

The Rise, Fall, and Rebuilding of New Vrindaban

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Introduction

We are students from the Global Leadership Center researching leadership of the Hare Krishna community in New Vrindaban. We found the era of leader Kirtanananda to be a critical time period in the life of this community, especially how New Vrindaban coped with the problems that arose in the community when Kirtanananda and New Vrindaban were expelled from the International Society of Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON).

Most of the information that is available focuses more on the past problems and not on how the community is faring now, so we would like this paper to examine the current leadership in the New Vrindaban community as well as how they got to where they are today. We spoke with community members to try and answer our questions on leadership.

Rise

In 1968, Kirtanananda Swami Bhaktipada, a disciple of Hare Krishna founder Prabhupada, bought a farm near Moundsville, West Virginia in order to start a self-sufficient community devoted to the spread of Krishna consciousness. Within 10 years, the community grew to 100 members and continued growing as leaders purchased more land. The devotees trusted his charismatic leadership and as a result the community's population reached more than 600 members (A Call for Krishna). Kirtanananda also built the Palace of Gold, a memorial to honor Prabhupada, which served as an example of how Kirtanananda could successfully bring a seemingly impossible idea to fruition (Houser).

Fall

Over time, the Palace of Gold became less of a memorial to Prabhupada and more of a tourist attraction. With this, Kirtanananda's vision shifted and he began to incorporate western devices into the traditional Krishna services. An Indian devotee recalls how drumming and chanting Vedic mantras was accompanied by an organ and tympani. And instead of a service conducted in Sanskrit, English versions were offered as well. Also, he "blended Christian and Native American religious traditions" (Wolves Within the Fold 115). The once sacred place of worship started to become what the newspapers called a "spiritual Disneyworld" (Almost Heaven 8). People came from all over the world to visit and other religions such as Christianity were honored at the site; for example, a statue of Jesus Christ sat alongside one of Prabhupada (Houser).

In 1987, Kirtanananda was being investigated for questionable activities and simultaneously New Vrindaban was expelled from ISKCON (Almost Heaven 10). A devotee said that during this time the community became divided on how they should deal with the challenges before them. Devotees began to question their own faith and became fearful of what would happen with Kirtanananda absent. Eventually, many

devotees decided to leave the community, and the population that was once 377 adult members strong, dwindled to 131 members in 1991 (Almost Heaven 12).

Rebuilding

In the 14 years since Kirtanananda's departure from New Vrindaban, the community has worked to regroup and restore faith in the community. "I'm sorry for all the duplicity, hypocrisy, fallen leadership, etc., but I will not let it affect the spiritual growth and development," said a disciple of Prabhupada (Wolves Within the Fold 111). New Vrindaban was admitted back into ISKCON in 1998 (Almost Heaven 13), and its population has remained stable at around 100 members; however, they are still in the process of establishing a stable governing body without the help of a charismatic leader. Because leadership is so complex, we divided it into three categories: religious, administrative, and emotional leadership.

Religious Leadership

Immediately following Kirtanananda's arrest in 1987, ISKCON's Governing Body Commission (GBC) began putting limitations on the power of guru responsibilities (Wolves Within the Fold 111). The GBC assumed ruling power over the community so that the gurus could focus on spiritual leadership (Wolves Within the Fold 109-110). They felt that this would help take the focus off of the gurus and return it to the teachings of Prabhupada.

An Indian devotee reiterated New Vrindaban's attempt to stay focused on spiritual matters during the time after Kirtanananda left the community. He said that the devotees maintained their Krishna faith by encouraging one another to follow the teachings of the Bhagavad-gita. This book of holy scriptures shows how service is a key element to religious worship: service to Krishna, service to a spiritual master and service to one another. By keeping this focus, they will be true to what Prabhupada wanted when he established Krishna consciousness in America.

Administrative Leadership

The prime overseer in the ISKCON administration is the GBC. The GBC has the final authority for all of ISKCON's communities and was established in 1970 by Prabhupada (Dharma dasa).

New Vrindaban's current administration is reflective of the GBC board. According to the community's GBC representative, Malati Devi dasi, one of the ways in which the community is using the GBC as a model is through the compiling of minutes from old meetings so that they may reference them when issues resurface, much like the GBC law book. New Vrindaban has also moved away from an authoritarian rule to a democracy with community representatives who meet to vote on issues that arise (Devi dasi).

One of the main functions of the GBC is, "to map out a global preaching strategy for the world wide society, while leaving details of local preaching to local management." The

GBC also must ensure that the current policies and regulations, which are recorded in a law book, are being implemented by ISKCON's communities (Dharma dasa).

Each of the ISKCON-recognized communities has a GBC representative to advise the communities and act as their direct connection to ISKCON. According to a phone interview with Sriman Sankarshan das Adhikari, these representatives are devotees who have earned the respect of the people in their area and their main focus is to guide the community. The GBC representatives must report to the GBC once per year, where they get pointers on community guidance and updates on GBC policies. Sankarshan sees the GBC efforts as, "working together as a family to promote global consciousness" (Adhikari das).

Emotional Leadership

According to E. Burke Rochford Jr., who has been researching the Hare Krishna movement since 1975, charisma is the greatest quality of a religious figure. In an interview, he said that charismatic leadership is a relational process that inspires people and motivates them. It is the vehicle of trust between a devotee and a guru, and this trust is a crucial element in order for a religious community to flourish.

The ISKCON movement greatly reflects this relational value and is shifting its focus inward towards individuals, instead of spreading the movement as a whole. "The newer generation of Krishnas are beginning to show sincerity to one another and the intelligence to engage others in discussions on Krishna" said Sankarshan during an interview.

Unfortunately, the current community at New Vrindaban is searching for a sense of direction and leadership, which is being shared so no one devotee has more power over the others. However, inklings of hope are being seen as a younger generation is moving in and meeting one another at a personal level.

Conclusion

New Vrindaban has come a long way since 1987, but there is still a lot of work to be done. When we asked Malati Devi dasi what New Vrindaban needed to survive in the future, she said plainly, "a miracle." Our research has shown that New Vrindaban is moving in the right direction of rebuilding, but much chaos and unsteadiness still lingers in the community. From our own observations, it appears that the spiritual leadership is developing more quickly than administrative and emotional leadership because the temple has gone back to a more traditional style of worship. We conclude that in years to come, New Vrindaban will be a thriving community as long as they keep multiple people in leadership positions to balance the power and remain consistent in their goal-setting and decision-making processes.

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