

Hare Krishna Sect Children Reared in Isolation on Ancient Mysticism

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DALLAS—Each morning before dawn the children of Lord Krishna arise to the tinkling of bells in their Gurukula, a commune school so alien to its surroundings in a run-down neighborhood here that it seems another world.

And well it might be for these 100 children of Hare Krishna devotees. The boys and girls are sent here from across the United States to be raised in a monkish existence of Eastern mysticism cut off from the outside world and amid clouds of incense, drumbeats and recitations from Bhagavad Gita, a Hindu spiritual text.

"These people," said Dr. Emileo Alonzo, a physician who treats the commune adults and children, "are regressing into the 13 and 14 century."

The children range in age from 3½ to 11, and most are from California, particularly the Los Angeles area, which is the headquarters of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, founded in 1965 by a retired Indian businessman, A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada.

The Gurukula leaders, most of whom have had little experience with children or teaching, are left to their own devices. There are 60 adults in the commune, most of them nonteaching workers.

The commune costs about \$10,000 a month to operate. The biggest expenses are fresh vegetables and fruit, milk and the mortgage. The property, an old church, cost about \$150,000. Eight small houses are rented nearby and used for the youngest children.

Parents are supposed to pay \$100 a month for the support of the children, but only about 50% of them do. Almost all the money for the operation comes from the sales of incense produced by the movement's Los Angeles factory, called Spiritual Sky, Inc.

The movement's members have become a familiar sight in most large U.S. cities, wearing saffron robes, their foreheads daubed with paste, hopping up and down and chanting "Hare Krishna."

The girls in the Gurukula are encouraged to be submissive; women are not considered as intelligent as men. Celibacy plays an important role in the lives of the adults. Many of the girls and some of the women wear rings in their noses as a mark of chastity, the holes made with sewing machine needles.

The boys' heads are shaved, except for a top knot, so Krishna can yank them into heaven at the proper time. The boys wear dhotis, an orange wrap-around garment.

Alonzo, who practices at the East Dallas Clinic, said he prescribes plenty of vitamins for the children to make up for a lack of protein in their vegetarian

diet. He said most of the children are pale because they seldom get into the sun. But he said the children are healthy and a nurse who worked with him said she had never seen an unhappy child at the commune.

A reporter saw no signs of mistreatment at the commune but neither was there any sign of affection toward the children from the adults.

A source close to the school, who asked to remain anonymous, said many of the children come from "destroyed families" where the way of life consisted of "hamburgers and LSD."

"The children are treated in a regimented manner at the school but for many of them it is better than what they had before," he said, explaining that many of the parents have been involved with drugs and entered the Hare Krishna movement "as the last step to save themselves from a mental institution or the penitentiary."

The single goal of the school is to make priests of the boys. At age 10, most of them go on to a farm in West Virginia.

The parents of the children have "a complete lack of interest in material things, and a complete devotion only to a spiritual god, and they get divorced from their own children," the source said. "Their children don't mean anything to them."

The parents usually see the children twice a year, provided they are willing to visit the Gurukula in Dallas.

The teachings of the Gurukula are based on Vedic philosophy, stretching back to a Hindu history and culture that existed between 2000 and 500 BC. The children's lives are centered on the worship and consciousness of Krishna, whom the movement believes appeared on earth about 5,000 years ago.

"We don't teach math and science," the headmaster said. "We teach through the Bhagavad Gita. We don't want to teach physical education or Texas state history."

A booklet describing the commune school notes that it is a "venture designed just to produce and enlighten a class of men to uplift the world."

The schooling, what there is of it, largely ignores the girls, who wear ankle-length saris and keep their heads covered.

"We cover our heads so that we will not attract men. It makes us chaste," said Anuraedha, a 9-year-old. She wore a small golden ring in her nose. She said she made the hole for it with a sewing needle. It hurt, she said, but was worth the pain.

The typical day in the Gurukula starts with showers for everyone. The showers maintain cleanliness and everyone takes at least two or three a day. The showers are also used by the adults to ward off lust.

Married couples are permitted sexual union only once a month and then only at the optimum time for conception.

The children spend hours sitting on the floor, or dancing, swaying or chanting in a large, incense-filled room before a beflowered altar of Krishna. Some beat drums or ring bells.

The children's day begins at 4 a.m. and ends at 7:30 p.m. when, segregated by sex and age, they go to sleep on mats on designated places on the concrete floor of a damp, windowless room in the church basement.

The school's headmaster is Michael Wright of Pasadena. He attended college there briefly after three years in the Marine Corps. His spiritual name is Dayanadadas.

"Our system of education requires that the children be separated from their parents," Wright said. He said the school was founded 2½ years ago with only 15 children.

Separating children from their parents is a "strengthening factor" for the children "to make them stronger," he said, "but it is not designed to destroy family ties."

The women take care of the younger children; as the children become older, they become more regimented, Wright said.

The first religious service is at 4:30 a.m. and lasts about 45 minutes. Devotional activities continue until 8:30 a.m., when some of the youngest children go back to sleep.

There are six daily offerings of food to Krishna and, as in the classrooms, the children sit on the floor, eating their fresh melon slices, bananas, oranges, milk and yogurt off pieces of waxpaper. Everyone eats with his hands and, children being children, the food sometimes ends up on the wooden floor. When this happens, some of the children simply lick up the food.

While the children are eating, an adult reads loudly from a religious textbook.

"Instead of toys," the headmaster said, "the children have deities to worship and Krishna books to read." There is a large playground next to the main building where the children sometimes play hide-and-seek and other games.

But they are seldom permitted to leave the fenced-in commune. They know nothing of current events. There are no newspapers or magazines, no radios or television sets, and no contact with people from the outer world except an occasional deliveryman.

country, another culture," the headmaster said. "We place a deemphasis on education. For example, we consider scientists to be of a lower class, like garbage men. Ultimately we hope we are headed for an agrarian standard."

There is never any doubt about a woman's place in the movement.

"Girls are brought up to be servants to their husbands," said John Partin of Tallahassee, one of the adults. "Women are child-like. They are encouraged to be married by puberty and they have only one boyfriend. When they are married it guarantees a lasting marriage."

Partin, whose spiritual name is Jnanagamy, said the Gurukula's children are spared "emotional entanglements from their parents" because of their separation from home.

Although many of the children obviously are not old enough to know what is going on around them, a booklet put out by the Gurukula, a romanticized advertisement for the school, states:

"The children are individually instructed in languages (English and Sanskrit), with classes in mathematics, geography, history, music and art. This curriculum, punctuated by vegetarian lunches, nap-times and afternoon fruit snacks, draws on all areas of intelligence and creativity. The purity and intensity of their consciousness flood the school so strongly that all who enter can tangibly experience the continued high level of awareness. The children radiate the essence of plain living and high thinking."

Asked what might happen to a child, indoctrinated during his most formative age, if he had to re-enter the outside world, a woman adult worker replied:

"Hopefully he would not have to."



HARE KRISHNA SCHOOL—Children take part in a ceremony in front of their beflowered altar in Dallas.

Times photo