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Published by Anonymous on Dec. 01, 1995

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Krishna Worship--Food for the Soul

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Several centuries ago, near Brindavan, India, thousands of devotees were devastated when they were forced to hide their beloved image of Sri Krishna Kalachandji--"the beautiful black moon-faced One." They sought to protect the deity from the brutal Moghul invasion of their country. Stricken with grief, they poured their souls out in fervent prayer for the day He would safely return. Thanks to His Divine Grace A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, he did indeed.

Srila Prabhupada, modern-day Hindu saint and founder of ISKCON, discovered Kalachandji hundreds of years later in a museum in Jaipur. He arranged for the ebony black polished icon to be brought to Dallas, Texas, where an elaborate palace was built there in His honor. A community of loyal followers blossomed and flourished soon afterward. The sacred rituals His disciples faithfully practiced so many years ago in His worship were then revived.

Today, in modern Dallas, stands the current product of the seed Prabhupada planted--a cushioned haven in the inner core of the city. Travel just east of the massive downtown skyline and you will find the awesome Kalachandji's Palace, behind whose walls lies the temple to Kalachandji, and a renowned

vegetarian restaurant. Beyond that, for a three-mile radius, is a collection of houses owned by devotees.

The general public doesn't know the extent of it. Many Dallasites on their first visit unsuspectingly think the devotees are merely working delicious dietary wonders. Imagine their surprise when they discover an atmosphere so vividly spiritual it is literally intoxicating. For some, it's intimidating. For others, it's irresistibly magnetic. I myself was a victim of the latter. I just had to keep coming back for more.

A Visit to Virtual India

When I came to the temple one weekend for their famed Sunday feast, where just about every meditation group in the Dallas/Fort Worth Metroplex flocks for a big festival, the experience was as unforgettable as if it were the first time. It was also all the more crowded, as pair upon pair of shoes lined up outside the temple indicated.

Veering to the right inside the front entrance and into the temple, I was swept into the spiritual realm by the drums, the chanting and the intoxicatingly fragrant dhupa, incense, its spicy aroma weakening any earthly inclinations. Shoeless devotees clad in multi-colored robes, their noses adorned with tilaka, occupied every inch between the temple's mahogany walls punctuated by paintings of Krishna. As they sang and danced in passionate worship, their drums, tambourines and lyrics of Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna reverberated off the walls like an eternal echo, penetrating every sense known to the occupant's flesh.

As my photographer and I dashed into the sole open space we spotted, by the throned statue of A.C. Bhaktivedanta in all his sacred majesty, the ritual reached its climax. The blue velvet curtain of the stage pulled back, revealing the black Krishna deity, Kalachandji, and His white female counterpart,

exquisitely draped in a lustrous white satin gown garnished with red flowers. On Her head lay a glittering jeweled crown, the tangible summit of Her holiness.

Spotting the bouquet of yellow carnations at Her heel, I was temporarily snapped out of the hypnotic trance and reminded of where I really was, minus the temple walls. An analogy, perhaps, to the famous "Yellow Rose of Texas"? "This is the original cowboy country," explained one man. Before he could elaborate, a woman offered me a sniff of the yellow pushba flower while another man squirted us all with the Jala. Once again, I became oblivious to my American whereabouts.

After a closing ritual with the deepalamp and tulasiplant, the ceremonial gaiety suddenly halted, indicating a shift to the pragmatic mode of their weekly meeting. A few minutes passed before the trance wore off and I remembered my original reason for being there--out I whipped my notepad.

Vino Patel, a Dallas financial attorney when not directing Kalachandji's temple activities, led the discussion. He announced an upcoming field trip to what North Texans call "West End" and "Deep Ellum," otherwise known as the night hot spots of downtown Dallas. The devotee community frequently roams the streets in crowds, zealously proclaiming their devotion to Krishna in the heart of the Dallas bar scene. The end result being, they hope, an increase in Krishna Consciousness.

This bold outreach elicits many interesting responses from the bar patrons, as gift shop manager Nandini Rossi explained to me. Nandini was the tour guide on my first journey through Kalachandji's. "Some join us, dance and walk around with us," she said, a triumphant look in her eyes. "But sometimes you'll get a drunken person who criticizes and says 'crazy people.'" Her look became more sullen.

His speech concluded, Patel approached the velvet-cushioned, mahogany bench by the temple door on which we sat. His job at Kalachandji's is completely voluntary. His legal practice, he told me, is primarily a bill-paying enablement. How remarkably unlike the vast majority of American white-collar professionals he was. "We give to the temple, not take from it," he said. "That's why I run a business on the side, to make a living difference for Hare Krishna," which, he feels, is the way the Vedas intended the religion to be. "The Vedic temples have been watered down to some extent. Some still follow the scriptures, others have created their own idea of what a temple should be," he lamented.

A Taste of Krishna's Cuisine

Early evening hunger pangs soon began to stir. Adjourning the temple and ambling towards the enticing aroma of the freshly-cooked vegetarian cuisine in the buffet line, I remembered Nandini Rossi's side effect warning from my previous visit. "Even the food is spiritual," she had said. "Before it's served, we offer it to God. My guests tell me they feel intoxicated." What perfect timing for the recollection, and the inevitable journalistic curiosities it raised. At that moment, Kalachandji's head chef entered the room and introduced himself. Sabio Alamazani, a tall, jovial African-American man otherwise known to the immortal world as "Krishna Seva Das," then gave me a tour of his sacred kitchen, narrating his divine food preparation process as he went along. On one of the wall's many shelves stood a three-compartment, gold-lined altar with a silver cup for beverages. This was used for the pre-consumption offerings to Krishna, producing the consuming sense of meditative tranquility Nandini and the patrons avow to feeling after dining. "The idea is that every aspect of our lives is for Krishna, food included. We keep our

meditation while we cook," he explained. "We don't even taste the food until it is offered for Krishna's pleasure--so it takes skill to get the right amount of spices."

Becoming more famished by the minute, I seized that opportunity to try the enticing Kalachandji menu for myself. Migrating out to the enchanting outdoor dining patio, another one of Nandini's anecdotes came to memory. "There were no architects for this restaurant," she had reminisced while we dined by the lush green centerpiece tree under the starry Texas sky. "Many of the devotees who built Kalachandji's were unskilled artisans. It was a labor of love to glorify God,"

While devouring the scrumptious vegetarian pizza and halava and sipping the sweet iced-tamarind, I met Bonnie Stewart, a devotee community resident. The middle-aged Australian transplant moved all the way to the Dallas branch upon her beloved guru's suggestion, a photographic T-shirt of whom she proudly wore with her sari. Regardless of the thousand-mile gap between her old home "Down Under" and here, she felt a strong sense of belonging. "The community is pretty much the same everywhere. It's a spiritual atmosphere," she said with radiant contentment. "We all have the same goals and the same reasons for being here. I've been in many communities, and this is the strongest. There's a very strong sense of security."

Twenty-three-year-old Bhaktajay Holzman then joined, quenching my curiosity about the community life as the youthful "Generation X" experiences it. Originally having joined the Washington D.C. Hare Krishna movement in 1989, the soft-mannered young man never succumbed to peer pressure for mainstream American culture integration, even in the heart of a city such as Dallas. "To see the mainstream lifestyle compared to a strictly spiritual lifestyle, it seems like they are completely free and unrestricted. But it's the devotees who

really are," he said, his gaze focusing in deep ponderance. "We have a naturally blissful lifestyle. It's a shelter, like an embassy for the spiritual world."

The nine-thirty closing time was rapidly approaching. Enjoying what I'm convinced was the infamous post-banquet meditative afterglow, I headed back inside, passing under the stunning red tiru thombai with elephant designs suspended from the ceiling. I still hoped to converse with someone who would reflect the reactionary sentiment of City Slickers to the Hindu culture here.

And there, by the buffet line, sat the perfect candidates, a young couple in their twenties, who had only recently made a trip to the restaurant a monthly ritual. "Can you believe," I asked them, "that you're still in the same city?" "It's very non-threatening, but when I first came here I was a little in awe," said Greg Constetabile, a Dallas resident. "It's not like being in Dallas. It's like, well, somewhere else." His girlfriend nodded in intuitive agreement, unable to express it better herself.

Nine-thirty struck, and it was time to begin my half-hour journey home to the suburbs. Merging back into the heavy Dallas traffic, my eyes embracing the neon skyscrapers ahead, I experienced a jolting culture shock, I remembered the temple--the dhupa, the chanting, the holy statue that reigned over it all; the devotees, the dining patio, the patrons; and, of course, the luscious Indian vegetable cuisine--all the elements which compose this whole other-cultural dimension, nestled in the heart of this bustling metropolis that is Dallas, Texas. Thirty minutes later, at home, I still couldn't believe the distance between me and them was a mere twenty miles.

Author Kelly Gormly, 22, and photographer Amy Conn, 28, are both students at the University of Texas at Arlington where

they study journalism and photojournalism. Both work full-time in their field of study and plan to continue upon graduation.

Infix thy mind in Me, be devoted to Me, offer service unto Me, render homage unto Me: so wilt thou assuredly come right unto Me. This I promise thee, as thou art dear to Me. --
Bhagavad Gita 18.65