

Krishna sect splintering in top ranks

By Carl Remensky
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Internal conflict threatens to splinter the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, founded 20 years ago to spread an ancient Hindu doctrine worldwide.

Scholars within and outside of the movement speculate that some gurus — spiritual leaders of the religion — may dissociate themselves from ISKCON because of disputes with the society's central authority.

One of the gurus they are concerned about is Kirtanananda Swami Bhaktipada, powerful guru of New Vrindaban, the Krishna settlement near Moundsville, W.Va.

Bhaktipada has alarmed the Governing Body Commission by establishing new temples in New York City and Bombay, India, both outside of his assigned geographic zone. In an interview, he said he will not stop such expansion because he believes it is a legitimate preaching function.

ISKCON was founded by A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, a missionary from India who died in 1977. While he lived, Prabhupada was the only spiritual master in the movement; however, he appointed 11 of his disciples to preach after he died. Since then, the number of gurus has grown to 33.

Krishna gurus, who are assigned specific regions of influence, teach

not only through scripture but also by example and are required to practice an ascetic lifestyle. They have absolute authority over their followers' spiritual lives and the affairs of their financially autonomous temples.

To ensure the purity of doctrine being preached by his successors, Prabhupada established the Governing Body Commission. It is made up of 22 members, some of them gurus and the remainder senior disciples.

If the gurus do break with ISKCON, the most serious consequence would be the inability of the GBC to carry out its charge, observed Larry D. Shinn, dean of the college of arts and sciences at Bucknell University in Lewisburg, Union County.

"ISKCON, as a missionary movement, is in danger of being fragmented beyond recognition" into individual temples or regional organizations with no central authority to ensure the purity of the theology, he said.

Shinn has studied the Hare Krishna movement for six years and lived in 14 Krishna temples in the United States and India for four months. He has written a book about the movement to be published next spring.

Conflict has arisen because, according to the ancient teachings of the religion, a guru's authority over



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Commune leader Kirtanananda Swami Bhaktipada rests on his canes.

his disciples is absolute.

"It's a spiritual vs. temporal problem," Shinn said. "How do you tell these gurus on the one hand that they are the supreme avenue to God, and then on the other hand tell them that they have to work cooperatively within an institutional framework?"

Steven Gelberg, ISKCON's direc-

tor for interreligious affairs, said rather than a major schism, many devotees are concerned that the movement is losing cohesiveness.

"There is a feeling that each area is developing its own personality ... that rather than being a unified international movement, it is developing into a federation of individual ISKCONs," Gelberg said.

Some devotees have accused Bhaktipada of trying to take over more than \$1 million in assets of the Berkeley, Calif., temple, in a lawsuit filed in federal court in June by leaders of the temple and ISKCON's representative for the San Francisco Bay area. He was accused of getting control of the assets by manipulating former officers of the temple.

The guru denied he was involved and said he was named in the lawsuit only because some of the former officers now live at New Vrindaban. ISKCON officials said the Berkeley temple has dropped the suit and the matter will be mediated by the GBC.

Shinn said he believes Bhaktipada's expansion efforts could be intended to bolster New Vrindaban's financial base to fund ambitious construction plans at the West Virginia community.

Bhaktipada founded New Vrindaban on the order of Prabhupada. To fulfill Prabhupada's request, a \$70 million plan includes construction of temples, a radio station, a hotel and other facilities.

Bhaktipada said the construction is being financed primarily by individual donations. The community has raised between \$3 million and \$4 million in its best year, he said.

The Krishnas have lost momentum in this country because the counterculture, from which ISKCON had drawn many members in the 1960s, had faded; anti-cult campaigners had made the Hindu sect a target; and, most importantly, the religion was becoming institutionalized and had lost much of the emotional appeal that had made it attractive during its early years, Shinn explained.

He said the religion also has suffered because "significant" numbers of its devotees initiated by Prabhupada have left the movement since his death because they questioned the status of new gurus.

"There was a growing percep-

tion on the part of many of Prabhupada's disciples that some of the new gurus were becoming carried away by their position and abusing their authority," said Gelberg, who has been a Krishna devotee for 16 years. "Controversies grew, in part, because Prabhupada's position was being eclipsed by the new gurus" as they initiated more devotees and Prabhupada's disciples became a minority in the movement, he said.

The debate has intensified because four of the 11 gurus who succeeded Prabhupada have left the religion or have been discredited. Two failed to remain celibate, one was arrested on weapons charges and another was not chanting his mantra, as the religion requires.

In 1985, ISKCON reported it had 5,000 initiated members in North America and 10,000 worldwide, and 2 million congregational members in North America and 50 million worldwide. Initiated members live in ISKCON centers — there are more than 200 worldwide — and devote their lives to service of the religion. Congregational members follow the religion but maintain their careers and homes.

Shinn believes those figures are high. He estimated that there are about 2,500 initiated adult members in North America.

Prabhupada, the founder of the movement, was an Indian pharmacist who abandoned his business, renounced his family, became a monk and — on the order of his guru — traveled to the West as a Hindu missionary.

The movement has roots in a traditional Hindu bhakti — devotional — faith which originated more than a century before the birth of Christ. It is based on the scripture Bhagavad-gita, "The Song of God" as spoken by Krishna, an incarnation of the supreme being, to a warrior in India 5,000 years ago.