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ISKCON Settles End to 17-Year Legal War

In the summer of 1983, when the jury in a southern California court awarded US \$32 million to Robin George and her mother in a cult-brainwashing case against four Hare Krishna ISKCON temples, even the Georges' attorney was astonished. The amount was twice what he asked for, four times the worth of the ISKCON centers. It would have bled the temples of California, New York, Louisiana and Ottawa, Canada to a quick fiscal death. The figure was so vindictive that US national religious councils (including Christian and Jewish) publicly worried over its impact on all religious institutions. The judge later reduced the award to US \$9.7 million, still a crippling amount. ISKCON appealed and went into receivership under a court-appointed third party.

This case - filed in 1976 - became famous in the mid-80's across the US as a high voltage public battle between a perceived cult- Hare Krishna - and a minor, Robin George. She joined ISKCON in 1974 at the age of fourteen. After numerous appeals, including a hearing at the US Supreme Court, the court award for actual damages was downsized to US \$485,000. including interest, the total is US \$1 million. In June, 1993, the Georges - Robin is now 33 - and ISKCON, drained after 17 years of legal warring, agreed to an undisclosed cash settlement for the punitive damages rather than go to a new state trial. ISKCON said it would cost more to continue fighting the suit than to settle. The president of the Laguna Beach temple, Kosanma Dasi, said it was unlikely this settlement would seed other lawsuits.

The Robin George suit was a landmark case in the legal territory of Hindu-related institutions in the US. As Robin testified at the trial, she voluntarily left her home at age 14 in 1974 to join the Laguna Beach Hare Krishna temple. She had received permission from her parents to practice the Hare Krishna faith at home, but later they changed their minds, destroying her altar and books. She was cruelly punished by being chained to a toilet for several days by her father. She left home and joined the temple, received initiation and was sent to the New York, Louisiana and Ottawa temples at her request to avoid her parents. After a year, she returned home, but again left to join ISKCON. After police threatened to jail ISKCON leaders on kidnapping charges, Robin George was returned to her parents. The suit sought damages for false imprisonment, emotional distress, libel and invasion of privacy. ISKCON and Robin George said she was free to leave or communicate with her parents at any time. But ISKCON admitted they were

irresponsible in allowing a minor to stay with them, and now require written permission. During the trial, testimony by religion experts on behalf of ISKCON attested to the validity of the the Krishna lifestyle as traditional Hindu practices to counter the mind-control (though Gita readings, early rising, japa etc.) allegations by the Georges' attorney. Surprisingly, the judge advised the jury to ignore religious authenticity in regard to alleged mental trauma.