

The Leadership of New Vrindaban's Young Brahmachari

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Introduction

Founded by Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada in 1968, the Hare Krishna Community of New Vrindaban first became a haven for new-age thinkers in the late 1960s. The community originated as a branch of the Hindu-based ISKCON (International Society for Krishna Consciousness) and despite setbacks within leadership and some negative media attention, the community has continued to attract new devotees to its secluded location in Moundsville, West Virginia.

This case study focuses on the young brahmachari that reside at New Vrindaban. Brahmachari are men that take vows of celibacy, wear white or saffron robes, and study under a spiritual guru. One can take the vows of brahmachari at any age, but the focus of our research is on the new generation of brahmachari at New Vrindaban; those in their mid-twenties. In this case study, we explore the leadership roles of several of these particular brahmachari. We discover how they perceive themselves as leaders, as well as other's perceptions of their leadership abilities. The leadership we examine was demonstrated and documented inside and outside of the New Vrindaban community.

Research Methods

Our main method of conducting research for this study consisted of one-on-one interviews with two specific brahmachari. Some of these interviews were recorded on tape and some were recorded in note form. We will refer to those two particular brahmachari throughout this study as young brahmachari one and young brahmachari two (abbr. YB1 & YB2). These two brahmachari were the focal point of our research. We traveled to the New Vrindaban community twice in order to interview other devotees (followers of Krishna Consciousness) about these young brahmachari and their leadership there, as well as to observe the brahmachari in the community. We also documented their activities outside of New Vrindaban, while they were engaged in their extra activities. It was important to view the brahmachari both inside the community and outside of the community. It was also important to get their opinions about themselves, as well as their opinions of the other devotees, and the opinions of those they have contact with outside of the community.

Leadership outside of the New Vrindaban Community

The young brahmachari have many commitments outside of the New Vrindaban community. This activity involves traveling to universities and cities around Ohio on a weekly basis. YB1 and YB2 both travel to Athens, Ohio every Tuesday to teach vegan-cooking classes. They also hold a class on Wednesday nights at a residential home in Athens to read from the Bhagavad-Gita, the holy book of Krishna Consciousness. Because Athens houses Ohio University, the brahmachari find a large audience of college students present at these weekly activities. Although these trips to Athens are their main commitment outside of the temple, the brahmachari often arrange other trips as well, such as teaching yoga classes in Columbus, Ohio or lecturing at other universities throughout the state. It became clear from the information we documented that the brahmachari are seen as leaders, both by others and in their own eyes, in the roles they take on outside of New Vrindaban.

- Cooking classes: Both YB1 and YB2 conduct vegan cooking classes every Tuesday night at the Wire, a local community center in Athens, Ohio. Although being a vegetarian is part of the Krishna Consciousness philosophy, the brahmacari see the classes as an outlet for creating a much deeper experience for those involved. After YB1 started the classes four years ago, the classes have continued to build a following among Athens' students and locals, as each person takes away something different from the activity. YB1 explained how important this aspect of the service is:

YB1: "Some people may just be grateful that they get a good meal every week. Some people in the same class may be grateful that we're just their friends. Some people may be grateful that we're offering an opportunity to help develop the community. Some people may be grateful for the opportunity to learn about different cultures. Some people may be grateful that we're just bringing people to the Wire, so people can start their activist life. Some people may be just grateful that we're providing an opportunity where if people want they can talk to us about Krishna Consciousness. Some people may be grateful that every week they come and we get to actually talk to them about Krishna Consciousness and give them spiritual guidance, advice, and counseling. So, in one single class, out of hundreds of kids, each one is different, and every one of them has a different need, and we try to, as a friend - we try to assist them in whatever way they need, because that's what friends do. Whatever you need, we're there to serve."

We conducted interviews at these cooking classes to find out the opinions of those who attend. Two of the girls we talked to had very positive feelings about the two brahmacari and their leadership abilities. Both girls are seniors at Ohio University in Athens, Ohio and in this case study will be referred to as student one and student two:

S1: "I've been going for four years because I enjoy the people who put it on and to experience different cultures, food, and the community that surrounds the cooking classes. I consider [YB1] and [YB2] to be leaders. They are the heart and backbone of these classes. They have perseverance in their consistency and planning of the classes. They are definitely servants; they go out of their way to talk to new people and be welcoming. They just want to be your friend above pushing their beliefs."

S2: "I've been going for four years to meet people who have the same values as I do and eat vegan food. [YB1] and [YB2] are definitely leaders because they travel here from West Virginia, cook the food, and teach us. They are always asking me if there is any way they can serve me. They host these classes not to push their beliefs, but to show us that there really are kind-hearted genuine people and to set up a place where we can meet each other."

- Bhagavad-Gita Readings: The brahmacari see the Bhagavad-Gita, the holy book that much of Krishna Consciousness is based on, as an outline for how they can be effective leaders in society. Each week, both of the brahmacari in our study read

excerpts from the Bhagavad-Gita at a residential home in Athens, Ohio. This building is located near Ohio University's main campus and is an open forum for students and other people who come to listen, eat, and participate in group discussions. Their goal is to relate the Bhagavad-Gita's principles to not only spirituality, but to all aspects of life and the world we live in. Many of the attendees said the main reason why they attend these sessions is to hold conversations and enjoy the company of people who share similar religious attitudes. The attendees also expressed that without the presence of the young brahmacari, these weekly gatherings would not exist and that they would feel a void in their lives. They definitely view these young brahmacari as spiritual leaders who guide them on a weekly basis and, if called upon, more often.

- Rainbow Gatherings: Rainbow Gatherings are temporary intentional communities. The gatherings are typically held in an outdoors setting and are based on praising and practicing ideals of peace, love, harmony, freedom and community. These events are one of the more liberal approaches these young brahmacari partake in, often cooking for thousands of people at the events. A new devotee of only one year said his guides are three of the younger brahmacari at new Vrindaban, including the two we interviewed. YB1 is the one who really got him interested in becoming a Hare Krishna. He met him at the Rainbow Gathering in West Virginia last year, while YB1 was acting as a cook for the event. The new devotee said that YB1 looked very exhausted, but at peace and happy to be providing food for thousands of people; that is was YB1's devotion to his cause that got him interested. When asked about the young brahmacari as a group, he responded that they were solid, had strong inner-strength, confidence in humility and purity, and selflessness.

Leadership inside of the New Vrindaban community

The young brahmacari participate heavily in many activities inside the New Vrindaban community, particularly within the temple. However, these religious and community duties do not place them as community leaders or spiritual leaders in the eyes of the elder community members. Instead, they gain respect for the function in which they serve to maintain and foster harmony within the community. Unlike their very recognizable leadership outside of the community, we found that their role within New Vrindaban receives much less leadership recognition.

- Temple responsibilities: Inside the community of New Vrindaban, the young brahmacari are the main caretakers of the temple. They care for the deities and attend all morning and evening services at the Temple of Gold. The temple is the center of the community, serving as a place for devotees to come eat, worship, and meditate. At these services, the brahmacari encourage worship and boost the moral of other devotees with their enthusiasm and by their spirit of involvement in the ceremonies. YB2 explains what this entails:

YB2: "I guess you could say our main service at the temple, our most important, is that we try to be good examples, attending all the temple programs and services, morning and evening. That's a big part of our service, just to be there,

at the temple services, for the full morning and full evening program - you know, be enthusiastic about those programs and try to inspire people in that way.”

The brahmacari also try to give a lecture at either one of these morning or evening services each day. Besides caring for the temple and being involved in services, organizing and running community festivals consumes much of their time. Because this is a very busy time for them, the brahmacari recruit additional help with duties in the temple so they can lead elsewhere and take on extra tasks.

YB2: “A lot of our service around New Vrindaban revolves around festivals. There’s a staff of devotees there that are basically able to cover the day to day activities of the temple...When there are festivals there’s a larger need for cooking, cleaning, and doing all kinds of different things. So, especially during festival time we’re called to do all kinds of different things, from cooking and cleaning, to organizing, to just whatever needs to get done to make it happen.”

- Community Perceptions: Taking a vow as a brahmacari might seem as if it would de facto set one apart as a spiritual leader and guide in a community such as New Vrindaban. However, much of our research indicated that while many members of New Vrindaban do respect the brahmacari for their discipline and the example that they set by their personal renunciation, few of the devotees we interviewed said they actually looked to these monks for spiritual guidance and instruction.

In fact, when mentioned to the two younger brahmacari that some of the elder devotees we had spoken to at New Vrindaban had referred to them this way in one of our interviews, they were rather surprised by the comments. This is a record of that conversation between YB1 and YB2 and one of our researchers.

(October 25, 2006 at 7:00 P.M. - 9:00 P.M.):

Researcher: “They [the older people] said that they listen to you and do the things you tell them to do.”

YB1: (both brahmacari seem skeptical) “They said that?”

Researcher: “Yes.”

YB1: “The older people?”

Researcher: “Yes.”

YB1: “Be quiet...get out...”

Researcher: “The group of people all sitting by where we ate lunch.”

YB1: “They were actually old people?”

Researcher: “A couple from Montana and then three other people - two other guys and a girl.”

YB1: “The two from Montana definitely wouldn't do what we said.”

(YB2 laughs)

In the prior conversation, our researcher told the brahmacari that some of the elder devotees in the community spoke of them in a way that implied that they should be treated with high regard. Clearly, this took both young brahmacari by surprise.

Although the couple mentioned made complimentary comments that implied respect for the brahmacari, after talking to brahmacari themselves, we realized that perhaps these comments were made as a courtesy to us, because we were visitors in the community. The couple said that they respect the young brahmacari, but in reality they would not apply this respect to them in a normal setting. As outsiders, some elders thought that saying they see the brahmacari as leaders and that they deserved respect seemed like the appropriate response to give us. When our researcher asked the young brahmacari to elaborate on their feelings about how they thought people saw them as leaders inside of New Vrindaban, YB2 explained as follows:

YB2: "At New Vrindaban, we're the youngest people, so no one takes us very seriously there. When we go to these other places, these places where we've been preaching, where people have actually become devotees just since we've been going to there, these much younger congregations, people are very respectful and will accept us as leaders. But generally, in a place like that [New Vrindaban], definitely not."

Although the above conversation concerning the couple from Montana seems to be an exception, after talking to many of the elder brahmacari, this seemed to be the general consensus. Most said that respect in the community is given to spiritual advancement [that comes with age] as much as titles, and that a man who puts a great deal of energy into his family might be just as much of a leader as one who puts his energy into the temple. After talking more extensively with the young brahmacari, they explained that they understand respect must be earned through experience and proving that they will maintain a permanent life of spirituality. They expect the elder members of the community (particularly the elder brahmacari) to not to look upon them as leaders.

YB2: "It's important to understand the history. Many people have been doing what we're doing previously and then they just weren't monks after that. They got married and they became just like ordinary people, living their lives, trying to make a living, raise a family and stuff. So part of that's true. Someone in our position, as a young monk, has not yet proven that they deserve the respect of having fully given up certain things, because they're still very young. It could happen that they could get married the next day... they've (the community) seen in the last ten years how many young monks come through and then are not there any more. We're the particular group of monks that are trying to do this now - live a life of complete dedication..."

How leadership roles are changing

The roles of the brahmacari in New Vrindaban have changed from what they were several years ago. While brahmacari in the past spent most of their time raising funds for and taking care of the temple, the current brahmacari now spend a considerable amount of time outside of New Vrindaban, focusing on community outreach.

YB1: “Our responsibility is more studying and teaching. They [elder brahmacari] also taught and they also studied, but a lot of their time went to, a lot, a lot of their time, went to actually raising money for the temple and stuff like that to keep on going, which is actually one of the responsibilities of the brahmacari, the student...that you’re supposed to go out and beg.”

Feelings within New Vrindaban as to whether the current brahmacari are focusing their time on the proper activities are mixed. Interviews with YB1 and YB2 revealed more about the new “liberal” approach they have employed as brahmacari:

YB1: “We’re doing things a little bit differently than they [elder brahmacari] did when they were our age. So therefore, that’s what their reference point is. So, some people feel that’s the way that we should continue doing things. We have a little different opinion and we think that our opinions and our direction is based upon learning from their mistakes and from just that the times have changed quite a bit, and that people have changed quite a bit. And there’s a lot of details to that that could be discussed...but that’s a whole different topic.”

YB2: “Some people really appreciate it, others find it difficult to relate to our liberal style of outreach, but most importantly our guru appreciates it, we learned this from him. We’re doing this for him and are trying to follow his example.”

Conclusion

As the aforementioned research and observation indicates, outside of New Vrindaban, the young brahmacari are admired as both spiritual and community leaders. Students, young people, and would-be devotees seek them out for advice and guidance as well as friendship. At the classes they teach and in the communities they visit, their leadership qualities and the way that others perceive them as leaders is very explicit and external. Outside of New Vrindaban, it seems the brahmacari take on the role of a leader in a very recognizable way.

However, from our findings inside of New Vrindaban, there is a very different leadership role for the younger brahmacari. In this community, where only age and extensive years of study give one the ability to be respected as a spiritual leader, even the title of brahmacari and a strict regimen of temple service and training are not enough to be considered a leader in the community. Still, it is also this service to the temple and the example of personal renunciation that they set to new devotees, as well as old, that garners respect from all the members of the community, as they perform a function of servant leadership. This leadership, as opposed to their leadership outside of the community, is much more implicit and internal. The young brahmacari receive much less explicit recognition for their leadership in this way.

The young brahmacari have decided to take a different route to show their love for Krishna and the ISKCON movement. They know that people will look upon their actions and lifestyles as an example of what they see as a “servant leader.” They have decided to take a liberal approach in offering their services outside of New Vrindaban. Instead of imposing

their religion upon others, they offer their friendship and advice to those who look up to them and seek them out. They recruit by example.

As time progresses, the brahmacari hope to continue their plans for outreach and education in Athens, Ohio and in the surrounding communities. Still, they also understand that they are still learning from their guru. They will continue to seek out knowledge and gain the wisdom needed to show that they will be the generation that is able to live the brahmacari's life of complete dedication.