

Nation

Troubled Karma for the Krishnas

The murder of a disgruntled disciple sparks a grand jury probe

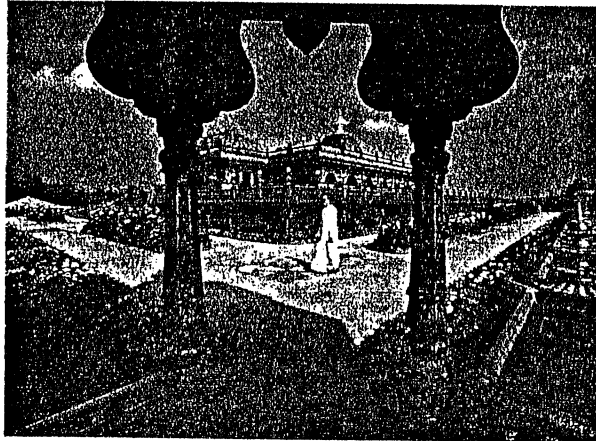
The case of Steven Bryant, who was found shot dead in his van in Los Angeles last May, might have slipped into oblivion were it not for the victim's reputation. Bryant, 33, was widely known as a longtime Hare Krishna who had turned against the sect in recent years. A bit of a crank, he bounced between West Virginia and California telling lawmen that the ever chanting, saffron-robed, pig-tailed, panhandling sect had turned corrupt.

Bryant accused the Hare Krishnas of child abuse, drug dealing and systematic violence. He charged that the Krishna temple near Moundsville, W. Va.—a 4,000-acre community called New Vrindaban that features an Oz-like palace decorated with gold leaf—was becoming like the Rev. Jim Jones' notorious People's Temple.

Law officers like Sheriff Donald Bordenkircher of Marshall County, W. Va., decided that Bryant's stories contained everything but substance. They dismissed his fear of being on a Hare Krishna hit list—until he was murdered. Now authorities are reconsidering some of Bryant's tales. California police have charged Thomas Dresher, 37, a former Krishna devotee from New Vrindaban, with Bryant's slaying. Meanwhile, police in West Virginia have uncovered evidence to charge

Dresher and an ex-sect member, Daniel Reid, 31, with murder in connection with the 1983 disappearance of yet another Krishna, Charles St. Denis.

Inquiries by the FBI and the state police are under way in West Virginia. William Kolibash, U.S. Attorney for north-



At West Virginia's Palace of Gold: "differences of opinion"

ern West Virginia, will impanel a grand jury Sept. 15 to probe possible murder conspiracy and drug dealing at New Vrindaban. Said Kolibash: "The Bryant homicide triggered the inquiry."

Suspicious about the sect have circulated since 1979, when California Temple Leader Alexander Kulik was convicted of

distributing heroin. He was also accused, with others, of laundering drug money through an investment company, Prasadam Distributors, controlled by sect members. The new questions could hardly have come at a worse time for the Hare Krishna movement in the U.S. (membership: about 3,000). Since the death in 1977 of Founder Srila Prabhupada, the sect has split into mutually hostile factions. The internal trouble was dramatized publicly last fall when a disillusioned devotee bludgeoned the leader of the West Virginia temple, Kirtanananda Swami Bhaktipada. The assailant is serving a 15-month prison term in West Virginia.

Bhaktipada, 48, who was left partly deaf and slightly lame by the bludgeoning, dismisses the West Virginia investigations as "absurd." He claims that Bryant began attacking the sect because he thought it had caused his wife to leave him. "He was vindictive," says Bhaktipada. Is there dissension within the Krishna temples? The guru concedes, "We have differences of opinion."

Investigators admit that the Hare Krishnas' penchant for secrecy will make it hard to find out what goes on in the inner sanctum.

Still, according to U.S. Attorney Kolibash, the authorities will have more leverage when the grand jury takes over the probe. He adds that he is determined to find out "who calls the shots." As Steve Bryant's end attests, that is not merely a figure of speech.

—By Frank Trippett.
Reported by Elizabeth Taylor/Moundsville

Bad Rap

Its driving beat and chanted lyrics echo the pulse and pitch of inner-city streets. But rap music also draws out a meaner side of ghetto life: gang violence. When some 14,500 fans poured into Long Beach Arena near Los Angeles last week for a concert featuring the popular rap group Run-D.M.C., more than 300 members of black and Hispanic street gangs swarmed through the crowd, attacking everyone around them. Audience members struck back with metal chairs and whatever else came to hand, until police armed with batons broke up the concert. Forty-five people were injured, including a man who was stabbed. The rioting was the fourth major outbreak of violence on Run-D.M.C.'s "Raising Hell" tour this summer, following earlier incidents in Pittsburgh, New York City and St. Louis that left 39 injured.

The next day, fearing another bloody melee, officials at the Hollywood Palladium canceled a Run-D.M.C. concert. The band, however, blamed lax security for the riot. Joseph ("Run") Simmons, 21, who with Partner Daryll ("D.M.C.") McDaniels became the first rap artist to produce a platinum album (1 million copies sold), defended his group. "Rap music has nothing to do with crack or crime," he said. "Check my lyrics. I'm a role model for kids, and I go out of my way to give them a positive message."

Indeed, rappers have produced songs that urge kids to

stay in school and avoid crime and drugs. The majority of rap lyrics are concerned with nothing more volatile than partying and macho boasting. Yet since rap became popular several years ago, many performances have been marred by brutality. Says Public Safety Commissioner John Norton of Pittsburgh, where teenagers went on a window-smashing rampage after a Run-D.M.C. concert in June: "There is absolutely no doubt in my mind that rap music spurs violence."

Many figures in the entertainment industry contend that rap is no more aggressive than heavy metal, punk and other types of highly charged rock 'n' roll. Rejecting the notion that rap is inherently violent, Psychiatrist Alvin Poussaint of Harvard explains that "rap music really comes from inner-

city street kids, some of whom are gang members immersed in antisocial behavior." Promoters have found that when guards are trained to spot gang colors and bar potential troublemakers, rap concerts are trouble free. Meanwhile, Run-D.M.C. is proceeding with the final week of its tour, hoping to raise a little less hell.



"Run" and Partner "D.M.C."