

## Hare Kṛṣṇa Chant Unsettles Soviet

By Theodore Shabad (reprinted from The New York Times)

The Hare Krishna movement, whose saffron-robed devotees have long been familiar in the United States, has begun making inroads in the Soviet Union, and the Kremlin does not appear to be pleased.

According to a published Soviet account, the group has won disciples among educated people such as engineers and technicians who were thought to be toughened against what the Kremlin regards as Western ideological subversion but who found themselves poorly prepared to cope with mantra-reciting youngsters. Their chanting and meditation appear to have found fertile ground in the Soviet Union, a country where the practice of yoga to achieve a higher level of consciousness has long had a following among intellectuals. The Hare Krishna group teaches a kind of devotional yoga known as bhakti, calling for selfless dedication to Krishna, a Hindu god.

The Soviet newspaper Sotsialisticheskaya Industriya, a national daily read by industrial managers, conceded that the beliefs and precepts of yoga appealed to knowledgeable people because some of its avowed objectives were close to those of Communism.

"It has become fashionable in the Soviet Union to fast for health reasons and to follow all sorts of diets, and yoga advocates vegetarianism," the paper said. "We are fighting against drunkenness and condemn smoking, and yoga prohibits the use of both alcohol and nicotine. We are trying to put crass materialism to shame, and yoga calls for asceticism and for renouncing the attributes of well-being."

But the newspaper, intent on portraying the Hare Krishna movement as a subversive device imported from the West, pointed out that while teaching ancient Indian philosophy, the movement had in fact had an American base and received most of its financial support from Americans.

The movement, known formally as the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, was founded in the United States in July 1966 by an Indian-born ascetic named A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupāda. He died in 1977 at age 81. What makes the movement unacceptable in the Soviet Union, the newspaper said, is that its emphasis on simple living and meditation diverts devotees from problems of everyday life and useful work and slows social and economic progress.

The industrial daily, which is published by the Communist Party's Central Committee, conceded that the Soviet authorities themselves had in effect opened the doors to the Hare Krishna movement by admitting its publishing arm, the Bhaktivedanta Book Trust of Los Angeles, to the Moscow International Book Fair in 1979.

While refusing visas to leading American publishing executives such as Robert L. Bernstein, chairman of Random House, and weeding out undesirable titles from displays, the authorities appear to have given virtually free rein to the Krishna publishing house to exhibit books on India's ancient Vedic philosophy and other religious and philosophical literature.

The 1979 book fair was attended by thousands of Russians, predominantly young and with the dress and bearing of the better educated. Some of them, apparently predisposed to the discipline of yoga, readily found their way to the exhibit. By the fall of 1980, according to Sotsialisticheskaya Industriya, the movement had spread as far as 2,000 miles east of Moscow, to the Siberian city of Krasnoyarsk, where a Hare Krishna chapter installed itself at the local House of Culture, the community center, under the guise of a health club.

The young Russian who had helped prepare sweets at the book exhibit, a man named Yevgeny Tretyakov, appeared at the first meeting in saffron garb, recited mantras and explained that the way to health was through Krishna consciousness. In the end, the law caught up with Mr. Tretyakov. He was sentenced to an unspecified term as a "social parasite."

The Soviet press tends to seize on specific examples to make a more general point, and the publication of the Hare Krishna expose in a major newspaper with a national circulation suggested that the devotional movement had won followers not only in Krasnoyarsk.

"Most of them understand by now," the paper said, "that they have allowed themselves to succumb to alien influence, swallowing the lure cast out by our ideological foes. But there are others," it went on pointedly, "who have yet to understand." [The preceding article also appeared on the front page of The Times of India.]