

PEOPLE

Riga's Krishna Temple Offers Food For Thought

By Andrea McDaniels

There are as many opinions about Hare Krishnas as there are people who walk by the doors of their temple at 54 Kr. Barona Street in Riga. A peek at what takes place behind the doors, however, affords the curious a chance to hear the devotees speak for themselves.

Step inside this nondescript yellow building and you are immediately greeted by a pervasive and exotic scent of incense and curry. Several fair-skinned youths in Indian garb and one in a warm-up suit lean in the doorways with their eyes closed or pace the floor muttering the Hare Krishna mantra, one hand concealed by a cloth bag. A devotee in a pink robe pulls his hand from

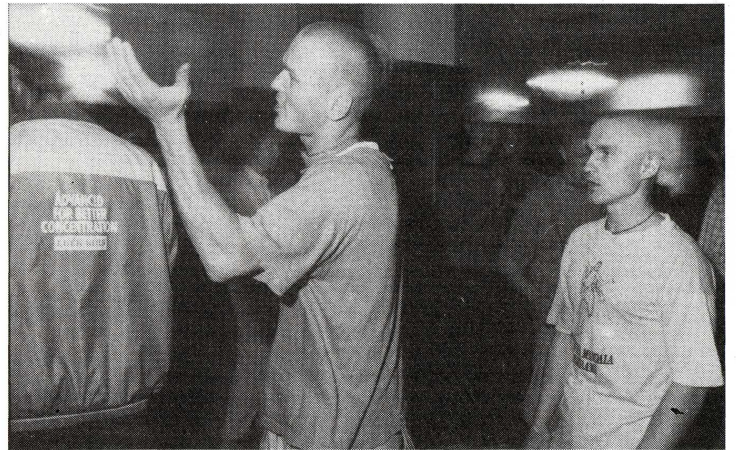
a.m., with prayers and the Hare Krishna chant occupying the hours from 4:30-7:00 a.m. The rest of the day, before bedtime at 9 p.m., is spent in lectures on Shrimad Bhagavatam and other Veda scriptures, in altar services in front of *Gaura-Nitai* icons, and in the kitchen cooking or on the street distributing books to earn one's keep in the temple. "Just as people outside have their jobs, we too must work hard for our spiritual goals," explains Syamadasi, who has lived in the temple for almost three years.

"People go through a one month trial period to see if they can live this austere life," says Guruttama das, a teacher at Riga's temple. As one of the first manifestations of *glasnost*, the sect first appeared in Latvia in the mid-1980s and was officially recognized in 1989. A

philosophy is that you are not your body, or any particular nationality. I'm part of an entity that's eternal, and separate from being Latvian," he explains. His mother has resigned herself to his decision to pursue life in the temple, but his father wishes he had become a doctor or lawyer. Parents archard to please, he admits.

"Some people are put off by the Indian appearance," Guruttama das says of the devotees' dress and hair. The men shave their heads to demonstrate the sect's emphasis on detachment from the body, as hair is associated with vanity. He jokingly concedes that some "alternative types" may be impelled by a "skinhead motivation," and view being shorn as trendy or attractive. All Hare Krishna women cover themselves with a headdress symbolizing chas-

Sinead Lynch



Devotees worship Krishna through chanting and dancing in their Sunday ritual at the temple.

sitting at the back of the room so as not to be a distraction for the men. "Some devotees criticize us on how we treat women," Guruttama das comments. "They see it as sexist, but they can't appreciate the relationship between men and women until they have lived a celibate life and follow celibacy in marriage." Married devotees have sex only for procreation, at the time when a woman is most fertile, he explains.

Devotees at the Riga temple take classes in ministerial skills, scripture, history of world religion, humanitarian work, music, and English language. Knowledge of English allows devotees to participate in international activities of the Society for Krishna Consciousness. They are usually initiated after one year, and after further education are advanced to the level of Brahmin.

The temple teaches its devotees self-sufficiency, Guruttama das says, adding that "we try to instill in them a sense of responsibility." He admits that the temple does attract quite a few free-loaders who expect the temple to provide everything for them for free, just as the state did in communist times. Classes cost 4000 Latvian rubles per month, but devotees may substitute the fee with labor if they so chose. The jobs include working in the temple's public vegetarian restaurant, open noon to 6 p.m. every day except Sunday, and assisting in the Food for Life program. The latter is the temple's soup kitchen which provides hot meals to 700 pensioners and invalids per day, according to Guruttama das.

The temple is home to 50 men and women between the ages of 18-25, but at any given time many are absent as they are visiting other temples. Devotees travel as far as Belfast and Melbourne, selling books to pay their expenses while they learn to orient themselves in unfa-

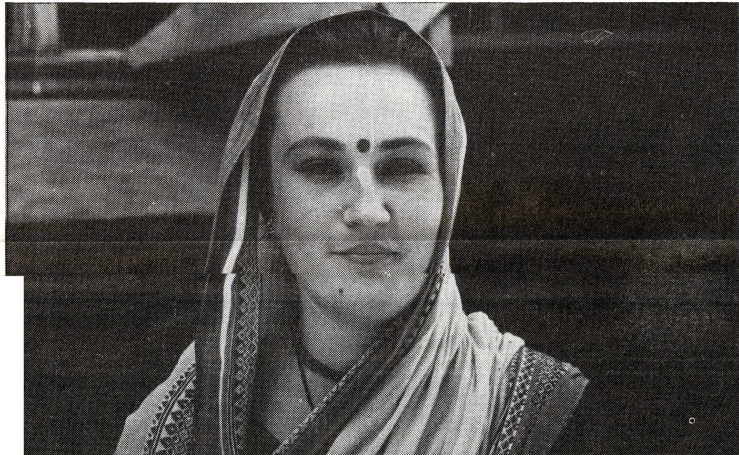
miliar surroundings as part of their training for initiation.

Worship of the two golden 30 centimeters-tall *Gaura-Nitai* deity figures takes place four times a day in the altar room. According to standard Hindu tradition, the figures are bathed and their costumes are changed daily. As a visitor watches, two women chant and one waves a small oil lamp under the statues. "This is not idol worship because we believe that the form is the same as God," Guruttama das explains. "The figures represent an incarnation of God which appeared in India 500 years ago." The worship should occur eight times a day, he adds, but the temple does not yet have enough qualified Brahmins to perform the ceremony.

The altar faces a life-size statue of the sect's founder, A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, sitting cross-legged in a large armchair.

This figure is also revered, bathed, and dressed in fresh silk robes several times a week. "We can also worship God through worship of the spiritual master," Guruttama says. Prabhupada died in 1977, after creating a central governing body in 1975 based in India to administer his growing International Society for Krishna Consciousness.

To some, the Hindu religion may seem out of place in a Baltic country, with a strong Christian tradition and European outlook. Guruttama das draws from his own experience as a Latvian living abroad to argue that Hare Krishnas can adapt to any country. "My family celebrated Jani [the Latvian midsummer celebration] in Australia but it didn't really work. It's winter there so it gets dark early and you don't feel like staying up late. Krishna Society offers something deeper. Its practices are not bound to time or place."



Sinead Lynch

All Hare Krishna female devotees, regardless of their marital status, wear a headdress symbolizing chastity.

the bag to expose a string of beads which keeps track of the repetition of the mantra. Some ten lines long, it is uttered 108 times for sixteen rounds, a process which takes approximately two hours. "The mantra is the focus of concentration," the young man explains. "It is a good way to pass the time, especially in the early morning."

The day begins at Riga's Hare Krishna temple at 3:30

28-year-old Australian-born Latvian. Guruttama das has lived in Latvia on and off for four years. Already interested in Yoga and Eastern philosophy, he became a Hare Krishna devotee ten years ago to escape what he terms his emigré parents' nationalism. He said that they considered him "a traitor" if he had Australian girlfriends or attended Australian parties. "The [Hare Krishna]

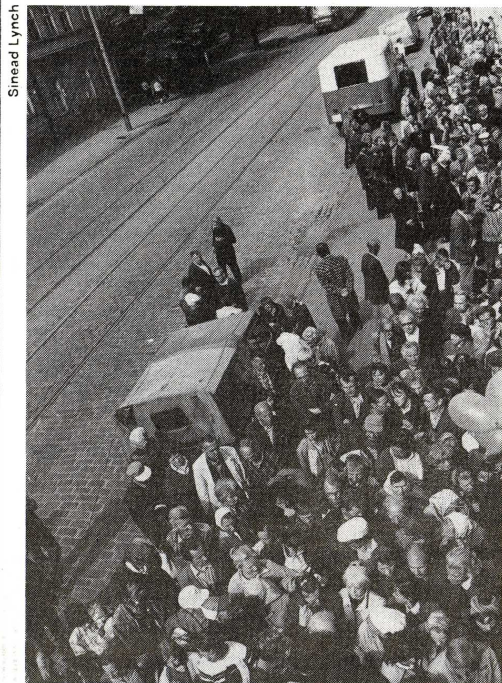
tity, but married women wear a white sari while unmarried women wear orange. "[Chastity] makes communal living easier. The sex drive is brought to a civilized level," says Guruttama das. "To live in a community free from that is a great relief. Women don't have to worry about being looked at, and the men don't have to show off."

Worship in the temple is segregated, with the women



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Pensioners have been waiting in line since 11 p.m. for a hot lunch. On this day, the 100,000th meal provided by the Food For Life program will be served.



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A hungry crowd lines up outside of the Hare Krishna soup kitchen on Kr. Barona Street.

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