


55°

Scattered clouds

[MORE WEATHER](#)

Published Friday, June 25, 1999

Hare Krishnas face new scandal

Child abuse issue coming to fore

 By Julia Lieblich
 Associated Press,

ALACHUA - Hare Krishnas with shaved heads and saffron robes still preach "God consciousness" on the streets and in temples. But in private talks and on public Web sites, many accuse their fellow devotees of the most godless of crimes.

After surviving scandals involving drug and weapons charges, the movement is in crisis again. This time, the issue is child abuse.

For at least a decade, current and ex-devotees claim, leaders of the International Society of Krishna Consciousness knowingly permitted suspected sex offenders to work among 2,000 children in its boarding schools. Now a law firm that has won millions from the Catholic Church is taking their case.

All of this could threaten the Hare Krishnas, the Eastern spiritual community that flowered in 1960s America only to wither in the '80s.

When the charges surfaced last fall, leaders pledged to atone. They were lauded for extraordinary openness when they acknowledged sexual, physical and emotional abuse at the schools.

Hare Krishna leaders announced in May that they would pledge \$250,000 a year to investigate past child abuse and aid survivors. The group's Office of Child Protection compiled the names of 200 people who allegedly inflicted abuse in the 1970s and '80s.

So far, the office reports it has finished investigating 30 cases. The organization says the investigators' pace is appropriately deliberate, but it has some former students questioning how serious movement leaders are.

"It's spin control," says Nirmal Hickey, 28, a boarding school veteran whose father was the Hare Krishna minister of education. "It's totally phony."

'Simple life?'

It was the height of the '60s when the Indian guru A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada brought his distinctive form of devotional Hinduism to the United States. Soon, thousands of Westerners were wearing saris and pajamalike dhotis, living in Hare Krishna temple compounds, and chanting the mantra they believed would lead to a greater awareness of God known as Krishna.

Prabhupada taught that celibacy was a means to achieve the highest spiritual state, and even married couples were not to engage in sex more than once a month. Children, he said, should be sent to boarding schools at age 5 so they could learn to be pure devotees, liberated from familial "ropes of affection." Parents were then freed to sell devotional books and do other jobs.

By the end of the 1970s, 11 schools, known as gurukulas or houses of the guru, were operating in North America with several more around the world.

Krsna Avitara, still boyish and lanky at 32, remembers seeing the movement's promotional films of children running through fields in Vrindavan, India, home of a Hare Krishna boys' boarding school. His parents, a pharmacist and a real estate broker in Miami, had joined the movement when he was 7. He grew up surrounded by pictures of his namesake, Krishna, a puckish blue-skinned deity who frolicked with the cowherds in his Vrindavan paradise.

"I thought that we were going to do the same," Krsna Avitara says.

But there were no cowherds to greet the American boys with shaved heads and topknots when they arrived in Vrindavan in 1980. Home was a square concrete building with stone floors. One hundred boys ages 5 to 18 slept on mats and picked worms from their meals.

The day began at 3 a.m. with a march to the showers, followed by chanting in the temple.

The "gurukulis," as the students were known, attended classes in Hindi, Sanskrit, Hindu scripture, English and history,

Advertisement

Advertisement

often taught by young, untrained teachers who lived with them. Most were the followers deemed least likely to succeed at proselytizing and fund-raising, says E. Burke Rochford, Jr., a sociology professor at Middlebury College in Vermont, who has studied the Hare Krishnas for two decades and was asked by the organization to look into the problem.

Many instructors lashed out at their charges, he and former students say. A week after he arrived, Krsna Avitara, then 12, says he was grabbed, hit and kicked by a teacher.

"We all had the same prayer," he says: " 'Krishna, get me the hell out of here.' "

Some children dreaded going to sleep, anticipating teachers' sexual advances. Referring to one teacher, Krsna Avitara says: "A lot of my friends slept with him. We thought that this was what love was about."

Collapse and rebirth

Hare Krishnas debate how much their leaders knew about child abuse and when.

Hare Krishna spokesman Anuttama says the GBC, or governing commission of top leaders, didn't understand the depth of the problem.

But longtime Hare Krishna Nara Narayan disagrees: "The GBC was aware of the gurukula abuses from the very beginning. . . . I personally witnessed severe child abuse by the teachers and registered complaints to no avail."

Hare Krishnas left the movement en masse during the 1980s, many sensing a growing disconnect between the group's espoused values and its gurus' behavior.

After a financial collapse, the movement closed all but a handful of its boarding schools worldwide.

But within a few years, students began coming back. Some say they returned because they had few job skills and little understanding of life outside. Others missed the intensity of the spiritual life.

Arjuna, 24, believes many early Hare Krishnas were lost hippies who misunderstood Prabhupada's teachings. His own father was a potato farmer in a nudist commune when Prabhupada visited.

"My brother was named Rainbow," he says, "so you can tell where my mother was at."

But religious truth, he maintains, transcends its adherents.

"Krishna is another name for God, and I have true love for God," he says. "All the [Catholic] fathers accused of molestation didn't change Jesus Christ's teachings."

Promise and doubt

The first public airing of child abuse came in May 1996 when 10 former boarding school students addressed Hare Krishna leaders who had gathered in Alachua.

"I've never seen 10 grown men cry before," says Jahnvi, who now heads Children of Krishna, an organization formed around the same time to help abuse survivors like herself.

The response looked promising. Hare Krishna leaders pledged \$105,000 from their personal funds to the ex-students. During the next three years, Children of Krishna would give \$85,000 in grants for counseling, education, and seed money for businesses. A year later the community formed a child protection task force.

Krsna Avitara, who earned an economics degree from the University of Florida, was so encouraged he volunteered to teach at the boys' boarding school in Alachua. But it wasn't long before new doubts arose.

Half the leaders didn't come through with their personal pledges, Anuttama acknowledged. And temple leaders' plans to raise funds to build a multimillion-dollar temple in Mayapur, India, angered devotees who thought the money should go to ex-students.

So far, the Office of Child Protection has conducted training on preventing child abuse and it has collected names of 200 alleged abusers, according to its head, Dhira Govinda, a social worker for Florida's children and family services agency.

Among the 30 people investigated, at least three suspects have been banned from Hare Krishna temples; another is in jail.

Krsna Avitara has no interest in suing or leaving. What he does want is assurance that the smallest child can learn about Krishna without being abused in his name.

Related Searches

[KRSNA AVITARA](#) [HARE KRISHNA](#) [SOCIAL WORKER FOR FLORIDA](#) [SOCIOLOGY PROFESSOR](#) [FLORIDA](#) [HEAD](#) [UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA](#) [TEACHER](#) [PUBLIC WEB SITES](#) [CATHOLIC CHURCH](#) [REAL ESTATE BROKER](#) [SPOKESMAN](#) [POTATO FARMER](#) [E. BURKE ROCHFORD, JR.](#) [UNITED STATES](#) [NORTH AMERICA](#) [KRISHNA](#) [CONSCIOUSNESS](#) [MAYAPUR](#) [VERMONT](#) [EDUCATION](#)

Sponsored Result

best mutual funds - Find Out What Today's Top 3) Index Funds Are.

[northernfunds.com](#) [Learn More Now.](#)

New Rule in ALABAMA: | ConsumerFinanceDaily.com

[www.ConsumerFinanceDaily.com](#) (JAN 2014): If You Pay For Car Insurance You Must Read This Immediately

Site  Web 

Search

Web Search powered by [YAHOO!](#) Search

