Murder Quickens Wider Crisis in Krishna Sect
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## In-Fighting, Succession Struggle and Demands for Reform Convulse ISKCON; U.S. Grand Jury Convenes

Sulochan Das had warned the police that his life was in danger. But they didn't believe him. His story seemed too fantastic to take seriously - filled, as it was, with unproven allegations of religious rivalry, designer-drug fund-raising, sex-scandals involving puritanical ISKCON's highest leaders and an unsolved 1983 disappearance near the West Virginia headquarters. Sulochan's life and police skepticism ended violently on May 22nd when the 33-year old crusader was killed by two gunshots to the head while sitting in his van in a neighborhood of Los Angeles, California.

A federal Grand Jury will convene on September 15th to investigate criminal charges. It is expected to take 24 months. In the meantime, there are wider issues and conflicts at work within the organization, a complex of convoluted entanglements sometimes referred to as "the Guru issue." It is shaking ISKCON to the very core and has already seen more than one guru censured and removed. True, the brazen murder of Sulochan Das is the stuff of headlines; but murder, like icebergs, is 7/8 below the surface. Our Special Report is the first to explore the inside story of what's happening in the Krishna sect whose name has, erroneously, become synonymous with Vaishnavite Hinduism. We begin in halcyon North India.

The International Society of Krishna Consciousness was riding high in March of this year. The Quincentennial (500th) Anniversary celebrations of Krishna avatar Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu's birth in Mayapur, India, were in a word, "transcendental." The sheer magnitude of the celebrations was a feat unmistakably bearing the imprint of ISKCON and a Hare Krishna/Hare Ram fete worthy of Chaitanya. Two million Hindus ogled the sights at the Society's World Expo in Mayapur, the international headquarters for the 20-year old organization. Devotees from 70 countries danced and chanted in glorious abandon. A mammoth sankirtan pilgrimage party, logging 4,000 miles on their Chaitanya pilgrimage odometer (a historic record says ISKCON) snaked into Mayapur. A commemorative Chaitanya stamp was released says ISKCON) snaked into Mayapur. A commemorative

Chaitanya stamp was released by the Indian government. And in a notable coup, Srila Gopala Krishna Goswami, one of the 11 successor gurus to ISKCON founder Swami Bhaktivedanta Prabhupada, appeared on India national television with Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi. At ISKCON's annual meeting of its highest level management council, the Governing Body Commission (GBC), always held at Mayapur in March, it looked and twenty new initiating gurus were sanctioned, bringing the total to around 36.

As far as the world knew, Krishna devotees were living lives of pure bliss and noble spirituality. Then came the murder of Sulochan Das, an independent Hare Krishna devotee seeking to expose apparent ISKCON upper-level corruption. He was allegedly the victim of a renegade Krishna devotee, Tirtha (Thomas Drescher), a former member of New Vrindavan, W. Virginia, U.S.A., one of the wealthiest, most popular communities. Drescher has been arrested. Federal, state and county authorities are investigating. And the U.S. press is bulldogging the story.

Internal Affairs: The incident has opened probes into possible links between New Vrindavan, its controversial, charismatic leader, Swami Kirtanananda Bhaktipada, and the murder. The Federal Grand Jury in Moundsville will not only probe the murder but look into Sulochan Das's charges of illegal drug running. ISKCON's own internal affairs machinery is looking into the situation. At a special meeting of the North American ISKCON leaders held on August 19, Swami Kirtanananda agreed to resign if indicted by the grand jury "in order to clear ISKCON's name." Swami Mukunda Maharaj, spokesman for ISKCON, says, "We would take disciplinary action irrespective of what position the person held in the Society."

And the large body of underground Hare Krishna devotees (disaffected or expelled from official ISKCON - see box, page 23) who see Sulochan Das as a martyr to their cause are clandestinely but comprehensively collecting evidence of malfeasance among several of the Society's original eleven successor gurus to Srila Prabhupada. The underground Hare Krishnas were worried that the grand jury would be a superficial investigation. But as their spokesman, who wishes to remain anonymous, now states, "The grand jury is scheduled for a 24-month investigation, meaning to us that they are seriously considering conspiracy to murder and illegal activity."

Until recently nine of the eleven gurus were still functioning as acharyas. But in the past few weeks two of those, Swami Bhavananda Vishnupada and Swami

Ramesvara Maharaj, have been formally removed from their guru status and GBCommissioner office by toe GBC (Governing Body Commission). Both were indicted for sexual liasions. Ramesvara, 35, who was head of the powerful and financially flush Bhaktivedanta Book Trust and guru for the Southern California, Mid-West temples, has renounced his sannyas. He is planning to marry a devotee and join his father in business. Swami Bhavananda, who functions primarily in Australia, is expected to resist the GBC order, remaining entrenched in Australia where his disciples are loyal to him. The removal, though, strikes a strategic blow for ISKCON's internal reform movement, which is actively seeking restructuring of the far flung institution.

Glorious Future: Krishna consciousness was intended to guide mankind until the year 11,977. Eyes ablaze with zeal, Swami Bhaktivedanta Prabhupada, the Calcutta-born Krishna guru and architect of the International Society of Krishna Consciousness, gravely prophesied his books would be "the law books for mankind for the next 10,000 years." It was as simple as that, as far as Srila Prabhupada saw it when he attained mahasamadhi at 7:30 p.m., November 14, 1977. The books - Bhagavad Gita As It Is, ten of the twelve cantos of Srimad Bhagadvatam and a cornucopia of Krishna/Chaitanya titles, sixty in all-had been pecked out on his typewriter, gloriously printed by the millions in a dozen languages. ISKCON was a worldwide vehicle, a huge, virile preaching organism, that would perpetuate Krishna salvation down a hundred centuries to the year 11,977 and perhaps beyond. At least, that was the Hindu missionary's plan. Heady, motivating stuff, to conceive of a 10,000-year spiritual destiny. The leaders of ISKCON are tirelessly inspired to manifest it. It is a common theme and morale-building battle cry for Srila Prabhupada's minimum conversion goal of 1% of the planet's population to this Hindu Vaishnava sect.

But since the death of Srila Prabhupada, ISKCON's leadership and proletariat are seriously pondering if the 20-year old society can survive as a united entity its first ten years of solo existence - the decade spanning 1977-1987. The organization was built by Srila Prabhupada as a united confederacy of semi-autonomous temple centers divided into 12 global zones under the managing authority of the Governing Body Commission. Now, it is not only confronting a U.S. federal investigation, but is tottering on the brink of secession, powered by a North American-launched tidalwave reform movement at the middle level - the temple presidents - of ISKCON leadership.

The Society's hierarchical leadership has spilt, in terms of power, about half and half between reform and stasis, orbiting around what Hare Krishna insiders for

years have labeled the "guru issue." It principally involves the legitimacy of succession, protocol and personal conduct of the eleven gurus that ascended to power after Srila Prabhupada's samadhi.

Godbrothers and Gurus: But it touches many levels of spiritual drama: these eleven, who were GBCommissioners when Prabhupada died and named in his will as trustees of ISKCON's real estate, became the ipso facto spiritual leaders of the Society, thus arguably rising in divine stature above their fellow Prabhupada initiates, their "Godbrothers," a very sensitive relationship in Chaitanya philosophy. They were each given one of the zones to function within, these zones often crossing over several country borders as they encompassed a group of semi-contiguous temples. Within the zones they developed plenipotentiary powers to control it and were initiating their own legions of disciples (grand-disciples to Prabhupada) who naturally are loyal to their guru's interests.

The gurus, within a month after Srila Prabhupada's death, were caught in a dilemma of fulfilling traditional guru protocol - their being on the receiving end of the worship, with some questioning their own worthiness and rightness of being elevated above their Godbrothers. Despite such reservations they became the "acharyas" of ISKCON, instituting guru pujas, special guru seats and guru chanting at or near the level of Srila Prabhupada's worship. As Swami Satsvarupa Gurupada - widely considered among the most humble and spiritual of the gurus and a "champion of reform" - tells it, "If the different worship systems we have instituted were excessive, my answer is that we did not know what to do because there was a no precedent scriptural rule which told us what to do." Swami Satsvarupa is the editor of Back to Godhead and the author of Srila Prabhupada's huge biography.

The Guru Issue: Rippling up and down ISKCON's hierarchy, the zonal gurus, Governing Body Commissioners, regional secretaries and a host of ISKCON temple presidents, sannyasin writers and devotee ombudsmen have been anguishing over the guru issue since December, 1977, one month after Srila Prabhupada's death. Each successive year saw more self-examination and demands for reform of the guru worship protocol and the zonal guru system as several of the gurus proved they were all too human and the zones became independent fiefdoms.

The worship and the power combined into an inebriating cocktail with positive and negative results. It has, as one reformist advocate, Berkeley Temple President Trivikram Goswami notes, "made ISKCON very successful in terms of preaching

magnitude but simultaneously erected giant egos that hurt a lot of devotees." Underneath the infections ebullience of many Hare Krishna devotees is a repressed anxiety which surfaces in private conversations and correspondence. As one unnamed source inside ISKCON says, "It is the trusting, loving devotees that are hurt the most. The sadhana - the chanting, mantram and puja - keep them buoyed up spiritually. But living conditions can be poor, the selling and begging quotas are stressful, particularly if the zonal guru is willing to suspend spiritual life for the acquisition of money which has happened quite often. And there is no outlet for expressing legitimate grievances. In fact, the voicing of such grievances may and resulted in vicious persecution, even ex-communication."

Reform: The reform movement is at heart a spiritual cleaning and regeneration within the Hare Krishna movement, a regeneration that is effecting the governance of ISKCON and on a one-by-one basis the personal deportment of the acharya gurus established in each zone after Srila Prabhupada's samadhi. Some have successfully fought against reform for years and still do today. But that is rapidly changing as nearly half of the original gurus have been severely disciplined by the GBC at one time or another. Ravindra Svarupa Dasa, Temple President of the Philadelphia ISKCON temple, and one of the most articulate spokesman for the reformists, says, "Many people fear that the turmoils in ISKCON are its death throes. In a sense they are right. One way or another the 'old ISKCON', the ISKCON of fratricidal strife is doomed."

Swami Satsvarupa explained the situation in a bulletin to his devotees after a landmark GBC, Acharya and Prabhupada disciple meeting at New Vrindavan in September, 1985: "At the New Vrindavan meetings, the GBC resolved that the individual temples could make the changes as they saw fit [level of worship of the initiating guru, where the guru sits, how many guru seats and the height of those seats in relation to Prabhupada's seat]. I thought it appropriate that the Mid-Atlantic and New England zone set a progressive standard and enact the changes that will be most satisfying to the general spirit of the Godbrothers. My intention is that I will discontinue initiating in the zone in order to instigate the new process."

It was this spirit that paved the way for the reform legislation at the Mayapur Quincentennial GBC meeting which opened up the zones to more gurus (in those zones amenable to such changes which some are not - they can simply withhold names of candidate gurus from reaching the GBC approval process) and framed the procedure sanctioning new initiating gurus.

In his final months, Srila Prabhupada, after years of being peace-maker for what he termed "fratricidal wars" among the highest level sannyasins and devotees, told his closest men, "How much you love me will be demonstrated by how you cooperate amongst yourselves after my disappearance." If these Vaisnava's love of their guru be measured by the greenhouse growth of ISKCON over the past nine years in terms of books distributed, temples and centers opened, services and programs launched, devotees receiving harinama initiation, sannyasins initiated and sheer strength of their preaching voice, then indeed Srila Prabhupada would be transcendently proud and happy. Their "Food For Life" program is a noble success, receiving municipal funds from several major cities in the U.S. and reaching major international hunger areas. The Bhaktivedanta Institute, which studies Vedic science and is headed by a born-Hindu swami, now achariya guru, from Manipura, is establishing an interesting dialogue with science. And their gurukulam schools are high calibre. As an organization ISKCON didn't wither after Srila Prabhupada's death as many foresaw. It didn't even shrink back a bit.

But if that love is measured by cooperation, either in a human sense, or more importantly in the Vaishnava sense of a Krishna brotherhood, the relation of all Krishna bhaktas as equally divine loving/giving brothers and sisters living the sadhanas and principles of their scripture, then, as many of ISKCON's own present guru acharyas and organization executives admit, there is a long ways to go to fulfill Srila Prabhupada's equation. One statistic clearly demonstrates this: out of Srila Prabhupada's 4,000 initiated devotees, only about 500 are still with ISKCON. Most of ISKCON today is comprised of devotees of the successor gurus, estimated at between 6-7,000, not including some 35,000 Life Members.

The Web of Maya: Indeed, the leaders realize that regardless of the statistics of success, ISKCON's internal and external history over the past nine years is fraught with incidents of what they term "maya", sheer, unadulterated worldliness: power-and-money mongering, drug, weapons and sex scandals, maltreatment of devotees, asset-eating law suits and horrendous debts. It includes a series of nightmarish episodes in the U.S. that reach back to the 1983 disappearance of a devotee near New Vrindaban, W. Virginia, to the November, '85, near death bludgeoning of Swami Kirtanandanda, head of New Vrindavan, to the shooting murder of Sulochan Das last May. A few days later there was a gas explosion at a New Vrindavan devotee's home, leaving him critically injured. He was a key witness in the case against Thomas Drescher, a.k.a. Tirtha, who was arrested for both the Sulochan murder and the '83 disappearance case.

It is this linkage of sordid episodes that kept turning the wheel of reform, as these

were the grossest manifestations of the guru issue. It has also led to fracturing within the Society, a kind of confederate secession. The GBC up to then was unwilling to take the reform past a certain point, specifically in removing GBCommissioners and/or acharyas (the original 11 acharyas were all on the GBC and their voting power protected them) who have grossly broken their vows (though in the early 80's they had removed acharyas Jayatirtha and Hunsadhutta). Bahudak Das, Vancouver Temple President, the 1984, '85 chairman of the international temple presidents and who is considered the reform general, says, "This year in Mayapur the GBC slammed the door shut and said 'No than you, we don't want to hear from you guys anymore.' There's not much more we can do. If they're not willing to come down to reality by choice, Krishna will use the agencies of the material world."

Trends which looked like hairline cracks several years ago, are now looming as wide canyons in the ISKCON edifice. From the West Coast of North America to the Iron Curtain country of Hungary, individual temples and constituencies such as Vancouver are veering off on individualized vectors, becoming the vanguard of what they see as a new, purified ISKCON. Viewing themselves as the true torchbearers of Prabhupada's mission they are openly disavowing allegiance to ISKCON's GBC. Bahudak Das explains, "ISKCON as Prabhupada envisioned it doesn't exist anymore. It's not that we are pulling out of ISKCON. It's eroded by the acts of the leaders so that it doesn't exist as a unified organization. We were always set up independently as far as our finances and managerial structure. The real coherence came through faith and common bonds. Those have been diminished...If there isn't really some radical reform in the next few years, temples such as ourselves will be seeking alliances and relationships with other temples and devotees who we trust and respect. It's already happening."

Zone Competition: Other entire zones, most notably New Vrindaban, under acharyaship of Swami Kirtanananda, an original successor guru and a commissioner, are ignoring very significant recent GBC rulings, effectively maintaining absolute zonal control and without authorization expanding preaching operations into other zones. New Vrindaban is establishing centers in Toronto, New York and Bombay where successful temples already exist. The Bombay ISKCON Temple is a showpiece, fiercely fought for by Srila Prabhupada, where thousands of born Hindu Vaishnavas congregate. It is the leading temple in enrolling Life Members to ISKCON - over 10,000 out of 35,000. It is certainly a lucrative mine for the acquisition of "laxmi," the Society term for money. New Vrindavan needs vast resources to fund the construction of its stunning all-granite Radha-Krishna Temple of Understanding. [See Hinduism Today front page story - September 85 issue.]

This June, New Vrindavan attempted to move in and take over the Berkeley ISKCON Temple under the leadership of Attreya Rishi, grihastra familyman, a longtime GBCommissioner, newly sanctioned guru and apostle of reform. Through the courts Attreya successfully blocked the takeover, though as a results the temple's assets are tied up. This adventurism and New Vrindavan's giant fund-raising drives that cross zonal boundaries have touched off a serious fire of discontent within ISKCON's zonal leadership, where hundreds of millions of dollars are necessary for financing existing temples and the many new mammoth temple and KrishnaLand projects underway.

So important is the fund-raising cycle, conducted by the "rank and file" devotees within ISKCON's zones that hundreds of thousands of dollars are spent as "transfer fees" when devotees relocate to a temple in another zone - the new zone paying the previous zone like football or baseball leagues negotiating player transfers. Within the past few weeks with Swami Rameswara returning to householder life, there was bidding between Swami Bhagavan Maharaj, acharya and GBCommissioner of the Southern Europe/England/South Africa/Mauritius zone and Swami Kirtanananda of New Vrindaban for Rameswara's disciples and temples. In the final negotiations, though, the GBC turned over the Bhaktivedanta Book Trust to Swami Bhagavan, and the disciples and temples to Swami Tamal Krishna, acharya of the Southwest U.S. and Fiji zone.

The fallout of the Sulochan murder is having its effect on formerly recalcitrant gurus. Swami Bhagavan, who was a "closed-zone, autocratic achariya" has just recently opened up his zone (allowing new gurus to arise within it) and instituted all the GBC guru protocol changes after a zone-wide referendum of the temples forced the change.

Seeds of Conflict: For ISKCON the guru issue is amazingly complex, involving the entire gamut of human and spiritual aspirations, frailties and foibles that have historically risen not only in large Hindu institutions but in the Catholic Church and medieval Buddhism. There is one factor which makes it unique among Hindus sects. Like Catholicism and Buddhism, ISKCON is a proselytizing force, the only one in the Hindu family seeking to loose the faithful of other Hindu denominations or other religions from their moorings. This proselytization is the single most driving force in ISKCON, a force driven to full throttle by Srila Prabhupada himself.

It has lead to elitism - Hare Krishna is the one true path, all others are spiritually

"bankrupt," a common phrase in ISKCON jargon. It has lead to a strange, strained declaration of quasi-Hinduness. When it serves their purposes, as in cases when ISKCON is under attack as a cult, the Society goes to great lengths to establish their Hinduness, their roots and legitimacy as a Hindu sect. Outside of those cases, ISKCON disavows and condemns the use of the term, "Hindu", using in its stead "Vedic" - maintaining an aloof relationship with fellow Hindus.

Perhaps most relevant to current events, the proselytizing has created a compelling spirit of competition in ISKCON - the more successful the preaching mission, the more Krishna's Grace is considered to be manifest in one's life. But this resulted in a built-in conflict of values. At the furthest extreme, anything was justifiable to spread Krishna Consciousness. Purity, honesty and integrity - values which Prabhupada taught were essential - were blithely transgressed.

Competition fueled financial and human excesses by some of the gurus and drove them apart. And the GBC let it continue. From the inside, the spiritual leaders and devotees themselves accomplished what no outside force could, despite many determined efforts. Forgetting brotherly spirituality, they turned on one another in anger, jealousy and selfishness. Those inside ISKCON wielded a deadly blow to the powerful spiritual body bequeathed to them by Prabhupad.

Now the trend is shifting towards keeping a pure house. To be successful, it will require revamping the ethics of proselytizing. As Attreya Rishi wrote recently, "GBC members will emphasize the importance of honesty in dealing with devotees and non-devotees. Poverty, discredit, setbacks, etc. should be preferred to success gained through cheating. All dishonest and immoral practices should be Shastra."

It is, of course, up to the gurus themselves to set the standard. If they resolve differences and return to the simple life and service exemplified by their founder, then the current difficulties may bring renewal and healing. But if the leaders choose less divine intoxicants, Krishna's empire may not be around in 11970.