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Krishna scandals boiling again;NEWLN:UPI NewsFeature

NEW VRINDABAN, W.Va. -- The fading red-and-white banner above the entrance of the Temple of Understanding proclaims, in Sanskrit, glory to the guru of this Hare Krishna community.

Before the canvas banner weathers another year, law authorities may pin a raft of criminal charges on the guru, Kirtanananda Swami Bhaktipada, and members of his mountain farm settlement. A wide-ranging investigation is looking at allegations concerning drugs, money, child abuse and even murder.

Specifically, investigators are trying to find out if Bhaktipada, 49, formerly Keith Ham, the son of a Baptist preacher, and others conspired in the suspected murder-for-hire in Los Angeles last spring of a dissident devotee.

They also want to determine if the community's estimated $5 million-a-year, coast-to-coast panhandling operation, involving unauthorized use of sports team logos and the comic character 'Snoopy' on caps and bumper stickers, violates trademark and copyright laws.

In February, the headmaster of New Vrindaban's now-closed school and one of his aides were charged with molesting a boy over a three-year period. Other possible such cases are now being examined.

Officials say the overall investigation, already 10 months old, has intensified and new witnesses have emerged since the governing body of the India-based sect excommunicated Bhaktipada on March 16 for insubordination and and the suspected corruption.

'Some of these witnesses are corroborating information we already had, others are providing us new stuff,' said a source close to the investigation, who declined to elaborate other than to say the witnesses include Krishnas.

Bhaktipada, who preaches 'plain living and high thinking,' denies any wrongdoing. In an interview with UPI after the

excommunication and before he left on a trip to India, he said he is the victim of religious persecution and Krishna politics.

He maintains that the action by the Governing Body Commission of the International Society of Krishna Consciousness (known as ISKCON), which accused him of violating religious policy and trying to form his own movement, was unlawful.

He vows to maintain control of his 4,000-acre community, which features 'The Palace of Gold,' billed as a top tourist attraction in West Virginia. He maintains the community has 700 residents 'and within a year, I guarantee you we'll have close to 1,000. We're getting fired up.'

Sgt. Tom Westfall of the Marshall County Sheriff's Office believes there are only 450 residents 'and the number appears to be dropping. Some devotees are getting concerned about being cut off from the rest of ISKCON.'

New Vrindaban, 75 miles southwest of Pittsburgh, near rural Moundsville, W.Va., is among the biggest of 14 independently incorporated Krishna communities in North America. Worldwide, the sect, rocked by power struggles and charges of immorality among leaders, has an estimated 5,000 fulltime devotees, down 50 percent from a decade ago.

Bhaktipada's saffron-robbed, chanting and pig-tailed disciples describe him as wise, inspiring and pure. But some ex-followers, investigators and Krishna researchers call him egotistical, harsh and dictatorial. They say he seems driven to make New Vrindaban, named for the birthplace in India of Lord Krishna, a monument to himself.

The investigation is being conducted by the Justice Department, West Virginia State Police, Los Angeles Police and the Marshall County Sheriff's Office. The Internal Revenue Service is being kept apprised.

One central figure is dead.

His name was Steven Bryant, a dissident follower who spent the last few years of his life criss-crossing America alleging criminal actions at New Vrindaban including drug dealing, child molestation and beatings.

Last May, while seated at the wheel of his van a block and a half from a Krishna temple in Los Angeles, Bryant was shot twice in the head at close range and died instantly. He was 33.

Within a few days, another devotee, Thomas Drescher, 38, of Ravenna, Ohio, who Sgt. Westfall says was known as 'an enforcer' at New Vrindaban, was arrested and charged with the murder.

In January, in an unrelated case, Drescher and another devotee, Daniel Reid, were convicted for the 1983 slaying at New Vrindaban of still another devotee, Charles St. Denis, in a personal dispute. Drescher's record also includes a 1979 drug conviction in Ohio -- an operation that investigators now believe may have pumped money into New Vrindaban, sources say.

Drescher is serving a life sentence at the State Penitentiary in Moundsville for the St. Denis murder. He is awaiting extradition to Los Angeles to stand trial for the murder of Bryant.

Drescher says authorities offered him possible leniency if he will testify that Bhaktipada paid him to kill Bryant. 'I'm not going to bear false witness against an exalted spiritual leader,' he said, fingering prayer beads in a small interview room at the penitentiary.

'I have no knowledge of any illegal activity by the swami,' said Drescher, who denies killing St. Denis or Bryant.

Investigators think Drescher knows plenty.

They believe Drescher stalked Bryant at the request of the Krishnas, and that he was promised $20,000 but paid only $4,000 to pull the trigger, sources say. Authorities also believe the money came through a former leader of the Krishna temple in Cleveland, a satellite operation of New Vrindaban.

At the time of his arrest, sources say, Drescher had a notebook - Drescher denies it -- that included a description of Bryant's van, and addresses where Bryant might be found. Authorities think they know a possible source of those addresses. Three months before he was killed, Bryant was locked up by the sheriff's office for carrying a gun and for saying and he others were plotting to get Bhaktipada.

The sheriff's office, in a move now criticized by some investigators, let two officials at New Vrindaban see Bryant's address book to determine if any of those listed lived in the community. None were found. But, sources say, investigators later found matching addresses in Drescher's notebook and in Bryant's address book, including one in Los Angeles near where Bryant was killed. ---

When Drescher was taken into custody, New Vrindaban distanced itself from him. Later, with Drescher saying he wanted to be a 'good devotee,' the community reached out to him. Umapati, a Krishna minister, now visits Drescher at the penitentiary weekly.

'He's preaching up a storm' in prison, said Umapati, seated outside the Temple of Understanding. 'He has attracted a lot of

interest among prisoners who want to know about Krishna Consciousness.'

Back at the penitentiary, Drescher said, 'In a way, I'm sort of their guru.'

A federal grand jury last September began examing New Vrindaban. U.S. Attorney William Kolibash wants a new panel to resume the probe this spring. 'I hope to have a resolution of the case by the end of the year,' he said.

Residents of the commune range in age from toddlers to senior citizens. Most are in their 20s and 30s. They work at the community's dairy farm, and harvest crops, build temples and make bricks and jewelry.

Mankumari, 37, formerly Marsha Ferry of affluent Potomac, Md., has lived at New Vrindaban since 1972, shortly after dropping out of the University of Maryland.

Mankumari found it unfair that the entire community is blackened for the actions of a few. 'It's like a pock mark on the moon,' she said. 'The moon is very bright and beautiful. What are you going to do, complain about a few pock marks?' She still strongly supports Bhaktipada.

Another Krishna devotee, a member of the movement for 15 years, said she left New Vrindaban a few years ago primarily because of Bhaktipada.

'I think he's sick, really weird,' said the woman, a former friend of Bryant's now living in California. 'You either worshipped him (Bhaktipada) completely or it was dangerous to be there.'

The woman, who asked not to be identified, said Bhaktipada 'told men to beat their wives because they like it.' Mankumari and other women at New Vrindaban says such comments are ludicrous. ---

Among Bryant's allegations were that New Vrindaban, now planning to build a new $50 million Temple of Understanding, was financed in part by drug money.

Investigators believe that between 1979 and 1981, Emil Sofsky, a fugitive sought for a 1979 drug conviction, delivered about $1 million in cash to New Vrindaban from his New York base, sources say.

Authorities have found no evidence of any active or recent drug operations involving New Vrindaban, but believe they have found a major source of money -- possibly unlawful panhandling.

On Jan. 5, about 50 members of the FBI, sheriff's office, state police and the IRS raided New Vrindaban and seized three truckloads of bumper stickers, baseball caps and buttons carrying logos of scores of pro and college sports teams, as well as 'Peanut' cartoon characters 'Snoopy' and 'Woodstock.'

In a court affidavit the FBI said it has 'reason to believe' that the goods violate trademark and copyright statutes and are part of a scheme to 'traffic counterfeit goods,' asking 'donations' when handing out the merchandise.

Bhaktipada responded, 'Isn't it strange that the government is spending so much time and money to defend 'Snoopy.' I can't imagine this happening if we were a Catholic or Presbyterian church.

'Our lawyers said we have committed no violations,' he said. 'If you don't sell, if you give out the material in the process of collecting donations, there is no violation.'

Some colleges, pro sports teams and the holder of the Peanuts' copyright are considering lawsuits.

Bhaktipada, a native of Peekskill, N.Y., joined the movement in 1966 as one of the first disciples in North America of His Divine Grace Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, who came to the United States from India in 1965.

Shortly after his excommunication, Bhaktipada departed for what he said was a previously scheduled trip to India.

A few days later, at the Temple of Understanding, Umapati interrupted the daily 5 a.m. service -- where bouncing devotees chant Hare Krishna -- to read a resolution denouncing the excommunication.

'We declare the expulsion null and void,' Umapati declared. 'Everyone in agreement raise your hands.'

Amid muffled cheers, all of the nearly 100 devotees did so.

Umapati smiled and said: 'Hare Krishna.'