

The empty throne

The Hare Krishnas don't have much to dance about any more. Their Australian organisation is in serious trouble, reports MARTIN WARNEMINDE.

It would make a great garage sale: one throne (rarely used) fit for a god-like guru plus his household of lavishly designed furniture, the only wear and tear caused by devotees' devout featherdusting. To go with it, his room-sized personal Swedish sauna and 10-metre in-ground pool.

The Hare Krishna movement's farm near Murwillumbah, on the far northern coast of NSW, has no immediate plans for such a sell-off but the money would come in handy. It is \$180,000 in debt and these days also short of live-in believers to help get it out of trouble.

The trappings of luxury have been gathering dust since September 1985. That's when Srila Vishnupad, the Australasian guru who had exclusive rights to use them, was defrocked after he came out of the ecclesiastical closet and admitted that he was homosexual. Until this fall from grace, he had visited the farm once or twice a year.

Known before he was stripped of omnipotence by such lofty titles as Spiritual Master and His Divine Grace, his real name is Charlie Baces — an American "textile designer and Hollywood movie producer" (or "director"; the description varies). That was before finding guruism a much better way of life. But, after many pampered years, he had to sit on his private throne one last time with his flock at his feet and confess all. "He felt he should tell the truth ... repent," says Hare Krishna public relations man Gary Anderson. "He was very charismatic but it kind of disillusioned a few people."

Around his neck like a crucifix the burly Anderson wears a tiny icon of Lord Nrisingha, the Hindu warrior god — a touch of pious jewellery to go with his flowing saffron robe, shaven head sprouting its hairy topknot and the twin streaks of "holy" Indian clay down his forehead. Once a year, Nrisingha is supposed to annihilate any anti-Krishna demons bothering the

sect. Anderson, also known as Gaura Gopal, might balk at criticising a deity but it seems Nrisingha recently has fallen down on the job.

The revelation that Vishnupad had feet of unholy clay would seem to be the least of the movement's worries. While Anderson sees it as the start of a lot of bad karma in Australia, it was such criminal shocks as child molesting, drug trafficking and murder by temple clergy in the US that have contributed most to a world Hare Krishna crisis.

Australians have deserted the organised church in such numbers and it is so much in danger of losing its "purity" that a stepped-up street chanting drive is planned. Anderson proclaims an urgent need for "missionary work".

Vishnupad's house is empty these days, the sauna room cold and the



Chasing the tourist dollar in 1986



Before the fall: Srila Vishnupad presides over his flock

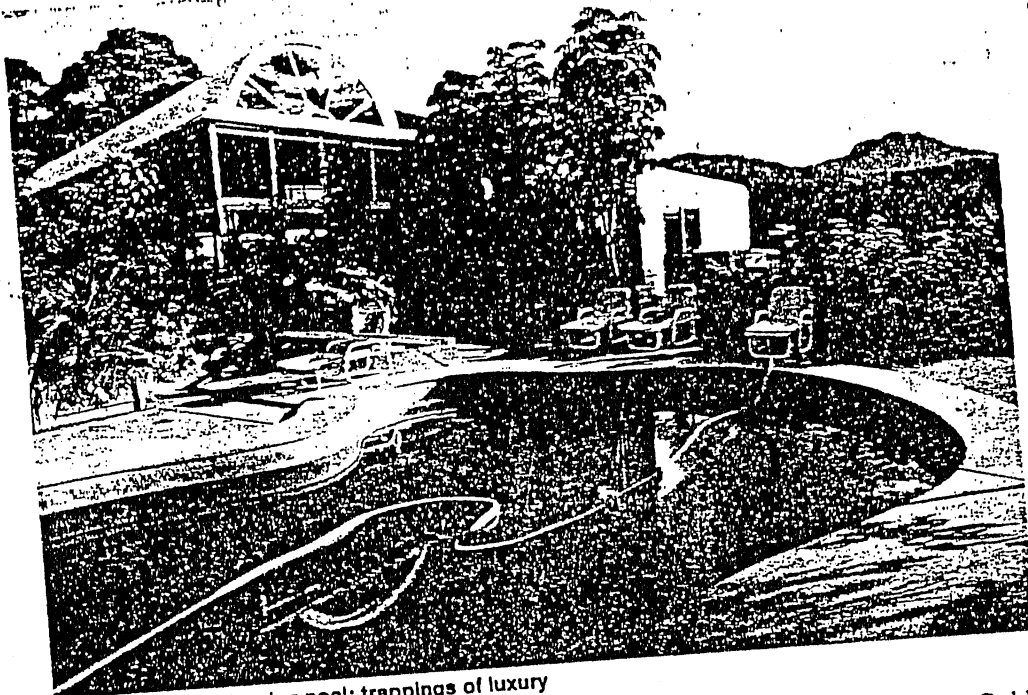
pool's filthy water slimy with green algae.

He was not replaced. The senior Hare Krishna official in Australia these days is Irish-born Prabavishnu Swami, the local member of the movement's Governing Body Council (GBC).

Melbourne temple president Robert "Balaram" Haughton has a less pessimistic view of the local situation. He

says the movement has Australian assets worth about \$10 million and estimates there are still "close to 1000" initiated devotees. He admits, though, that the overseas troubles did make Krishnas here feel they should "batte down the hatches because the flag might start falling".

Anderson describes what has happened, particularly at the Murwillumbah



The house and swimming pool: trappings of luxury

bah farm, as "growing pains ... we've had a bit of a hiccup".

The 440-hectare property was given the Indian name New Govardhana when bought for \$80,000 in 1977. Later, when chasing the tourist dollar by flogging the sect's oddity value became a prime objective, the name was changed to Hare Krishna World. At its peak, the farm community was 350 to 400 strong but desertions have reduced it to "about 40 or 50". The farm school had more than 70 pupils but Anderson estimates that this is down to about 30.

The truth seems to be that nobody really knows how many people still inhabit the failed religious theme park. Newly-appointed co-head of the farm, 33-year-old John Atkinson ("Venu Gopala"), puts the school enrolment at 47 and the adult population at 30 to 40 "couples" and six or seven "celibate men". (Sex for anything but would-be procreation is supposed to be a Hare Krishna no-no — along with meat eating, intoxication and gambling.)

The farm has had five or six "presidents" since 1977. "I don't know why ... I'm going to be quite frank with you," Anderson says. "For some reason, it's been very difficult to manage that place." Their troubles may have been a special "test" Krishna had given them, more or less saying: "Okay, if you want to have that level of attraction, then you must have the purity there. It can't just be show."

None had been sacked because of wrongdoing, Anderson says. "There may have been some human frailties.

Dealing with money basically ... managerial problems with money. Some kind of overspent and, as a result, the farm became a little in debt."

Parents of the farm's remaining schoolchildren appear to use it as a rural crashpad rather than hi-hoeing joyfully into organically enriched fields each day. A few private market gardens may be hidden away in secluded gullies but the main farm has nothing eatable growing.

Even Atkinson seems more interested in the place as a stud for his collection of Appaloosa and Arabian horses. He does not shave his head, saying, he did enough of that when he was single and celibate.

Anderson says the lesson the Hare Krishna movement has learned is that it must "get back to basics ... to show people we can live simply, that we can grow our own vegetables". He compares the trials they are going through with the Christian Reformation.

Not that he's likely to be joining the depleted ranks of fellow devotees and getting his feet muddied. Anderson is a travelling man, occupied with driving about Australia in a luxurious coach. His self-appointed task: collecting signatures for a petition to free seven Hare Krishnas he says are still held in Soviet labor camps despite the lifting of a ban there on the religion.

For many people, the prospect of Hare Krishnas once again haunting the pavements will be no cause for celebration. When they were on the panhandling loose until a few years ago they

often seemed little more than drum-thumping, cymbal-clanging street gangs draped in yellow sheets and using religion as a front to hustle money. Many were arrogant and there was something scary about those shaven skulls. Few non-believers experienced a sudden conversion when jostled on footpaths by groups tediously chanting the name of their new-found Hindu god. It often was intimidation, real or imagined, that sold copies of Krishna publications.

The Murwillumbah farm is nestled in the rolling hill country of the Tweed River valley at Eungella — eight kilometres outside town and less than 30km from that mecca of the hustler, the Queensland Gold Coast. The Krishnas might prefer sandals to white shoes but they wholeheartedly embraced

Gold Coast ways of making money.

The farm also is in the heart of alternate lifestyle country — a motherlode of potential converts. Communes tucked away in surrounding valleys are more easily found by following the smell of marijuana smoke than a roadmap.

There was early trouble with the Tweed Shire Council when they built a temple and school without planning approval but talk of sending in bulldozers to flatten the settlement proved just talk. The local authority eventually gave reluctant blessing to what the Hare Krishnas touted would be an \$8 million, religious-village-cum-tourist-trap. It was to have 40 houses, a boarding school for 160 pupils, an even bigger temple, a two-storey monastery, a convent, a 200-seat restaurant, a 20-unit motel ... even a \$2 million zoo.

Another lure for tourists was to be a \$290,000 museum involving a series of life-size dioramas complete with sophisticated audio-visual effects — "a miraculous synthesis of transcendence and technology," predicted Anderson. He has not been caught short of a superlative when flogging the promised wonders of Hare Krishna World ... or anything else about the movement. "Upon entering the main auditorium, the air will suddenly explode with the tumultuous sound of bugles, trumpets, horns and drums ..." he enthused.

That detonation, like just about everything else at the farm, turned out to be a fizzer. The most tumultuous noise these days is the buzz of insects.

While both the farm and the move-

ment have gone through a crisis, Anderson insists that "it hasn't gone rotten". Just some rotten people at the top, perhaps? — "No; their position intoxicated them to some extent and, when you are intoxicated, you become forgetful . . . you become a little inattentive. People have become a little lavish in their living and, you know, some people went overboard."

"Charisma" is targeted by Anderson as the downfall of both the leaders who misused it and those for whom it was the only reason they joined the Hare Krishna movement.

"This movement is a bona fide religious institution. It's not some weird cult. It's not something like the Oranges . . . the Orange People."

Charismatic leaders with "problems" also caused the worldwide "hiccup" in the Hare Krishna movement. Few of the 11 gurus who carved up the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) into personal fiefdoms after the death in 1977 of its founder, Srila Prabhupada, have not had them.

Prabhupada, a pharmaceuticals executive turned swami, introduced the religion to the West in 1965. At last



The Murwillumbah farm today: difficult to manage

count, five swamis besides Australia's Vishnupad had been excommunicated.

Not all agreed to leave quietly. The most controversial — Bhaktipada — runs an opulent temple coated with 22-carat gold leaf in West Virginia, US, called New Vrindaban. He says he is the founder's true heir and has ignored the order.

The crimes with which the movement has been associated in the US were not even thought of here. He does concede: "The occasional person comes along — because, keep in mind, the whole Murwillumbah area is full of alternate lifestyles — and, if they smoke dope, that's their problem."

More disturbing allegations are made about New Govardhana by some

Toll of the gurus

The accusation that its gurus have allowed a religion to degenerate into "a bunch of cults" has been levelled by a member of its Governing Body Commission. The GBC, in theory, controls the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON).

Atreya Rishi, a graduate of Harvard Business School in the US and a former temple president, says the 11 gurus who took over after the death of Prabhupada "started building their own empires".

The GBC is dominated by the gurus and works hard to protect them but could not ignore the corruption: It has excommunicated six in the past seven years on the following grounds:

■ Charles "Vishnupad" Baces (Australia) — homosexuality.

■ Robert "Ramesvar" Grant (Los Angeles) — seducing a teenage girl.

■ William "Bhagavan" Ehrlichman (Europe) — violating vow of chastity.

■ Hans "Hansadutta" Kary, aka Jack London (Berkeley, California) — involvement with drugs and guns. One night, he shot up a liquor store and a Cadillac dealership.

■ Keith "Bhaktipada" Ham (West Virginia) — abuse of philosophy and "legal problems". His Palace of Gold has been linked to cocaine dealing, child molestation and murder.

■ James "Jayatirtha" Immel (London) — using the hallucinogen LSD. ■

local residents but most tend to be hearsay rather than backed by solid evidence or personal experience. An exception is freelance photographer Bruce Devine, who took the pictures on these pages. He has become friendly over the years with some of the Hare Krishna leaders. When the exodus from the farm started, Devine says, one told him a woman had left because her 16-year-old daughter "was knocked off by about six blokes" and an official lost his job "after he was caught fooling around with the kids".

Devine says that he once saw a pile of semi-automatic rifles in the boot of a Hare Krishna car. He was told they were for an arsenal at the farm that was needed because some locals had threatened physical violence.

Some criticisms of the movement are nothing more substantial than the suspicions of an antagonistic "straight" community.

One of the first things most locals ask hopefully when discussing the farm's dwindling population is whether the sect is going to sell up and move out. For them, it's no such luck. Anderson says that, despite being in the red and having lost followers, the property is valued independently at \$1.4 million. That sort of capital gain makes the amount it owes seem insignificant.

There will be one difference from the old street chanting days, Anderson makes a big point of promising: no panhandling.

He decides to repeat the promise for emphasis but in the process makes the

guarantee sound a little dubious: "It's our whole policy now not to sell books on the street . . . unless, of course, there is permission given by a particular council." ■