

New Vrindaban: A Case Study of Communal Child-Rearing

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Case Study Objective

We are members of the Ohio University Global Leadership Center. From September to November of 2006, we studied social aspects of New Vrindaban, a Hare Krishna community in West Virginia.

As part of our research, we traveled to New Vrindaban to interview parents and grown children in order to document the community's opinions about communal child-rearing, the process of separating children from their families and redistributing parental duties amongst numerous, often unrelated adults. This case study will examine the positive and negative features of New Vrindaban's communal child-rearing past based upon what we learned from New Vrindaban members (devotees) and secondary sources on the subject. The names herein have been changed to conceal the identity of the interviewees.

Background Information

History of Community

New Vrindaban is a religious community located amongst the foothills near Moundsville, West Virginia. It was formed in 1968, two years after the organization's founder, Srila Prabhupada, brought the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) to the United States from India. ISKCON is a sect of Hinduism that describes its goal as "(promoting) the well being of society by teaching the science of Krishna consciousness according to *Bhagavad-gita* and other ancient scriptures" (About ISKCON).

New Vrindaban was intended to be a self-sustaining community based on spirituality. Originally, members were delegated duties by their leaders, who had a great deal of power and required them to cut relations with Western society in order to live fully communal lives. The majority of children were sent to a boarding school, known as a *gurukula*, in New Vrindaban. Parents were allowed little contact with them in an effort to eliminate influences from mainstream culture. Close bonds between parents and their children were actively discouraged and considered a distraction that kept children from completely committing themselves to Krishna consciousness (Rochford, Jr. and Bailey).

In 1987, Kirtanananda, the then leader of the community, was indicted on several federal charges, including conspiracy to commit murder. Allegations of child abuse emerged, and it was discovered that the youth in ISKCON schools throughout the United States, including New Vrindaban, were being grossly mistreated. This abuse in the schools was facilitated by the segregation of children from their families and the difficulty they faced trying to communicate their situation to adult relatives. Letters home to parents had to be approved by the schools and students were often forced to rewrite them. As a result, Hare Krishna children suffered from gruesome physical, psychological, and emotional abuse without recourse (Rochford, Jr. and Bailey).

In 1990, residents once again became responsible for supporting their families independently, putting an end to mandatory communal child raising. However, controversies surrounding the scandals and Kirtanananda were enough to discredit the community and religion and ultimately led to the decline of New Vrindaban. Many people began to leave the community, which was a significant problem for the sustainability of New Vrindaban. The community is still in the process of moving forward and rebuilding (Rochford, Jr. and Bailey).

Today, the leadership in New Vrindaban is more relaxed and parents are able to form natural and close relationships with their children. Nevertheless, all adult devotees in New Vrindaban continue to play a vital role in raising each child. The New Vrindaban devotees who we interviewed agree that one of the most important responsibilities they have is to foster the spiritual development of the children. The adult devotees are expected to set examples for the children on how to be Krishna-conscious. Additionally, parents are encouraged to create a spiritual atmosphere in the home that is conducive to living a devout life.

Advantages of Raising Children in a Communal Setting

Increased Interpersonal Development

Research shows that the majority of children raised in communities in which multiple adults are viewed as equal parental units have a higher-than-average degree of maturity, self-confidence, and self-reliance. Intellectual development was described as being varied, although early psychological maturation, confidence in interpersonal relationships, cooperation, and ability to express emotion were all noted as strengths amongst communally-raised children (Johnston).

One Hare Krishna devotee, Thambu, whose children were raised in New Vrindaban, agrees, stating, "Our own children can get along well with others. They developed a deep sense of personal moral values; (They are) honest, tolerant, considerate of others (and) non violent." Another woman, Pugazhngai, said she believes children who were educated in New Vrindaban are more intelligent and well-rounded than children educated in public schools outside the community. She raised her children in the community and said they developed an extensive vocabulary at young ages thanks to listening to the scriptures.

Although some mothers worried their children might become socially inept, a young female, Samboornavalli, thought the children educated within New Vrindaban had sincere personalities and were fully able to communicate with outsiders.

Increased Religious Involvement

A second advantage of communal child-rearing is the opportunity it allows for biological parents to pursue personal interests. One Indian couple, Janak and Sangeetha, recently returned to India so that she could give birth in the company of family and friends. Sangeetha's mother and other relatives formed a network to help care for the child and Sangeetha as she recovered from the birth. In the interview it was evident that the father believes this type of communal childcare would benefit everyone in the community. The current segregation of nuclear families in Western society leaves

little time for Sangeetha to focus on spirituality; she has a hard time getting in her mantra chanting while caring for their child.

Rajalakshmi, a devotee mother, credits the support she received from other community members, saying she had more time to devote to her spiritual life. Prayer is an important and time-consuming aspect of Hare Krishnas' lives. Before having children, Rajalakshmi said she could easily chant early in the morning and attend services. Afterwards, it became more difficult and would have been impossible without the sharing of childcare responsibilities.

Support Network

Rajalakshmi raised her children communally in the 1980s. She lived in New Vrindaban when it was a strict commune, as well as after its communal policies relaxed. The raising of the community children was done as a group, and everyone was involved with the cooking, teaching, and caretaking. She believes that the community as a whole benefited from raising children together; it not only helped the mothers when they needed a break, but provided them with a sense of sisterhood.

Female devotees in particular played an important role in helping to raise children. "If one of us was sick, or our child was sick, there was always a mother there to help us out, share medicine they may have, lend us a sweater or whatever," Rajalakshmi said. "We were like sisters, for the most part, so we shared kind of naturally."

She strongly believes that the advantages of raising children communally outweigh the disadvantages. Rajalakshmi said that she had the freedom to decide who had an impact on her children's lives, and she only let the people she respected help raise her children. As a mother, she felt it was her duty to be the best example of a Hare Krishna devotee that she could be for her children, but she also allowed room for them to make mistakes. Today, both of her children, who are now 18 and 24, follow the Hare Krishna traditions, although they do not live in an ISKCON community.

A Child's Perspective

A young female devotee named Balika, who was raised communally in New Vrindaban, felt the experience was positive. She said that having numerous adults as parental figures provided her with a variety of perspectives on personal decisions. Balika described situations when she felt that her biological mother or father was being unfair. After talking with another "parent," she realized that their views were rational and well-founded. In general, she feels as though the communal system gave her a much deeper respect for parents as opposed to that held by traditionally raised children.

Future Outlooks

Samboornavalli recently joined the community and has very strong opinions on the topic. She believes that the community environment should be more independent from mainstream society and that the boarding school should be reopened so children could be raised communally, strictly within New Vrindaban. Samboornavalli feels that this would foster devotion to Krishna, as well as the children's creativity and intelligence. Isolating the children from the outside world would be beneficial because it prevents them from being influenced by the media, which encourages violence and "casual

relationships” between men and women, she said. She also expresses confusion regarding why the concept of communal child-raising is unappealing to some and said that she and her close friends plan to raise their children collectively, regarding every child as their own.

Disadvantages of Communal Child-Rearing

Increased Likelihood of Stress

Research has suggested that some elements of communal child-rearing cause significantly more stress than conventional familial child-raising. Namely, women with children sleeping and residing in communal facilities worry much more about their welfare than those whose children sleep at home. The amount of stress that this arrangement causes is gauged as more substantial than the actual task of child care. These reports suggest that there may be a higher level of life satisfaction and mental well-being in parents with children sleeping at home than in parents whose children use communal child-sleeping facilities (Isralowitz).

Devikala, a New Vrindaban community member, voiced concerns about communal child-rearing. She mentioned that her trust and comfort levels had been breached by other community members and expressed doubt in whether raising her children communally had been the right decision.

Increased Likelihood of Abuse

Rajalakshmi experienced a negative aspect of communal child-raising firsthand when child abuse issues arose within New Vrindaban. Although she appreciates the child-raising camaraderie, she feels that the children may have been better off being educated outside the community.

Decreased Religious Retention

Also, studies of Shaker settlements have suggested that children who are raised communally in religious settings are less likely to remain affiliated with that religion during adulthood than those children who were raised by a single set of parents (Cosgel). This is clearly a disadvantage to ISKCON. Thambu stated that his children are no longer interested in any form of organized religion. In addition, he said that although "communal living created a bond between devotees and allowed everyone to focus on their spiritual practices as well as on the growth of the community without interruption," he and his wife have no desire to return to communal living.

Conclusion

According to our research, we have concluded that the New Vrindaban community is divided on its views of past communal child-rearing. While parents appreciate assistance from other community members, many find it difficult to share the responsibilities and emotional ties for their children with others and generally prefer to assume the leadership role in their children’s lives. Younger members, however, are open to a second generation of communal living.

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