

To Sargshila. I am no lumber with my printer's destiny of Caitanya than you were! Richard.

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A PARTY FOR HARE KRISHNA

The International Society of Krishna Consciousness, better known as the Hare Krishna movement, is a western offshoot of a major Indian religion tradition, the emotional brand of Vaishnavism which is associated with Shri Caitanya (1486-1533). Caitanya was a Bengali, and his adherents have been strongest in Bengal and adjoining Orissa; but their sacred places are concentrated in Vrindavan, an area near Mathura in north India, where they believe that the boy god Krishna grew up as a cowherd. Most Vaishnavas regard Krishna — who is said to have recited the *Bhagavad Gītā* — as an incarnation of Vishnu (alias Hari), but followers of Caitanya regard Krishna himself as the ultimate godhead.

A retired Bengali businessman who studied in Vrindavan and there took the name of Bhaktivedanta was told by his guru to be a missionary to the western world. He arrived in New York and founded ISKCON in 1966, and soon acquired a following in several American cities. In January 1970 an English HQ was established, the Sri Sri Radha Krishna Temple at 7 Bury Place, close to the British Museum; its first head was an American. The chanting members of the movement, the men especially conspicuous with their yellow robes and their heads shaven except for a topknot at the back of the crown, are a familiar feature of the West End scene.

In August 1973 I received the invitation reproduced below; immediately after the reception I wrote this article.

Routledge and Kegan Paul
Publishers of
Krishna, The Supreme Personality of Godhead,
Sri Isopanisad,
Nectar of Devotion,
and Collier, Macmillan, publishers of
Bhagavad Gita As It Is
invites you to an informal reception

at
Claude Gill Books, 181 Oxford Street, London W.1.
on Wednesday 12th September 1973, at 12 noon.

The reception will be attended by
His Divine Grace A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami
Spiritual Master of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness,
World authority on Vedic Scriptures and internationally recognised
Sanskrit scholar and philosopher.

R.S.V.P.
Michael Bonwood,
Collier, Macmillan,
35 Red Lion Square,
London WC1R 4EJ



hare krishna!

The reception promised to be a curious hybrid between East and West, between religion and business; but in the event the Hare Krishna people had things all their own way, and spiritual solace substituted for party banter, 'prasada' (consecrated vegetarian food) for sherry. I arrived at Claude Gill's bookshop at noon, as invited, and was received by no one. I found my way to a large bare room on the first floor which had been relieved of its normal furniture and decoration. The yellow walls were hung with multicoloured paintings of scenes from the life of Krishna; these were in the lurid sentimental style of Indian bazaar prints, and may indeed have been copies of such prints, but were executed by American devotees; similar illustrations adorn the published translations of Hindu texts which the reception was ostensibly held to promote and celebrate. Among the polychromes hung a photograph of His Divine Grace. On a low dais at one end of the room was a huge low chair in red plush with a small golden canopy; this seat, which they call a *vyasasan*, had been brought over from Bury Place. Next to it a devotee in orange-pink robes was Hoovering a strip of carpet, on which rested also a small table bearing the movement's publications. A man in normal clothes (from Gill's?) was arranging chairs in four rows for an audience to face the platform. Only half a dozen people had so far arrived, though several devotees, mainly girls, scurried in and out with huge pans of foodstuffs from their communal kitchens, and set up a long table at the back of the room on which they began to lay paper plates.

social organisation

I approached an unoccupied devotee, an unmistakably English girl with a fresh complexion and mild expression, dressed in a white and mauve cotton saree; she turned out to be a Londoner and to live in the movement's second English temple, in Watford. This temple is housed in Bhaktivedanta Manor, which has been given to the movement by the ex-Beatle George Harrison. His Divine Grace, their spiritual master, had been living there for the past two months, with a short excursion to the Continent (she mentioned Sweden, Germany and France) to visit new centres and potential centres there. The Watford temple, she estimated, houses 40 and 50 devotees who are permanent residents, most of them English, but during the summer they have been joined by a floating population of 10 to 20 American visitors who have come to enjoy the presence of their spiritual master. The Bury Place temple is rather smaller. Resident devotees work full time for the movement, most of them in the movement; duties, whether they be household chores or the promulgation of the truth, are assigned to each member, and she assured me that the male devotees share in the cooking. Organization is the responsibility of a president in each temple; when I asked how he was chosen she replied

that he is elected by the members of that temple. Some members, she said, have jobs outside the movement but live in the temple; I surmise however that this category is small. It is intermediate between the full-time workers in the movement (all of whom wear Indian clothes) and what one might call the lay following, those who have accepted Krishna consciousness in their hearts but continue, typically because they are married to unbelievers, to live in their own homes and visit the temples as outsiders. A distinction is made between those who have taken a vow of celibacy and the rest: the latter if married are called 'grihastha', using the classical Sanskrit word for a married householder, the celibates are 'swamis'. There are as yet, my informant said, no English swamis. Devotees are encouraged, perhaps even ordered, to marry each other; otherwise sexual intercourse is forbidden, and rumour has it that it is altogether only allowed for procreation, but I did not ask about that.

My informant said that she had become acquainted with the movement through talk with her brother, and had then seen them dancing in Oxford Street; at last she had found something to live by. Her family were Methodist but hardly practising; she felt that sometimes she had been packed off to church on a Sunday to get her out of the way. She had been employed in offices, but found no satisfaction in her work; she and everyone else were always looking at the clock. Now she never had to bother about the time, and her life was full. In her leisure hours she had turned, in her late teens, to the pursuit of pleasure: drink, dancing, and smoking (marijuana?), but had become disappointed. Many of the devotees had arrived in the same way, disillusioned with superficial pleasures. But some of them had joined straight from school and were completely innocent. Some thought that it was a disadvantage for these young converts not to realize by experience the emptiness of what they were missing, but she doubted it. Though she expressed herself mildly, I thought I detected echoes from a puritan background in conflict with to-day's permissive teenage culture. I asked about the economic support of her parents; she said she had never contributed much as her father was retired and they could live well enough on his pension.

dissemination

At last at 12.45 the familiar drumming was heard, and His Divine Grace was conducted by his devotees to his throne; he was garlanded, and then sat cross-legged on the throne while a devotee arranged a microphone around his neck. The movement's literature variously proclaims his present age as 78 or 79; he is short and frail, with many gold fillings in his teeth. He turned the pages of a copy of his translation of the first part of the *Bhagavata Purana* while his disciples performed 'kirtan' (chanting). At his entry they had all prostrated themselves; now they rose and sang their unvarying chant: 'Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna, Hare Hare, Hare Ram, Hare Ram, Hare Ram, Hare Kare.' One beat the drum, another the cymbals, and the rest clapped and cavorted; a few girls leapt into the air and waved at His Divine Grace, who paid no attention. After about five minutes this ended abruptly, and His Divine Grace muttered a few sentences to which the devotees, again prostrate, responded 'Jai' ('Victory' — the word is used rather like 'Hail' in English). His utterances were I think in Hindi, but the last one was 'Thank you very much' — 'Jai'.

An American devotee sitting cross-legged on the floor by the throne then read out the passage which His Divine Grace had been locating: a Sanskrit verse, its English translation, and His Divine Grace's English commentary. The world had come to a bad state — the commentary referred to China's attack on India in the early sixties — because of the decline in religion; the wise however resorted to reciting the sacred texts, however imperfectly preserved. After the reading His Divine Grace spoke for about 20 minutes on the same theme, slowly and with a strong Indian accent. Just as a man with jaundice, he said, could be cured only by eating sugar-candy, but was at first reluctant to eat it because it tasted bad to him, so this world, which could only be cured by religion, was reluctant to return to it. The recital of the mantra 'Hare Krishna' etc. produced vibrations which could awaken the Krishna consciousness in our hearts. Near the end he mentioned some sales figures for his translations, which his devotees were selling on the streets; but they also needed the cooperation of publishers and booksellers to disseminate the truth.

doctrinal confusion

When he ended, another devotee who had been sitting near him rose to ask in a toneless and almost inaudible voice if there were any questions. The devotee who had been beating the drum, another American, repeated this more loudly. But it was 1.15 and there were none; besides, some of us had been standing still for half an hour, and we could all smell the food, which we were now invited to eat, being told that it was made according to Vedic recipes. Though one may doubt the Vedic authenticity of potatoes, apples and grapes, the Indian food on paper plates was certainly tasty, even if some were disconcerted to be eating it with their fingers. There were also paper cups of liquid yoghurt and lime cordial.

During the meal I talked to another English female devotee, who carried an armful of magazines which she had just been trying to sell on the street, an occupation to which she returned as soon as the reception was over. I asked her whether it was essential to wear Indian clothes, and she told me earnestly that yes, it was extremely important, their spiritual master had ordered it. She had been a few minutes late for the sermon, and asked me what she had missed. I said that His Divine Grace had said we were now living in the Kali Yuga (the last and worst of the four ages of an eon), and that the human life-span was continually getting shorter, but that my own impression was rather that it was getting longer. She replied that after all a single life was unimportant, as we all had many lives. She then told me, and reaffirmed, that Krishna had been incarnated as Caitanya in Vrindavan, and in that form had spoken the *Bhagavad Gita*. (The first devotee I spoke to assured me that Caitanya was not divine, only divinely inspired. Indian followers of Caitanya do believe him to be an avatar (incarnation) of Krishna, or of both Krishna and his consort Radha. But no sect has held that Caitanya was the author of the *Gita*; that is a serious doctrinal confusion). We talked of translations of the *Gita*, and she told me that it was the universal opinion of Sanskrit scholars that none of the previous translations had been accurate. When I revealed myself as a Sanskritist and contradicted her she asked me to wait, and went off to fetch a tall, thin, bespectacled male devotee.

Pradyumna Das was a friendly American, who told me that he travelled with His Divine Grace as his secretary — they were off to India, whither His Divine Grace returns every autumn, in two days' time. Pradyumna Das has done a term's Sanskrit with Professor Ingalls in Harvard and has also studied at Ohio State University. He has been teaching himself Bengali too. His Divine Grace makes his translation into a tape recorder; Pradyumna Das then corrects the English, and checks the writing of the Sanskrit; he also proof-reads, and generally supervises the publication of the books. The translation of the whole *Bhagavata Purana* is well advanced; next they plan to produce a translation of the life of Caitanya, the *Caitanya-caritamrita*, and then writings of Caitanya's immediate successors, the six Goswamis. I said that translations of previously untranslated works would be valuable, but why had they felt another translation of the *Gita* to be necessary? He was naturally voluble on this point: no previous translation had been accessible to the ordinary man. When I suggested Mahesh Yogi's Penguin translation he said scornfully that none of *his* followers could show any practical results; their own translation was for *practical* use, for daily consultation. (Indeed, my first informant had told me that whenever she had any difficulties she consulted the *Gita* and immediately found the answer there. This recalls some Christians' use of the Bible rather than Indian custom.) He also repudiated my suggestion that Edgerton's translation was close to the original: Edgerton did not *understand* the *Gita*, which he thought was written by savages; their own translation brought out its true meaning, with the aid of Vallabha-deva's commentary. (Vallabha-deva was a contemporary of Caitanya who wrote a commentary on the *Bhagavata Purana*, not on the *Gita*.) I asked whether they had plans to translate Vallabha-deva's work, but he said no, its essence was available in their spiritual master's commentary.

Sanskrit in Texas

Pradyumna Das is from Massachusetts; he joined the movement in 1966 in New York after reading about it in the *Evergreen Review*. He is married and has a child not yet of school age. In due course he will send the child to the movement's school in Dallas. There, he told me, all the children are taught Sanskrit, and start by learning the *Gita* by heart; the five-year-olds, he told me proudly, can already recite two or three chapters of it. There are already 40 or 50 pupils. The Sanskrit is taught by members of the movement; I asked whether they were going to import a pundit from India, and he answered that they had not yet found anyone suitable.

Pradyumna Das then asked me whether I would like to meet his spiritual master, who was still seated on his throne, facing which two chairs had been placed on the dais for those requiring an audience. At my assent, he introduced me as Professor G., a title I hastily disclaimed. To make myself intelligible to His Divine Grace I found it necessary to speak very distinctly. At close quarters His Divine Grace looked his age, and without the microphone his voice was weak. He toyed with a small red rose, the western equivalent of the lotus traditionally handled by Indian potentates. I asked him about his education in Sanskrit, and he told me that he learnt it at school in Calcutta as a compulsory part

of the syllabus; he took Sanskrit and history at Intermediate (roughly equivalent in standard to our A-levels). For his B.A. at the Scottish Church College (part of the University of Calcutta) he took economics and philosophy. He asked me if I knew the college, and when I said I had only visited Presidency College (the oldest and most famous) he assured me that his college was 'equal in status to Presidency'. He had only taken up the study of Sanskrit seriously again after retirement. I asked him about the college which I had heard the movement had founded at Navadvipa in Bengal; his answers on this were rather hesitant and he looked at his secretary for help. No, the college was not yet accredited by the government; they taught courses on the *Gita*; teaching was in English, because Bengali students wanted to learn English. I then asked His Divine Grace about his attitude to other religions, and he replied in normal Indian style that all religions were good; he was only against irreligion. He had been asked why his followers wore Indian clothes, but that was their idea, not his, he had never told them to. (Note the clash with the girl's statement during lunch.) He then proceeded to an attack on meat-eating. Someone had asked him, 'Thou shalt not kill — whom?' At least one should not kill one's parents. The cow is our mother because she gives us milk. I asked whether the goat is mother to those who drink goat's milk; yes, but the use of cow milk is universal, everyone in the whole world drinks it. Then the bull is one's father, because without sex the cow cannot produce milk. So the bull and the cow are our parents.

a belated welcome

I thanked His Divine Grace and took my leave; it was 2.15 and I was almost the last to go. Outside on the Oxford Street pavement several devotees had resumed their normal public activities. I bought a magazine from the girl I had talked to over lunch. They are given, not sold, she said, but the normal contribution is 20p. Pradyumna Das leapt joyously in the air to wave me farewell. Hare Krishna!

Postscript. The next day I received by mail an unsigned and undated stencilled letter from Cassell and Collier Macmillan, headed 'Welcome to the Party!!!' In fact I received two copies of the letter, one addressed to Dr. Gombrich, the other to Dr. Gombirch. The letter assures me that 'This will be no ordinary publishers' party'. After giving information on the Hare Krishna movement and His Divine Grace, who is returning from Stockholm especially for the reception, the letter continues, 'In an atmosphere heavy with incense, guests will be offered numerous tempting delicacies, while talking to members of the Hare Krishna Movement and their friends, who range from racing car drivers and pop singers to professors of philosophy.' I wonder how I missed those professors of philosophy. Could they both have been me?

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