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CRIMES AMONG THE KRISHNAS

For years, this mysterious religious sect was mainly known for the shaved heads and saffron robes of its followers. Illegal activities in some communities — extortion, prostitution, drug dealing — went largely unnoticed. But then, last year, one of the most vocal critics of the Krishna leadership wound up with two bullets in his head . . .



By **ERIC HARRISON**

CRIMES AMONG THE KRISHNAS

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The world wouldn't listen to Steven Bryant's charges against his religion's leaders. Until he was murdered.

THE PARTY WAS OVER, SUCH AS IT WAS, AND STEVE BRYANT WAS ON HIS FEET. IT had been just him and an old friend, together for some laughs, a late meal and a beer or two. It was the last meal for Steve, as it turned out.

He was just passing through — Steve was always just passing through, no matter where he was — and his host offered to let him stay the night. But Steve said no. That was Steve. He always said no. He said he'd sleep in his van. The old van was the closest thing he had to a home. It was a peculiar-looking thing — sort of maroon, rusted out, with a high ceiling and no windows in back. It looked like a converted UPS truck, to tell the truth. Steve had paid \$300 for it back in Michigan and remodeled it into some approximation of a motor home. That truck had taken him from Detroit to West Virginia and now all the way out to L.A., dragging trouble like tin cans on a string.



Murdered reformer Steven Bryant.

Steve knew he was being watched on his travels — sometimes he even wore disguises — but he was hoping he could cut his trackers loose before they did him harm. Pretty soon now, he planned to head north with his bride-to-be, straight up the coast to the mountains of northern California, where he would settle down for a while. He thought he would be safe up there from the men who were trying to kill him.

Bryant, 33, blond, good-looking, and a devotee of the Hindu god Krishna, had long predicted that he would be killed — the victim, he said, of leaders of the Hare Krishna religion who wanted him silenced. Still, as he stepped out onto the front porch and said goodbye to his friend, he gave no hint in voice or manner that he felt himself in immediate danger, that very night.

The van was parked on the street in front of the house, and his host asked if he would leave it there. Steve said no. "I don't want to be paranoid about all this, but if I take the small precaution of at least not parking outside my known friend's places, it will show to Krishna that I'm taking a little bit of care."

So he drove the van, a '76 Dodge, around one corner and then a second and then yet a third, continuing as if he were circling the block. He came to a stop finally on a quiet street of neat lawns and stucco houses not far from where he had begun. And that's when it

happened — swiftly, just as he had long predicted. Two bullets in the head. A flurry of movement on an empty street. The roar of engines as two cars vanished into the night.

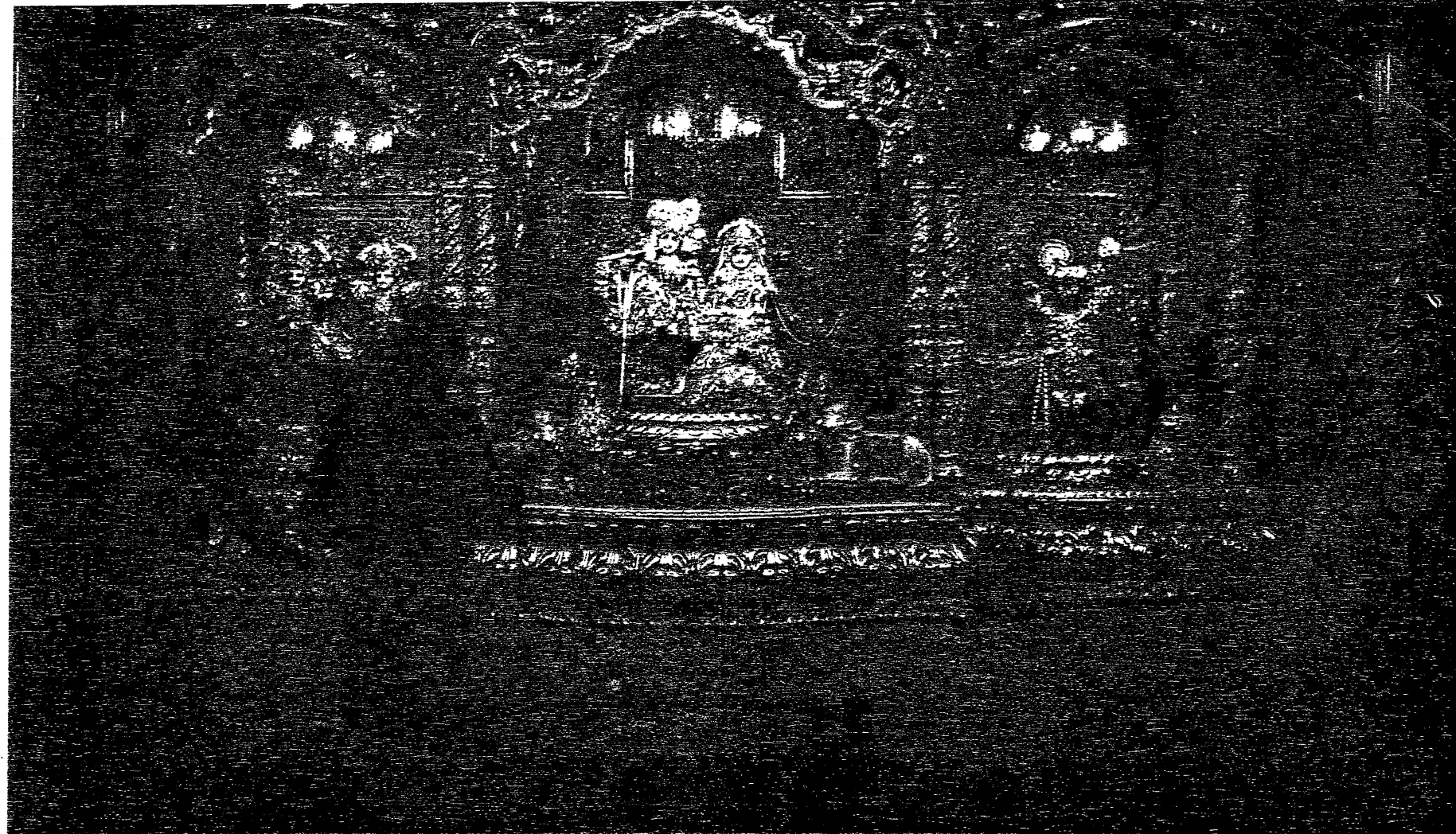
And Bryant — called Sulocana das by his godbrothers; a rebel who was little known outside the religious movement to which he had dedicated his life — instantly became something more: a martyr, perhaps. Some say a saint. Certainly a catalyst for a volley of investigations into the secretive and far-flung religious organization known formally as the International Society of Krishna Consciousness.

BRYANT WAS CERTAINLY NO PROPHET — BY MOST ACCOUNTS HE WASN'T EVEN A very good Krishna devotee. By the time he died, he had been excommunicated, discredited and branded a dangerous crackpot by the Krishna leaders he'd dedicated his life to overthrowing, and his allegations of corruption had fallen largely on deaf ears.

But soon after his death in the early morning of May 22, the FBI, a federal grand jury, the West Virginia State Police and the Los Angeles police were all probing the Krishna movement — investigating not only Steve's death but also the allegations he had been making for so long all over the country.

Bryant's allegations were astonishing. To the FBI, to reporters, to anyone who would listen, he

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Of all the more than 200 Krishna Consciousness centers and farm communities around the world, none surpasses in splendor the commune of New Vrindaban, in the hills near Moundsville, W.Va. Besides being the home of about 700 devotees, the commune ranks as the state's second-largest tourist attraction. Its centerpiece, the resplendent, gold-leaf-covered, jewel-encrusted Palace of Gold, sits on a high ridge overlooking one of America's most economically depressed regions. Above, Krishna worshipers stand before the main altar of the temple.



At left, the commune's spiritual master, Kirtanananda Swami Bhaktipada, stands before the Palace of Gold. Before his death, Steven Bryant had accused Bhaktipada of using money raised in international drug trafficking to build New Vrindaban. He also said that Krishna devotees at the commune had engaged in prostitution to raise money for the religion and that sexual abuse of children was widespread there. Bhaktipada and others call these charges lies. They say that any crimes committed by Krishna followers were the misdeeds of individuals who had strayed from grace.

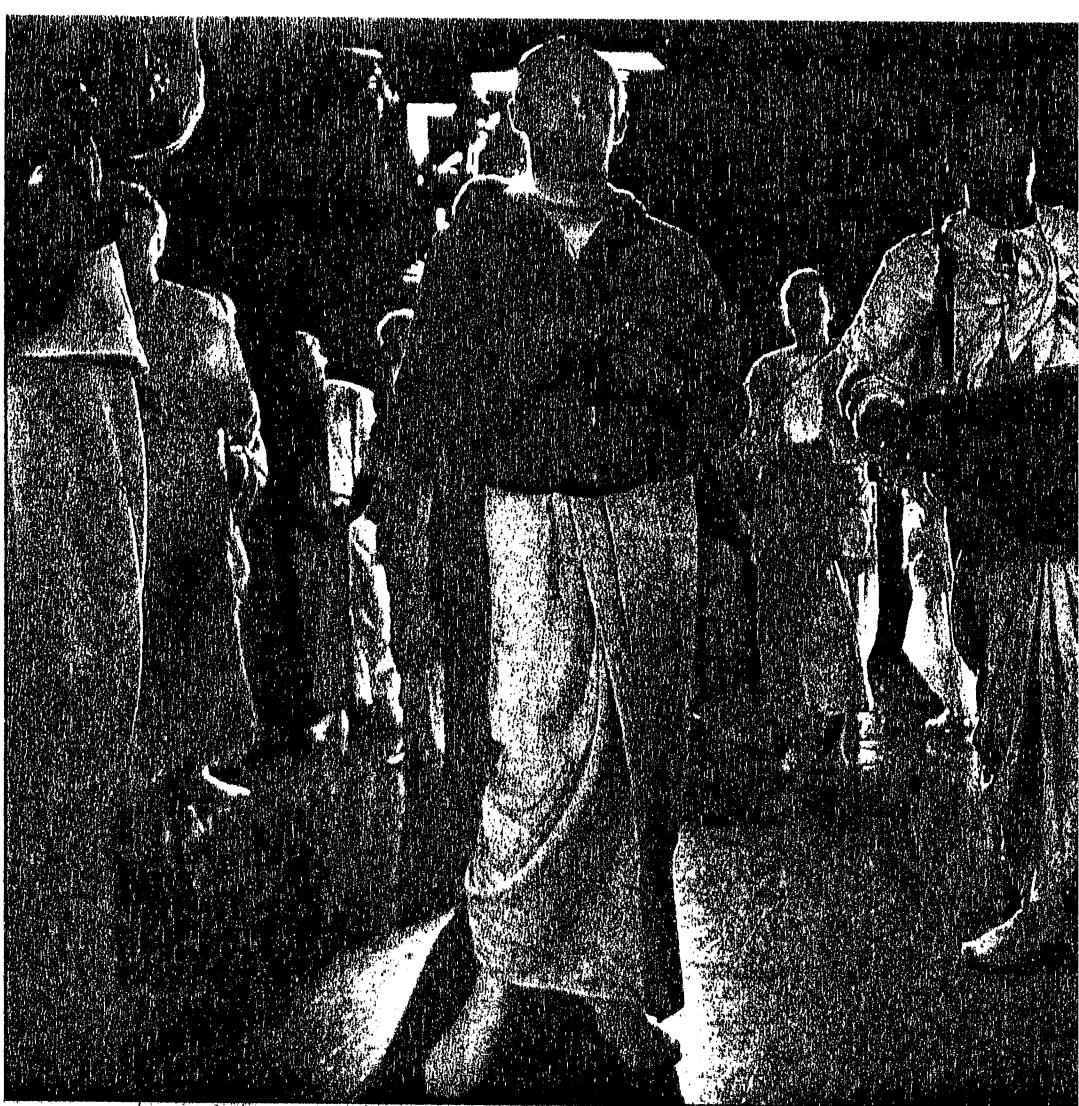
characterized the Krishna hierarchy as a demonic organization. He charged that certain Krishna shrines around the world — especially the extremely lavish community of New Vrindaban, near Moundsville, W.Va. — were built with money earned through international drug trafficking. He charged that the guru of New Vrindaban, Keith Ham, known since the 1960s as Kirtanananda Swami Bhaktipada, kept a "hit list" that included Bryant's name and the names of local officials with whom the sect had had differences. He charged that devotees at New Vrindaban had engaged in fraud, counterfeiting and prostitution to raise money for the religion and that women in the commune were kept under subjugation, with girls as young as 12 being married off and passed from husband to husband. He also charged that Bhaktipada and others were pederasts who molested the young boys of the sect.

Bhaktipada's response to the allegations is that they all are lies — the inventions of fallen devotees and local politicians who he says are conspiring to destroy him. "We not only deny them," he said of the allegations earlier this year, "we know they'll all disappear like the breeze, very shortly. They haven't found anything so far with all their investigations, and there is no reason to think that they will, because [the alleged crimes] don't exist, it's just not true."

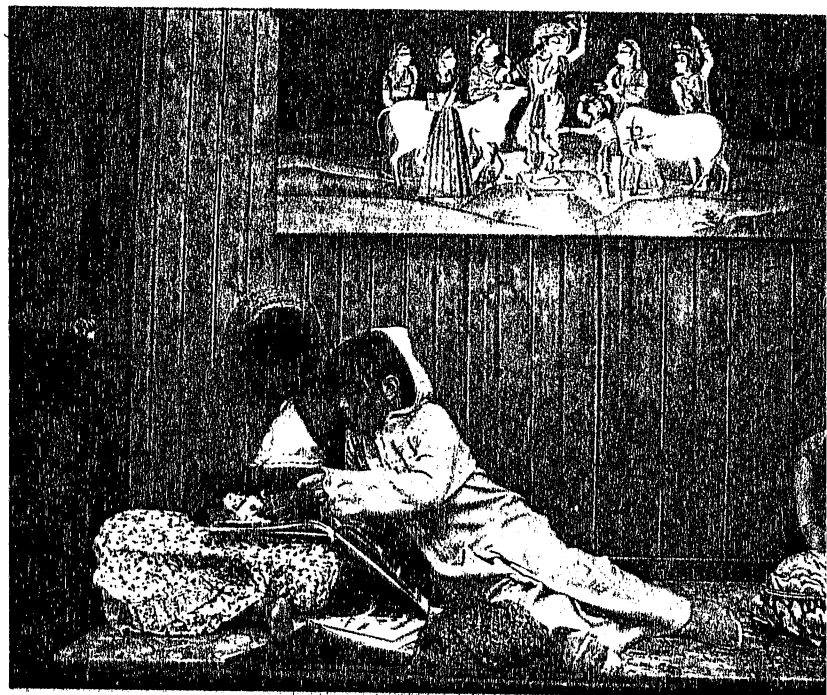
To most people, the Krishnas are best-known as saffron-robed figures who solicit handouts in airports and other public places. Until Steven Bryant's death, disputes within the movement — and cases of criminal wrongdoing — attracted little outside notice. But although turmoil within the sect only recently burst into public view, the movement has been wracked for a decade by bitter internal controversies, which have led to the ousting of nearly half of its most exalted leaders. (Only last month, Bhaktipada himself was officially expelled by the Krishnas' international governing board. However, he is refusing to step down.)

According to police, the sect also has been plagued by criminal activity. In 1977, a midlevel Krishna official in California, Alexander Kulik, was charged with murder and possession of a pound of heroin. Disillusioned Krishnas alleged that a company run by Kulik had laundered hundreds of thousands of dollars in profits from drug deals and funneled the money to some of the sect's gurus, but this was never proved in court. Kulik was convicted on the drug charge in 1979, as part of a plea agreement. The murder charge, involving the shooting of one of Kulik's business associates, was dropped.

Police were told that Krishna devotees, in order to finance several ambitious construction projects, began smuggling heroin into the United States in the 1970s in shipments of religious materials printed in the Far East. An ex-devotee who used to live in Thailand said the sect's operations there were "just a front" for church-sponsored criminal activity. "They were coming in and out of Thailand, and they were bringing back the heroin," said the ex-devotee, who asked



Above, 8-year-old Dhruva das participates in the 4:30 a.m. worship service. The service is held before dawn so the mind will be freer to concentrate on Lord Krishna.



Three girls study beneath a painting of Lord Krishna. From left, they are: Bhagavati, 9; Sunita, 8, and Vrinda, 10. Children are kept in a separate ashram at New Vrindaban, where they study and worship among their peers.



Steven Bryant's ex-wife Jane, or Yamuna, as she is now called, sits with her 1-year-old son, Balaji, in her room at the commune. She disagreed with Bryant's criticisms of the guru Bhaktipada.



Krishna Balarama, a devotee at the community of New Vrindaban, touches the foot of a large statue of Lord Nityananda for a bit of dust, which he will then touch to his forehead as a blessing from Krishna.

to remain anonymous for fear of reprisals.

The crime ring supposedly was headed by certain members of the sect's governing board and ranged throughout the East, including Japan. In 1975, after a series of problems with Krishna devotees that included allegations that they forced people to contribute to the sect and beat up others who tried to stop them from propagating their faith by force, Japan's Justice Ministry concluded that the sect's activities were against public order and morals. The ministry barred Krishna members from entering the country and revoked the visas of at least 29 missionaries. A leader of that ring is now serving a 15-year sentence in Japan on grand theft charges.

Some former devotees have also alleged that teams of female devotees from New Vrindaban and from Berkeley, Calif., have raised funds by engaging in prostitution. Jiva Swami, one of the men said to have run those operations, was killed several years ago while participating in a California drug deal, according to Officer Joe Sanchez of the Berkeley Police, who has made investigating the Krishna community a personal crusade.

Even more notorious was the charismatic guru Hansadutta, whose Christian name is Hans Kary and who has sometimes used the alias Jack London. The sect's governing board excommunicated Hansadutta in 1983 because of a wide array of criminal and moral accusations made against him and his associates while he headed the Berkeley temple. He refused to give up control of the temple after being excommunicated, and only left Berkeley in December 1985. By then, his popularity had waned, and donations had plummeted after he was charged with going on a drunken rampage in 1984 and firing dozens of rounds of ammunition into two occupied buildings near the University of California at Berkeley. He was convicted of the charges in March 1986. Police say that the Berkeley temple was always well-stocked with arms when Hansadutta was there and that his followers were often convicted on robbery, extortion and other criminal charges.

Official Krishna spokesmen have insisted that whatever crimes the sect's members committed were the misdeeds of individuals who had fallen from grace. Even the harshest critics concede that the great majority of Krishna devotees have gone about their religious worship and duties untouched by such wrongdoing. The Krishna temple in Philadelphia, for example, has remained aloof from the controversies, as have most other local temples. But the allegations at the heart of the current criminal investigations — those launched since the murder of Steven Bryant — go beyond the misdeeds of individuals. These new investigations contemplate a Krishna hierarchy that is itself rife with corruption, and a board of governors that is powerless to control renegade gurus.

THE BOGUS GURUS

SHORTLY BEFORE HE WAS murdered, Bryant had talked of dying to the woman he'd planned to marry. They were up in the mountains of central California, near Se-

quoia National Park, and the grandeur of that setting did little to relieve the sense of frustration he felt. For two years, he had fought to expose the hierarchy of the Krishna sect. But now, in the mountains, he seemed finally to have grown tired. His Berkeley friends who saw him said the same thing: *Steve had reached the end of his rope*. Privately, now, he acknowledged that he might not be able to achieve his goals. At least not while still alive.

"Upon my death," he told his girlfriend, "that's when everything will unfold."

She didn't like him to talk that way, but Steve wouldn't stop. "When I die, then everyone will see," he said.

"Don't die for a cause," she told him. But Steve said it was his destiny.

The primary focus of his crusade had been New Vrindaban, the lavishly appointed commune in West Virginia. Bryant wanted to see it destroyed. He made no bones about that. He was angry at the guru Bhaktipada, whom he blamed for interfering in his previous marriage. That had been the start of his crusade, really — a domestic conflict, little more.

Of course, it soon became something more. Bryant became the leader of an underground resistance movement aimed at the entire Krishna organization. Even so, Steve said from the beginning that he would stop fighting if his wife would quit worshipping Bhaktipada and come with him to California. She refused, and divorced him. So he altered his demands. He wrote her letters and called her on the telephone, pleading: She could do what she wanted with her life but just let him have his two sons and he would be content. But that request, too, was denied. Afterward, for Steve, there had been no turning back.

Steven Leslie Bryant had joined the Krishna movement in 1974. Spiritually unfulfilled and searching, he had started attending churches of different denominations with his friends while still a high school student in suburban Detroit. Then, at age 21, he found the Krishnas. Or they found him.

Started in New York in the mid-1960s by an ailing Indian swami named A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, the Krishna movement had grown quickly from a handful of former hippies into an international religion, with temples, schools and communes in 50 countries, in cities as diverse as Bombay, Bangkok and Boston. Early support by the likes of Allen Ginsberg, Timothy Leary, the Grateful Dead and the Jefferson Airplane helped introduce the sect to thousands of youths for whom the main mode of transcendence previously had been drugs. But once the celebrities snared the young people's attention, it was Prabhupada's philosophy that kept them. It was a Hindu-based philosophy, thousands of years old. But it spawned a movement that was both a product of the rebellious era of the '60s and, in its firm stand against permissiveness and drugs, a reaction against it.

Atreya Rishi das, a Berkeley member of the sect's governing board, explained why the original American converts were so attracted: "We were all hippies. We were young disillusioned people, and we had no trust for any authority of any sort. And then this man [Prabhupada]

came, and he exhibited qualities. We were attracted by him because he showed something very, very genuine."

Prabhupada had come to America from India in 1965. Sponsored by an engineer of Indian descent who lived in Butler, Pa., the robed holy man spent two relatively uneventful months in Pennsylvania, then traveled alone by bus to New York City, where eventually he set up shop in a storefront on the Lower East Side and began attracting college students.

"It was incredible," said Rishi. "In five or six short years, he had thousands of real followers who did a lot for him. He had centers all around the world."

And then, on Nov. 14, 1977, Prabhupada died. That was when the trouble began.

Upon the 81-year-old master's death, 11 of his oldest and closest disciples took up the mantle of guru. Declaring themselves Krishna's new representatives, they continued to expand

the movement, initiating new members, raising funds, accepting worship, sitting atop thrones, just as Prabhupada had done in the last years of his life (one of the new gurus is even said to have used a gold leaf toilet seat and gold dinner plates) and, basically, building for themselves near-autonomous empires around the world. While Prabhupada was alive, he initiated an estimated 10,000 people into the religion. Although the sect now claims a North American membership of two million, many Krishnas think that as many as 80 percent of the original devotees have left the movement, many because they disputed the spiritual authority of Prabhupada's successors.

The thrust of Steven Bryant's message, in fact, was that the 11 successor gurus were bogus — that they had usurped Prabhupada's movement, using it to acquire more and more power for themselves.

Bryant had not been among those who protested the ascension of the 11 from the start, although the appointments did cause widespread dissension within the sect. It took the separation of Bryant from his family

at New Vrindaban to get him involved in the reform movement. By then the gurus, one by one, already were falling from grace. "Eight little, seven little, six little Indians. . . ." This became a favorite ditty of devotees as they contemplated the dramatic series of fall-downs.

One guru, Jayatirtha, who had been based in London, was expelled by the governing board in the early 1980s after he began openly espousing the use of LSD in worship services. Next came the excommunication of Hansadutta at Berkeley. Two gurus — Ramesvara Maharaj, the guru for Southern California, and Bhagavan Maharaj, who was overseer of parts of Europe, Africa and the Middle East — resigned under pressure last year to get married. They both had been under fire for breaking their chastity vows, thus proving themselves to be less than Prabhupada's equals, as they had claimed. And the governing board has been trying for months to remove a fifth guru, Bhavananda Vishnupada of Australia, for similarly breaking his vows. Thus far he has refused to step down.

Those who opposed the gurus' taking power from the start say it has all happened because the 11 were never fit to become

gurus in the first place.

SULOCANA'S WAR

NEVER ONE TO DO ANYTHING halfway, Bryant, in taking a stand against the gurus, made the fight his life. Crisscrossing the country in one aging vehicle or another, he preached his message for two years, starting in 1984. He wrote pamphlets, won supporters and tape-recorded interviews with other devotees across the country about criminal and moral wrongdoing within the sect. Both in manner and method, he distanced himself from the larger reform movement within the society, which he considered ineffectual. He saw himself as waging an underground war over the soul of the Krishna religion.

It was an effort that some feared might erupt into an actual violent, small-scale holy war. Bryant fed such fears with his ranting and his threats, which grew more desperate and frequent as his crusade started to falter.

"He was an intolerably uncontrolled person," said Nalini Kanta das, president of the Krishna temple in Berkeley and a part of the mainstream reform movement. "He was at my house about a week before he was killed. He was getting tired of his crusade a little bit, but he was really out of control of himself. I had to ask him to leave. . . . He himself was using drugs. He was using foul language. He was brandishing weapons and threatening death to the gurus."

Bryant was writing a book, an expose of the movement. Probably, he lacked the patience and discipline ever to assemble it into a coherent publishable work, but the collected mass of essays, documents, letters and transcribed conversations offer a fascinating study of his state of mind as his war broadened from a personal struggle against one man into something akin to an underground guerrilla movement with an estimated 200 supporters, most of them on the West Coast. Part theological tract and part confession, it is the public journal of a man who is near the point of breakdown and knows it, but who keeps pushing, grasping at straws, turning from one blocked avenue to another.

"The violence being enacted upon Prabhupada and his mission is far worse than anything that could possibly happen to any of us in our efforts to stop it," he writes at one point. "Therefore, if the demoniac imposition refuses to surrender to Prabhupada's instructions, then we have no choice but to fight them. If we experience death in this way, it will be glorious."

More to the point, he writes elsewhere: "It is only a matter of time before each 'guru' is dead or wishes he were. This is just a fact of life. Their fate is sealed by their own actions."

Only three months before he was killed, Bryant had appeared in Marshall County, W.Va., drunk on vodka and packing a loaded .45-caliber semiautomatic pistol. When he was arrested — after his ex-wife's new husband, who was also a Krishna devotee, filed a harassment complaint — Steve freely told the police that he had come to kill the guru Bhaktipada.

This was after Steve had appealed unsuccessfully to the Krishna governing board for help in censuring Bhaktipada and reuniting his family, and after he had been told by journalists and by law-enforcement authorities that he did not have enough proof of crimes at New Vrindaban

for them to take action.

In his drunken state, he told Donald Bordenkircher, the square-jawed, silver-haired sheriff of Marshall County, that he had brought friends with him from California and that others already had come quietly to infiltrate the commune. Together, Steve said, they would put an end to the reign of the bogus gurus once and for all.

This news came as a jolt to Bordenkircher. He didn't know what to make of it. Bordenkircher had met Bryant once before, in late 1985, and had spent hours talking to him. Steven Bryant had then seemed an intelligent, articulate and deeply sincere young man. In fact, Bryant had been afraid. He told Bordenkircher that men from New Vrindaban wanted to kill him, and he asked the sheriff to take him into protective custody in the county jail, which Bordenkircher did.

Shortly after Steve had left town that first time, the guru Bhaktipada was nearly killed in a savage attack at the commune. A transient devotee, saying he wanted to cleanse the religion, attacked the guru in public, bludgeoning him on the head with an iron pipe.

Bryant, by now long gone, wrote a three-page letter to the jailed assailant. "I don't believe we have met," it began, "but I wanted to let you know that there are many of us out here who are grateful for what you've done." The assailant, whose name was Michael Shockman, has since been released after serving a 15-month sentence for assault.

As Bhaktipada lay in a coma in a Pittsburgh hospital after undergoing operations, the Krishnas at the commune all accused Bryant of masterminding the attack, but the allegation could not be proved. Bordenkircher surmised that the assailant had known of Bryant's crusade only from afar and had been moved to violent action by Bryant's writings, which were widely disseminated among Krishna devotees.

THE GURU BHAKTIPADA HAD first embraced Krishna Consciousness back in the mid-1960s, when his name was still Keith Ham. Forsaking his hippie lifestyle, he had moved into the converted storefront on Second Avenue in Lower Manhattan that then served as Krishna headquarters. He had been the first of Prabhupada's followers to shave his head and walk the streets wearing saffron robes, just as later he became the first disciple to take the vows of priesthood. According to a book written by his former roommate and sold at the commune, Ham once went in his robes to apply for welfare but was told that first he would need psychiatric testing. When he checked himself into Bellevue, they locked him up. He was diagnosed as a "malignant schizophrenic." His release was won several weeks later only with the aid of a Jungian psychiatrist recommended by Allen Ginsberg. Ham's father also came down from Long Island to help free his son, on the condition that Keith give up this religion, which his father considered Satanic-cult worship, and go back home to become a Christian. Ham promised, but on the way home he jumped out of the car and ran all the way

back to Second Avenue and his swami.

Today, hundreds if not thousands of devotees around the world worship Bhaktipada — consider him, in fact, to be the only true guru, Krishna's one pure devotee. But hundreds more despise him, partly because he maintains that his authority as a guru is higher than the authority of the Krishna governing board — which appointed the 11 gurus in the first place — and he has often ignored rulings of the board.

He is equally disliked by many residents and officials of the rural communities surrounding New Vrindaban. In 1973, about half a dozen men on motorcycles rode onto the commune armed with guns. One of them claimed that the Krishnas had taken his daughter, a charge that Bhaktipada denies. They shot four devotees, none fatally, and then some of the men marched Bhaktipada out of the temple at gunpoint and forced him to climb a hill. "They said, 'You're going out to dig your grave,'" the guru recalls.

At that point, he says, his would-be assassins were frightened away. "In the temple, [the other intruders] started throwing things around. They threw the dieties, the marble dieties, off the altar, and it made such a noise that the men who were taking me up the hill heard it and they became scared. They ran back down."

After that, the commune started stockpiling weapons, and armed guards were assigned to patrol the grounds.

So, when Michael Shockman attacked the guru in 1985, authorities knew that violence at the commune was not without precedent. They also knew of the intense feelings Bhaktipada aroused both inside and outside the sect. They did not believe, therefore, that Bryant necessarily was behind the attack. But, when Bryant showed up in Marshall County with a gun early last year, everyone had reason to wonder.

"When Steven was brought in, he was terribly vocal," Bordenkircher says, recalling the night of Bryant's arrest. "He was almost like a different Steven Bryant than the fellow we saw when he was here before. When he was here before, he was vehemently wanting to exercise his constitutional right of free speech and requested protective custody in his endeavors to do just that. The second time he returned was without notice. He had a loaded gun on him. He had some booze in him. And he was saying he'd brought friends with him, that he had friends in the community up there and that he was here to finish the job Shockman started."

"So the second time he returned," said the sheriff, "Steven Bryant is not the hunted but appears clearly to be the hunter."

Bordenkircher obtained a warrant to search the apartment Bryant had been keeping in a tiny village south of Moundsville. They found a small amount of LSD and marijuana in the room, but because the search warrant had been specifically to seek evidence of a murder conspiracy, they couldn't prosecute him for possession. But the authorities now had to ask themselves: Just who are the bad guys

here? Who is it that needs protection from whom?

THE TEMPLE ON THE HILL

BY NOW, SEEING THE effect Bryant's crusade was having on him, some of his friends started to counsel him to let Bhaktipada keep control of his family. "We used to have arguments," said one friend from northern California who'd also had bad experiences at New Vrindaban in the early 1980s. "I'd say, 'Steve, why in the hell don't you just forget about it? What's the point? You've got your whole life ahead of you. Forget about it.'"

This would seem to have been not unreasonable advice. There was no hope by now of Steve's ever regaining his wife, Jane, or Jamuna devi dasi, as she now is called. She'd divorced him in November 1984 and gotten custody of their two sons. She remarried soon after the divorce.

In sad, angry, long-distance telephone conversations after he had left in 1984, Steve would beg her to follow him to California with the children, but she wouldn't budge. Women in the Krishna sect have few rights and are taught to be subject to their husbands' demands, but Bhaktipada gave Jane his personal permission to stay at New Vrindaban without Steve. Her relationship with Steve, Bhaktipada told her, was only physical, whereas with the guru, it was eternal.

Steve and Jane had gotten married in England in 1979. *Sweet and naive* are the words most often used to describe Jane. Steve said as much in his writings, and her current husband uses the terms now. She is dark-haired, petite, and reminds one in manner and voice, except for her British accent, of the actress Rosanna Arquette. She had been a hippie in London when she started hanging around the Krishnas, wanting to learn more about their religion. Friends suggested that she could learn a lot by marrying a devotee. Steve, meanwhile, had been having problems following the religion's strict rules against, among other things, illicit sex. His friends persuaded him that having a wife would help him.

Jane now complains that Steve mistreated her and did not follow the religion's rules during their marriage. But they both tried to make a go of it, even though she hated the constant wandering from place to place. Steve would not settle down. From England they

moved to New Vrindaban in 1980. Or, rather, Jane moved. Steve came later, after traveling in India without her. Then, in 1982, he moved the family cross-country to California for a year. Jane already had fallen in love with New Vrindaban, which she said reminded her of Vrindaban, India, the sacred place where Krishna is said to have appeared 5,000 years ago. She did not want to leave.

The 4,000-acre commune sits in the hills of West Virginia's northern panhandle, 75 miles southwest of Pittsburgh. The largest Hare Krishna commune in the world, it is a sprawling architectural curiosity: part holy shrine, part dairy farm, part glitzy tourist trap and home to 700 Krishna devotees, all of whom worship Bhaktipada as the latest in a line of spiritually pure teachers that goes back five centuries.

Jane felt at home there. She didn't want to leave, but she felt it was her duty to go where her husband led. In California, she says, her life was hell. Steve wouldn't let her worship the picture of Bhaktipada she tried to keep in the house. And she had to listen while Steve's friends bad-mouthed the gurus.

In California, says Jane, Steve picked up bad habits, such as reading right-wing books that warned of a Communist takeover of the country. He began buying guns, she says, and even talked — in a way she did not take seriously — about becoming a political assassin. Once, he even got a friend of his to fashion a crude silencer, although why he needed it was never clear.

"He was kind of fanatical in a lot of ways," Jane says. "He'd get an idea and he'd get really enthusiastic about it. But it's kind of eccentric, really eccentric at the same time."

On one occasion, while they were living out in California, he had demanded that Jane's 5-year-old son by a previous marriage be sent back alone to West Virginia to live in an ashram and attend a Krishna school. As Steve later admitted ashamedly in his writings, he had not been able to abide the presence of another man's child in their house.

"He took me out on the freeway and made me try to hitch a ride," Jane says. "I had to stop people and ask them if they'd take my son to West Virginia. The whole time, I was telling him the whole idea was ludicrous. First of all, how do you find anyone who at that particular point is going to West Virginia? Then, if you find them, how do you persuade them to

earlier. He spent much of the last two weeks of his life with her up in the mountains, near Sequoia National Park, not far from Fresno. In the stunning beauty of that natural setting, they had talked of getting married.

He was there with her when, a few days before his death, his shadow — or a man his girlfriend took to be his shadow — made his presence known. The couple had been driving together on a mountain road, on their way to an isolated swimming hole in the hills, when Bryant pulled into the parking lot of a store, and a second vehicle pulled right up beside him. The driver of the other car, a man, waited until Bryant had gone inside.

"Then he came up and started talking to me," recalls the wo-

THE SUSPICIOUS STRANGER

AT LEAST FOR SEVERAL days before his death, Bryant felt sure that he was being shadowed by someone. Bhaktipada says that members of his sect, without the guru's knowledge, had kept Bryant under surveillance for a time in West Virginia before his arrest there, but that, to his understanding, the surveillance did not continue after Bryant's release from jail. Investigators say, however, that Bryant was followed all the way to Los Angeles.

After leaving West Virginia last April, Steve went to his parents' home in Michigan for three weeks before continuing his last trek west to California. He had met a woman there in Three Rivers about nine months

and then, after waiting around the commune for Jane to come with him, he drove up the road a few miles to Wheeling. Steve was still hoping that he might be able to persuade her to follow him. Eventually, she did come, but she was accompanied by a group of men from New Vrindaban who took the two children away.

"And then, after he left, he started a whole series of threatening phone calls to me, saying that if I didn't leave that he was going to destroy New Vrindaban," she recalls. "He said he was going to destroy Bhaktipada — all kinds of different threats. He said: 'If you'll just leave and come with me, then I won't do anything.' But I didn't really take these threats too seriously. I felt, well, what could he do anyway?"

"The things that he is accusing New Vrindaban of — this is the thing that really makes me so mad — are the things that he was guilty of himself," she says.

In 1983, after about a year in California, they began a two-month trek back to West Virginia, making numerous stops along the way. This time, when they finally arrived, Jane was determined to stay. She quickly was accepted back into the community and went to work at the children's day-care center. Bhaktipada refused, however, to give Steve a job at the commune. Angry, Steve decided, in 1984, to move back to California. This was when Jane refused to go.

When Steve left, he took his two sons, aged 3 and 1, with him. He loaded them up with his possessions in his motor home

take along a kid? A couple of people stopped, but most of the time they were going just up the road, you know. My only hope was that it wouldn't happen, that it was too ludicrous." Next, she said, he tried to force her to send the child across country alone on a bus. She protested, and finally he relented and bought an airplane ticket for the boy, who is now 9.

Bryant would travel to India for several months every year on money-making ventures. Often he would bring back precious gems to use in his jewelry-making business. The last time he made the trip while they were married, in 1984, she heard later that he had smuggled hashish and opium back with him.

man, who, like nearly everyone Bryant associated with, also is a devotee of Krishna. "He asked if the van was from Detroit. He said it looked familiar." The man asked a few more questions and then he walked away. She became frightened.

IT WAS IN THIS FEARFUL atmosphere that Bryant made plans for his last trip to Los Angeles. Steve earned his living by making and selling religious jewelry, pendants that featured the likenesses of Hindu deities. At least, that was his preferred product. When the Hindu jewelry wasn't selling and he needed money fast, he added a line of Christian jewelry. Like many Krishna devotees, Bryant was receiving welfare, but that wasn't enough. Once, in California, he'd grown a crop of marijuana with the aim of selling it, and he even bought a large stack of Playboy magazines to help him fashion a line of erotic jewelry — anything that would sell. During his travels, he carried his jewelry-making equipment with him in the back of his van, so he could work on the road. Now he wanted to settle in one place and start a new life. But first, he wanted to go to Los Angeles and sell the jewelry business, the mainstay of the old life.

So the trip to L.A. was impor-

tant both to Steve and to his girlfriend. But after the incident in the parking lot, she pleaded with him not to go.

His friends say he was torn by conflicts those last weeks. "He was living out of his van," says Kanta, the Berkeley temple president. "His van was a mess. It was very dirty, clothes strewn everywhere — it was like his state of mind. He was very disturbed."

But Kanta adds: "He was also coming to the realization that what he was doing was not being effective and that he was hurting his own spiritual life as well. . . . It's ironic that he got killed, because he was about ready to give up the fight."

Other friends dispute this last point. Only this much is known for sure about his intentions: He planned to go to L.A. and meet with a devotee who wanted to buy the jewelry-making equipment. Then, as soon as it could be arranged, he would marry his intended bride and move with her and her two children to the mountains of northern California, where he would start a new business, converting vans, such as the one he drove, into mobile homes.

He wanted to make the move quickly, within the next few days, but she had resisted the quick uprooting. "If I had

known he would be killed," she says, "I would've just gotten out and just moved like he wanted to." But then, after the incident with the man at the store, she feared that he was in immediate danger, and she urged him to postpone selling the jewelry equipment. She wanted him to keep a low profile and stay away from L.A., but he said no. He said it wouldn't be any safer to wait.

THE LAST SUPPER

WHILE BRYANT'S DESIRE to get married and settle down did not necessarily mean that he

was ready to give up his fight against the gurus, it certainly meant that the nature of his crusade was about to change. The woman who was to become his wife says he was prepared to devote his time to the family, his new business and his book, which was to be called *The Guru Business*. But others who knew him say the frustrations of his struggles had only made him more desperate. Shortly before he was killed, in fact, he had worked himself into such a state, according to one friend, that he was on the verge of doing something drastic — something

that would draw nationwide attention while diminishing, by one, the number of gurus he accused of polluting the Krishna religion.

Beatrice Wolfe, a disenchanted devotee who was a part of Bryant's underground movement, says that Bryant talked of going to L.A. to kill the guru who headed the Los Angeles temple. He wanted to do this, says Wolfe, because "he didn't believe that he could go back and get [Bhaktipada] because he had too many people around him."

Whatever Bryant's intentions on that final trip of his to Los Angeles, he never got the opportunity to fulfill them. He was shot and killed not much more than 24 hours after arriving in town.

On the night he died, Bryant had spent the evening with a group of friends, including two men who were guards at the Los Angeles temple and therefore worshipers of the very guru that Bryant, by one account, had supposedly planned to kill. Afterward, he went to the home of his old friend, the last person to see him alive, who lived mere blocks from the L.A. Krishna complex and temple. This friend was also a disillusioned devotee whom Steve had met years before in India.

"He came over around 10. . . . I cooked dinner and we ate and had a good time, you know," the friend recalls. The two of them laughed and talked for at least two hours as Wednesday night eased into Thursday morning. "We were rolling on the floor that night, laughing," his friend says. "We had a great time. . . . One time I said something that struck him funny and he grabbed his stomach and literally rolled on the floor, he was laughing so hard. It wasn't that he was like a fanatic all the time. He wasn't like that."

Around 1 a.m., Bryant said goodnight.

His friend recalls: "I said, 'If I don't see you tomorrow morning' — because oftentimes when he was in L.A. he'd come by about 7 to make sure I got up in time to go to work — 'if I don't see you in the morning, I'll see you in the evening. Come by and we'll have dinner.'"

"He said fine."

Steve got into his van and drove away. His friend immediately went to bed. "I was dead tired — it was 1 o'clock — and I turned out the lights immediately. Within five minutes I was lying down."

That's when he heard the

shots: Bang! Bang!

"And something inside of me, in my gut, went" — he clutched at his stomach, whispering the words — "*Something's happened to Sulocana*. And then I said, *Don't be crazy*. The intelligence, the so-called intelligence, said, *Don't be crazy*. I lay there for a minute, and then a second later, I heard like cars going vroooooom! You know, rushing from the same area as the shots. . . . It was a car roaring down the street. I said, *Something is coming down, man*. So I jump up and run to the front door and look. . . . This car, vroooooom, rushes by. *What's this about?* Then I listen. . . . Nothing. . . . Then another car roars by. . . . I listen again. . . . Nothing."

"What am I going to do — you know, I'm in my underwear — start walking through the neighborhood? I don't hear anything. You hear gunshots all the time in L.A. So . . . go back to sleep."

WHEN BRYANT'S FRIEND Beatrice Wolfe heard about the killing, her daughter got on the telephone. She called someone she knew who was living at New Vrindaban.

"I was standing right there," says Wolfe. "I heard the conversation. She said, 'So you've gone and killed Sulocana.' And he said, 'Oh, yeah. Right. Tirtha was going to go out there and do that.' Just like that, he said it."

"I called the police right away," Wolfe says.

Five days later, Thomas A. Drescher, whose spiritual name is Tirtha, was arrested. Working on a tip from informants, police in Kent, Ohio, spotted his Isuzu Trooper II as he drove through town with a friend and his family, with nearly all his belongings piled into the back. Police followed him until he pulled into the parking lot of a bank in the small Ohio town, about 50 miles from the West Virginia border.

Drescher, 37, who lived in nearby Ravenna, Ohio, surrendered without resistance. He was carrying with him more than \$4,000 in cash and detailed surveillance notes on Bryant's movements during his last days in California. He had cleaned out his trailer shortly before he was arrested, and police believe he was preparing to flee the country.

The day after Drescher's arrest, in an incident police believe is connected, Randall Gorby, a West Virginia informant who helped authorities make the case against Drescher, was seriously burned when his house was leveled by an explosion.

Murder-for-hire charges have been filed against Drescher in Los Angeles in connection with Steve Bryant's death. Drescher has pleaded not guilty and is awaiting trial. He had already been convicted in West Virginia — in December — of murdering a devotee named Charles St. Denis in New Vrindaban in 1983. St. Denis' body — along with that of another man, as yet unidentified — was recently found by police at New Vrindaban, buried in a creek bed.

Bhaktipada, the guru, says Drescher has had no official ties with the Krishna community since before the 1983 murder. Krishna leaders describe him as one of the commune's many hangers-on — former Krishna members who have proved themselves unable to abide by the religion's strict rules but who continue to live on or near the commune. In early 1983, Drescher had been excommunicated, they say.

Police say, though, that Drescher was still involved with the Krishnas. Kent, Ohio, police officer Ron Piatt, one of the two officers who arrested Drescher, says Drescher maintained close contact with the sect's leaders. For example, Drescher represented the sect in talks with a Kent real estate agent last year about buying a building for use as a Krishna center, Piatt says.

And Drescher has told federal investigators that Bhaktipada paid him between \$3,000 and \$4,000 to keep an eye on Bryant and other Krishna dissidents. Drescher admits that he was one of the men who followed Bryant, but he denies killing him.

The guru acknowledges that Drescher received \$3,000 indirectly from him shortly before Bryant was killed. The money, says Bhaktipada, had been loaned to the president of the Krishna temple in Cleveland for the purchase of a van for a food distribution program. Since the arrest, the Cleveland president has left the country.

"Now unbeknownst to me, but not illegally, he made arrangements to buy a vehicle from Thomas Drescher," says Bhaktipada. "I didn't know where he was buying the vehicle; but even if he had told me, I'd have no reason to think that it was wrong. That money was given to Drescher in exchange for a vehicle." The guru said that he had nothing to do with Bryant's death.

A GROWING NUMBER OF disenchanted devotees are coming forward now to denounce New Vrindaban and other Krishna centers as sites for drug

operations, child abuse and other crimes. Most of these people refuse to allow their names to appear in print. Many have moved several times since Bryant's death, afraid to remain in any one place too long. They have gone, truly, underground.

Because she worked with Bryant, Wolfe now says she also expects to die. "I'm pretty sure something probably will happen to me, and to my daughter and her children," she says.

"There's a lot of paranoia," agrees a friend of Bryant's in the Berkeley area. "You can get killed for talking." He predicts that this fear, coupled with the devotees' religious zealotry, will make it hard for authorities to win much cooperation from potential witnesses.

Many members of the sect tend to view the investigations as the work of Krishna. "These purifications that are taking place — all these conflicts — are essential purifications because God wants to see that the essence of Prabhupada's teachings remain," said Atreya Rishi, a governing board member who opposes the "one-man dictatorial regimes" of the gurus.

Meanwhile, Bhaktipada, for his part, has launched a nationwide public relations campaign aimed at countering the allegations against him. In recent months, he has visited Philadelphia and other major cities, giving interviews and distributing literature denouncing religious persecution. His literature characterizes the allegations of drug trafficking, murder and child abuse by Krishnas at New Vrindaban as "the most bigoted type of harassment" by "a handful of motivated local politicians and a fringe group of ex-Hare Krishna devotees on the West Coast."

As for the criminal investigations, Bhaktipada says that they "will only show that we are what we say we are — religious people who have no other business than to serve God. . . . Of course, I'd be a fool to say everyone who chants *Hare Krishna* follows all the principles [of the religion], but I don't think the same scrutiny is put to other religions either. So far, there are only allegations and no evidence. This is un-American, isn't it?"

Bhaktipada has also suggested that the wave of negative publicity might be part of God's "special plan" for the spread of Krishna Consciousness.

"Perhaps it has no other purpose," he said, "than to make us very famous. . . . It's a preaching opportunity, which we plan to take full advantage of."