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Where have they all gone?

By Mary Courtis
Of the Emerald

Where have all the Rajneeshes gone? It seems a pertinent question. From the time the group bought the Big Muddy Ranch in eastern Oregon and renamed it Rajneeshpuram, their presence in the state consistently made headlines and incited heated controversy over a three-year period. Clashes between Oregon officials and the Rajneeshes' outspoken representative, Ma Anand Sheela, received frequent national coverage.

Entertainers and social observers also were quick to joke about and judge the group. Bill the Cat underwent a temporary conversion to Rajneeshism in the comic strip "Bloom County," for example, and TV hosts such as Phil Donahue arranged debates between Rajneeshes and their critics.

Interest in the Rajneeshes also ran high among the academic community. Sociologists and psychologists from the University of Oregon State University and several colleges in Washington visited Rajneeshpuram, and many conducted studies dealing with the community or its residents.

Then in the fall of 1985, Sheela and several other important people in the Rajneesh organization abruptly left Rajneeshpuram. It later was reported that they had embezzled millions of dollars from Rajneesh Foundation International, and their names were linked to other questionable acts such as tapping rooms and telephone lines, an outbreak of salmonella in the Dalles and attempts to poison members of Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh's personal staff.

Though the Rajneesh community made a determined bid to survive this scandal, their efforts were in vain. Further investigation by local authorities suggested that other illegal activities — most notably sham marriages allegedly arranged by Rajneesh to get foreign *sannyasins* (disciples) into the United States — had taken place at Rajneeshpuram. Such reports led to the arrest and later expulsion of Rajneesh from the country and the deportation of most foreign *sannyasins*.

These events marked the demise of Rajneeshpuram as a vital community and the Rajneeshes as a vocal and visible group in Oregon. Consequently, there has been speculation that Rajneeshism is dead as a religious movement and its followers disbanded and disenchanted.

These rumors have little substance, however. The Rajneesh movement has not dissolved, but only gone underground — especially in Oregon and other states where the resentment towards *sannyasins* was and is the greatest. Many of these disciples have dropped their Sanskrit names and no longer wear red clothes or malas, the lockets with Rajneesh's picture on them. Many have gone back to school or resumed their former professions. They also are less likely to live communally or engage in group activities than in the past.

Smaller city- or area-specific centers also have tended to replace former attempts to consolidate either power or people. Most of these centers are careful to avoid negative publicity and in some cases downplay their affiliation with Rajneesh. But though the outer form may have changed, the inner commitment these *sannyasins* feel for their master remains the same.

"Much of the outer structure of the organization has evaporated," said Swami Prem Jal, a *sannyasin* who lives in Seattle. "The outer form of the movement now seems more like what I feel it has always been in essence: an individualistic path of inner growth. For me, the challenge of being part of the development of an alternative culture has been

Rajneesh movement still strong; disciples now living in mainstream



replaced by that of individual growth while living and working in the mainstream society. . . . The larger community still exists, but few of us feel the need to consistently gather together in large groups. Most of us keep quite busy developing our own individual lifestyles."

For some *sannyasins*, however, the attempt to integrate back into American culture has not been easy.

"Before becoming a *sannyasin* I lived for 15 years in Portland and owned a home there," said Ma Vinal Agyana, another Seattle *sannyasin*. "But after I left the ranch (Rajneeshpuram), my right to vote was revoked and I couldn't get a job in Portland. The prejudice was so bad that I finally had to move to Seattle."

Agyana hopes to return to Portland in the

future. But other *sannyasins* plan to remain in the Seattle area as permanent residents. They keep in touch with each other through an informal phone network and meet periodically at one of the 10 to 20 houses that serve as communal gathering spots to watch videos of Rajneesh's latest discourses, to meditate or to discuss experiences and insights.

Space also is made available for traveling *sannyasins* or other visitors at the cost of \$15 per day, which includes a private room and three meals. Coordination of this and other activities is very loose and relaxed. But the apparent lack of structure does not seem to bother *sannyasins*.

"I do not feel that the growth process of *sannyasins* stopped because of the lack of a center, commune or of therapy groups," Jal said. "The spontaneous interactions of *sannyasins* within and

between the houses, as we deal with the practical and human problems of everyday life, serve as highly effective catalysts for both catharsis and awareness. I view my house as an ongoing, leaderless growth group."

Unstructured spontaneity does not characterize the interactions of all Rajneesh communities, however. In San Francisco, for example, *sannyasins* maintain their own newspaper and opportunities for group meditation, and other activities are more frequent and varied. Ties to Rajneesh Friends International, located now in Boulder, Colo., also are stronger and more judiciously acknowledged than in Seattle.

"Basically, Seattle *sannyasins* are a bunch of rebels and anarchists," Swami Deva Pradip said. "A lot of us originally came here because we wanted to be close to Bhagwan, but we didn't want to live at Rajneeshpuram and deal with the organization."

Among those *sannyasins* who stayed at Rajneeshpuram until it closed, most did not seem bitter about the experience or wish they had not participated in life at the commune. Rather, they appeared to regard their time spent there as a positive, growth-promoting step in their spiritual development and devotion to Rajneesh.

"I do not look back on my experience at Rajneeshpuram as being negative," Jal said. "I came to feel that the energy of the place was such that it served as a kind of psychic vacuum cleaner for my own negative and unnatural conditioning, relentlessly pulling large quantities out from inside me so that I could wallow in them for a while until they disappeared. . . . I now have a sense of a very definite gap between the person I was before and after this period of time."

Some *sannyasins* also believe that the media coverage biased public perspectives on events at Rajneeshpuram and that many of the actions taken by community leaders at the time were understandable or quite legitimate.

"After I became a *sannyasin* people became very hostile," Agyana said. "One time I was almost run down deliberately in the street — twice! Many people who patronized our 'Zorba the Buddha' restaurant in Portland had their tires slashed. While at the ranch, I also personally experienced being shot at by cowboys when I was working in the vegetable fields. I feel that this climate of hostility made everyone at the ranch feel threatened, and the wire tapping and other security procedures were instituted to protect the community. It's unfortunate that the press blew the facts way out of proportion."

Another common misunderstanding was that the Rajneeshes "took over" the neighboring town of Antelope, Agyana said.

"The land in Antelope was up for sale," she said. "We just bought it. It's ridiculous to say that we took over the town. Another misconception is that Bhagwan is fabulously rich and self-indulgent. In truth, Bhagwan doesn't own anything — including any of the cars he drove. A separate finance company owned the Rolls Royces and they were considered to be investments. Bhagwan just enjoyed driving them. They were gifts of love, given freely. To think that coercion or brainwashing was ever involved is to misunderstand the master/disciple relationship and not appreciate what it means."

Clearly, Rajneeshism is still alive. Whether it will persist and ever gain recognition as a legitimate religion in the minds of most Americans still is uncertain.

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