

HARE KRISHNA MOVEMENT IN THE BRAZILIAN WAY¹

La manera de ser del movimiento Hare Krishna en Brasil

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ABSTRACT: The purpose of this essay is to present a brief outline of the Hare Krishna movement in Brazil. Initially, it shows the extent to which the Hare Krishna movement was able to fit into the context of Brazilian society, during the nineteen-seventies when its presence was first perceived. This is followed by a description of a case concerning a specific Hare Krishna temple in the south of Brazil, Porto Alegre. Tensions were observed among the followers of the Hare Krishna doctrine in Porto Alegre, especially between a family of devotees who financially supported the Temple – functioning in their vegetarian restaurant – and the IS-KCON's leadership and its congregation. Finally, a short analysis is made on the idea of considering the Brazilian Hare Krishna movement a typical way of doing a traditional Hare Krishna movement – in Brazilian societal attributes. In other words: Is it possible to consider the Hare Krishna movement originally rooted and traditionally genuine in any country?

KEYWORDS: Hare Krishna, identity, community, conflict.

RESUMEN: La propuesta para este artículo es enseñar un panorama breve acerca del movimiento Hare Krishna en Brasil. Inicialmente, se mostrará las circunstancias y los hechos en los cuales favorecieron encajar el movimiento Hare Krishna en el contexto social brasileño a lo largo de los años setenta, cuando fue percibida su presencia en el Brasil. A partir de ahí, se va a seguir con la descripción etnográfica, específicamente, del templo Hare Krishna ubicado en el sur de Brasil en la ciudad de Porto Alegre. Conflictos y tensiones fueron constatados en esta comunidad de devotos, principalmente, entre la familia de devotos que mantenían el

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templo financieramente y los líderes representantes de la tradición del movimiento Hare Krishna (ISKCON). En conclusión, se hará una reflexión teórica en el intento de cuadrar el movimiento Hare Krishna dentro de una manera de ser brasileña y, por esa razón, buscar contestar la siguiente pregunta: ¿Se puede considerar que el movimiento Hare Krishna es originalmente ubicado y tradicionalmente genuino desde algún país?.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Hare Krishna, identidad, comunidad, conflicto.

A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE BRAZILIAN HARE KRISHNA MOVEMENT

Brazil is well known for its religious diversity. Officially, it is the biggest Catholic country of the world. As a matter of fact, Catholicism has been practiced in a variety of ways, influenced by the Indigenous, the Africans and the Iberians. Starting in the nineteenth century, when the Brazilian harbours were opened to international trade, a series of religious denominations emerged, installing new Christian versions such as the Pentecostals and also the *Spiritist* doctrine of Alan Kardec. Brazil has since become the most *Kardecist* country in the world.

The Vedic meaning of *Karma* and reincarnation has been used in different ways in such religions. For example, in the *Umbanda*, a spiritual incorporation of Indigenous and African ancestors is practiced by Mediums who, through these incorporations, could practice rites of healing. Also, in the *Umbanda*, Africans “Orixás” which can be compared to the Hindu *Devas*, are worshipped. There is a specific range of Spiritism called “Spirits from India”, the “Indian Flow of Space” and some famous *Spiritists*, as “Zartur, the Indian”.

During the twentieth century, the Brazilian religious field was influenced by *gurus* from India, especially, Swami Vivekananda, Aurobindo, Ramakrisna, Ramana Maharishi, Maharishi Yogi, Swami Tilak, Osho, Sai Baba and Prabhupada Bhaktivedanta Swami. Most people who got interested in such “new spiritual practices” were highly educated and could be found on the Eastern, Southern, and Central parts of Brazil. These were considered the most urbanised places in that country. Moreover, more people started to

be interested in non-traditional practices, doctrines and philosophies such as: Rosicrucian, Buddhism, Teosophy, Hatha Yoga, Martial Arts, Macrobiotics, and Vegetarianism. Those people called themselves “Spiritualists” in order to make a distinction from those who practice “Spiritism”.

From 1964 to 1978, Brazil was taken over by a military dictatorship. The economic and political aspects of life were closed to many social changes, however the Brazilian religious side of life kept its pace. It was in this social scenery that the Hare Krishna movement came to emerge in Brazil – during the second half of the nineteen-seventies. The Hare Krishna movement was started in Brazilian society by young adults who, during the nineteen-sixties had travelled to the United States and/or England and had come to know the movement in those countries – some of them even met Prabhupada, the founder of ISKCON (International Society of Krishna Consciousness) in 1965 in the United States. Those enthusiastic devotees started to translate Prabhupada’s books into Portuguese. They also took classes in areas which were considered “Spiritualist” and “counter-cultural” in some parts of Brazil. The counter-culture movement in Brazil was defined by an eclectic intense intercultural dialogue. Some of the few possible “alternative experiences” in the Brazilian society during the military dictatorship were: *Rock ‘n’ Roll*, *Flower Power*, Hippie communities, Vegetarian restaurants, Yoga practice, esoteric venues, etc. All of these were considered spaces for Prabhupada’s disciples to preach and also to take classes on the *Bhagavad Gita as it is*².

In 1978, an American *Sanyasin*, Hridayananda Goswami, became a *guru* and there were many people, especially young people, initiated by him. During this period they founded a rural community called “New Gokula” which is situated in a religiously important and historic place in Brazil. The City of Aparecida do Norte, located in the countryside, between São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, is one of the most important Catholic centres in Brazil. The Hare Krishna community was situated in a small farm close to the nearby farm town of Pindamonhangaba. It is a beautiful place surrounded by mountains and forests just like the Nilgiri Hills, in Southern India.

² Sw. B. Prabhupada, *Bhagavad Gita as it is*, Bhaktivedanta Book Trust, Los Angeles 1972.

This community would become one of the most important Hare Krishna centres in South America. The beginning, as mentioned by some pioneer devotees, was a hard time. The Radha Gokulananda deities altar was installed in an old room, in the farm house. It was a small house with only two bedrooms – one for men and the other for women – and a kitchen. They used to bathe in a rivulet, called Yamuna River by the community, and eat white flour *chapatis* with taros. People living in the surrounding areas considered them very unusual people. The devotees used book distribution, incense and took Hari Nama Sankirtana, in order to collect money to build their community.

During the eighties there were again many changes in the Brazilian social lifestyle. It was a period of re-democratization. Starting in 1979, a cultural effervescence surged in many different ways, including artistic manifestations. The alternative movements from the previous decade became fashionable. There was a body worship movement, the use of health foods, martial arts, etc. All of those “alternatives lifestyles” became relevant in the context of the Brazilian society.

The Hare Krishna movement was spread by opening many temples in different cities in Brazil. Chaitanya Mahaprabu’s³ five hundredth birthday was celebrated in 1986. It was considered a historical reference to the Hare Krishna movement in this period of time. In 1985 the rural Hare Krishna community New Gokula was the main location of an important event called “National Meeting of Alternatives Communities” which made the Hare Krishna movement visible in different parts of Brazil. By way of a rural community concerned about environmental recovery, the Hare Krishna movement became well known, not only for its Indigenous spirit lifestyle, but for the devotees’ efforts in the recovery and the preservation of the tropical forest, from what used to be a devastated and abandoned land. Because of this, people interested in such environmental issues started to visit the

³ Chaitanya Mahaprabhu (1486-1533) was considered a Bengali saint who revitalized the Hare Krishna movement at the end of the fifteenth century in the West Bengal – India. He was assumed by the Gaudiya Vaishnava tradition as Krishna himself who came back to Earth to spread the *Maha mantra* (name of God) around the world.

Hare Krishna rural community. Nowadays there are five Hare Krishna rural communities and all of them are protected environmental areas⁴.

In 1994, Brazilian government carried out a crucial financial reform, the “Real Plan” which improved the financial situation enough for Brazilians to travel abroad. Brazilian currency became equivalent to the U.S. dollar. That made it possible for many Brazilian devotees to go to India, especially to Vrindavan, to stay in the ISKCON’s guesthouse and share their experience with other devotees from different parts of the world, within “Krishna’s pastimes in Vrindavan”. An Indian style of clothing, food, spices, music, and musical instruments were introduced into Brazilian society during this decade, by the devotees’ efforts to reproduce a sacred Indian lifestyle. It was very common to see people in some major cities in Brazil wearing t-shirts displaying images of some Indian deities such as Krishna, Shiva, Lakshmi, Ganesh, and Saraswati. These sorts of t-shirts were introduced in Brazil, by the Hare Krishna movement followers.

The Prabhupada’s centennial was celebrated during 1996 and 1997, considered as the peak of the Hare Krishna movement in Brazil. New Hare Krishna cultural centres were inaugurated in various Brazilian cities during this time. A memorial to Prabhupada was inaugurated in New Gokula rural community, where two thousand people gathered for the events. In one of these celebrations, *Malati Dasi*, a female devotee and Prabhupada’s disciple was formally presented. She is the spiritual leader of the female community of devotees in the United States. Some followers in that event were surprised to see her wearing a saffron *sari*, when she introduced herself as a feminist *Sannyasini* – an inconceivable attitude for the subservient Latin-American female devotees. It was possible to hear commentaries by some male devotees, in a jocular way saying that “everything in women is *maya*”.

At the end of the nineties, the Hare Krishna movement started to decline. Conflicts concerning Temple administrations, scandals involving ISKCON’s leadership⁵ in some ISKCON’s temples around the world, seriously

⁴ See: Fazenda Nova Gula, www.novagokula.com.br; and Sociedade Internacional para a Consciência de Krsna (ISKCON), www.iskcon.com.br.

⁵ See: E. Burke Jr. Rochford, *Hare Krishna in America*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, NY 1985; S. Guerriero, *The Hare Krishna Movement in Brazil: the Religious*

compromising its reputation, caused ISKCON to be examined, especially in India.

During this time, a Srila Prabhupada's spiritual brotherhood, Narayana Maharaja, started to visit different ISKCON's temples around the world and heavily criticised the way ISKCON's leadership was dealing with the Prabhupada's legacy. Conflicts among the devotees of *Vaishnava* and *Vaisnav* – outside India – became an issue to be re-thought. Some spiritual leaders at ISKCON were favourable of Narayana Maharaja's criticisms and accepted his way of preaching. One example was Isvara Swami, one of the most well-known and important spiritual leaders at ISKCON in Brazil, who decided to join the Naraya Maharaja's movement. Isvara Swami used to have many devotees as his disciples, when he made a decision to renounce his position as a Sanyasin. Hridayananda Goswami's authority in Brazil started to be questioned. His followers, who helped him to set the Hare Krishna movement in Brazil, isolated themselves from the Brazilian devotee community as whole⁶.

A brief overview of the last ten years of the Hare Krishna movement in Brazil can show us some contrasts of peaks and declines in its importance in Brazilian society. Nowadays, the rural community of New Gokula has lost its diversity of public devotees and "alternative people". It is sometimes possible to find many people together in the rural community, when there are famous Vaishnava's parties, such as *Jammasthami* and *Radhastami*. In fact, "New Gokula" is still an important Hare Krishna centre in Brazil but the same intense social community life that used to gather around some three hundred devotees, does not exist anymore.

Community of Nova Gokula, Master Dissertation, PUC, São Paulo 1989; M. Silveira, *Hari Nama Sankirtana: An Ethnographic Study of a Ritual Process*. Doctoral Thesis, UNB, DF. Brasília 1999; V.H. Adami, *Transgressions and Concessions of a Westbound Hinduism: An Ethnographic Study About the Hare Krishna Movement*, Master Dissertation PUC-RS, Porto Alegre 2005; and others.

⁶ See the follow sites about Narayana Maharaja: <http://radhesyama.multiply.com/> <http://gve-brasil.blogspot.com>, <http://sripadvanamaharaja.blogspot.com>, <http://www.purebhakti.co.uk> <http://brasilsanga.ning.com>.

It is important to emphasize that none of the devotees broadly accept the idea of a schism. Such an idea is rejected by almost all of them. For the most part, they agree that the Hare Krishna movement has experienced some serious conflicts within the organization. However, from the perspective of the devotional approach, the Vaishnava's practices, all devotees are still joined together in their beliefs. So, what has changed?

CONFLICT CASE AT ISKCON TEMPLE IN PORTO ALEGRE, BRAZIL

At the beginning of this text, a brief overview concerning the manners in which the Hare Krishna movement was introduced and established in Brazil was discussed. In the present section, the main purpose is to describe a specific case of conflict that took place in a Hare Krishna temple in Porto Alegre, a large capital in Southern Brazil⁷. The conflict was defined by power struggles between the confessed and the non-confessed Hare Krishna members and the ISKCON leadership, in an attempt to locally recognize a "legitimate Hare Krishna movement", in accordance with their convenience and interests.

The ISKCON Temple model⁸ in Porto Alegre is located in a neighbourhood, broadly considered as an "alternative" place: the neighbourhood of *Bom Fim*⁹. The ISKCON Temple is actually inside a vegetarian restaurant – The Govinda's – which is a private business owned by a family of devotees, who also lead a snack bar and support the Temple financially. In fact, they pay for all basics such as rent, bills, fees, some food for the deities and

⁷ This analysis was based on an ethnographic study carried out during 2002 and 2004 in Porto Alegre, Brazil. See: V.H. Adami, op. cit. for further information.

⁸ In V.H. Adami, op. cit., the author has described distinct "models" to be considered by ways of "doing Hare Krishna movement". ISKCON's model is one of these.

⁹ The neighbourhood of Bom Fim ("The Good End") is broadly considered in Porto Alegre as an "alternative place". It is also possible to find others Oriental religious communities there such as: a Buddhism Temple, Ananda Marga Association, stores of Indian goods, some of them also sharing space with drug users and male prostitutes at night. Most part of the Hare Krishna Temples in urban cities are located in places where one could easily find drugs and their users.

the maintenance of a *Pujari*. The family of devotees and the *Pujari* set out to coordinate a conciliation around some administrative issues between the congregation and the ISKCON leadership, which was composed of a Brazilian GBC (Governing Body Commission)¹⁰ and his local secretary, a Vaishnava Swami.

The congregation was founded by some pioneer devotees, some newcomer devotees and the so-called “Krishna’s friends” – people who usually go to the Temple to worship the deities, as well as to eat in the restaurant but who do not consider themselves professed devotees. The deities of *Jaganatha*, *Baladeva* and *Subhadra* were taken by the GBC’s secretary from India to Porto Alegre, during the eighties. They were installed in different houses in Porto Alegre, as an ISKCON Temple, in accordance with the financial possibility of the congregation to support them. In 2001, the deities went to stay in a family restaurant of devotees because it was not possible for the congregation anymore, as a whole, to keep them in their place. As a result, this family of devotees decided to arrange a small place in their restaurant to install the deities.

By this time, coincidentally, the restaurant became very successful. There were some rumours that their success was due to the fact that “the deities were living in the restaurant”. There was much tension and gossip between 2001 and 2003, which could be broadly assumed to make up in an attempt to create a sense of meaning within the Hare Krishna movement, which could be properly matched to each of their own interests. A description of another observed conflict case in 2002 between the family of devotees, the congregation, and the ISKCON leadership can show us how the Hare Krishna movement was able to fit in a local context in accordance with the devotee’s interests.

When the deities were “living in the restaurant” there was an “official *Pujari*” who got used to doing all the worship practices, *pujas*, alone throughout the day, as well as tried to follow the specific standards of wor-

¹⁰ In Brazil the GBC – Governing Body Commission – is a Brazilian, Paramgati Swami, who is a *guru* and also the GBC in Portugal, Spain and France. The GBC is responsible for the worship standards of the deities, installed in the ISKCON Temples.

ship established by the GBC¹¹. However, there was one standard that he was unable to follow, which was to be on time for the deities' services. Punctuality is one of the basic principles to keep the standard "to serve *Jaganatha*, *Baladeva* and *Subhadra*". Therefore, some rumours concerning delays of the *Pujaris*' service were spread through the congregation. The GBC's secretary heard about it and then asked the Temple's administration – the family of devotees and the "Official *Pujari*" himself – to find a solution for the delays. During that time a devotee considered Brahmana was visiting Porto Alegre and the deities, so he could also serve the deities in the altar. He offered to stay in the Temple to serve the deities and as a way to help the "Official *Pujari*". Although it was not proper for the Temple to receive devotees to live there, because it was a private restaurant, the coordinators accepted the "Visitor *Pujari*" to stay there for a while, in order to remediate with the deities the problems with delays in attendance. Apparently, it was a solution for the secretary's immediate concerns. However, it did not last long because again, some rumours were spread concerning the intimate life of the "Visitor *Pujari*". It was said that he did not have an official marriage so this *Pujari* would be infringing the cleaning premise, as a standard to worship the deities.

Cleaning is also related to the "purity" of the *Pujari* situation and there is a regulation that says "do not practice illicit sex" and sexual relations without officially getting married¹². So the situation was considered as "illicit sex". The GBC secretary sent an e-mail to the coordinators, saying that he would take the deities back and put "them to sleep", if the coordinators had not isolated the deities from the "Visitor *Pujari*", because his conduct did not meet the standards of behaviour required to serve the deities directly. This created a serious disturbance amongst the followers because "the deities represent Krishna and how would we stay without Krishna around us?" Furthermore, the restaurant owner also was not married in an "official marriage"

¹¹ In accordance with an informant, the standard of worship *Jaganatha*, *Baladeva* and *Subhadra* deities is less strict and more flexible. They say that these deities are more compassionate. The *Pujari* should follow at least these premises: opulence, beauty, punctuality and cleaning (purity).

¹² "Official marriage" means to be married in a civil and Vedic way by a fire ceremony.

and sometimes she served the deities in the altar. The coordinators called the GBC, the secretary, and the congregation to a meeting to talk about this problem. The meeting lasted for four hours. Power struggles were very visible. The groups were divided into three: the Temple's coordinators, which included the restaurant owner; the secretary's group; and the congregation. The congregation's group was split between the coordinator's and the secretary's group. The newcomer devotees and most part of the "Krishna's friends" were in favour of the coordinators' group. The older ones were rather in accordance with the secretary's claims. The secretary suggested bringing two *Pujaris* from India, in order to clear up the tensions, otherwise he insistently said to "put the deities asleep in a box". According to the secretary, the *Pujaris* coming from India would follow these principles naturally. The restaurant owner did not allow it because she would not accept strange people living in her restaurant. Moreover, she reassured that she would continue to serve the deities in the altar in spite of the secretary's concern. The coordinator's group prepared a signed list from the part of the congregation, who were against the secretary, requesting the GBC for another person as secretary to the Temple in the Brazilian Southern region. A meeting was set up in order to clear all the conflicts. The GBC started the meeting calmly, trying to promote harmony between the groups. However, it became clear the strategy was not working and he resorted to hitting the floor repetitively with his bat, requesting silence. This was a kind of a wooden bat covered with a pink cloth. The GBC reiterated the importance of keeping the regulations and the standards to serve the deities at the altar, as well as the restaurant owner's action to make a place in her restaurant available to accommodate the deities. Although the deities were in a private place, the GBC confirmed that "it was an ISKCON Temple because its deities were there".

The secretary decided to question all the members present at the meeting about the reason for him being substituted. It was brought up that the claims originated from the time when he used to be the Temple administrator and that since that time he had kept the same radical posture towards the devotees. The GBC decided not to take into account the request from the coordinator's group concerning the secretary. According to him, his attention

was focused on finding a solution for the deities. The solution was found by a female devotee who offered to stay in the Temple for six months, in order to help the “Official *Pujari*”. The GBC asked her if she agreed with the principles and regulations in order to carry out that devotional service. She said that she was ready, because although she had married into an unofficial marriage the previous year, since that time she had been abstaining from sexual relations, in accordance with her religious vows. The restaurant owner accepted her being in the Temple, so the “Visitor *Pujari*” was no longer allowed to enter the altar. He would be able to worship the deities only in the Temple room. The restaurant owner’s serving the deities was not questioned, because she presented evidence that she would be married in a fire ceremony as soon as possible.

Three months after the meeting, it was heard that the secretary renounced his position in the ISKCON leadership and the GBC became directly responsible for the ISKCON Temple in Porto Alegre. Up to the end of this research, the deities were still in the restaurant and it was heard that the secretary renounced his position as a *Sannyasin*, because he had decided to get married to a devotee. He is no longer a member of any ISKCON Temple.

FINAL CONSIDERATION

Is it possible to consider the Hare Krishna movement originally rooted and traditionally genuine, based in any country? In accordance with our multi-sited fieldwork in Hare Krishna communities in Brazil, India, Spain and England, we have assumed that the Hare Krishna movement is a “social phenomenon”¹³. However, a social phenomenon is not limited to a specific area, for the same might occur in different countries, only covered by different layers, that we metaphorically considered as if it were a “way of dressing a phenomenon”. We mean that the sexism, feminism and the power

¹³ “Social phenomena” is defined here as, “all behavior which influences or is influenced by organisms sufficiently alive to respond to one another. This includes influences from past generations” (J. Markey, “A Redefinition of Social Phenomena: Giving a Basis for Comparative Sociology”. *The American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 31, No. 6, May 1926, p. 733).

struggles observed at ISKCON temple in Porto Alegre were social phenomena covered by the layer of “Hare Krishna clothing”. When such “clothing is worn” by any phenomenon, it does not mean that it comes from somewhere as genuine or original. Because any social phenomenon only exists rooted in its place and its legitimacy is defined locally by power struggle.

In attempt to recognize a “legitimate Hare Krishna Movement” in accordance with the interests of the Hare Krishna followers in Brazil, we want to assure that, in a wide sense, the Hare Krishna Movement is not so different from the ones in other parts of the world. We mean that we can bring into the sense of “Hare Krishna Movement as power” and power in any social interaction arises and gets legitimacy in the local place. Power comes from the place where it is lived and may or may not be, as a strategy, justified from somewhere, something and/or somebody, in order to strengthen its own struggles.

In this case, everything introduced in Brazil by the Hare Krishna followers and considered by them as Indian customs, is represented in order to express a Hare Krishna way of life in the local place where they have been living. By their entire self-assurance of life, they “wear” a Hare Krishna doctrine in order to experience their beliefs locally.

The presence of such conflicts in different parts of the world where it was possible to spread the Hare Krishna movement, was at the beginning an effort of those Hare Krishna communities to build what would be accepted as an ideal of a “Vedic culture” by the Prabhupad’s teachings from his first disciples. It was not an Indian lifestyle, neither Eastern nor Western; it did not come from anywhere. Moreover, the Narayana Maharaja and Gaudya Matha’s influences into the Hare Krishna communities outside India, have shown that the Indian’s *mathas* (Philosophical Vaishnava Schools) and their gurus – charismatic spiritual leaders – have been in combat with the western organizational religious way inspired by a sort of gospel sect, in which the descendants of a charismatic spiritual leader try to keep their founders teachings unchangeable in order to get a constant bureaucratic influence from the followers. The deities and the swamis at the Gaudya Vaishnavas in India are considered “sacred persons” and they are supposed to be located on a superior platform in relation to the devotees, initiated by Western Sannyasins.

Parts of these Western Sannyasins are considered a spiritual brotherhood of the Sannyasins born in India. However, most of the Indians Sannyasins don't recognize and accept the authority of the Western ones.

The spiritual legacy of Srila Prabhupada to the ISKCON leaderships should be "frozen" as a monopoly style of worship. To the Indians' Gaudya Vaishnavas, such a doctrine is a misrepresentation. Srila Prabhupada started a religious movement which has to be maintained by them to keep the universalization of the Gaudya Vaisnavism.

The conflict observed in the ISKCON Temple in Porto Alegre shows that it is not possible to create a sort of the "Hare Krishna church". Dealing with the doctrine and keeping the expenses of the deities make an important standalone basis that has to be set in accordance with the social conditions of the place. In order to keep a balance among the local congregation of the devotees – as it was perceived in some main Brazilians cities – it is necessary for them to become increasingly self-governing. However, such an example of a self-governing Hare Krishna temple was also found to exist as an organizational pattern in other temples around the world.

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