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978-0-521-38554-1 - Charisma and Control in Rajneeshpuram: The Role of Shared Values in the Creation of a Community

Lewis F. Carter

Excerpt

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1. The Oregon colony at peak development

Initial awareness of Rajneeshpuram came by accident to me. In August, 1983, I was on a road trip through Oregon and California with my family. We stopped for breakfast in Grass Valley, a small community servicing farms and ranches on the escarpment (plateau) some sixty miles beyond the south rim of the Columbia River Gorge. As is usually the case in small town cafes, talk quieted with the arrival of strangers. However, after we took a table and attended to our own concerns, conversations returned to the price of hay and to debate of the ethics and economics of harvesting elk antlers for a growing Pacific Rim aphrodisiac trade. Most of those locals who were present seemed against the harvest of fresh antlers, but the local economy was then in severe depression and others noted that there was no lasting harm to the herds.

We turned our attention to breakfast, and then to coffee and the local newspaper, which featured an article on the nearby Antelope school district (thirty seven miles away). From the article and bits of overheard conversation, we gathered that an Eastern Indian sect had defeated a school levy and that local children were to be bused fifty miles to the town of Madras as a result. A few tentative questions revealed that the group at the cafe knew little about the sect except that they lived in a commune, followed an Indian guru who drove a Rolls-Royce and “they all dressed in red.” There was disagreement about whether the group was Hindu or Buddhist. (In retrospect, it is curious that so intense a conflict made such slight impression on those who were so near but not actively involved.)

We continued on our way, briefly considering a side trip when passing a sign on U.S. 97, near the ghost town of Shaniko, which indicated that Antelope was eight miles to the east, but we chose not to interrupt our itinerary. Having been told that the sect was reclusive and did not welcome visitors, we dismissed it from mind. At the time I did not imagine the significance of the “Antelope School Issue” which Oregon’s attorney general Dave Frohnmayer would later identify as *the* incident persuading

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him that his office must intervene in the conflict between Rajneesh followers and prior residents of the area.

The “decision” to study Rajneeshpuram

Aside from quick reading of periodic human interest news notes in Washington and Idaho newspapers, I gave no further thought to the Rajneesh movement until the 1984 spring semester when I was teaching a graduate course in social research methods. As the class moved into research and survey design (on the way to sampling and measurement), several members expressed dissatisfaction with what they saw as the absence of opportunities for field research experience in the course, and more generally in the curriculum. The gap, it was argued, limited the study of many facets of social organization and social movements and allowed methodological preference rather than issues of interest to determine one's research focus. After cautioning the students that systematic field studies involved greater time commitments (both in the library and field) than a single course would allow, I offered to facilitate a limited field experience if the class could agree on a setting sufficiently accessible to permit a visit during the spring break.

After a caucus, the class suggested a trip to Hayden Lake, Idaho to investigate the neo-Nazi church located there, an idea which I vetoed on the grounds that the neo-Nazis were then alleged to have shot (or bludgeoned with sledge hammers) investigators who grew too curious about them. Reconsideration by the group produced the proposal to visit Rajneeshpuram. Since the Eastern Oregon setting appeared to satisfy the class desire to examine a community with a strong ideological conflict but appeared to involve no physical risks to visitors, I agreed to the project, with the condition that no one would participate who had recently experienced any unusual stress or personal loss (divorce, separation, major life change). Any students who preferred to substitute a field research experience in the Pullman area were encouraged to do so.

Gathering background information

The five graduate students who chose to participate prepared by reading three “official” sources: Joshi's (1982) biography of Bhagwan (an idealized history of the movement); *The Psychology of the Esoteric* (a collection of Bhagwan's views linking the psychologies of Freud, Jung and contemporary humanists with ‘antecedent’ ideas from Tao, Zen, Sufi and Buddhist traditions); and *The Mustard Seed* (a reinterpretation of Chris-

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tian traditions from Bhagwan's point of view). Many of the ideas from these books were already familiar to those who had exposure to the earlier "westernizations" of Hindu and Buddhist ideas as popularized by Allen Watts or Richard Alpert.¹ These conventional themes included:

1. A view of the universe from the Advaita tradition of Hinduism, in which there is no separation between spiritual and material, between man and God. All aspects of existence (divine, human, animate, inanimate) are seen as coexistent, as simply manifestations of a universal "one." Notions of good and evil, right and wrong, are taken as artificial and illusory creations of the mind.
2. The belief that social institutions (families, religions, governments) cripple individuals' search for self-realization and enlightenment by "programming" them to respond in terms of norms, values, rules, and laws.
3. Commitment to the notion that individual enlightenment can be achieved only by giving up (transcending) all prior socialization, all norms or rules about how to behave and how to relate to others. Surrender of ego is viewed as essential to this process, as is giving up attachments to family and other institutions.

As in charismatic groups generally, many individuals identifying with the movement viewed the leader – Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh – as a spiritual master whose words and person were to be revered and whose instructions were to be obeyed without question. The movement was distinguished from some other east–west hybrids in its "Tantric" orientation (a sexually based yoga tradition). Specifically, sexual energy was seen as the fundamental source of all human energy, and repression of this energy as the source of most individual problems. A number of practices were directed toward moving energy concentrations from lower to higher "energy centers" ("chakras"). It was argued that enlightenment depends on transcending *both* repression *and* indulgence. As the socialization of many people gives them considerable experience with repression, Rajneesh practices focused more on indulgence (though this is described as a device to permit transcending of desires). Westerners are viewed as especially constrained by their socialization histories and the various "therapies" were added to prepare them to experience meditation.²

We also examined promotional materials extolling the various program, therapy, and meditation offerings at Rajneeshpuram with counterpoints provided by Belfrage's (1981) ambivalent report of her experience in

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Poona and Mehta's (1979) contemptuous description of that ashram. Feminist commitments were indicated by the predominantly female hierarchy (under Bhagwan, of course). In addition, the commune was described as devoted to strong ecological principles. However, further analysis suggested that these two "themes" were added later as "political planks" in an ideological platform, the ecological notions when the group moved to the Pacific Northwest and the feminist orientation when courting that movement earlier in England.

The recent book, *Rajneeshism: An Introduction to Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh and His Religion*, posed something of a puzzle for us because the developed hierarchy and tendency toward ritual described therein conflicts so blatantly with Bhagwan's expression of generalized distrust of all organizations. At the time, we did not appreciate the special tactical significance of the "church" for the Oregon commune. Nor did we fully understand the general application of the "meta-rule" in Bhagwan's ideology, which is: "Contradictions do not matter."³

While regional newspaper accounts gave some general information about the commune's conflict with neighbors, our understanding was limited by the fact that most details were still secret (or hotly disputed) and much of the publicly available information was restricted to local newspapers with limited circulations.⁴

Negotiating the terms for a visit

In our naiveté, we initially hoped to simply enter the community as we would any other small town, take up public lodging, and mingle with residents, supplementing informal observation with a structured field protocol (or interview schedule). We quickly learned from a previous visitor that Rajneeshpuram had developed routinized ways for insulating its residents from casual visitors:

Park at the visitor center, watch video-tapes of Bhagwan, board the tour bus and then leave. Make a purchase at the shops in the mall if you like, but don't get off the county road.⁵

Subsequent telephone calls suggested additional resistance to entry. When we called the "public relations" office and identified ourselves as a group of sociologists from Washington State University who desired to visit Rajneeshpuram in late March, the ranch representative suggested that we delay our visit until a festival scheduled for the coming summer. She explained that "nothing was happening at the commune until then."

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After indicating that we preferred to learn about the normal daily routines of residents, we were told that facilities were not yet completed and “the Eastern Oregon roads are impassible in the spring.” Assurance that we would gear appropriately to avoid getting stuck brought an offer for us to interview residents for a fee of \$30 per hour. Since the field trip was to be funded personally (except for automobiles provided by the university), the interview offer was declined, though we pressed our desire to visit the community. Aside from the lack of research funds, we had no desire to restrict our contact to professional informants provided by the commune. At this point we were invited to stay in the hotel Rajneesh at a cost of \$100 per day per person (two persons per room). Further inquiry resulted in our accepting alternative accommodation in the “Alan Watts Mountain Cabins” at \$50 per day per person (double occupancy), which included “three vegetarian meals per day.” After several additional telephone calls, we were delighted to learn that meals had to be taken in the community cafeteria, so allowing informal contact with sannyasin.

Orientations of research team members

We elected to treat the initial visit as a form of “social reconnaissance” and, while we speculated about the commune and its relationship to surrounding institutions, we decided not to follow formal research protocols. Instead, basic and very general questions were to be addressed to those we encountered. For surrounding residents, the opening question was usually some variation of the form, “I understand that there is a group near here called the Rajneesh. Can you tell me anything about them?” For sannyasin, routine questions included personal information:

1. How did you decide to join the Rajneesh movement?
2. How can one become a member?
3. What did you do before you joined?
4. What do you do in a typical day?
5. How are your work assignments made?
6. What is it like living here?

Additional questions routinely asked about the group were:

1. How many people live in the commune?
2. How are decisions made and conflicts resolved?
3. What are the meditations like?

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4. What therapies are available?
5. What is the Rajneesh religion like?
6. What is planned for the future of Rajneeshpuram?
7. What can you tell me about your neighbors?

In addition, we decided to map physical facilities, catalogue equipment, observe personal relationships, collect promotional materials, and follow any leads that promised insight into the group's beliefs and practices. Questions of participation in meditations, therapies, or other activities would be left to individual choice and opportunistic assessment of context.

Our reading had disclosed antithetical interpretations of the Rajneesh movement, ranging from Joshi's adulation to Mehta's contempt, so we were particularly conscious of the subjectivity of responses aroused by contact with it. Though the observer's personal frame-of-reference poses a dilemma for all direct observation, something about the Rajneesh group seemed to trigger especially strong responses of approach or avoidance. We speculated that the key lay in the sannyasin rejection of conventions of interaction, which seemed to throw most observers either into the Rajneesh group or into antagonism with it. We briefly considered retreating to some form of survey to standardize observations and reduce the influence of our personal orientations on interpretation. However, as we observed that our team varied considerably in background, we opted instead to act as checks on each other through discussion and cross-checking of observations.

While a common frame-of-reference would standardize our views, agreeing upon such a standard might limit the unique insights inherent in our varied socialization histories. In many ways, the team's composition was as varied as the sannyasin we wanted to study. Our numbers included individuals reared in England, Indonesia, the United States (Texas and Washington), and Vietnam. Several of us had lived or traveled extensively in other parts of the world (Australia, Europe, Latin America, and the Philippines). There were two women and four men, ranging in age from 30 to 45. The team was varied in terms of religious backgrounds and several of us came from "mixed traditions." Some of us had limited experience with the human potential movement and others had none. Some on our team practiced meditation, though none had any prior contact with the Rajneesh movement. Except for the fact that we neither expected nor sought enlightenment at Rajneeshpuram (sociology being

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perhaps our only common faith), our team had many of the characteristics of sannyasin recruits and much of the variation found among them.

A visitor's view of Rajneeshpuram (spring 1984)

Mills and Kaplan's (1983b) characterization of their visit to Rajneeshpuram as ". . . the closest thing to an Eastern Bloc experience available in the United States . . ." cannot be appreciated properly without first understanding the "normal" social background of communities which they used for *implicit* contrast. Most of us have experienced this normal social background so routinely as to give it no attention. However, visitors who enter Rajneeshpuram on an "Air Rajneesh" plane or "Buddhafield Transport" bus excursion may not notice the extent to which community entry is atypical, in part because several invisible control barriers have already been passed when one boards the bus or is cleared for landing and, in part, because the act of joining a tour constitutes an implicit break with routine experience and a surrender of individual control. In contrast, driving to the commune reinforces the everyday experience of entering ordinary American small towns as a stranger and it is the sudden loss of the implicit relationships and rules governing that entry which most disturbed initial visitors to Rajneeshpuram.

Our travel across Eastern Washington and into the northern part of Eastern Oregon was so routine as to be unremarkable, except for the contrast it provided for later experience. Briefly, we passed through scores of small communities, assuming the ordinary roles of travelers. In only one of these towns did we note a police vehicle at the town boundary and, drawing on cultural experience, we assumed the community to be a "speed trap." No one stopped our vehicles at any point, nor did anyone inquire about our reason for walking about as we attended to gasoline, meals, and motel accommodation in various towns. No personal identification was required, save when one of us offered a credit card or check instead of cash for some service. An early evening stroll around Biggs, Oregon before retiring occasioned neither comment nor apparent notice.

Desiring to arrive early at Rajneeshpuram, we left Biggs before dawn. Quang Tran accompanied me in one car, to be followed shortly by the other with Don Beck, Janet Lee, Andara Masman, and Susan Weeks; we agreed to meet in Antelope before proceeding to the ranch. Highway 97 climbs a steep grade of several thousand feet to the south of the Columbia River Gorge on to a high plateau separating the parallel rugged canyons

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cut by the John Day and Deschutes rivers. (The ranch bordered the John Day, but that canyon is too steep in places for easy road construction and entry requires a circuitous routing.)

Shortly after daybreak, Quang and I, somewhat ahead of the others, stopped for breakfast in Grass Valley. Like the previous year when I stopped there with my family, the cafe was already busy at that early hour. However, the difference in season was reflected in the local talk which now centered on waiting for the fields to dry enough for spring work. After pouring coffee and taking breakfast orders, the waitress inquired, "Are you boys on vacation?" (This was the first acknowledgment of our "stranger" status on the trip.) We indicated that to be the case, adding that we had heard about Rajneeshpuram and wondered if she knew anything about it. While we did not verbally emphasize the name, other conversations stopped immediately and, after a pause, the waitress said:

I don't know anything about those people and I don't talk about folks that I don't know, but I've seen them on their buses – the men hug the men and the women hug the women.

She turned and left for the kitchen. Several of the other customers gauged our reactions and slowly returned to local talk. After we paid our checks, the waitress added, "You boys be careful if you go out there. A lot of them don't come back." We assured her that we intended to be careful, and to come back.

As we passed Kent, 13 miles toward our destination, we speculated about local definitions of sannyasin and wondered what reactions might be to Janet, the only one of our group dressed entirely in "sunrise colors." Fifteen minutes later we left the highway and entered Shaniko, a small "ghost town" which was being restored as a tourist attraction (nearby fort and mill, hotel, shops, cafe), though only the combination filling station, grocery store, snack bar was then operative. A block into town, two signs indicated that Antelope and Rajneeshpuram lay down a narrow paved road (Oregon 218) branching from Shaniko's main street.⁶ This road winds past scattered ranches, climbs a further grade, and descends into a small valley where Antelope is located.

Entering the Buddhafield

As the road bends into Antelope, the first impression is that of any other small western ranching community which has contracted to one hundred or so residents: closed store fronts along the main street; two flanking

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streets with a mixture of well-maintained and abandoned houses; some newer mobile homes; two churches; and a school. The first counter note was struck by the absence of the usual morning bustle of cars and pickups.⁷ Perhaps the most unusual feature of the community was the forest of signs: “For Sale,” “Private Property,” “No Trespassing.” Many yards and some vacant areas were ringed with these warnings. The only operating public facility was the Zorba-the-Buddha restaurant, a somewhat garish red and white building at the far end of town. There was a gas pump left by the prior owner who had operated the usual combination small town service center, but gasoline was not for sale.

Unlike other towns through which we passed, there were no cars or trucks at the cafe, though upon entering, we found a half-dozen sannyasin adults, identifiable by their “malas”⁸ and their purple and red clothing. Also, there were a dozen similarly dressed children, who were shortly collected by a van.⁹ The children continued quietly talking among themselves; the adults stopped when our research team entered. After some excellent carrot cake and coffee, we purchased a copy of *The Rajneesh Times* and inquired after directions to the ranch. Before these were given, we were asked whether anyone at the ranch knew that we were coming. After we indicated that we were expected, the two sannyasin operating the cafe discussed the fact that “no one had told them about any visitors” before directing us to take the first “major” side road approximately four miles out of town and then to follow the signs. (At the time we were unaware that Antelope served as an early warning post for Rajneeshpuram and rather imagined that these were sannyasin who simply preferred not to live communally.)

Entering the Big Muddy Ranch

The turn on the “county road” was unmarked that morning (signs often disappeared during the conflict). The car with the other team members was due to follow us immediately after the group finished coffee, but they missed the turn and took an unintended side trip to the John Day river, an eventuality which separated our arrival times by more than a half hour.¹⁰ The gravel road was not well maintained by the county during the sannyasin’s stay and the eighteen-mile trip took over an hour. As we neared a second branch in the road (fortunately, its marker intact), numerous signs were seen in adjacent fields: “Repent Sinners,” “Jesus Saves Those Who Love The Lord,” and, somewhat ominously at the final turn toward Rancho Rajneesh:

Abandon Hope Ye Who Enter Here

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Details of entry to the ranch will convey the meticulous attention given to security, as well as the subtlety of some of the control mechanisms. A few hundred feet beyond the crest of the pass leading down into the Currant Creek canyon was the first official guard post, a windowed, octagonal structure located on ranch property a few feet off the county road and linked to the Peace Force center by telephone and radio connections. The post was staffed by a young man who remained inside, telephone in hand, and an armed but cheerful young woman, carrying a radio, who approached us on the road and signaled for us to stop. She wore a mala, a pink jump suit, and a Rajneeshpuram Peace Force badge. The legal niceties of the stop were at least partially covered by a sign, blocking the left lane:

Stop to Check on Road Conditions

Again we were asked if anyone at the ranch expected us and told that unfortunately the roads were so muddy that we might be unable to continue safely. I indicated that we had brought chains for such a contingency. After inquiring as to whether there wasn't another vehicle, the officer acquiesced, telling us to check in at the visitor center. The road was rough, but dry.¹¹

At each of the several guard posts along the county road, one officer would stay inside, telephone in hand, as the other approached with a radio. Since our intentions had been formally communicated and no additional "Check Road Conditions" signs were encountered, we waved to the officers as we passed each check point, a gesture which they returned. Signs of greeting, "Welcome to Rancho Rajneesh," were interspersed with those of warning, "Essentially a One Lane Road," and:

Steep Grades, Sharp Curves, Rough Road, Good Luck!

The last several miles of road were bounded by a sturdy New Zealand type electric fence; all side roads were prominently posted and barred by locked gates.

After a winding descent to the canyon floor, we passed the recently constructed 350-million-gallon "Lake Krishnamurti" with its docks, a floating barge (*HMS Bhagwan*), and the ubiquitous "no trespassing" signs.¹² The extent of water developments on the ranch remains in dispute even after the fact, some facilities having been quietly dismantled later, but in 1984 these included an additional lake (Patanjali), an estimated 60 wells, and three pumping stations on the John Day to supply fourteen irrigation systems as well as water for the peak demands of festivals. In