Robin George Vs. ISKCON Category: <u>lanuary 1984</u>

Published by Anonymous on Jan. 01, 1984

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A Case of Persecution? Hare Krishnas Fighting for Rights in L.A. After \$9.7 Million Decision in "Brainwashing" Suit

On the East coast, mid-1983, it was a blue-sky West-Virginian June day at Prabhupada's Place of Gold, the Hare Krishna sect's breathtaking architectural memorial to their founder, A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada. Summer tourists from all over the U.S. meandered around the Place awestruck at the fantastic gold, marble, onyx and stained-glass craftmanship. Thousands of hours of meticulous hand-crafting by Hare Krishna devotees have gone into the palace, ace, and you can bet billions of recitations of the famed Hare Krishna mantra have echoed through the halls. Planned to eventually be a 7- temple complex, it is a 'kshetra," a spiritual oasis in America. A state official touts it as 'the top cultural, attraction in the state."

On the west coast that same day, not tourists but reporters were in attendance at the Orange county Superior Court in Santa Ana, California, site of the Robin George vs. ISKCON 'brainwashing' case. The civil suit, brought to court by the George family against ISKCON's California, New York, Louisiana, and Ottawa, Canada, corporations, sought damage awards for false imprisonment, emotional distress, libel and invasion of privacy, and for contributing to the wrongful death of Robin's father, James George, who died of a stroke shortly after Robin's return home from ISKCON. In essence, Robin George, the prosecution alleged, was kidnapped and brainwashed by the Hare Krishnas.

After 5 months of trial proceedings, in a judgement against ISKCON, the jury had awarded Robin and Marcia (Robin's Mother) George a staggering \$32.5 million in compensatory (\$3.5 million) and punitive (\$29 million) damages. The court was stunned. "That kind of figure shocked everyone," said Bhutatma Das, one of two key spokesmen for ISKCON's L.A.-based International Office of Public Affairs. "That shocked even Milton Silverman (the George's attorney." Mr. Silverman had asked for \$16 million. The jury has doubled it. Mrs. George, a fundamentalist Christian, commented after the verdict came in, "We had God on our side." "Well, at least the jury was," stated Bhutatma Das. "I think at that point, that the exorbitant award

[some 4 times the corporation's net worth] gave most people the idea that the jury was harboring bias." The final award, set later by the presiding judge, the Honorable James Jackman, was \$9.7 million.

ISKCON Hit Parade; From the Palace of Gold to a Superior Court trial; that is a black and white picture of how ISKCON is perceived by the American public's curious-but-suspicious eye. They are both liked and disliked. In W. Virginia and Michigan the saffron-clad Hare Krishnas are tourist industry heroes. Scions of Detroit's famous Ford and Reuther families, Alfred Ford and Elizabeth Reuther, now Hare Krishna devotees Ambarisa Dasa and Lekhasravanti, pooled part of their inheritances to transform a former Detroit mansion into the celestially opulent Bhaktivedanta Cultural Center, now Michigan's 3rd biggest tourist draw. In Texas they are extolled for their 'Gurukulam' education system. In both New York and Northern California, ISKCON was applauded for their social services in guiding alienated youth and combating drug addiction. Many people truly appreciate their colorfulness, the transplanting of Vedic culture into mainstream America, their joyous chanting, county fair-like festivals and their savory "higher taste" vegetarian prasadam.

Despite such good works (or perhaps because or their notable successes) ISKCON ranks near the top of many anti-cult group's hit list. These vigilante groups label ISKCON "dangerous." This is the low and ugly end of the opinion spectrum,

So far, no money has gone from ISKCON to Robin George (who had assumed a Hare Krishna spiritual name). Nor is it likely to for several years to come, if it does at all. Soon after the trial, ISKCON filed a petition of appeal with the 4th District Court of Appeals in Santa Ana. As a process totally separate from the actual appeal hearing, the 4th District Court granted ISKCON immunity from having to post a \$15-million bond (1[?] times the award), allowing ISKCON to go into receivership. In receivership ISKCON's control of assets is turned over to a court-appointed third party- in this case Mr. Melvin Feldman, a respected attorney who, when he heard of ISKCON's plight, specifically asked for the appointment. He protects and manages the property assets while the appeal is pending. This prevents the selling or hiding of assets to avoid payment of any damages. In ISKCON's opinion this was fair, "Quite frankly, we do not have near that kind of money. It [posting the bond] would have knocked us out," said Bhutatma Das. The appeal won't be heard for one to two years.

Public Lashing: Like a societal backlash, the Robin George case sought severe, debilitating punishment against ISKCON. When Carol Burnett won her libel suit against the National Enquirer, the public cheered. A nosey tabloid, infamous for its yellow journalism, had met its comeuppance, people, thought Now, an incredibly excessive award against ISKCON hints at an opportunity taken for the public to hit back at ISKCON, taking fullest, almost vindictive, advantage of the case. A culturally and religiously alien Hindu sect has been tried and punished.

Robin George's association with the Hare Krishna movement began 8 years ago. Now 23, Robin at age 15, had left he Los Angeles suburban home to join the Hare Krishna temple at Laguna Beach, California. According to her testimony during the trial, she had received permission from her parents to practice there religion of her choice and had begun practicing Hare Krishna disciplines in her home. At some point the parents turned against her choice destroyed her altar, books and other religious paraphernalia. She testified that she was later physically punished by being chained to a toilet for several days by her father. In this time of personal crisis, she had run away from home and sought shelter at the Hare Krishna temple. She was accepted as a devotee, became initiated and adopted the Hare Krishna lifestyle. Moving to Hare Krishna temple centers in San Diego, Louisiana and Ottawa over a year-long period to avoid her searching parents, she returned home for a brief period, then left again to rejoin the Hare Krishna temple. Finally, after the police threatened to jail Hare Krishna leaders on kidnapping charges, Robin George returned home. The lawsuit was failed against ISKCON by the Georges, and ten months later James George died of a stoke. It was 1976.

Hinduism on Trial: That's the bare bones of the case. The raw-nerve-and-muscle issues- was it kidnapping or compassionate abetting, was it brainwashing or following a traditional pattern of Hindu sadhana-were cut open and probed during the five-month long trial. There are peripheral issues. Did Hinduism itself end up going on trial in the jurors' minds? Was this case an opportune arena for the Christian anticultists to finally really hurt a successful and well-to-do non-Christian religious sect in America? In an extensive interview with Bhutatma Das, The New Saivite World explored ISKCON's perspective on the case. "The whole idea, the basic emphasis of the whole thing was that becoming a devotee of Krishna was becoming indoctrinated. This process of bhakti yoga was a brainwashing technique. Early rising, vegetarianism, bhajan, mantrajapa, temple worship were construed as to be brainwashing. That was their case, pure and simple. And the jury bought it."

Anti-cult Pros: "Now there was the one factor that she was under age," Bhutatma Das continued. "That in itself shows ISKCON as being irresponsible. Certainly, we

should have sent her back to her parents. And, admittedly, today we would only allow a minor into ISKCON with written permission from their parents." But there is another dimension to this age factor. According to ISKCON, through Marcia George's association with the Citizen's Freedom Foundation, one of the top 5 U.S. Anti-cult groups, the Robin George case had been selected by the CFF as the one having the best chance of winning, because it involved a minor. CFF gave the case it's full support. Two anticult professionals were brought in by CFF for the case-Mr. Milton Silverman, a successful anti-cult attorney, and Dr. Margaret Singer, a well-known anti-cult psychologist.

Mind Control: Mr. Silverman's contention of "mind control" through sleep deprivation, constant chanting alteration of diet and the indoctrination of basic Hindu beliefs such as reincarnation, karma, etc.; and Dr. Singer's testimony on Robin George's mental health, which drew mostly on clinical theory effectively convinced the jury. In a questionable move, the judge repeatedly advised the jury not to take into consideration the validity of ISKCON's religious beliefs when weighing the evidence but allowed Dr. Singer's psychological evidence regarding the impact those beliefs had on Robin George. In an unrelenting effort to associate ISKCON's religious practices with brainwashing, Silverman repeatedly introduced Hindu beliefs and practices, bringing in the Bhagavad Gita, and "they wanted to bring in temple worship with the deities. Of course our lawyer objected. It was coming to the point where they were attacking our religion," lamented Bhutatma Das. ISKCON's attorney, William Morgan (in his closing argument), said, "The First Amendment (which guarantees religious freedom) was kicked all over the courtroom."

As a key part of its defence, ISKCON had brought in numerous doctors and scholars from many different fields to testify to the validity of Hare Krishna's religious practices and philosophy as being a traditional expression of Hinduism, and as being innocuous to mental health In the words of Bhutatma Das, "The jury just wasn't buying that."

In the 8 years since she left ISKCON Robin George hasn't simply been vegetating in some psychiatrist's office. She just recently graduate from a California state university after four years of college. Described during the trial by one reporter as "attractive and confident," Robin shows no apparent physical signs of traumatic damage. As the George's one psychologist witness, Dr. Singer provided the only testimony that she is suffering mentally as a result of the support brainwashing. As for the false imprisonment or kidnapping charges, Robin George testified that she came to the Hare Krishna temple of her own free choice and that at no time was

she physically mistreated or restrained. In fact, she ran away twice to the Hare Krishna temple. "She had money, access to phones, she could write. She could go out. She herself requested to be sent to cross-country centers to avoid her parents," stated Bhutatma Das. The Hare Krishna devotees complied with her wishes, and thus were, out of their wanting to help Robin, abetting a run-away minor. Dr. Singer told the court that the false imprisonment was not physical, but mental-a type of "mind-control" imprisonment.

Do Robin George and her mother have any form of legitimate grievance with ISKCON? To a small degree, yes. Three were definite excesses of indoctrination. Certain individuals within the sect indoctrinated her with ideas and beliefs that extend beyond the normally catholic Hindu tenets, and are peculiar to the Hare Krishna sect. She was told that her parents were "meat-eating demos" and that if she didn't attain Krishna consciousness she would "be reincarnated as a worm in stool." This mentality of the-evils-of-materialism and Krishna-is-the-only-way does surface within ISKCON both within its literature and as expressed by some of its teachers. Not all ISKCON leaders and devotees think this way, but it does exit and Robin George was exposed to it. "Yes there could have been excesses," stated Bhutatma Das.

Rites and Rights: What have been the immediate effects on ISKCON? Financially, receivership has not wrought any notable changes in ISKCON's activities. "We weren't planning on selling any of our properties anyway,' says Bhutatma Das. Psychologically, the Hare Krishna devotees have grown closer together, have become more dedicated than ever to their spiritual mission as a result of this trial. And ISKCON is making internal adjustments to prevent future occurrences of this type. But there is still the past. As a result of this trial, Bhutatma Das forecasts, "We will probably see some more of these cases. There is one brewing out on the East Coast."

With the appeal hearing one to two years away, ISKCON is confident the higher court will overturn the verdict. They have good reason to think so. ISKCON's team of attorneys contends that several major breaches of trial protocol occurred during the case, including certain of Judge Jackman's instructions to the jury. ISKCON will bring the case to the Appeals court as a First Amendment issue. "This [case] is tantamount to saying you cannot practice Hindu religion or you are liable to pay a \$32 million penalty," stated Mukunda Maharaj, Director of ISKCON's Office of Public Affairs. ISKCON has strong precedence on this. A new York Supreme Court and a U.S. Court of Appeals have previously affirmed that Hare Krishna is a genuine Hindu sect "for free exercise purposes." Other fringe religious or human-potential

organizations have also seen their First Amendment rights strongly upheld in higher courts. "Recently, in a case similar to ours a lower court verdict against Scientology was overturned by the Appeals court," commented Bhutatma Das. On the extreme edge of freedom's domain, in 1982, religious liberty was extended by the Georgia state Supreme Court to a Church promoting witchcraft.

In a published rebuttal to an article in Science Digest on cults, attorney Gara Lamarche (Assistant Director-New York Civil Liberties Union) wrote on "rites and rights." "The law must be wary of scientists' definitions, for one man's indoctrination is another's received truth... Efforts to differentiate "cults" from "mainstream" religions have their antecedents in crusades against atheists, Catholics, Jews, Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses-all once reviled in terms as scathing as those now applied to the 'cults.' The First Amendment does not, of course, give religious groups total immunity. It does not bar prosecution from criminal acts. But singling out 'cults' for special scrutiny is exactly the kind of religious discrimination the First Amendment forbids.

What if: If the appeal is lost, ISKCON will seek a hearing in still higher courts. If ISKCON finally did have to pay out \$9.7 million to Robin George, the effects, they assert, would be devastating. That figure, according to the ISKCON attorneys, still exceeds the \$7-million combined net worth of the 4 corporations. A lot of property and valuable trusts may have to be sold and dissolved. The resourceful, resilient ISKCON would certainly survive and thrive though its widespread network of temples, farms and public showplaces across the U.S. But this precedent could leave other Hindu organizations open to the same kind of brainwashing charge. Bhutatma Das thought this wasn't too likely because ISKCON is to public, so foreign and involves so many Western youth that it stirs people in unusual ways. Other Hindu groups don't have such a high profile, and thus are not so vulnerable to civil litigation.