

[Sheela Defects to Europe; Rajneeshism Is "Dead"; Whether Ruse or Anarchy, the Shakedown is Serious at Oregon's Commune - Crimes and Confessions](#)

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Spokesperson Ma Prem Sunshine assured Hinduism Today that the most serious effect of recent defections, crimes and policy changes at Rancho Rajneesh "would be the wardrobe." She was referring to the dismantling of rules that required followers to wear sunset colors and Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh's photo on a necklace. "There's suddenly a lot of blue jeans in the boutique," she added. But in the days that followed her statement, Oregon law enforcement agencies began issuing search warrants and preparing indictments on charges that included attempted murder, poisoning, wiretapping and more. And the First Interstate Bank terminated all accounts and credit cards associated with the corporations. Clearly, there was more happening than fall fashions.

Troubles began on September 14th when Ma Anand Sheela, Bhagwan's 35-year old Indian secretary of four years, fled with 10 of the highest ranking corporate and financial officers mostly Indians, now being replaced with American disciples. Sheela, who is said to be staying in a German hotel is quoted as saying "there is so much disunity in the community and I'm so tired of trying to hold it together." Germany's Stern magazine quoted her as tired of "being his slave for 16, 17 or 20 hours a day" and of "taking food out of the mouths of people to buy him watches and Rolls Royces."

Bhagwan struck back with a vengeance. At a press conference on September 16th, he accused "Sheela and her gang" of making his commune a "facist concentration camp," of attempted murder, embezzlement, bugging his room and illegally recording every single phone call in and out of the remote commune. Bhagwan insisted he didn't know a thing about Sheela's crimes, and offered to rebuild fences between his group and Oregon residents, who remained skeptical about the strange goings-on.

In a dramatic gesture, the ex-Jain guru proclaimed the death of his religion, Rajneeshism [see Rajneeshism: World's Newest Religion in Bitter Conflict/Winter Issue, 1984], on September 30th, calling 2,000 to a funeral pyre where they cheered and danced. Pallets of a little red book, "Rajneeshism: An Introduction to Bhagwan Sri Rajneesh and His Religion," were carried to the flames, some draped in the silk and velvet robes that Sheela used to wear. "It [the book] was Sheela's baby," Ma Sunshine chortled, "not Bhagwan's." Rajneesh wished the world to know that "I never wanted [the religion] to be born in the first place, but because I was silent and in isolation, a gang of facists managed to create it."

That glib profession of innocence didn't impress all who heard it. After all, it was Sheela alone who had the privilege of private conversations with the guru during his self-imposed silence of three years. Furthermore, Sheela has been abroad this year, mostly in Europe and Australia. But Bhagwan insists that Sheela had "become addicted" to power and fame and was dissatisfied with playing second fiddle since he began to speak again.

Skeptics, and enemies, wondered aloud whether the media-savvy Rajneesh and Sheela might have concocted the whole thing to defuse and divert immensely negative PR against the group, painting Sheela a scapegoat and Rajneesh the innocent victim of her ambitions. Others think he could be paving the way for leaving Oregon should current problems get too hot, sending Sheela and funds ahead. "The movement is in trouble," said Margaret Hill, former Antelope mayor, "and Bhagwan is trying this means to rescue it." A Hawaii librarian scoffed, "He can't think we're going to believe that he rides around in all those Cadillacs [sic] and runs those businesses and didn't know about these things. Nobody's that gullible." Her sentiment was echoed by Diane McDonald, a critic from Madras, Oregon: "It just doesn't wash." She noted a month ago Rajneesh himself publicly said of Sheela, "I have been preparing her like a sword. I told her to go out and cut as many heads as possible."

When asked by Hinduism Today if she could deny such a possibility, Ma Sunshine demured, "I just can't respond to that. It's all very shattering. People I trusted are gone. People I doubted are here. I can no longer speculate on people's motives since I obviously haven't been too accurate in the past."

Others at the commune seemed shattered, too. It was as if wide-eyed True Believers were finally told that the king was indeed unclad. Days of soul-searching

followed the startling disclosures. About 60 devotees packed and left. But a few, alienated by Sheela, returned in her absence. A new honesty was fashionable, revealing hatreds, jealousies and storm-trooper tactics. The place they had touted just the week before as "paradise" and the "only crime-free community in America" was shown to be endowed with all manner of offenses, legal and human.

Ma Prem Smita confessed that the "absurd had become normal and those who refused to toe the line were punished, subtly or grossly, but punished. And the irony of the situation is that we were the ones who came here because we could not stand the lies and games of our societies any more." Smita discussed the "mom" system, whereby an elite group of women, often driving 4 by 4 brown pickups and wielding high-tech Motorolas, kept the troupes in line: "This was definitely not a classless society. The name of the game was surrender. Surrender to those who know, because you don't. No need to figure it out, just give up your independence of spirit."

A non-Indian, Swami Anand Subhuti, was even more graphic in his disappointment, "I felt like a freed prisoner...I had resigned myself to living under her regime without a word of protest - just keeping my nose clean and hoping enlightenment would come soon." He explained that Sheela and the others had used harassment and fear "so successfully against me in the past, against me and every one else. Toe the line or get out...be positive or hit the road...work 12, 14, 17 hours a day or pack your bags." After crying on several shoulders, Swami Subhuti wrote a scathing letter to Bhagawan, "I was boiling with tears and anger. He should have known. He should have seen what a monster she was. He should have protected us."

At higher levels criminal and financial investigations were underway. Most questions defied answers: how will the "death" of his new religion affect the group's tax-exemption, was a rapprochement with Oregon's conservative populace possible and what did this all mean to the leaders pending legal alien status in the U. S.?

One thing was certain, the Rajneeshees were still afraid of the outside world and were keeping their well-armed and tough security measures intact for fear of "crack pots." There are lots of confessions going on as everyone adjusts to the reality of a past that they are now ashamed of and desperately try to preserve the revolutionary vision of a future that they still hope Bhagwan and his new leadership will bring them.