

# KRISHNA: From Tiny Sect to an Earthly Kingdom

Continued from First Page

votees, and *karmis*—the “fornicating meat-eaters” who comprise the world of non-believers.

And though there is no dungeon under it, the Hare Krishnas have a real honest-to-goodness palace, glittering with gold, and laden with tons of marble, ebony and carved teakwood—in West Virginia.

More than one traveler, rounding a sudden bend in a dirt road, has rubbed his eyes in amazement: there, crouched meditatively on a ridge before him, is an ornate Indian palace, purple flags flying.

The Krishnas' world is sufficient unto itself—a chanting monastic world that is filled with adoration of the blue-bodied Lord Krishna, perfumed with the constant, overpowering odor of incense and weighted with thousands of years of accumulated Hindu culture.

Devotees who once were American kids from just down the street fall upon this culture greedily. Some of them habitually chew a mild, spicy Indian seed called coriander; others eventually begin to speak English in the faintly nasal sing-song accent of the educated classes of Bombay.

## Earthly Problems

But the Krishna devotees have not been able to completely seal off the universe they share with non-believers. They have faced their share of earthly troubles.

Like the early-day Jehovah's Witnesses, Krishna fund-raisers have run head-on into social resistance and legal controls.

And like the first Latter-day Saints, or Mormons, the unusual customs of the Krishna movement have sometimes alienated followers from the rest of the world.

The alienation was so deep at times in the past that harried parents across the land often tried to extract their children from the movement forcibly, with the assistance of deprogrammers and court-appointed guardianships.

That kind of overt friction is less a problem now, since Krishna leaders no longer accept devotees below the age of 18 without written parental approval. But the alienation remains.

## Began in Poverty

Krishnaland has been touched, too, by scandal: drug-smuggling, gun-stockpiling against the ravagers of the outside world, street hustles that left bad impressions and manipulative fund-raising techniques that have generated dollars but angered donors.

These are all relatively new problems for a movement that began in abject poverty among the winos of New York City's East Greenwich Village.

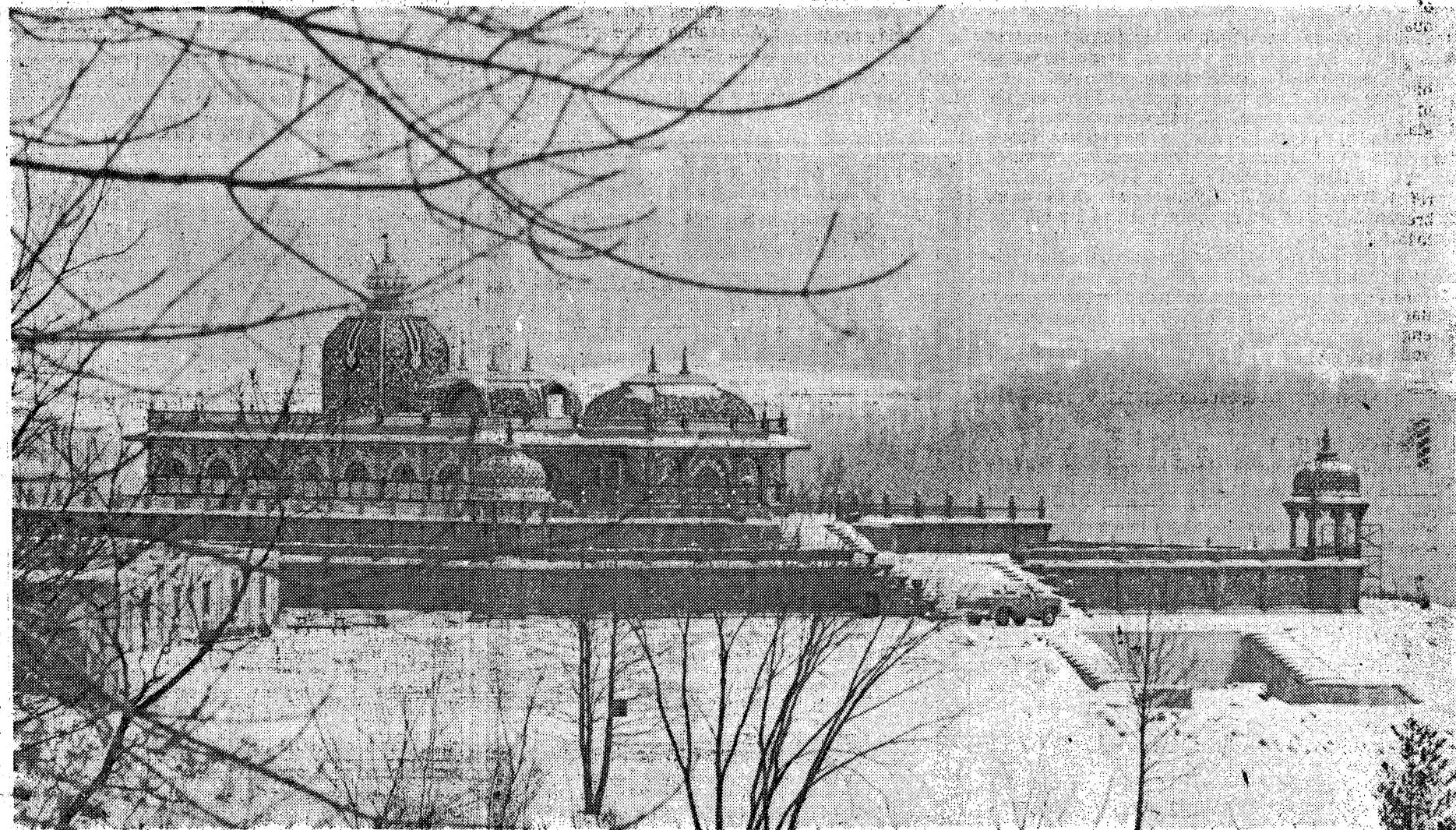
Soon after Prabhupada founded the movement in a New York City storefront, he began attracting scores—

*'A new religion either becomes more public or it begins to grow inward. The Krishnas, I'm afraid, are becoming more elitist, internalized and paranoid.'*

—Former Krishna magazine editor

then hundreds—of young street people, many of them burned out on drugs and disillusioned with conventional paths to spirituality.

Prabhupada taught them that true inner peace lay in chanting “Hare Krishna”—literally “Holy God”—renouncing materialism and leading an austere life. They could escape endless reincarnation and return to eternal bliss within “godhead,” or Krishna, he said.



STEVE FONTANINI / Los Angeles Times

Rounding a bend in a dirt road, the traveler comes upon the Hare Krishnas' ornate Indian palace crouched on a ridge in West Virginia, its purple flags flying.

Among the leading figures in the power struggle are three gurus initiated by Prabhupada, each with his own coterie of devotees and each able to initiate new disciples. They are:

Kirtanananda Swami Bhaktipada, 43, a no-nonsense intellectual with a flair for architectural design who rules the West Virginia farm and palace; Ramesvara Swami, 29, the bespectacled business mastermind of the



movement's book publishing operation in Los Angeles, and Hansadutta Swami, 40, a charismatic, mystic German who likes firearms and meditates in a silver Airstream trailer high in the hills of the remote Northern California Krishna ranch.

All three of the gurus were godbrothers together when the movement began. They were known then as Keith Ham, Robert Grant and Hans Kary. They were all graduates of the kind of spiritual disillusionment that



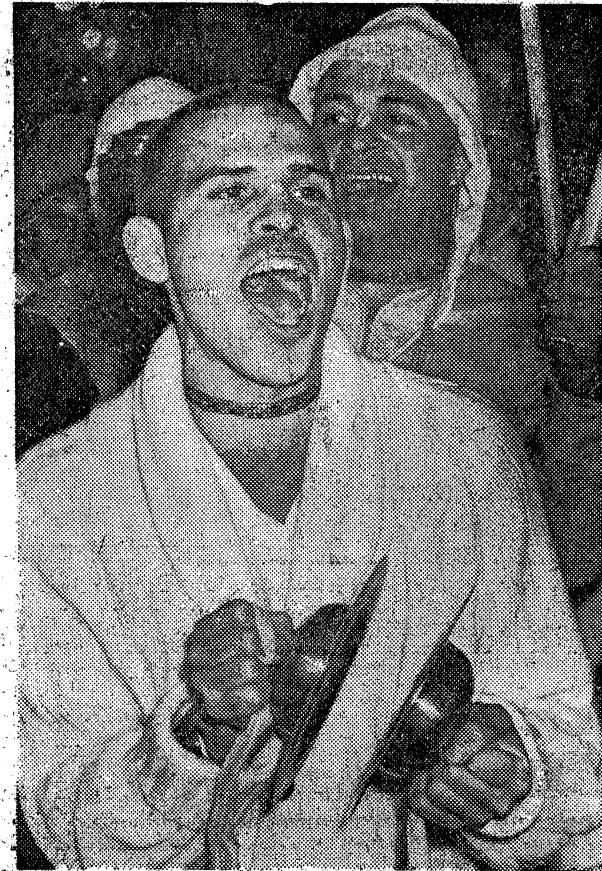
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#### Internal Squabbling

And the cadre of true believers grew. They spread the word and began collecting the money that eventually formed much of ISKCON's power base. With power and money, leaders emerged—and leadership struggles began.

And now, in the wake of Prabhupada's death, devotees of Krishna-consciousness face growing questions of organizational unity, doctrinal purity and plain, old bickering.



GARY FRIEDMAN / Los Angeles Times

Suryanga das bangs the cymbals, chants with other Hare Krishna followers on a Westwood street.

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Even in those exotic days, though, the Krishna monks were a novelty, a departure from what little norm was left. With saffron robes and shaved heads (save for a topknot with which Lord Krishna may jerk them to heaven) they pounded drums, clanged cymbals, danced, and chanted the hypnotic and repetitious "Hare Krishna" mantra.

And collected money.

They seemed peaceful enough, if a bit kinky, sincere, if a bit persistent and overzealous. Even when they moved their pitches, or missionary work, into airports and began pressing flowers as well as books into the hands of harried travelers, they seemed harmless and benign.

But this missionary practice of *sankirtan*—the material base of Prabhupada's heavenly kingdom-building and a religious requirement for devotees—has increasingly been at the heart of controversy inside and outside ISKCON.

According to experts in the Hindu religion, *sankirtan* is the means of "propagating the truth" of Krishna. While *sankirtan* can refer to any form of service or devotion to Krishna (the incarnation of God) performed by the devotee, in the Vaishnava Hindu tradition it has for centuries always included dancing, chanting and singing praises composed of the names of God.

#### Changes Occur

Gradually, during the last two centuries, distribution of missionary literature and collection of donations were added to the activity.

Krishnas profess that non-believers in the Lord Krishna are misguided, impure souls (*karmis*) who are without salvation because they exploit God's wealth for their own, personal, sense gratification.

*Karmis* may, however, partake in salvation, even unwittingly, by contributing to Krishna's work. Thus, separating a *karmi* from his money—even if the *karmi* is not aware that his money is going to a Krishna temple—can be viewed as doing the donor a great spiritual favor, Krishnas believe.

Ramesvara, initiating guru in charge of the Southern California zone, says: "We glorify God by getting people to donate money, and using that money to print millions of books."

*Sankirtan* has also been at the nub of about 150 court cases involving ISKCON, according to the movement's



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Hare Krishna artist works on details of a religious painting for group's opulent Prabhupada Palace.

chief legal adviser, attorney Barry Fisher of Century City.

"The Krishnas are the most litigious religious group since the Jehovah's Witnesses," who fought hundreds of legal battles to proselytize in small towns, Fisher said in an interview.

What the Krishnas are fighting for, Fisher added, is access—access almost without limit to public buildings, sporting events, state fairs and the like. Any place where crowds gather and people may have money to spend or the inclination to discuss religion.

Whether the Krishnas—and, indeed, a vast variety of religious and political groups—have a constitutional right to wander through large public spaces to sell or distribute items may be decided this summer by the U.S. Supreme Court.

The high court last month agreed to hear arguments in a Krishna case involving the religious group's right to aggressive face-to-face solicitations at Minnesota's annual state fair.

In many of the lower court cases involving *sankirtan*, judges have granted broad, First Amendment protection to the Krishnas.

#### Collection Quotas

But in a controversial and trend-setting decision now being appealed by ISKCON, a federal judge in Syracuse, N.Y., declared last summer that the Krishnas were "engaged in a widespread and systematic scheme of accosting, deceit, misrepresentation and fraud on the public."

Presiding Judge Howard G. Munson's 42-page decision and order, a victory for the New York State attorney general's office, noted that "when Krishna devotees become proficient at practicing *sankirtan* and collecting money, they are given collection quotas by the Brah-

mins or priests, some as high as \$100 and \$200 a day."

(Former Krishna devotees told Times reporters some Krishna women can easily collect \$400 to \$500 a day, especially during holiday periods at airports.)

The Munson opinion outlined apparent deceptive practices used by Krishna followers at the New York State Fair in recent years: adopting "disguises" of Western dress and wigs to cover male Krishna's shaven heads; slurring the word "Krishna" to make it sound like "Christian," claiming to collect money for worldwide food distribution for needy children; targeting retarded people and teen-agers for pitches; miscounting change or short-changing donors; and using female devotees to flirt with male donors.

Krishnas also misrepresent their affiliation, Munson declared, by using various non-religious items, or paraphernalia, as a means of obtaining money.

"Artificial flowers and 'Keep On Truckin' buttons... were used strictly because they could be rapidly sold without any questions—especially questions about the Krishna religion," Munson said.

#### Religious Records

The most commonly used items were religious records, according to the judge, packaged to look like the records of popular recording artists.

"One woman was startled to discover that her 'Stevie Wonder album' sounded like a 'cat in heat,' and she could not figure out why Stevie Wonder would want to ruin his career like that. What she actually heard was a typical Krishna song," the judge wrote.

Krishna leaders and their lawyers have answers to the allegations. Fisher, the chief counsel, said that during the 1979 New York fair, there had been only nine

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## Grandfather Hits Krishna Sect Where It Hurts — in the Pocketbook

By EVAN MAXWELL, Times Staff Writer

The Hare Krishna movement, which is heavily financed by direct economic action in the nation's airports, got a dose of its own medicine from a Chicago grandfather who once was a labor organizer.

The events took place in 1975 and 1976, but are the subject of a lawsuit that is expected to come to trial in the next six months.

At the heart of the lawsuit is David Yanoff, now a 16-year-old high school student in Chicago. He lives with his father, Jerome, and wants to be a film maker.

But in 1975, David was a precocious 11-year-old Krishna devotee, headed, some said, for a position of leadership in the movement. His involvement with Krishna began in August, 1975, when he came to the Los Angeles temple to spend a month with his

one Sunday at the Culver City temple and tried to retrieve David, who was dancing with other children during a festival. Temple leaders resisted, there was an argument, then a scuffle, and Yanoff was evicted without his son.

When Jerome returned several months later, armed with an Illinois court order granting him custody of the child, neither David nor his mother were anywhere to be found. Temple leaders said they knew nothing about where they were.

The matter remained at an impasse for 16 months. Jerome Yanoff and others in his family hired private investigators to trace the child. The boy's grandfather, Morris, even wrote directly to the spiritual head of the movement, A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, enlisting his help.

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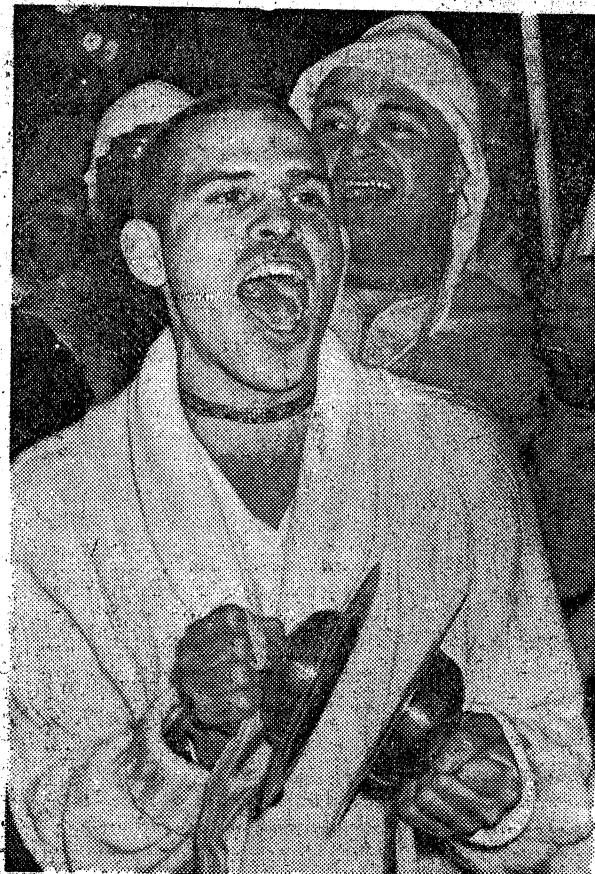
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Jerome Yanoff now is plaintiff in a civil suit seeking more than \$7 million in damages from the movement for stealing his son.

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But in 1975, David was a precocious 11-year-old Krishna devotee, headed, some said, for a position of leadership in the movement. His involvement with Krishna began in August, 1975, when he came to the Los Angeles temple to spend a month with his mother, Karen Wilson, a devotee and secretary there.

During his month at the temple, David fell in love with the Krishna life style, according to depositions and interviews with persons involved in the present lawsuit. The boy decided to become a devotee, a decision his father objected to, forcefully.

Jerome Yanoff, supported by relatives, appeared

one Sunday at the Culver City temple and tried to retrieve David, who was dancing with other children during a festival. Temple leaders resisted, there was an argument, then a scuffle, and Yanoff was evicted without his son.

When Jerome returned several months later, armed with an Illinois court order granting him custody of the child, neither David nor his mother were anywhere to be found. Temple leaders said they knew nothing about where they were.

The matter remained at an impasse for 16 months. Jerome Yanoff and others in his family hired private investigators to trace the child. The boy's grandfather, Morris, even wrote directly to the spiritual head of the movement, A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, enlisting his help.

But nothing worked.

Nothing worked, that is, until Morris Yanoff, a retired Chicago labor union organizer, remembered an important lesson of unionism—the value of direct economic action.

With some of his retired friends, Yanoff set up a kind of informational picketing operation at O'Hare International Airport, the busiest in the country and

a goldmine for Krishna fund-raisers.

Yanoff said in a recent interview that at the time, Krishna fund-raisers were deliberately hiding their religious affiliation to mislead potential donors. Yanoff said he and his corps of counterpickets would wait until a disguised Krishna devotee engaged someone in conversation.

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"The Krishna kids had a very careful pitch worked out and any little interference from us pretty well shut them down."

Yanoff and his cronies kept up their campaign for more than three months. The local Krishna temple, which relied on O'Hare for much of its support, was being driven toward economic disaster, Yanoff said.

"We were killing them," he said, without a trace of remorse.

But Krishna leaders continued to maintain their ignorance of David's whereabouts. Finally, just before the lucrative Christmas travel season, a Chicago Krishna leader approached Morris Yanoff.

"He said, 'David is coming home. Now will you

please call up right away and pull your people out of the airport?'"

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Ramesvara, guru of the Los Angeles temple and a defendant in the case, denies the charge, maintaining that the leaders did nothing to assist Karen Wilson in what was essentially a private child custody battle between two parents.

Robert Brock, Yanoff's attorney, said he expects the case to come to trial, perhaps as early as this summer.

Karen Wilson, David's mother, is expected to testify against the Los Angeles temple. Last year, she left the Los Angeles temple, joined the Berkeley temple and is now a follower of Hansadutta, the Northern California guru who is Ramesvara's chief rival.





STEVE FONTANINI / Los Angeles Times

The Kuladri das family, Krishna colony members, stroll through snow at farm in West Virginia.

## Colony in Rural West Virginia

# Krishna 'Farmhouse' Is Opulent Palace

By RUSSELL CHANDLER, Times Staff Writer

MOUNDSVILLE, W. Va.—“We want to get back to plain living and high thinking,” declared Kirtanananda Swami Bhaktipada with a sweep of his hand as he showed visitors a panoramic view of the Hare Krishnas' farm straddling the hills and dales of this rural wooded countryside.

“City life is artificial. If you have a little land and a cow, your economic problems are solved,” he continued, his breath steaming in the cold of a clear West Virginia winter morning.

The Krishna colony here, called New Vrindaban, has more than a little land—2,000-plus acres, in fact—and a herd of several hundred dairy cows and a brace or two of oxen.

### Domed Palace on Hilltop

The 300 devotees, or followers, of Lord Krishna and their guru, Kirtanananda, chant, pray and work up to 18 hours a day. They do indeed practice an austere life style. It is linked to a spiritual culture that stresses ending what the swami calls a life of earthly “botherations” so they may “go back to godhead.”

While the devotees' heads have focused on heavenly things, their hands have built, over the course of nearly a decade, a magnificent black-and-white-domed palace atop the highest hill for miles around.

The palace, now a memorial to the departed founder and master swami of the International Society for

Krishna Consciousness, A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, is opulent by any standards. It reportedly cost \$500,000 but that was only for materials. Labor was, of course, donated by devotees.

Prabhupada's Palace was the brainchild of Kirtanan-

anda, 43, the son of a Southern Baptist minister of Peekskill, N.Y. Kirtanananda, formerly Keith Ham, came under Prabhupada's sway while studying for a doctoral degree in religious history at Columbia University in 1966.

The glistening building, covering 5,000 square feet with 63 tons of marble of 40 varieties, 80 stained glass windows, 3 tons of carved Indian teakwood and a dome frosted with four pounds of 22-karat gold leaf, seems as out of place in rural West Virginia—maybe even in the United States—as Kirtanananda Swami does in his Indian *dhoti*, or “skirt,” orange ski cap and muffler, tooling

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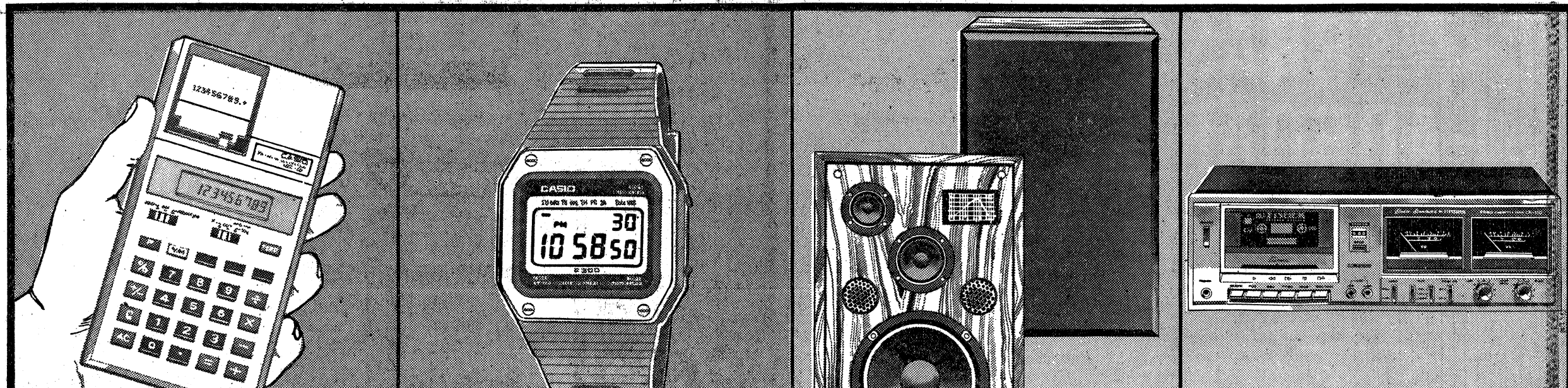
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## FARM: 2,000 Acres and Palace on Hill

Continued from 13th Page

around the farm in his blue K-5 Chevy Blazer.

If the palace does not follow the rules of architecture, nor its designer the mien of a Hindu seer, neither does New Vrindaban fit the Western concept of religion.

Up by 3 a.m., the devotees—single men and women and married couples with young children—leave their sparsely furnished dormitories and cabins to gather by 4:30 a.m. in the temple sanctuary to chant "Hare Krishna" and be instructed in achieving transcendental bliss.

### Devotees' Daily Routine

The pungent aroma of incense, burned during elaborate rites before statues of Hindu deities, gives way to the spicy smell of sanctified vegetables (*prasadam*) cooking for a 7 a.m. breakfast.

Then, devotees are off to their various jobs: cooking, cleaning, farming and a variety of craft-oriented skills to complete the palace complex and to produce for public sale goods such as Tiffany-style lamps and jewelry.

Announcements, tapes of Krishna gurus' lectures and Hindu music blare incessantly over loudspeakers indoors and out.

There is midday *prasadam*, served, as are most meals, on the floor in metal trays. And there is more chanting and work until bedtime, usually 7 p.m. to 8 p.m.

The 70 or so children at New Vrindaban leave their parents' care when they are 5 years old and are taught in boys' or girls' "boarding schools" scattered throughout the farm. The children learn Sanskrit, arithmetic, a little science and geography—and a lot about Lord Krishna. They sit cross-legged on the floors of the converted farmhouse schools and sleep in bedrolls near their teacher.

They are the first generation to be raised in the Unit-

ed States according to Krishna practices, in the hope, say their elders, of avoiding the contamination that spews from secular culture.

New Vrindaban seems a bucolic, peaceful place. Not even the cockroaches that crawl on the temple walls may be killed, because Krishnas believe in reincarnation and the sacredness of all life.

So perhaps it seemed a bit incongruous that a conversation with Kirtanananda during his 12-course noon *prasadam* in the palace the other day should turn to firearms and violence.

Certainly it was true, the guru said between mouthfuls of cucumber yogurt and mung bean soup, that the commune had armed itself in 1973 after four members were shot by two men who were trying to retrieve one

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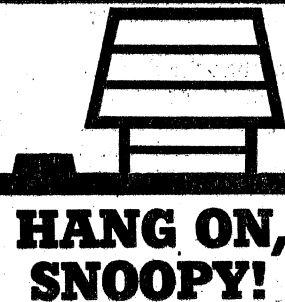
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