

Women in New Vrindaban: Community in Transition

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Near Moundsville, West Virginia, there is New Vrindaban, a community of Hare Krishna (Hindu) devotees that has been active since 1968, after the founder, Srila Prabhupada, brought the religion to the United States. Of the 10 women interviewed for this report, most feel that men and women have had different experiences within the community. This paper will serve to explore the changing role of women from the establishment of the community in 1968 to the present.

The beginning years: 1968-1986

According to the majority of female devotees interviewed, women residents of New Vrindaban were not treated as equals until the late 1980s. Living separately from men, many of them were forced into arranged marriages with men they barely knew. Many women feel that they had lower status, were seen as less intelligent than men, and had little say in the running of the community. Women were assigned the roles of cooking, cleaning and childrearing; however, they had little power over their own children because young children were brought up in a communal nursery.

Some community members used their views of Hindu scriptures to gain power over women. Many early members came from the hippie culture of the 1960s and did not adjust easily to the principles of the Hare Krishna movement. With the death of Srila Prabhupada, in 1977, a new leader, Kirtanananda Swami, emerged. His conservative influence aggravated the mistreatment of the women, according to most of the women interviewed.

Interfaith League of Devotees: 1987-1996

In 1987, New Vrindaban was excommunicated from the International Society of Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), <http://www.iskcon.com>, a worldwide confederation of thousands of Hare Krishna devotees, due to scandals in the community. In 1988, Kirtanananda started the Interfaith League of Devotees. The experiment, which lasted six years, was an effort to remind members of the original principles by bringing in leaders from other faiths to serve as an example. Many residents, uncomfortable with the change, left New Vrindaban.

The positive influence of female leaders from other faiths began to broaden the views of devotees. Most families moved to private homes, and women gained more respect from their families and the community.

Current times: 1997-present

Ten years after the interfaith experiment started, New Vrindaban rejoined ISKCON. Women had a larger role with the new managerial style of leadership. Women had more freedom with their behavior and dress and did not marry as young. They were no longer expected to wear saris exclusively, and it became generally more acceptable for men and women to interact.

When discussing their past and present lives at New Vrindaban, many of the women interviewed had some common views on marriage, motherhood, etiquette, relationships, work, and spirituality.

Marriage

For the first five years from 1968 to 1973, men and women in New Vrindaban lived entirely separate. Around 1976, men and women started interacting by attending the same worship services. Community leaders started to see a need for marriage because male and female devotees were in closer contact, and Hare Krishna beliefs do not allow for sexual relations outside marriage. Rama Lila, a female devotee who grew up in the community, said that during the 1980s it was not unheard of for some girls as young as 13 years old to enter arranged marriages.

Rupa, 55, said during the early years, sometimes the women would get a call on the CB radio that “so-and-so was getting married in the morning so make sure she came down.” Rupa was asked if she wanted to get married, and “I knew what my answer was supposed to be, so I said ok.” Her marriage only lasted five months, and when it failed people assumed it was Rupa’s fault.

Kamalavati said the former leader, Kirtanananda, encouraged abusive behavior. She took her children and left her husband and the community, returning 25 years later to marry a devotee of her own accord.

Vidya, an original member, was one of the few women whose arranged marriage did not end in divorce. She thinks her marriage has been successful because they changed in similar ways, although they have had their ups and downs.

Vani, a native Indian who lives at New Vrindaban as a devotee, said that arranged marriages are commonplace in Indian culture. She sometimes feels frustrated because American devotees do not understand her marriage. “Sometimes people criticize me – how come you do this for your husband? How come you do that for your husband? That’s how we were brought up.”

Today, the direct pressure to get married has lessened, and women can stay single without being ostracized. However, marriage is still highly regarded by the community.

Motherhood

Motherhood is revered by both male and female devotees in New Vrindaban. Men are taught to think of and treat all women as their mothers, except for their wife.

In the past, motherhood empowered women within their households and earned them more respect from the community. Vidya said, “With the birth of your children and as they get older, you get more respect from your husband. You get more respect in your house, and when you get your own house it doesn’t matter what anyone says to you.”

In the early years, a strong relationship between mother and child was not highly regarded. Kamalavati said women were marginalized and encouraged to send their children to the community school where parents had little contact. She said that it made

her uncomfortable how women were expected to work — sharing child-care duties like babysitting and breast-feeding.

Mores and forms of etiquette

Some unwritten rules still exist regarding dress, behavior and dating that many female devotees are encouraged to follow. Although there are more freedoms and choices than in the past, the community's beliefs still differ from mainstream society.

Rama Lila, who grew up in New Vrindaban, said there is a certain etiquette that a woman should follow, but devotees can choose how seriously they want to take their faith. "It's no longer a cookie cutter society." She said that personally she always tries to act in an honorable fashion; for example, she would not spend time alone with men because people would draw wrong conclusions.

Lalita Gopi came to New Vrindaban from an all-female temple in Columbus, Ohio. She likes the etiquette rules such as dressing chastely and tying back her hair because they make her feel safe from sexual pressure. "I didn't want to do the whole dating thing."

Gokula came to New Vrindaban in 1994. When she became a Hare Krishna three years prior she moved into a temple and said she had a little trouble adjusting to the rules. Her experience was like many others who joined the Hare Krishna movement. "I had brothers and my best friend in high school was a guy, but then [after I lived in the temple] I couldn't speak to men unless I had something to say." She said the women liked to joke and say that it was the "pass the salt" rule because they could only ask men for the salt, but times have changed and the belief is no longer as strict; men and women now follow similar rules.

Relationships between men and women

Original female members of the New Vrindaban community were very close because genders were isolated from one another by living in separate temples or ashrams. Vidya said, "All the women were put in one ashram at first. ... you would go weeks, months without seeing a man." Even today, Sankirtana, a male devotee said, "There is a deep camaraderie among the women."

Men and women in New Vrindaban have always followed certain gender roles. The men had more authority and the women were typically seen as caretakers. Jayasri said, "Our particular movement does have a male dominance." Men have always been the governing gender of the community, but recently women have started to step up, she said. A women's council has recently been organized and a female devotee has been elected to sit on a community governing board.

Work

During the early years, the women did not work outside the community. When the women lived separately from the men, they were not permitted to drive cars. As the culture at New Vrindaban (and mainstream America) has progressed, women have gradually gained more rights and greater independence.

Although most members of the community as a whole—both male and female—would prefer to focus on their spirituality rather than matters of money, they understand the importance of having an income.

Devotees are welcome to stay in the temple in return for doing work such as cleaning, cooking and managerial tasks. However, the most common circumstance is for families to live outside temple grounds in their own homes or apartments. For the most part, women in the community are responsible for child-care, while men are responsible for providing for the family. When necessary to support their families, women—especially single mothers—often work outside the home.

Spirituality

Men and women have different ways of worshiping at New Vrindaban. During the temple services, women tend to stay more to the back and left of center, while the men are more likely to be seen front and center. Dancing, which is a key part to the service, is also separate. Women dance with other women, while men dance with other men.

According to Jayasri, it is stated in some Hindu scriptures that women are less intelligent than men. Because of this, she said men should take care of women rather than take advantage of them. This has not always been the case at New Vrindaban. “Men are the dominating factor ... but [if] they aren’t so qualified, what they do is they put the women down,” Jayasri said.

Although situations have improved, there are still times in which unqualified men are put before women. In the Hindu culture it is a great honor to offer a garland. Recently, a leader gave a young man who has not been initiated the last garland rather than giving it to Jayasri. Jayasri is a senior devotee as well as a former temple president, the first and only female president.

Future

There is an increasing population of Indian devotees living at New Vrindaban, and thus the influences of Indian culture will be felt more strongly. More devotees will have the background for following Krishna Consciousness because Hindu beliefs were central to their childhood; however, the community could find itself becoming more traditional. Women may begin to feel the impact of a more restrictive lifestyle.

At the same time, the large number of visitors each year causes New Vrindaban to be more in touch with mainstream culture. At a recent women’s leadership conference at New Vrindaban, some women were discussing the possibility of a woman guru in the future and more female leaders in the governing body council of ISKCON. Women will inevitably see change as time goes by.

Our sampling of Hare Krishna devotees at New Vrindaban offered a variety of insights about life in the community. Although at times women were not treated with respect, the community is maturing and becoming more inclusive. Many of the female devotees said even during the “growing pains” of the community they stayed because it was worth struggling for an idea so precious and potentially beneficial to all.