



R E V I E W S

Monkey on a Stick: Murder, Madness, and the Hare Krishnas

Documentary by Sphere Media. 2024. 105 minutes.

Reviewed by Barton A Stewart

The cult phenomenon of the Western world is often viewed as an offshoot of the counter culture movement of the 1960's, in spite of the fact that many cults today wear business suits and high-and-tight haircuts. But one category of cult that maintains the characteristics of non-conformist hippies is Eastern Mystical groups, and of these for many people the Hare Krishnas—the International Society of Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON)—remains the very epitome of cults.

Probably the best-known book on the Krishnas was *Monkey on a Stick* (1988) by John Hubner and Lindsey Gruson. The Mystery Writers of America nominated it for an Edgar Award that year in their Best Fact Crime category. Now the book has been made into a documentary by Sphere Media titled *Monkey on a Stick: Murder, Madness and the Hare Krishnas*.

To tell the tale, Director Jason Lapeyre interviewed *Monkey on a Stick* co-author John Hubner, PBS cameraman and filmmaker Jacob Young, former member Nori Muster and her old friends from ISKCON—Steve Gelberg, Alma Bella Maglaya, Maria Ekstrand, Puranjana, David Shapiro, Rukmini Heidi Chacon, Srimad Bhagavatam McKee—and cult educator Joe Szimhart. Unlike many documentaries, this one has a cinematic look that really elevates it, with vintage photos and video clips bolstered by live action segments. The musical score by Todor Kobakov fits to a T.

The history of the group, which is narrated in much detail and becomes appalling in the extreme, begins with the arrival of the near-penniless Indian sage Prabhupada to America in 1965. He was 70 years old, and a man on a mission from God. He would bring Krishna Consciousness to the Western world.^[1] What began as a small group chanting in a park exploded in size at such speed as to beggar description without clichés. Word of mouth in the youth culture led to temples popping up nationwide seemingly overnight. With the swami in place in San Francisco for the Summer of Love, ISKCON became a testament to being in the right place at the right time. It didn't hurt that a Beatle was personally and vocally supportive of them.

The public image of the group was utopian. All flowers and blissful singing and chanting the name of what certainly seemed to be a god of pacifism. Lord Krishna was the pleasing blue color of a cloud, and played with his girlfriends in paradise. The basic idea was that humans are spiritual beings and the highest level of happiness is to be found in contemplation of God and chanting his name.^[2] But commentary by former members reveals ISKCON as a highly male dominant hierarchical religious order. (A male dominant religion? Imagine that!)

Women were to be submissive to their husbands. The husbands were to be submissive to their guru. For everyone the main thrust of life was—fundraising! They had quotas! Just like in the material world! Former devotee Alma Maglaya says hers was \$1,000 a week. That was in the 1980s. Not a lot of training backed up these fundraising goals. The fact that they were raising this money for God cut through a lot of ethical considerations. Likewise, the laws of man were well beneath the laws of God. The main thing was, go get bread for the guru. Thus, the legend of the pan-handling Hare Krishna was born. Off it went into who-knows-how-many TV comedy sketches and New Yorker cartoons.

With exponential growth and an avalanche of money, the materialism that crept into the upper levels of the cult can be seen clearly in one of the leader's closets: Armani suits on one side, saffron robes on the other.^[3]

The film details in vivid colors the many shades of corruption that set in. For example, as time marched on and the sect kept growing, devotees were having kids. The higher-ups ensured that fundraising activities would not be interrupted by sending the kiddies from the age of *five* to ISKCON centers as far away as India, run by people of unknown backgrounds whose only qualifications was their capacity to chant the names of the Lord. For any parents who objected to this arrangement, it turned out that ISKCON taught a version of a torturous eternal Hell for spiritual backsliders.

A searing thread in this film is its candor about sexual crimes, especially but not only at the schools. These, ultimately, became a significant factor pulling the walls down on ISKCON.

The floodgates opened on these and all manner of abuses after an earthquake hit the group—the demise of its leader.

Prabhupada's death in 1977 led to a meeting of the 11 swamis who ranked just below the great ISKCON founder. These men set up an entirely new order, called (yes, really) the Zonal Guru System.^[4] They divided the world into 11 zones, and began fighting among themselves over who would be the Big Boss. Prabhupada's letters, found after his death, revealed that he had never intended for there to be 11 gurus. He envisioned administrators!^[5]

The narrative points out that the vast majority—about 80 percent—of those who were in the movement at the time of Prabhupada's death ended up leaving. Was it simply the natural end of an era? The Summer of Love had been 10 years earlier. It had been 12 years since the holy man arrived in New York City. ISKCON had had quite a run given the attention span of American society.

But, the film tells us, the malevolence up until 1977 had been only prelude. The 11 Zonal Gurus would bring forth the madness that we associate with the worst of cultic Krishna groups.

As a case in point: A guru named Jayatirtha was cast out of the group for using LSD, and ended up forming his own acid-dependent sect in London. Nori Muster describes him as basically a nice man who never hurt anyone—but himself.^[6] It was in a hardware store in London that he was murdered in horrific fashion by a drug-crazed follower.

And even darker was the story of Hansadutta,^[7] a narcissist, obsessed with guns, who lapsed into paranoia. Ostensibly a Hare Krishna holy man, he was openly hedonistic, sloshed

with alcohol, and intent on becoming a rock 'n roll star. He was busted for a stockpile of illegal weapons and lost his position in ISKCON. Three years after that, in 1983, Hansadutta spun out into a psychiatric crack-up that became another black chapter in the history of the group.

One of the most devastating stories this film tells is how the ISKCON schools descended into horror houses of abuse: Up at 3 AM. Cold shower. March 1 mile to the schoolhouse to begin a day of mind-numbing chanting and recitation of religious texts. Five years old. First it was the Dallas school, then another and another, until the catastrophe was almost system-wide.

The colossal scandal of the religious schools was a major part of the downfall of ISKCON. But, the film tells us, there was more.

The largest Krishna community in America, set up in West Virginia,^[8] was called New Vrindaban, named for the childhood home of Lord Krishna in India. This site became what they called a spiritual Disneyland, awash in painted statuary and colorful temples and palaces. Looking at the video of the place in the film, one is sobered by imagining the fundraising work that had to go into financing it. How many candy boxes, flowers and candles were sold in how many airports and parks? How many hours of sheer drudgery from how many young people went into paying for New Vrindaban?

The guru behind this project was said to be Prabhupada's favorite: Kirtanananda. If any of the Zonal Gurus were obsessed with becoming the Big Boss, it was he. He wanted to be the new Prabhupada, reigning from his holy city in the West Virginia hills. Tragically, we learn, the city was a place of extremes.

The guru and those at the top of the pyramid lived in plush accommodations. The vast majority of devotees who labored in the temples lived out of the tourists' view, in dilapidated, unheated trailers and shacks. Disease and hunger were part of the scene beyond the gold-painted turrets.

Kirtanananda had numerous personal problems, megalomania and malignant narcissism among them. But he was also a pedophile, with a retinue of young boys in attendance. But it got worse—and here the film, bringing together Nori Muster's and others' narratives and original footage of events, skillfully relates the major force in the downfall of ISKCON.

The guru was absolute monarch of his kingdom and set up a police state replete with surveillance cameras and microphones—and some serious strong-arm enforcers. Two people who ran afoul of the guru were murdered.

The first victim, Charles St. Denis, was buried on the New Vrindaban grounds in 1983, and at that time was considered a missing person. Steven Bryant, who was enraged at the depredations of Kirtanananda and had compiled a hefty file on him, was killed in California in 1986, and this second homicide made national news.

Devotees—were supposed to avoid looking at outside media, but Nori Muster, working in the public relations department of ISKCON, saw the news clippings and was aware of what was going on. When her father pointed out that there were all these negative stories in big national magazines but nothing in the *ISKCON World Review*, the publication she wrote for, she decided to expose what was going on.

She asked her superiors why she couldn't interview Kirtanananda and get his side of the story. Though she was told not to she went ahead, and she found some of the answers to her questions to be feeble and bizarre. The pressure of the hierarchy's censorship and intimidation was building up in her, and would soon lead to her exit from the cult. What she couldn't know was the radical turn in the story that was coming just days after her interview.

The collapse of Kirtanananda's empire came out of the blue. It transpired that he had a printing operation at New Vrindaban, churning out counterfeit merchandise: college and professional sports team logo shirts, jackets, banners, and other copyright merchandise of all kinds.^[9] They were selling it nationwide. Somehow it came to the attention of the law, and there was one gigantic raid. Two tractor-trailer loads of counterfeits were hauled out. It became the largest federal copyright violation case in history. They seized computers, documents, weapons, and mountains of cash. But, the film tells us, it got worse.

During the raid, information was recovered that led to the unearthing of a human skeleton on the property. It turned out to be the missing Charles St. Denis. It was understood that this man's death was meant to send a message that you don't cross the guru. This messaging method goes back to the old days in India, when fruit fields were sealed off with fencing to keep the monkeys out. If a monkey got in, he was killed, and his carcass would be impaled on a stick and posted on the fence for the others to see.

When all was said and done, Kirtanananda was sentenced to 30 years in prison.

Later, in 2000, a major class action lawsuit was filed: The Children of ISKCON versus ISKCON. They sought \$400 million dollars in damages. Only a small fraction of that was recovered, as ISKCON declared bankruptcy.

This review has only touched on some of the prominent parts of the story in this astonishing documentary, which runs about an hour and 45 minutes. It should be seen in its entirety by everyone.

Sadly, in conclusion, 2025 finds that ISKCON is back, bigger than ever, with 800 centers worldwide and 50 in the United States. They set up a "Child Protection Office" in 1998, which has been criticized for being underfunded and shielding some gurus from investigation.

ISKCON also has training courses for gurus and disciples to prevent abuses of power. The training is not mandatory.

Nori Muster is the author of *Betrayal of the Spirit: My Life behind the Headlines of the Hare Krishna Movement*, University of Illinois Press, 1996), which examines her years in ISKCON.

Joe Szimhart has a YouTube channel on cults and religion, @josephszimhart9431

Barton A Stewart is author of *The Contraption*, a literary novel about a cult experience.

Footnotes link to time stamps of the movie.

[1] 3:05

[2] 11:45

[3] 28:07

[4] 23:39

[5] 1:14:39

[6] 32:55

[7] 42:10

[8] 56:08

[9] 1:24:32