

## HARE KRISHNA MOVEMENT

Krishna devotees, chanting the Hare Krishna mantra in the streets of American and European cities with their shaven heads and saffron robes, were the most visible face of the Eastern religions exported to the West in the 1960s. The "Hare Krishna Movement," registered as the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), is a branch of what is traditionally known as Gaudiya Vaishnavism, a movement inaugurated in East India by Chaitanya Mahaprabhu in the sixteenth century. Chaitanya, accepted as an incarnation of Krishna by his followers, established a religious system featuring the chanting and dancing in public places that remain prominent in Bengal and other parts of India.

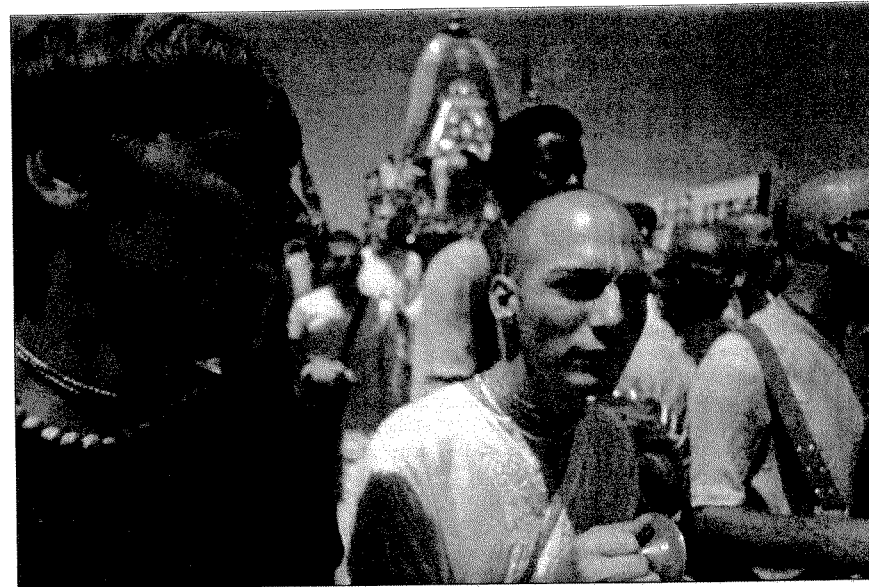
Gaudiya Vaishnavism is a monotheistic tradition that has its philosophical roots in the theistic schools of Vedanta philosophy stemming back to the great Vaishnava theologians Ramanuja in the twelfth century and Madhva in the thirteenth. These schools, in turn, have their roots in the Upanishads, the earliest philosophical texts of India. Krishna is considered to be the Supreme Being by the Gaudiya school, rather than a derivative incarnation of Vishnu, as other Vaishnava schools hold, and the devotees can interact with Him through five primary *rasa* moods, or types of relationships. These five *rasas*, which constitute a distinctive theological feature of the sect, are *santa*, quietistic or neutral; *dasya*, servitude; *sakhya*, friendship; *vatsalya*, parental; and *madhurya*, erotic. Thus one can relate to Krishna in a quietistic meditative mood or, more actively, as a servant to a master, as a friend to a friend, as a parent to a child, or as a lover to the beloved.

The Bhagavata Purana is the principal scriptural text for Krishna-centered theology. Its tenth book depicts God at play, interacting with his devotees as a master, friend, child, or lover in *lilas*, or devotional pastimes. The school considers these *lilas* of Krishna to be not only the activities of God during His descent to earth but a sample of God's eternal *lilas* that transpire in His transcendent spiritual realm within Brahman, the term given to the ultimate truth in the Upanishads and Vedanta philosophical texts. Thus, in addition to his activities as the protector of religion in every age, Krishna comes to attract souls back to

His eternal spiritual realm, called *Goloka*, by displaying His *lila* pastimes, and exchanging *rasa* through His relationships with His devotees. The primary *rasa* of interest to the Gaudiya school is the conjugal *rasa*—interacting with Krishna as a lover.

To be eligible to participate in Krishna's *lila*, however, a soul must be freed from all taint of personal desires and selfishness and completely immersed in loving, meditative absorption in Krishna. A further distinctive feature of the Gaudiya school is the belief that Krishna incarnated again in the present age in the form of Chaitanya in order to spread the process of yoga by which souls enmeshed in the turmoil of the world can develop their innate love of God, become freed from the sufferings of material life, and return to His transcendent realm of *Goloka*. Since the name of Krishna is considered to be identical to Krishna Himself, Chaitanya traveled around India engaging in the ecstatic chanting and propagation of the Krishna mantra—"Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna, Krishna, Krishna, Hare Hare, Hare Rama, Hare Rama, Rama, Rama, Hare Hare." This chanting and hearing of the names of Krishna is the primary feature of the form of yoga practiced by this school—*bhakti yoga*, devotion to God. The practice is bolstered by immersing the mind in hearing, reciting, and remembering the stories of Krishna's *lilas* from the Bhagavata Purana; worshiping the deity form of Krishna in the temple; visiting the places of pilgrimage associated with Krishna; and participating in other devotional activities.

Chaitanya's disciples, the six Gosvamis who resided in Vrindavan near Krishna's birthplace, were sophisticated men of letters and wrote numerous volumes formulating and articulating the theology of the sect in the sixteenth century. The Chaitanya tradition remained centered primarily in East India and Vrindavan until the early twentieth century, when a follower of Chaitanya's, Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati, established a missionary wing called the Gaudiya Math. This branch attempted to propagate the chanting of the Hare Krishna mantra around India and even, via missionary activity, in the West. In 1965, Bhaktisiddhanta's disciple, Bhaktivedanta Swami, arrived in New York City as a representative of the Gaudiya lin-



Hare Krishnas on the beach, Venice, California (TripJ. Stanley)

age. Alone and penniless, Bhaktivedanta sat in Thompkins Square Park and began to chant the Hare Krishna mantra. Although the first few months were difficult for the seventy-year-old swami, or *prabhu-pada*, as he was called by his disciples, he soon began to attract a small but devoted following, and the Hare Krishna movement was born.

Although the movement's strict requirements—no meat, fish, or eggs; no intoxication; no sex outside of marriage; and no gambling—contrasted sharply with the bohemian lifestyle of the Lower East Side, Bhaktivedanta's teachings gave meaning and purpose to many disaffected youth. The International Society for Krishna Consciousness soon spread to other major cities of America and other world metropolises. By the time Bhaktivedanta Swami passed away in 1977, ISKCON had well over 100 temples and dozens of farm communities, restaurants, and *gurukula* schools for the society's children. In India, in particular, the opulence and lavish worship conducted at ISKCON temples

all over the subcontinent have caused them to be highly frequented places of worship. Bhaktivedanta Swami was also a prolific author and translated and published most of the multivolume Bhagavata Purana; the entire multivolume Chaitanya Caritamrita, depicting the life of Chaitanya; and dozens of other books on the practice of Krishna devotion, which his disciples translated into all the major languages of the world.

Despite being heir to a rich and sophisticated Indian devotional tradition, the movement was plagued by scandals during Bhaktivedanta's lifetime. The young hippies Bhaktivedanta attracted found themselves suddenly managing a rapidly growing international organization. Questionable fundraising tactics, coupled with an isolationist mentality and the excesses of neophyte proselytizing zeal, brought public disapproval and caused the movement to be a prime target of the anticult crusades of the late 1960s and 1970s. The postcharismatic phase of the Krishna Consciousness Movement in the West—the time since

its founder passed away almost a quarter of a century ago—has been a period of particularly dramatic turmoil and has presented the movement with new sets of problems. Bhaktivedanta did not clearly specify how the lineage was to continue and how new members would be initiated after his demise, and when he passed away, eleven of his senior-most disciples monopolized the initiatory function of the sect, which they divided into world zones. In time, most of these eleven gurus became embroiled in various dramatic scandals and the system came under increasing attack from other members of the movement. Even after the zonal guru system had been dismantled and the authority of initiation extended to any of Bhaktivedanta's disciples in good standing, scandals connected to the new gurus have continued to erupt regularly, mostly involving deviations from the vows of celibacy. Frustration with this state of affairs developed into an ongoing reform position known as *ritvik*. According to this view, all incoming second-generation members of ISKCON were to be considered Bhaktivedanta's direct disciples even after the founder's death, and not disciples of his disciples.

As a result of such crises of leadership, the movement has splintered into a variety of independent expressions and is undergoing further schisms centered on issues of transmission of authority. A majority of its members have disaffiliated themselves from the institution, and there has been a widespread exodus of large numbers of its constituency to other branches of the Chaitanya lineage in India. The turmoil has spawned various debates over dogma, particularly in instances where Bhaktivedanta's teachings conflicted with previous authorities in the lineage, resulting in the formation of an orthodoxy and the excommunication of heretics. The organization is also experiencing something of a suffragette movement as members react against the historical disempowerment and denigration of women, who have long been denied access to prominent roles in the institution as a result of the *sannyasi* (male lifelong renunciate) culture and ethos that developed in ISKCON in the 1970s. This trend resulted in the fiercely contested but historic appointment of a woman to ISKCON's Governing Board Committee (GBC) in 1998. Moreover, ISKCON is faced with a major looming child abuse case sponsored by more than 100 alumni of its *gurukulas*, private religious boarding schools (which have for all in-

tents and purposes become defunct in the West). Such problems have shaken even the movement's most loyal followers and threaten the very survival of the institutional aspect of the tradition.

The movement also faces other serious issues that will determine its relevancy on the religious landscape of the modern world. Its scriptural literalism, and subscription to *varnasrama*, the social system of ancient and medieval India, bring it into conflict with the dominant intellectual and social currents of our times. Elements within the movement have matured and made efforts to redress the excesses of the past, however, opening themselves up to dialogue with, and influence from, the academic, social, legal, and other mainstream institutions of the greater society. As with any more established religious tradition, there is an inevitable tension between a fundamentalist, literalist element and a more liberal, progressive one. Ultimately, the very fact that there is now a wide spectrum of participatory possibilities outside the jurisdiction of ISKCON suggests that the tradition of Gaudiya Vaishnavism has taken some broader roots in the West. If it can emerge from its crises of transplantation and institutionalization, as well as from the trauma of its present postcharismatic turmoil, the tradition has a unique role to play amongst the various Hindu traditions that have flourished in the West. It is the only representative of the prominent monotheistic sects of India to have attracted converts on a wide scale, as most other expressions of Hinduism that have attracted Western interest are representatives of monistic sects. All in all, the trajectory of the Hare Krishna Movement provides fascinating material from the perspective of the study of religion and offers a unique glimpse at the formative stages of a religious expression struggling to establish roots in a foreign environment.

—Edwin F. Bryant

#### SEE ALSO

Asian American Religious Communities; South Asian American Religious Communities; New Religious Traditions

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## HINDU TEMPLES

Building temples in America has been an important step in establishing the visible presence of Hindu communities here. Most Hindu immigrants to America would not have become involved in the planning and building of new Hindu temples had they remained in India. In the United States, however, there was no physical and cultural infrastructure for the maintenance and support of a Hindu community. Many new Hindu citizens have found themselves deeply involved in creating the institutions needed to serve the growing Hindu population. In building temples, they have also built a sense of community among themselves and have learned to negotiate with their new American neighbors. They have had to establish their nonprofit status and raise money, and in many cases, they have encountered the strictures of zoning boards and the regulations of city councils.

The post-1965 immigrants did not come to a land completely devoid of Hindu institutions, however. The Vedanta Society, launched in the 1890s by Swami Vivekananda, has more than fifteen "centers" across the country, from Boston to St. Louis to San Francisco. In the 1960s and 1970s, the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) had temples in dozens of cities. The Vedanta centers, with their rows of chairs, worship books, and philosophical sermons, offered an assimilated form of Hinduism

that had intellectual appeal. The Krishna movement was intensely devotional and offered opportunities for *puja*, or worship, and festivals more like those of Hinduism back home. In the late 1960s, both groups were largely Euro-American; by 2000, they had undergone many changes because of the growing participation of Hindu immigrants from India. ISKCON temples, in particular, became the first temple homes of many immigrants. In some cities, Hindu immigrants and their children continue to gravitate toward the ISKCON community because of its English-language religious instruction.

For most Hindu immigrants, however, temple life in the United States did not begin at an ISKCON temple or a Vedanta center. Instead, immigrants gathered in homes with Tamil, Gujarati, or Bengali friends for special occasions. Gradually, these family groups began to rent public halls for their festival gatherings. Beginning in the 1970s, one city after another began to develop a "temple society." Eventually, they purchased land, consulted ritual architects, engaged engineering firms, and began construction. Temple completion usually takes many years, from the ritual groundbreaking ceremony, called the *bhumi-puja* (the worship of the earth), to the festive dedication, called the *kumbhabhishekam* (the consecration of the temple by the sprinkling of sacred water). In