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# Hare Krishna sect faces growing police scrutiny

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and Raul Ramirez  
Tribune Staff Writers

Once, their colorful saffron robes and shaved heads gave the members of the Hare Krishna sect the image of a Gandhi-like movement reborn on the streets and in the airports of the United States.

That was more than a decade ago, when the movement began to mushroom.

Today, police in Berkeley, Ukiah, Tokyo and places all over the world are telling a story of a sect that has begun stockpiling weapons and whose members have been accused of jewel thefts, credit card fraud, heroin trafficking and at least one murder-for-hire.

Faced with the pressures of recurrent police scrutiny, the Krishna peace-loving yoghurt-and-honey image is beginning to dissolve.

An Oakland Tribune investigation of the Hare Krishna movement in the Bay Area reveals a portrait of a rigid religious hierarchy. The Berkeley headquarters is led by men with a fascination for high-powered weapons and fascist philosophy. One claims to be willing to die for the movement.

"They are not a peaceful religious group," said Lake County sheriff's investigator Lt. Jeff Markham. His jurisdiction includes the Berkeley temple's ranch near Ukiah which police raided in March. "They are quite heavily involved in criminal activities. It's not Mafia types, but it's organized crime just the



Tribune photo by Bill Knowland

Portrait of guru Hansadutta adorns Berkeley Krishna altar.

same. They'll do whatever it takes — robbery, selling dope — to make money.

"I can assure them of one thing: the time they escaped scrutiny because they appeared peaceful is over. Some of these are very dangerous people."

The group vehemently denies any violations of the law. Its leaders contend they are actually showing America the way back to its moral origins.

"There may be people who come here with the idea of controlling," said Berkeley temple

president Hai Haya. "We have people who steal our money, come in off the streets, because we are accepting all kinds of people. And some do not reform. That is not the fault of our movement. It's like having one small parish go bad in a whole religion."

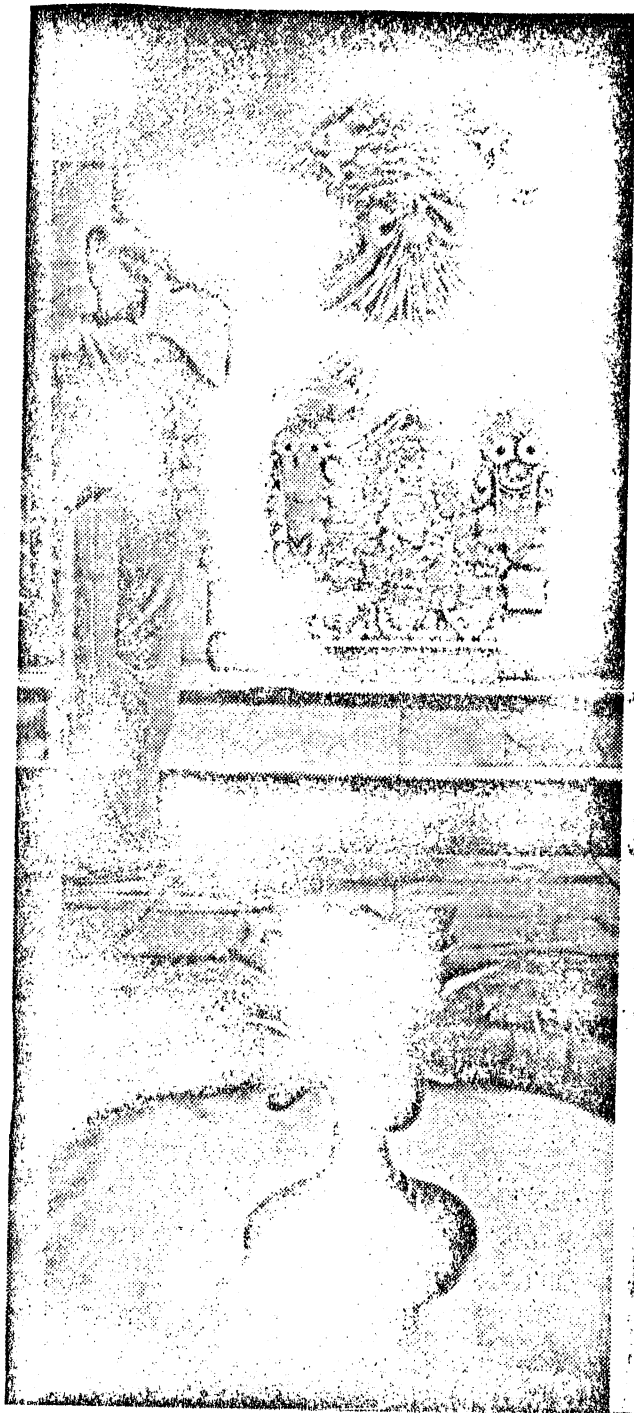
"I don't know why the police do not like us. How can they call us organized crime? We take people off drugs — is this organized crime? What is the goal of our crime?"

But California law enforcement authorities and other observers — mindful of all the "ifs" that might have prevented the Jonestown Peoples Temple tragedy — have grown increasingly skeptical of the group's stated goals.

Even one of the sect's 11 worldwide leaders has conceded that the image of the organization has changed radically. Srila Hansadutta Swami, who founded the Berkeley temple, said in a tape recorded conversation, according to a transcript reviewed by the Tribune, that the sect is now seen as "a bunch of freaks and rip-off, change-up artists."

Whatever its image, the reality of the Krishna movement in the U.S. is hardly one of poverty. By the account of a top Los Angeles temple leader, Srila Ramesvara Swami, the Krishna movement has in 10 years netted some \$75 million from solicitations in the U.S.

Police attention has focused on a string of incidents throughout California ranging from overzealous solicitation for donations



Tribune photo by Bill Knowland

Attendant faces altar of Berkeley temple.

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# Krishna

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to drug dealing, murder and stockpiling of ammunition and high-powered weapons.

The evidence and the movement's responses to alleged and established illegal activities includes:

■ The convictions in Southern California last fall of two members and their guru, or teacher, on charges of drug smuggling and hiring a mobster to murder three rivals, only one of whom was actually killed. Police said at the time of his arrest, they found more than a pound of heroin in the guru's car.

Another temple member who turned state's evidence in the case was prosecuted on lesser charges. Krishna officials disavowed the suspects, calling them "fallen devotees."

Berkeley temple president Hai Haya says the Southern California temple's difficulty is an isolated incident.

"Our presentation then, was, as now: we have a few members who commit criminal acts and we must pay for their activities. We don't say we are perfect; we say we want to become perfect."

■ A stolen credit card investigation in Berkeley that led to a raid in March at the sect's Mt. Kailasha farm in Lake County. Investigators discovered thousands of dollars worth of stolen and fraudulently purchased temple and farm equipment, thousands of rounds of ammunition, a grenade launcher, a bayonet and 20 firearms.

Most of the guns were high-power weapons, including semi-automatic rifles, carbines and riot guns. Some were fraudulently purchased. Investigators heard from several devotees who said leaders encouraged them to accumulate such weapons. They said the firearms were needed for protection.

Leaders disavowed member-suspects and their alleged illegal activities, although police speculated in court documents filed in Lakeport that suspects who fled before the raid had been warned via short-wave radio from the Berkeley temple.

"The first point we wish to make," said Bharata das, or Harold Wilson, public relations coordinator for the northwest coast Krishna operation, "is to separate the Hare Krishna Society from the illegal activities of a few individuals . . . In no way, can theft and abuse of credit cards be sanctioned by our religion."

He said the sect offered "full cooperation in the initial phase of the police's routine investigation."

■ A few Nazi insignia — a belt buckle, knife and a Special Service pin — and weapons and Nazi literature found in police raids of Krishna property. The Nazi items, a Krishna German-born member who acquired some of them said, are kept by them for nostalgic reasons.

■ A fraudulent passport probe that triggered a raid weeks later and the seizure of still more ammunition at an El Cerrito gun dealership operated by Krishna members. Federal passport fraud charges against a devotee, Ronald Ray Walters, are pending.

Federal authorities indicated at the time of the El Cerrito gunshop raid this spring that Berkeley Krishna members had, in the last seven months, spent between \$20,000 and \$30,000 on firearms and ammunition locally. Some of the temple's cash weapons purchases were large enough to prompt reports to police from concerned local gun dealers.

■ The adoption by many Krishna affiliates of multiple identities. Some of these have been illegally obtained and others, such as guru Hansadutta Swami's passport under the name of Jack London and his California driver's license under his native German name of Hans Kary, are legal.

■ The detainment by Berkeley police of Krishna leader Hansadutta this month after police found half a dozen weapons, including an illegal submachine gun, inside a locked briefcase in a car parked outside his Berkeley house.

Days later, the guru's attorney turned over to police a tape-recording of another temple member confessing to owning and assembling the submachine gun. That member, instead of his guru, now faces the weapon's charge. A temple spokesman disavowed the member's actions Tuesday, declaring that he has only loose ties to the movement.

The emergence of other Krishna devotees, some of whom have been close associates of top Krishna leaders but are now disavowed as "bad apples," as suspects in recent law enforcement probes. Police say their principal suspect in the Berkeley credit card theft and forgery case is Michael Pugliese or Govar Dan, who chauffeured his spiritual master, Hansadutta, between Berkeley and the temple farm in recent months and, in the words of one devotee waited on the guru "hand and foot."

"Govar Dan is wanted by Tokyo police on three jewel theft warrants and is believed by U.S. authorities to have fled to Hong Kong to avoid prosecution. Police say he has at least five aliases and I.D.s to go with them.

Berkeley police have also asked the Alameda County District Attorney's office to file assault charges against Govar Dan in connection with the nearly fatal beating of a fellow devotee in Berkeley last August.

Also among the alleged "bad apples" is Walter Bernstangle, one of three German nationals who had charge of the Mt. Kailasha weapons and who is wanted on grand theft warrants in Mendocino County. During Hansadutta's January visit to the temple farm the guru called Bernstangle, then ranch president, an "exemplary" devotee in a tape-recorded talk entitled "How Not to Misuse The Guru."

Another former Mt. Kailasha temple official, Peter Kaufmann or Chakavarty, was president of the Frankfurt temple under Hansadutta's supervision and was arrested in 1974 for possession of a loaded Luger. He, like the other German nationals who had keys to the Lake County farm's gun locker, is wanted for questioning in connection with the Berkeley passport investigation and disappeared shortly before the raid on the farm.

The guru said recent criminal activities were the action of a few "left fielders" who did not represent the bulk of the movement's membership.

Transcripts of conversations with guru Hansadutta, which have been examined by the Tribune, in which the guru is quoted saying members should be prepared to suffer and even to die, in order to advance the movement.

"If you want to make this movement successful, you'll have to lay down your life," Hansadutta is quoted as saying in one transcript.

In that chat five months ago the guru compared the sacrifices of totalitarian world leaders to the discipline required to build a national "God-conscious" movement.

"I just happen to be a little familiar with Hitler," said the German-born guru, who divides his time between Berkeley and temples in Northwest America, Sri Lanka, Hong Kong and Southeast Asia.

"Hitler's men were determined and they did lay down their lives. When they saw it failed, they committed suicide, they were so dedicated to their cause.

"I don't see any instance in history where the government has just said, 'Can these people are so nice, let them take over.'

"It will never happen. In the end, you're going to have to establish men who can fight, men who can do business, men who can do hard labor and men who can preach under the most difficult circumstances."

Lake County investigator Markham is not alone in his concern about the Hare Krishna movement. His resolve to monitor the activities of movement members is privately echoed by Bay Area law enforcement people. Their perception is in sharp conflict with the Krishna claim of being a peaceful group of individuals seeking enlightenment and spiritual advancement in the Bhagavad-gita Hindu scriptures.

Krishna faithful are asked to renounce the world of possessions and sense-gratification and adopt a strict daily regimen of chanting and devotion.

Krishna surfaced in the U.S. in New York in 1965 and now claims 5,000 members in 26 urban and seven farm temples in the United States alone. The Berkeley temple has 70 full-time members and dozens of affiliates at its complex on Stuart Street.

Since the death in 1977 of the movement's founding guru, Swami Bhaktivedanta Prabhupada, Krishna has been governed by 11 disciples chosen by him, including Berkeley temple founder Hansadutta.

Krishna "Sankirtan" — ritual street dancing, Hare Krishna chanting and solicitation — first reached San Francisco's Haight Ashbury district 12 years ago in the wake of the flower children. In 1970, the Bay Area Krishna headquarters was moved to Berkeley, and Sankirtan since has changed in form and moved from location to location. It was the form of alms-collecting that has led to the movement's first and most pervasive troubles with law enforcement agencies.

Assistant District Attorney Bernard Walter of San Francisco charged in a recent misdemeanor begging case that "the robes, the chanting, the dancing and musical instruments were largely abandoned on the advice of a new public relations expert. . . . The new image was that of a solicitor collecting money, pure and simple."

Walter further charged that Sankirtan had become "predatory solicitation" that has triggered complaints about "accosting," "short-changing" and "battery."

Similar charges have prompted civil lawsuits, misdemeanor and criminal charges, throughout the U.S. and in Japan and Germany.

Authorities at the San Francisco and Oakland airports dealt with overzealous solicitation by threatening legal action. The threats pushed the solicitors to Fisherman's Wharf, where they ran into trouble with merchants who complained to police last fall. That has led the San Francisco district attorney to prosecute solicitors on misdemeanor charges in Municipal Court.

One former Krishna devotee told Berkeley police why the faithful sometimes turn to hard-sell practices to raise money:

"If you are not getting your quota, life gets more austere. . . . I've been awakened in the middle of the night and told I'm not making enough money," said the disillusioned member. He said devotees sometimes simply grabbed money from prospective contributors if they were unable to get it otherwise.

San Mateo sheriff's detective Bill Buchalter worked as an undercover narcotics agent at San Francisco Airport for six years. He described some of the problems he saw.

One Berkeley temple solicitor, he said, was pursued by angry onlookers

several years ago when she reportedly yanked a dollar bill from a child in a wheelchair as he was digging in a coin purse for change to donate.

Such incidents, he said, were not unusual.

Privately, local Krishna leaders have acknowledged that their image has become that of an obnoxious, devious, money-hungry group of proselytizers.

"Let's just simply admit that we've been diverted," Hansadutta is quoted as saying in a temple transcript of a January discussion with a Los Angeles Krishna leader.

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Many of the guru's discourses are taped, transcribed and indexed by temple members. Temple members also tape-recorded a conversation Hansadutta held with a reporter of the Tribune. A transcript of that talk was provided to the reporter with alterations, such as substituting the words "black people" where the guru had used the term "niggers."

In the transcript of the January conversation with the Los Angeles leader, Hansadutta also said: "We were overly concerned with money ... We should ... attract people on the basis of the image that we are monks, mendicants, that we've given up everything ... Now, our movement projects an image of a bunch of

freaks and ripoff, change-up artists."

Detective Buchalter said he spent two weeks cataloging contributions logged by seven Berkeley devotees who worked from 7:30 a.m. to 4 p.m. seven days a week, each soliciting about 350 travelers a day for an average contribution of one dollar. He figured an average monthly gross of more than \$60,000 and said the devotees told him they were grossing \$50,000 a week.

"They were extremely dedicated and approached their solicitations almost as if they were suicide pilots preparing for attack. Whoever made the most got to go to a special event — to solicit in the Rose Bowl parking lot during the Superbowl game,

for example."

The guru and other Krishna leaders have shown a liking for fancy foreign cars — Mercedes Benz and Porsches. And the Berkeley temple alone has become a million-dollar-a-year operation.

According to sworn statements on file in Alameda and San Francisco counties, income from book distribution earned the sect \$1.1 million in the Bay Area in 1977. In 1978, local solicitations and book sales earned the movement \$887,000.

Last year, Krishna leaders declared in the sworn statements, solicitations earned the International Society for Krishna Consciousness of the Bay Area, Inc., the movement's local legal entity, \$772,205 of its total Bay Area

income of \$1,032,858.

The local Krishna claims total assets of \$1.4 million, including \$1.2 million in real estate property at its Berkeley complex in the 2300 and 2400 blocks of Stuart Street, and a net worth of \$878,929 as of last year.

In an interview with the Tribune, Hansadutta dismissed the notion that devotees are primarily fund-raisers, working for the benefit of the temple leadership:

"This girl here is a qualified doctor," he said during a temple gathering not long ago, pointing at one of the devotees huddled at his feet. "She spent many years studying in school. She's a gynecologist. She's chanting Hare Krishna. Now, is she brainwashed?"

# Origin of Krishna Society

The Hare Krishna movement came to the United States in 1965 with the arrival of an elderly, small-framed Bengali who sat down in a park on the Lower East Side of New York City and began to chant the now-familiar Hare Krishna mantra.

Bhaktivendanta Prabhupada, then almost 70, launched the International Society for Krishna Consciousness to bring the principles of the ancient Hindu sect to the Western world.

He sought to transplant the Krishnaite sect of Viashnavism, a branch of Hinduism that originated in East India in 1486, to America.

After a year the movement began to attract young followers intrigued by the

master's call to a non-materialistic, purely spiritual life. They were taught that enlightenment could be reached through study of the ancient Vedic or Hindu scriptures and daily chanting of the mantra.

"In contrast to the complexity and anxiety of modern life, the Krishna conscious lifestyle is based on the principle of 'simple living and high living,'" reads one movement account of the group's theology and goals. "As a prerequisite for the serious pursuit of spiritual life, all devotees voluntarily abstain from meat-eating, illicit sex, intoxication and gambling."

Within several years the movement had established temple centers on both

coasts.

Prabhupada, who spent much of his life translating the holy Vedic scriptures into English, also founded the movement's book trust. Followers have peddled the master's scriptures on street corners, sidewalks and college campuses.

Prabhupada, who died in 1977, left the movement without a direct successor, breaking the divine line of "self-realized spiritual masters" believed by the faithful to have descended from the Lord Krishna himself.

The movement claims 5,000 members in the U.S. and religious centers in country and in 30 nations.

— Carol Brydolf



# Krishna guru: 'Americans should bear arms'



Srila Hansadutta Swami

Srila Hansadutta Swami, Hare Krishna guru, sat one sunny morning several weeks ago in the garden that devotees have painstakingly landscaped for their spiritual master behind the ashram for male celibate student monks.

At the feet of the saffron-robed teacher sat a troubled-looking man about 35, dressed in conventional Western dress; his head bowed in shame as he accepted the master's soft-spoken rebuke.

"If you want to be my servant, say so," said the guru, who is one of 14 worldwide disciples appointed by Krishna founder A.C. Prabhupada before his death three years ago to carry on the sect leadership.

"I'll put you to work. But I have to see that you do work," he added, a slight edge on his quiet voice. He inclined his angular head and peered at the penitent at his feet.

"If you must pleasure your

senses, go do that until you burn out. Then come back."

The man pressed his forehead to the earth as a sign of submission and respect before quickly taking his leave.

Hansadutta oversees temples in Northwest America, Southeast Asia and China. Because of the movement's recent tangles with local police, he returned from his travels early and honored the Berkeley temple he founded in 1969 with a visit.

In the garden, the master turned his attention to the devotees seated around his feet; he nodded his head and a chair was brought for a guest. Fresh apple juice, squeezed by the faithful that morning, was served in silver goblets.

A tape recorder was adjusted and the devotees prepared for Hansadutta's teachings.

He began with the miseries that make up life in the material world, a world Krishna devotees hope to transcend in their next

lives for eternal spiritual bliss.

"Material nature functions in such a way that we can never be happy," the guru said, his eyes hidden behind aviator-style dark glasses.

He stressed the four basic laws of the Eastern religious sect, which he joined 13 years ago, after immigrating to the U.S. from Germany in 1950: abstinence from eating meat, from sex except to procreate, and from gambling and intoxicants.

Sexual renunciation is a topic the guru frequently mentions in temple services:

"The body is a bag of blood, puss, urine, stool and bone," he said that week. "Making love is like squeezing that bag. A dog, who can enjoy all the sex he wants without worrying about contraception or abortion — he has better sex than you.

"You may read Playboy to catch a glimpse of something, a breast, vagina. But you have to work hard for sex. You must

make dinner, serve it, serve wine, and hope that you will get some."

As required of those who attain the highest spiritual ranks of Krishna, Hansadutta cut his ties with his wife of nearly 9 years when he accepted what devotees call the renounced order of life.

Through constant worship, three hours of daily mantra chanting and adherence to God-conscious laws, Krishna devotees can move toward eternal bliss in the spiritual world.

"We want to create an alternative," he said. "We are creating a class of men who are saints, renunciates, (who) can exhibit self control, honesty, cleanliness.

He was asked about the temple's troubles with law enforcement mainly over weapons found on temple property and about some members' apparent fascination with guns. The guru appeared puzzled by the adverse reaction to the gun disclosures:

"America was won by the gun

and it's maintained by the gun," said the guru, who owns several weapons. "We also bear arms, not because we are violent or we have any schemes of designs on overthrowing society. That's an insane thing to think.

"But at the same time, we are not fools. If someone comes and causes us trouble, we are not going to set there and let them steamroll us.

"We don't agree with the idea of turning the other cheek. ... Yes, Americans should bear their arms in case the authorities fail."

The guru was critical of the public and press perception of the movement and its difficulties with the law. He startled his afternoon visitor when he said that condemning the Krishna movement for the actions of a few members would be like saying "all niggers are the same."

Several days later, a transcript of the talk that quoted the master as saying "black people," and that omitted a later reference to "Jimmy Jones" was delivered to the visitor by a devotee.

on behalf of Krishna. I don't want to be steamrolled by a bunch of Communists and fags."

America, the guru said, is losing spiritual values.

"Our people are completely demoralized. There is no standard at all ... Men are going arm in arm and kissing ... What is the utility of the homosexual life? ... It's just the sign of utmost degradation. That is the repetition of the Roman empire, the Greek empire. You just look through history and you'll find that at the end they were becoming homosexuals."

"I am not at all liberal. I'm not going to say, 'Oh, let him be a fag, it's okay. I think there are some things which are forbidden to human beings. If this can't be understood, you can't have a nation like America much longer."

Then the audience was over and devotees withdrew to leave Hansadutta to enjoy the peace of his lotus pond and garden.

"I am in ecstasy whenever Hansadutta preaches," said a blond-haired, sari-clad devotee, shimmering slightly.

—Carol Brydolf

America is the world's only hope, Hansadutta went on to say, and a return to religion is the only way to save it from ruin at the hands of madmen, homosexuals and those overloaded with sensory gratification.

"I hope you will print this because it will be revolutionary," he said, indicating the smiling followers clustered at his feet.

"You can bend new bamboo but old bamboo cracks. We are appealing to American youth. Don't allow yourselves to be brainwashed. Don't become a zombie, a drug addict, a fag. Become a hero and save your country ... Make the whole world God-conscious. Destroy communism ... because it is godless.

"Communists say we will bury you, but I would rather be buried

# Disavowed member loves guns, Nazis

The Hare Krishna Berkeley temple member who was disavowed by the temple leadership last week after he admitted owning the illegal submachine gun that led to his guru's detention had told the Oakland Tribune only a month before that he held supervisory positions in the temple.

Vipra, 40, also known as Vladimir Panasenko, is "not a member in good standing in this Society," said the press release issued last Tuesday by Berkeley temple spokesman Bharata das, who is also the Krishna's northwestern region public affairs coordinator.

The temple disavowal came after an attorney for one of Krishna's 11 worldwide leaders, Srila Hansadutta Swami, turned over to police a tape recording in which Vipra took responsibility for a submachine gun found in a Temple unregistered car outside Hansadutta's home.

Hansadutta's attorney, in a television news interview shown last Tuesday, said that it was his understanding that Vipra was a recent arrival at the Berkeley temple from "back east."

But in an interview with the Oakland Tribune in the office of temple spokesman Bharata a month ago, Vipra detailed his long, deep involvement with the Hare Krishna movement and its Bay Area temple. He said he had joined the movement eight years after being impressed with devotees he met in Golden Gate Park.

He said during the interview he was in currently in charge of the temple's motorpool.

And, he told the Tribune then, as he had told Berkeley police in March, that he was the manager of the Berkeley temple's Mt. Kailasha farm in Lake County.

Berkeley police say that Vipra is highly knowledgeable about weapons and has been identified as a frequent purchaser of legal firearms at local gun dealerships in recent months. Many of the weapons discovered at the Mt. Kailasha farm and inventoried by police have been traced to Vipra's purchases.

After Vipra appeared in court on the weapons possession charge last week, Bharata said Vipra "has never in the past held any office at the temple or at the farm, yet has been repeatedly consulted as spokesman of our organization by various newspaper reporters."

When a reporter for the Tribune first called the office of spokesman Bharata in late April to arrange a visit to the temple, it was Vipra who answered the telephone. He said he was filling in for Bharata as temple spokesman. He invited the reporter to the temple's festival on the following Sunday.

When the reporter arrived, Vipra unlocked the door of Bharata's office where he proceeded to explain Hare Krishna beliefs and his own commitment to them before introducing the reporter to other temple members she could interview. Later that week, the reporter interviewed Hansadutta in the temple garden.

Vipra said that day he was one of the male members who had reached "varna," the third spiritual level for Krishna men requiring that they be freed of the "rat race" of family life.

Having reached the level of Varna, Vipra explained he no longer need shave his head or wear colored

robes, as do beginning-level male devotees.

Vipra told how he left conventional family life and eventually joined Hare Krishna eight years ago.

He said he first left his wife and children and an engineering job in San Francisco 10 years ago, dedicating his time to "drifting, thinking and reading."

"I had just turned 30 and felt it was the turning point in my life. I felt I wanted to dedicate my life to the highest truth and principles," he said. "I think the girl was 12, and I guess the kid must have been 7."

After he joined the Krishna movement in San Francisco eight years ago, he said he spent five years traveling in a bus, bringing the master's word to fairs, airports, and streets.

"Some people are antagonistic; most think we've gone off the deep end. But the information available in these scriptures, in the books we distribute, is so valuable that it's worth any personal discomfort to disseminate."

In later conversations with the Tribune this month, Vipra, who says he owns eight firearms, made no secret of his affection for "mean-looking guns and fast cars," and said that other leaders felt similarly.

Last September, according to California Highway Patrol and Alameda County Sheriff's office records, Bharata, Vipra and a third Krishna devotee were taken into custody after officers heard shots apparently coming from a car near Castro Valley Boulevard and State Highway 138.

The officers stopped the auto and reported finding a Ruger .22-caliber rifle on the floorboard and several expended casings in the car. The three were questioned and released without charges. They told officers they had been testing the rifle while driving around.

"The media has repeatedly painted a picture of our movement as one endorsing firearms and violence and has attempted to castigate us from the mainstream of society," said the temple press release last week. "Our movement is a movement of nonviolence. Proof of this is the fact that we are completely vegetarian and do not support the wholesale slaughter of animals for food."

"Also, even though random members have owned firearms, it is our Society which has repeatedly suffered the abuse of threats with guns twice at our farm."

Bharata told the Tribune that the shooting incidents were not reported to police but were instances when members were threatened by "drunken deerhunters."

Vipra's affection for weapons and World War II memorabilia, such as the SS symbol of the Nazi secret police he sometimes wears, is difficult to reconcile and seems inconsistent with his soft-spoken, even-tempered demeanor.

"It would be hard for Americans to understand," said Vipra, who grew up in Germany during the World War II, "but my exposure to the SS was not negative."

"An SS officer saved my life during an attack on a train and then afforded me the honor of watching the battle. To me the SS is no different from any other elite military force, like the Green Beret. And there was not a damn thing wrong with the Green Beret."

—By Carol Brydolf