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## Bhagwan's Sexism

Rajneesh's dirty work was usually left to women.

By **WIN MCCORMACK**

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The caption to a picture in the book *The Sound of Running Water*, a history of the Shree Rajneesh Ashram in Pune (Poona), India, during the 1970s, refers to “the unholy trinity of Anus, Lajmi and Sheela.” At the time this photograph of an office scene inside

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to Laxmi, and Ma Prem Arup was Rajneesh's personal secretary. "It is no coincidence," the caption goes on to say, "that virtually all the major administrative roles in the community are given to women."

No coincidence, indeed. In another chapter in the book, Rajneesh laid out his rationale: "This is the point," he is quoted as saying, "the male mind is a little further away from the no-mind than is the female mind. So the ashram will be run by women until I find people who have no-minds. When the no-minds are available, then there will be no question of male and female; then the ashram will be run by no-minds."

Actually, there were two quite different and separate power systems within the Rajneesh ashram in Pune. Testifying at the trial of Rajneesh disciple Margot Gordon on international drug-smuggling charges in Paris in 1980, French journalist Patrice Zerbib, who had lived at the ashram, explained: "Everything is permitted, but within a very well-run, IBM-type structure. There are two hierarchies: that of the custodians, and that of the therapists."

Because the Pune ashram during the 1970s specialized in psychotherapy practices drawn from the human potential movement and humanistic psychology, the prestige of the therapists within the Rajneesh community was at the time as great as, if not greater than, that of the "custodians," or administrators.

While virtually all the administrative personnel at the ashram were female, most of the Rajneesh therapy leaders were male; and, according to ex-disciples, sexual exploitation of women in the therapy groups, particularly the so called "Tantra" groups, was rampant.

"It was typical of the group leaders that they would pick out which woman they wanted, then lock the door after the rest of the group left and get it on with whomever they wanted to," says ex-Rajneesh disciple Roselyn Smith. "Group leaders got lots of sex. In fact, the guys on the outside, who worked in other parts of the ashram, would call the group leaders the 'pussy pool.' They were the guys who had all the fun. There was tremendous sexism going on there, yet they tried to make you believe that because Rajneesh was picking women to run all those departments he really believes in liberated women."

Ex disciple Sarah T. (a pseudonym) remembers several putative “therapy” groups in which she participated at the ashram that she says were nothing less than out-and-out sex orgies. Of one particular Tantra group that essentially consisted of three days of sexual intercourse between members of the group, Sarah comments: “It totally turned me off. I think it was more of a group that the men enjoyed than the women.”

“It was definitely an exploitation of women,” contends Smith. “I think Bhagwan attracts a lot of men to him because of this. People have been very impressed by the quality of the men he attracts; he has doctors, and lawyers, lots of professionals. One of his main hookers is sex. People heard that if you went to Pune, if you went to Oregon, there was lots of sex, the women were really open, and you could get all you wanted. . . . You could pick up anybody. You could walk up to anybody and say, ‘You want to get it on? You want to go home with me?’ If they say no, there’s loads of other people you could ask. I think he attracts a lot of men because of this. Because men can’t find that anywhere else.

“The women were harangued into thinking that they were really uptight and negative if they didn’t want to be sexually free. The women who didn’t take part in it were made to feel very guilty and selfish and self-centered and uptight, frigid and rigid and rejecting of men. As I get further away from it, I realize more and more . . . I used to think Bhagwan was a feminist. When I was in Pune, I used to want to write a book extracting his views on women. I thought that he supported a woman’s right to an abortion, that he supported a woman’s right to be a leader. Women ran the whole ashram there, and I was so impressed by that. But as I get further away, I realize that he’s got the macho-male trip down flat; the way he got women to be sexual servants for men is every man’s fantasy.”

According to Smith, Rajneesh—although reputedly being too sick to have sexual intercourse any longer (Rajneesh’s longtime “companion,” or mistress, an English woman named Ma Yoga Vivek, supposedly told friends at the Pune ashram in the late 1970s that she had to be back home

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every night at 11:00 pm “to masturbate Bhagwan”)—was known to be obsessed himself with human female sexuality. “Someone told me,” Smith avers, “that he picked as mediums—the disciples who dance around him and supposedly transmit energy from him, the master, to the audience—women who could have orgasms right there on stage in front of him. I don’t know if that’s true, but I do know that in Pune, the mediums, about fifty of them, all lived in his quarters, Lao Tzu House; and that at night, all throughout the house and the vicinity, all you could hear were the sounds of women orgasming. He surrounded himself in this house with women, and all you could hear through the night was yelling and screaming from these women. He definitely has some thing about female sexuality.” In the early ’70s, before his health began its apparent precipitous decline and he turned to such acoustical sexual pleasures, Rajneesh’s physical appetite for female followers was known to be prodigious.

Besides servicing male Rajneesh followers sexually both inside and outside the therapy groups in Pune, many female followers also worked part-time as prostitutes in Pune, Bombay, and other Asian cities to raise money to pay their keep at the ashram. Some female disciples later worked as prostitutes and striptease artists in various cities in Europe and in San Francisco to earn their living and raise money to contribute to the new commune in Oregon. And, in addition to Gordon, the half dozen or so Rajneesh followers arrested and tried in Europe and Canada on drug smuggling charges in the 1979–80 period were all apparently females. Most of these disciples claimed in court that they had been psychologically coerced or induced into smuggling drugs out of India by men at the Pune ashram.

When Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh transferred his operation from Pune to Oregon in 1981, the emphasis within his community shifted from personal and interpersonal exploration to the arduous job of building—and defending—the new city of Rajneeshpuram; the administrators, now called “coordinators,” came more to the fore. The majority of the coordinators who administered the various “departments” at Rancho Rajneesh were women. This group was referred to by Oregon writer Kirk Braun in his 1984 pro-Rajneesh book, *Rajneeshpuram: The Unwelcome Society*, as the “Ma-Archy,” and later by the *Oregonian* as the “Dowager Duchesses.” Atop this matriarchal pyramid sat Ma Anand Sheela, who had succeeded Ma Yoga Laxmi as Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh’s top executive assistant. Braun pictured Sheela in one passage as “Sheela, the matriarch . . . amongst her children.” Braun also quoted Ma Prem Karuna, who was the mayor of Antelope until she was demoted within the Rajneesh hierarchy, as explaining the predominance of women administrators this way: “Women tend to be more in tune and feel less that they always have to have a rational reason for their decisions. . . . In general, my experience with the women who are

administrators [is that they] are more willing to move quickly, less hesitant, less always figuring out things in a way that is dysfunctional.”

During the Rajneeshees’ tenure in Oregon, Ma Anand Sheela— described by *New Yorker* writer Frances Fitzgerald as “observably the queen of Rajneeshpuram”—achieved unique national as well as local notoriety for her strident and belligerent manner in dealing with outsiders. While admitting that there were exceptions to the rule—such as Arup and Ma Prem Isabel, the public relations director at Rajneeshpuram, whom they describe as more gentle and nurturing—Smith and Sarah T. both say that Sheela’s public persona was not radically different from that of the typical Rajneesh female administrator.

“Most of the women running departments were big, husky, fat women, like Sushila [Ma Yoga Sushila, who for a long time was the top Rajneesh fund-raiser, and who was also Sarah T.’s roommate in Pune], says Smith. “Very aggressive and very mean and very manipulative. . . . They seemed just like commandants in Nazism to me. It’s the closest experience to what I’ve read about Nazism that I’ve ever had. The kind of women that ran that ranch, that’s how I’ve pictured the commandants of the Nazi concentration camps.”

Agrees Sarah T.: “It was usually very bitchy women who ran things, like Vidya [Ma Yoga Vidya, who was in charge of personnel at the Pune ashram and at the ranch in Oregon and was president of the Rajneesh Neo-Sannyas International Commune, legally the provider of the workforce that built Rajneeshpuram].”

Smith and Sarah both cite the infamous Deeksha, who oversaw the kitchen operation at the Pune ashram, as a stellar example of the kind of woman administrator favored by the Bhagwan. Says Smith: “The things I heard about that woman were just horrible. Terrible intimidation. Her technique was to demean a person and make them feel like they’re just low and ugly and inadequate and stupid and foolish. She’d come into the kitchen and she’d put her hands on her hips—she’s a big, fat, ugly Italian woman—and she’d yell at a person and tell them how stupid they were, and how could they be so dumb and how did she ever get stuck with them. Just constantly demeaning people. Her people were just like slaves. People were so afraid of Deeksha, you’d walk into the kitchen and there’d be utter silence.”

In *The Sound of Running Water*, Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh is quoted as saying regarding Deeksha: “Deeksha is the dragonmaster! When I don’t succeed with somebody, I send them to Deeksha! Simply surrender to Deeksha. . . . This is one of the things that has to be learned in the community: everybody should start learning to surrender to the community, otherwise the community cannot grow a soul, it will remain a crowd. . . . When you surrender to Deeksha, it is just through Deeksha that you are surrendering to the community. . . . Sooner or later I would like to create a collective community soul.”

According to Sarah T. and numerous other former sannyasins, Rajneesh strongly discouraged his female disciples from having children and strongly encouraged women followers—especially his women administrators—to have themselves sterilized. Sarah recalls that in 1980, the year before Rajneesh left India, nearly all the top women in the ashram hierarchy underwent sterilization at the ashram medical center. The method of sterilization used there, she says, was cauterization of the fallopian tubes.

Rivalries among the Dowager Duchesses comprising Rajneesh’s Ma-Archy were reportedly intense, and apparently to some extent deliberately fomented by Rajneesh himself. Says Sarah T.: “It was kind of like a medieval court, like the Medicis or something. Lots of intrigue, backstabbing, favorites, and ladies-in-waiting. You could really do an incredible drama comparing the ashram and the commune with the Medicis’ court.” Rajneesh once explained in Pune: “The open secret is that you can be free only if you have put too many women around you. Then they are so concerned with each other, they leave you absolutely alone. . . . Their jealousies, their envies are enough to keep them occupied.”

Rajneesh also made it quite clear in Pune that he, not his women assistants, was the ultimate power within his community. He said, regarding his then top executive assistant: “And always remember that Laxmi never does anything on her own. She is a perfect vehicle. That’s why she has been chosen for the work.” In fact, when Ma Yoga Laxmi failed in repeated attempts to find land suitable for Rajneesh’s projected new commune, she was summarily dismissed and replaced by Ma Anand Sheela, who pushed to locate the new commune in America.

Sheela indisputably turned out to be the most tyrannical, amoral, and ruthless of Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh’s executive assistants so far, both in her conduct toward those outside the commune whom she perceived to be enemies of the Bhagwan and in her treatment of those inside the commune whom she perceived to be threatening to her own power and standing. She saw to it that other strong women administrators who might challenge her authority, in particular Deeksha and Sushila, were exiled from the

Rajneesh movement; the woman she herself had deposed, Laxmi, was for a long time not even allowed to live at Rancho Rajneesh, despite her unwavering devotion to the Bhagwan.

With the assistance of Ma Anand Puja, a Filipino nurse who ran the Rajneesh Medical Corporation (despite a disproportionately large number of doctors at Rajneeshpuram, all or almost all of them men), Sheela arranged the poisoning of Jefferson County District Attorney Mike Sullivan, Wasco County Court commissioners William Hulse and Raymond Matthews, and over seven hundred restaurant patrons in The Dalles. She and Puja allegedly drugged dissidents within the commune, quarantined enemies on the basis of spurious AIDS-test results, made repeated attempts to poison and kill Rajneesh's personal physician, Swami Devaraj, and attempted to poison Ma Yoga Vivek. Puja, whether on her own initiative or at Sheela's instigation, also was apparently trying to culture a live AIDS virus in a secret biological-warfare laboratory at Rajneeshpuram when the commune, happily, self-destructed.

Despite Sheela's precautions, a rival to her throne had finally emerged when her management of the commune and its relations with the outside world began to go awry: Ma Prem Hasya, one of the leading members of a group of well-to-do sannyasins from Hollywood known as the "Beverly Hills Clique," who in the spring of 1984 married Devaraj, not long before Devaraj was allegedly first poisoned (Hasya herself was later reportedly quarantined for over a week inside the Rajneeshpuram medical clinic). On Saturday, September 14, 1985, Sheela, accompanied by Puja and Vidya, abandoned Rajneeshpuram for Europe; she was quickly followed into exile by Ma Prem Savita, the Rajneeshees' chief accountant; Ma Anand Su, the president of the Rajneesh Investment Corporation; and Ma Shanti Bhadra, the treasurer of the Rajneesh Foundation International. Hasya succeeded Sheela as Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh's top executive assistant, but her reign at Rajneeshpuram was short-lived; before the end of the year, Rajneesh, after attempting to flee the country to avoid indictment for immigration fraud, pleaded guilty to two charges of violating immigration law and was put on probation and allowed to leave the United States legally. He eventually went back to Pune and reopened his ashram there.

In summer 1986, Sheela, Puja, and Shanti Bhadra pleaded guilty in federal and state courts to a number of charges, including attempted murder, and were sentenced to jail. The other former Rajneesh official sentenced to jail was ex-Rajneeshpuram mayor Swami Krishna Deva. Other Rajneeshees who pleaded guilty to various charges were given probation. By the end of 1986, some

eighteen former and present Rajneeshees had been convicted of crimes in Oregon; another ten charged with crimes remained fugitives. The overwhelming majority of those indicted and those sentenced were women.

In 1990, Dhyan Yogini, aka Alma Peralta, confessed to her own involvement in the conspiracy to murder U.S. Attorney Charles Turner. She assisted prosecutors by testifying against the other defendants she named in exchange for a deal; she received only two years in prison. Her confession sparked the indictment of seven other conspirators. Of the eight members of the plot, seven were women.

Throughout the nineties each of the coconspirators was indicted, extradited to Oregon, and tried for her participation in the assassination plot. Most of the members of the plot served time in prison for attempting to kill the U.S. attorney and for participating in the Rajneesh wiretapping scheme.

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Win McCormack is the editor in chief of *The New Republic* and the author of *The Rajneesh Chronicles: The True Story of the Cult that Unleashed the First Act of Bioterrorism on U.S. Soil.*