thought considers this the greatest waste of human energy because human life provides a chance to acquire knowledge. Therefore human society should be directed towards the goal of liberating the self from the bondage to matter."

Their dietary laws are strict. They eat no meat, no eggs and no fish. They drink no coffee or tea and can't smoke or drink alcohol, gamble or use drugs. In the foreword to the *Hare Krishna Cookbook* compiled by Krishna Devl Dasl and Sama Devl Dasl, Kirtanananda Swami says that the diet designed "not for him who eats too much or for him who eats too little." It is designed to supply the body with necessary nutrition, without pandering to the whims of the changing senses. ...If the tongue is agitated for sense enjoyment, all other senses follow.

Women do have a place in ISKON, though in India Krishna temples no holy women can be found. Indian devotees consider the role of women in ISKON as a strange American addition. Though women may be part of the movement, they only have a very subordinate place. They are thought to be inferior and placed in a servant role to the male or to their husband if married.

Beliefs

ISKON Is syncretistic. It claims that absolute truth is contained in all the great Scriptures. The oldest are the Vedic Scriptures. The Bible is considered simply as a later version. Its literature has tried to put Christianity under ISKON's umbrella. Snila Prabhupada writes: ... Christos' is Greek for Krsta, ' Christ', Krsta Krsna ... Ultimately you are addressing the same Supreme Personality of Godhead." Yet ISKON devotees believe that every religion, except their own, is inadequate. And they "quote for support Krishna's statement in the Bhagavadgita: "Abandon all varieties of religion and just surrender unto Me."

a. Krishna

Hinduism has many gods.

The best known is Vishnu. Krishna is one of the incarnations of Vishnu. He is portrayed as a somewhat mischievous and amorous young man. The story goes that Krishna played the flute in the forest with such piercing sweetness that 16,000 young women dropped whatever they were doing to come and dance with him and make love. Miraculously, Krishna was able to multiply himself so that each of them felt she held his hand and so absorbed his attention.

The story is spiritualized to teach Krishna's demand for total obedience of those who follow him, and the need for the believer to become one with Krishna. So Krishna .worship is different from most of Hinduism which tends to have an impersonal feeling about God.

b. Salvation

What must one do to be saved? Chant the Krishna mantra. It is the way to all knowledge and salvation. "The chanting of the maha mantra-Hare Krsna, Hare Krsna, Krsna, Krsna, Hare Hare/ Hare Rama, Hare Rama, Hare Hare - is the recommended process of self realization in this age.

"Man means mind, and tra means deliverance. Therefore, a mantra is a chant meant to deliver the mind from all unwanted thoughts.

"Maha means great. The Hare Krishna maha-mantra is the great chanting to deliver the mind from all unwanted thoughts which keep us from realizing our true selves. Our consciousness is originally pure or Krsna consciousness, but now, due to association with material nature, our minds are filled with impure thoughts."

The magazine *Back to Godhead* emphasizes that Bhaktivendanta Swami Prabhupada has "mercifully given the chanting of Hare Krsna to the world so that one may regain his original joyful consciousness and live in peace and happiness. By chanting these holy names, we reestablish our lost link with the Supreme and enjoy our real life, which is full of eternity, knowledge, and bliss."

The ultimate goal is the attaining of Krsi Krishna consciousness. Only through this achievement can one become liberated and receive an eternal spiritual body. He then dwells in eternity, bliss and; knowledge with Krishna in his residence, Krishna-loka. This is the soul's journey back to the Godhead.

c. Reincarnation

As Hare Krishna is of Hindu origin, it dwells on the doctrine of reincarnation. The way to liberation is long and hard. One must go through endless cycles of birth and death, in the existence of either bugs or beasts, or human beings.

How must we view Hare Krishna? As one great denial of life! Reality is stamped out. One's concern is only with personal ecstasy and the search for Krishna Consciousness. Christianity is world affirming. This is our Father' world and we may enjoy it to the fullest.

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