

THE ROUTINIZATION OF RAJNEESH PURAM:
CHARISMA AND AUTHORITY IN THE RAJNEESH
MOVEMENT, 1981-1985

by

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This paper concerns the application of Max Weber's theory on the routinization of charisma to the development of a large commune in southeast Oregon during the early 1980s. Ma Anand Sheela reorganized this community from a purely charismatic movement into a tightly regimented organization that she ruled through traditional, despotic authority and a bureaucratic administrative staff characterized by their loyalty to Sheela. Sheela's institutionalization of the Rajneesh movement at the Oregon commune embodies Max Weber's theory on the routinization of charisma in social groups, as argued in part 1 of his *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*.

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Introduction

This introduction begins to explain the development of the Rajneesh movement's Oregon commune in the early 1980s using Max Weber's thesis on the authority structures and the routinization of charisma. Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, a popular Indian guru through the 1970s and '80s, moved to southeast Oregon in August 1981 to build a permanent, communal ashram or "new society"¹ for his disciples to gather in their quest for enlightenment. These disciples, called sannyasins, were mostly educated, affluent westerners influenced by the counterculture movement who had discovered and joined Rajneesh while travelling in India. They named the Oregon commune Rancho Rajneesh, and later Rajneeshpuram ('City of the Lord of the Full Moon').² The purpose of the Rajneesh movement, perhaps 25,000 strong internationally in 1983, shifted during this time from the individual's pursuit of enlightenment, to a communal mission of "making Bhagwan's vision a reality" by "building the buddhafiield," a utopian community centered around his "energy field."³ Bhagwan told his disciples that the "buddhafiield" would give birth to a "new humanity" that would be superior to other humans by striking a balance of spirituality and materialism.⁴

Bhagwan did not lead the movement through this routinization process though. He appointed one of his inner circle, Ma Anand Sheela, as his secretary, spokesperson and chief executive in January 1981 and granted her power of attorney over the

¹ Carter, Lewis. *Charisma and Control in Rajneeshpuram: A Community Without Shared Values*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 135.

² Gordon, James. *The Golden Guru*. (Lexington, Massachusetts: Stephen Greene Press, 1987), 103.

³ Ibid. 99

⁴ Ibid., 92

Rajneesh organization's finances, resources and operations. Bhagwan then entered a period of public silence until late 1984. The official reason was that this marked the "ultimate stage" of his work, where his silence would "deepen the communion" with his followers.⁵ Sheela provides a different account, claiming that Bhagwan told her "If I speak, it will only be an obstacle to the work of building the new commune."⁶ This left Sheela in control of the entire Rajneesh movement and building the Oregon commune. She set about reorganizing the community into a regimented, rules-based society where she exercised despotic power through a large bureaucracy.

The purpose of this study is to show how Sheela altered the organizational structure of the Rajneesh movement during her time at the commune. To understand these changes, however, they must first be explained in the theoretical terms of German philosopher Max Weber. Weber predicts that charismatic movements are always in a state of transition. They tend towards consolidation under more stable authority structures or they fall apart. The Rajneesh movement under Sheela deftly illustrates routinization of charisma in a modern setting. Sheela's commune grew out of Bhagwan's charismatic grounds, but after their leader entered seclusion and the movement moved into a new, foreign environment, Sheela reinvented the organization. It emerged as a form of what Weber calls "traditional authority,"⁷ or rule by decree and bound only by precedents. These decrees were administered through a strong "bureaucratic administrative staff."⁸

⁵ Ibid., 93

⁶ Birnstiel, Sheela; Sheela, Ma Anand. *Don't Kill Him: The Story of My Life with Bhagwan Rajneesh*, 1st ed. (New Delhi, India: Prakash Books, Kindle Edition, 2012), kll. 2013.

⁷ Weber, Max. *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization, Translated by A.M. Henderson and Talcott Parsons*. (New York: Oxford University Press. 1947), 341.

⁸ Ibid., 333

This paper begins with an introduction to the sources informing this study, their probable biases, and a note on some of the challenges encountered while researching the Rajneesh movement. From here the paper establishes Weber's concept of charismatic authority in part 1, with a discussion on his theory on the process of routinization of charisma in groups and an explanation of traditional authority and rational-legal authority. In part 2 Bhagwan's charismatic authority will be explored, who his followers were, how his charisma fits and does not fit Weber's definition of a charismatic leader and what his role was on the Oregon commune after he secluded himself from the daily life of the commune. After this necessary groundwork will come this paper's central argument in part 3: that Sheela institutionalized the charismatic authority of Bhagwan on the Oregon commune and, according to Weber, because charismatic authority is unstable and must either dissolve completely or transform into a traditional or rational-legal authority structure, the outcome was that Sheela ruled the commune as a traditional authority through her strong administrative staff. While the following paper only provides a thumbnail sketch of the fascinating Rajneesh movement, readers can find a contextual history of Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, Ma Anand Sheela and the Oregon commune in Appendix A.

Primary and secondary sources

Primary sources include several first hand accounts from disciples both loyal to and disaffected from the Rajneesh movement, several academics who researched the commune, and Oregon newspaper articles. There is also a great deal of printed material issued by the ranch through their weekly commune tabloid, *the Rajneesh Times*. In addition, this will be the only study of Rajneeshpuram, so far that I know of, to include

Sheela's memoir, published in 2012, where she offers her own account of events at the ranch and how she came to the Rajneesh movement.

Three of the primary sources should be introduced before the analysis in order to explain their inherent biases. First is the *The Golden Guru* by psychologist James Gordon, who examined the movement from its early days in the 1970s. His account, which draws on first hand observations, interviews and independent study, cannot be ignored in a history of the Rajneesh movement. However, he lived in the Poona Ashram for several months and underwent Rajneesh therapies, developed personal relationships with disciples and remained sympathetic with Bhagwan's movement long after the events in Oregon.

Another valuable source is *Bhagwan: The God that Failed* a memoir by Hugh Milne, a.k.a. Swami Shivamurti, one of Bhagwan's long time disciples, and chief bodyguard for several years. Milne left Rajneeshpuram in 1983 and eventually became a leading critic of the movement. Milne's account is biased toward his own experience and he had an antagonistic relationship with Sheela. He portrays her as power-hungry and ruthless. Milne's memoir is clearly mistaken in some places about chronology and attribution, but for the most part it is a valuable perspective into the routinization of the movement after Sheela took over.

Finally there is Sheela's memoir, perhaps the most valuable and most suspect source in this study. Her memoir, *Don't Kill Him! The Story of my life with Bhagwan Rajneesh*, covers her life after the commune, then doubles back in part two to when she first met Bhagwan and recounts how she became his secretary and ran the commune, where she was a self-described "Queen." In the memoir Sheela paints herself as the

naïve victim of Bhagwan's scheming. She was a lovesick young woman who gave her life to Bhagwan and in return he framed her for conspiracies and crimes she denies ever occurred. Sheela washes her hands of any and all wrongdoing and blames the other sannyasins for the collapse of the ranch, calling them lazy, incompetent and childish. For anyone doing research on the Oregon commune, Sheela's tale is valuable. There is much to be learned from how Sheela frames events, her report of Bhagwan and even from what she doesn't say or discuss. Given how vague her memoir is about dates, facts, names, locations and events, anything Sheela says must be taken with a whole bucket of salt, but, given her centrality to the Oregon commune, no future history of the Rajneesh movement in Oregon should be written without taking her memoir into account.

Balancing the biases of these sources has been a continual challenge with research on the Rajneesh movement. The best method for resolving the discrepancies has been cross referencing disciples' accounts with observations from external sources like newspapers, observers and academics, and vice versa. Where three or more sources agree, including at least one commune 'insider' and one 'outsider,' the information has been judged relatively trustworthy. In cases where only one source notes a particular behavior, event, or observation, I have noted as much in the paper. Because of Sheela's incredible bias, I have in almost every case indicated in the text when a claim or piece of information comes from her perspective.

As for secondary sources, the first scholar of note is Max Weber, whose paradigm of authority structures offers a valuable framework for understanding the events at Rajneeshpuram. His typology of authority, developed decades before

Bhagwan was born, give valuable insights to how the Rajneesh movement of the 1970s and '80s evolved over time as will be shown and his theory on the routinization of charisma can also be applied with alacrity to the development of the Oregon commune.

The first academic to draw a line between the Rajneesh movement and Weber's concept of charismatic authority was the sociologist Lewis Carter, who wrote extensively about the role of charisma in the Rajneesh movement in the 1980s. Carter's book, *Charisma and Control in Rajneeshpuram*, remains an authoritative study on the Rajneeshpuram event. He took an interest in Rajneeshpuram while it was still functional in 1982 and though his account includes first hand observations and eyewitness interviews, it was completed some years after the ranch shut down. Parts of his analysis can be used as a primary source, but for the most part Carter serves in this paper as a knowledgeable scholar on the Rajneesh movement. His work was the springboard for this thesis and he was the first academic, so far as I know, to connect Weber's theories on charisma with the Rajneesh movement. Carter defines the group as a charismatic movement in the same vein as Weber's thesis, but the rest of his analysis focuses on the group's sociology. He doesn't address how Sheela routinized the movement or why the commune's authority structure evolved the way it did. As already stated, this study will address those questions.

Though Carter's work is foundational for this analysis, I have drawn on many other scholars: Marion Goldman's gender-focused *Passionate Journeys: Why Successful Women Joined a Cult*;; Bob Mullan's *Life as Laughter: Following Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh*, and Les Zaitz's investigative newspaper series for the Oregonian *Rajneeshees in Oregon: The Untold Story*. Though there are a few other secondary

sources, the field of Rajneesh studies is quite narrow. I have had time to review most of the secondary literature on the period and the sources above are by far the best accounts with the most detailed analyses, research and offer the most insight. Other secondary sources are included, but described at the end in the annotated bibliography.

The problem with “rules” in Rajneeshpuram

“Those who came purely out of love had it easiest to understand and follow Him. Their mind did not work hard, and so they could devote themselves to Him. Those who brought their intellect, their value judgements, and firm opinions with them had it the hardest.” Ma Anand Sheela⁹

There is a paradox regarding the rules of Rajneeshpuram and the Rajneesh movement, which in turn leads to several problems with researching this period. The paradox is that the Rajneesh movement had been for most of the 1970s against codes of conduct, against laws, against “rules” of any kind. Only those prescribed by Bhagwan needed to be observed. Even those were only respected until Bhagwan issued new, contradictory orders. The movement in general encouraged bending, breaking or deriding all the other rules of society. Only during Sheela’s reign were the rules a serious matter and a variety of penalties and punishments devised for enforcing them at the Oregon commune. Neither of these situations is very surprising given the Weberian framework this paper draws on. Charismatic movements, according to Weber, by their nature “repudiate the past”¹⁰ and Bhagwan’s specific philosophy encourages that.

Sheela however needed to enforce rules and regulations in order to manage a large population engaged in an enormous construction project. However, this leaves the

⁹ Sheela, kll. 3021.

¹⁰ Weber, 362

study with the problem of recording and analyzing the fractured record of commune rules. Different accounts and studies report different rules and regulations on the ranch at different times. Therefore it is difficult to ascertain if many of the rules or regulations on Rajneeshpuram were strictly enforced, quietly expected, temporary, or just derived from one of Sheela's many outbursts. Sheela had a penchant for reactively declaring new rules, which presents almost its own problem with research on the commune's routine structure. She once forbade the commune sannyasins from "public displays of affection" saying that on her commune there would be no "slobbering" all over each other.¹¹ But was this regulation ever enforced and how trustworthy is the source? Only Hugh Milne reports this rule in detail and he never mentions if it was enforced. However, other rules are widely agreed on in the literature. By late 1983 for example sannyasins were forbidden to make phone calls off the ranch or leave the commune without getting permission from commune officers. Rules on movement within or onto the commune were generally the most strictly enforced along with other regulations concerning ranch security.

The more arbitrary regulations or rules with limited documentation can be better understood if we consider two basic elements of Rajneesh's beliefs: atomistic truth and spiritual surrender. Bhagwan's teachings were contradictory, but because of atomistic truth, where any one thing can be true independently despite conflict with another thing, contradictions did not pose an ideological problem. This had been true since the earliest days of the movement and, in addition to being an important element of control for Sheela and the administrators, lead to many of the severe negative opinions and

¹¹ Milne, Hugh. *Bhagwan: The God That Failed*. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986), 214.

reactions against the ranch. Though here this flexible take on facts, time, and truth is classified as 'atomistic truth' most of the ranch's neighbors and enemies just called it "lying." The other principle, spiritual surrender, was another major component of the movement and a key signal of devotion to Bhagwan's charismatic authority. Those who resisted rules, orders or assignments, anyone criticizing the running of the commune or questioning policies were typically classified by commune administrators as "negative," and risked a variety of penalties or punishments.

Part 1: Max Weber's Paradigm

Charismatic Authority

Max Weber develops his ideas on charismatic authority as part of a broad, systematic analysis of authority structures. While other Weberian ideas have fallen out of favor in modern times—especially his once lauded theory on the protestant work ethic—Weber's typology of authority and his theory on the routinization of charisma remain two of his more relevant contributions to contemporary thought. Weber defines “charisma” as the quality an individual may possess “by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities. These are...not accessible to the ordinary person, but are regarded as of divine origin or as exemplary...” From these qualities the person in question gains legitimacy for leadership and followers accept their charismatic authority.¹² Charismatic authority is the last of Weber's three broad categories of social power, the other two being traditional authority and rational-legal authority. Weber defines “traditional authority” as when “obedience is owed to the person of the chief who occupies the traditionally sanctioned position of authority of the office.”¹³ The other possible authority structure Weber defines, common in the modern era, is a “rational-legal authority” where “obedience is owed to the legally established impersonal order. It extends to the persons exercising the authority of office under it

¹² Ibid., 358-59.

¹³ Ibid., 328

only by virtue of the formal legality of their commands and only within the scope of authority of the office.”¹⁴

Weber’s thesis describes five characteristics that members of charismatic groups exhibit. First there is recognition of charisma, whereby followers place their “absolute trust” in the leader, “guaranteed by what is held to be a ‘sign’ or ‘proof,’ ”¹⁵ but more importantly, *genuine* charisma is when followers regard it as their “duty” to recognize this charismatic “quality and act accordingly,” which is a matter of “complete personal devotion to the possessor of the quality.”¹⁶ The second characteristic is that followers look for continued proof of charisma, meaning that above all if the charismatic leader fails to benefit his followers they may abandon him or her. Third, the community of followers around the charismatic leader, according to Weber, is organized in a strikingly different fashion than other societies:

“[the community]...is based on an emotional form of communal bonds [Weber uses the term *Gemeinde*]. The administrative staff of a charismatic leader does not consist of ‘officials;’ at least its members are not technically trained. There is no such thing as ‘appointment’ or ‘dismissal’, no career, no promotion. There is only a call at the instance of the leader on the basis of charismatic qualification...there is no such thing as a definite sphere of authority and of competence...followers tend to live primarily in a communistic relationship with their leader on means which have been provided by a voluntary gift. There are no established administrative organs...There is no system of formal rules...concrete judgements are newly created from case to case and are originally regarded as divine judgments and revelations....”¹⁷

The nearest examples at hand of such charismatic communities in the ideal form Weber describes are Jesus and his apostles, as described in the New Testament, or Mohammed

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., 360-61

with his followers at Medina. The fourth requirement Weber puts forward is that the leader by example and followers in imitation “disdain” economic considerations, which does not mean a “renunciation of property or even of acquisition,” but it does mean followers scorn economic gain or economizing for its own ends because they exist outside the “routine world” and are relieved from “economic concerns” or at least this the ideal.¹⁸ Finally, charismatic movements possess a “revolutionary force,” which “may then result in a radical alteration of the central system of attitudes toward the different problems and structures of ‘the world.’”¹⁹ This “radical alteration” may also be described as an individual’s desocialization from their previous relationships and institutions and assimilation into the charismatic movement. As this study will show, the guru Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh was a strong charismatic leader and his Rajneesh movement possessed all the characteristics just described.

The essential problem Bhagwan faced, the problem facing all charismatic leaders Weber writes, was his succession. Bhagwan had no children, and claiming that he was the only enlightened man on earth, no obvious spiritual successor. His health was reportedly quite fragile;²⁰ he was reportedly allergic to scents and dust, had chronic backpain, weakening eyesight, diabetes and asthma.²¹ Sheela writes that she worried his silence signaled that he was preparing to die, “He is going to die soon, and if He stops talking His body would not survive...”²² If she did really believe that, it could explain

¹⁸ Ibid., 362

¹⁹ Ibid., 363

²⁰ Bhagwan’s weak health factored into how his disciples thought it was part of their duty to protect him. He also repeatedly “blackmailed” followers with the threat that he would “leave his body [die]” if they failed to follow his wishes.

²¹ Carter, 93

²² Sheela, kll. 1996

in part why Sheela took measures to stabilize and consolidate the movement—as preparation for the loss of their charismatic leader. Weber writes that this kind of forethought is actually quite common among administrators and followers in charismatic movements, who must look to their “ideal and material interests”²³ and this incentive is a huge part of the routinization process.

Routinization of Charisma

Charismatic authority is potent, but Weber asserts it is always transitional, a starting point for another structure of power.²⁴ By its nature, charismatic movements tend toward dissolution or routinization, whereby power is made regular and codified.²⁵ Weber defines routinization of charisma as when a charismatic movement seeks to “take on the character of a permanent relationship forming a stable community of disciples...”²⁶ and that it must become “either traditionalized or rationalized, or a combination of both.”²⁷ It is the former organization type that the Rajneesh movement began to evolve into under Sheela. The term “routinization” in this paper is used to mean the gradual regimentation of daily life and spiritual practices at the Oregon commune into a traditional system of rule by decree as implemented by a strong bureaucratic administrative staff, which was dominated by Sheela, not Bhagwan. Though she had little or no charisma of her own, disciples believed that Sheela acted as Bhagwan’s appointed leader, that he had “designated” her to build the commune and

²³ Weber, 364

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

lead them while he remained in silence. Sheela's power by appointment was just the first step in the routinization process and a key factor in her traditional authority.

Bhagwan had already established the position of secretary in the early 1970s when he had just a handful of disciples.²⁸ The first secretary had been Ma Yoga Laxmi, who acted as Bhagwan's spokesperson, controlled who he saw, and relayed his orders to disciples. This and other actions set the precedent within the movement that "the actions or words of those who represented him or were closer to him, were used by his disciples as guides for living..." Sheela had been Laxmi's assistant for years before ousting her²⁹ and in Oregon she strengthened the "traditional" role of secretary until she had the powers of a Queen.³⁰

As already mentioned, the routinization of charisma is motivated when the 'ideal and material interests' of both followers and administrative staff focus on the "continuation and continual reactivation of the community." Further, that the administrative staff have an interest in securing their social position on an everyday basis.³¹ These motives become "conspicuous" in charismatic groups with, as Weber writes, "the disappearance of the personal charismatic leader."³² Note that Weber says "disappearance", not death or decline, and that his terminology matches the situation the Rajneesh movement effectively came to in 1981. Bhagwan disappeared from daily life at that point, living in seclusion and public silence and apart from his followers

²⁸ Gordon, 44

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Calling Sheela a "Queen" is an accurate description of her powers and presence in the commune, and true to how she was described by both outside observers and herself. "I was the boss, the Queen. I was His [Bhagwan's] personal secretary and the one in command (Sheela, kl. 182-83)."

³¹ Weber, 364.

³² Ibid.

beginning in March 1981.³³ This occurred just before the movement moved to the United States on June 1st,³⁴ and then began construction of the large, international Oregon commune in August. The first structure built on the Oregon commune was a luxurious mansion for Bhagwan where he spent all his time isolated from the rest of the commune while Sheela ruled in his absence. With Bhagwan's "disappearance" from daily life, the movement began to routinize his charisma.

Traditional Authority

Weber defines traditional authority as a system of personal loyalties, where rules are based on precedent instead of legislation, which are the only limits on the powers of the "chief" who rules by decree.

"...legitimacy is claimed for it and believed in on the basis of the sanctity of the order and the attendant powers of control as they have been handed down from the past... The organized group exercising authority is, in the simplest case, primarily based on relations of personal loyalty, cultivated through a common process of education. The person exercising authority is not a 'superior,' but a personal chief. His [or her] administrative staff... [consists] of personal retainers. Obedience is not owed to enacted rules, but to the person who occupies a position of authority by tradition or who has been chosen... on a traditional basis."³⁵

Weber goes on to argue that the 'chief's' powers are bound by a conceptual "double sphere: on the one hand, of action which is bound to specific tradition; on the other hand, of that which is free of any specific rules."³⁶ Weber reaches back in history to provide examples of traditional authority, citing Germanic law, Chinese government, and Indian Rajas, implying that he sees this system as a more primitive authority

³³ Gordon, 93

³⁴ Bhagwan left India

³⁵ Weber, 341

³⁶ Ibid., 342

structure. Writing from the early nineteenth century, he may not have suspected the resurgence and mutation that traditional authority, as he describes it, would enjoy in the 20th century and how it could function through a bureaucratic administration. This took the form of absolutist states including Stalinist Russia and Hitler's Germany to name two famous examples. In these regimes, the 'leader' ruled by decree, but often that decree was implemented through bureaucratic administrative organs, the most horrific example of this relationship being the Holocaust. Sheela fashioned in Oregon a similar system of absolute control, administered through bureaucratic means. She made the rules, which were legitimized because Bhagwan had given her complete authority to run his commune, and any behavior short of obedience to the commune's rules and regulations, or open criticism of Sheela, was deemed "negativity."³⁷

Rational-legal Authority

The rational-legal authority Weber describes—which is intrinsically linked with bureaucratic administration—underpins most western democracies, including the United States. In his assessment, bureaucracy, the "most rational" system for ordering human beings was likely to be the dominant form of government in the 20th century thanks to the modern state and capitalism, and in many ways he's been proven right, but

³⁷Though "negativity" was a term used early in the Oregon commune, its use changed to suit Sheela's needs. Before Milne left the ranch for the first time in 1982, he tells a story about how Sheela addressed disciples' physical exhaustion from commune construction with drugs and labelled their exhaustion as negativity. Speaking to the commune publicly, Milne says Sheela stated that "quite a few people are getting sick. I asked Bhagwan what provision to make for them, and he said that the majority of sick people were negative, and that everyone who really loved him would find the energy to go on working for him...Negative people...get sick on the slightest pretext." Negativity was indeed any behavior or condition that was negatively affecting the ultimate goal: realizing Bhagwan's vision. This could include sickness, criticism, complaining, opposing Sheela's decisions, asking for a change in work assignment, questioning ranch policies, violating ranch rules, disobeying orders, or anything else that could slow down commune construction or undermine Sheela's authority.

it has rarely succeeded in a pure form. The essential components of a legal system as defined by Weber include offices of authority, a “consistent system of abstract rules,” and a bureaucratic administrative staff with advanced technical skills. Weber further asserts that under a legal authority people obey “legal norms,” that is laws or regulations, only in their capacity as members of the group, they owe their obedience to an “impersonal order,” and new legal norms may be established by agreement or imposition on “grounds of expediency or rational values or both...”

The Rajneesh movement never fully developed any of these ideal characteristics, though the technical knowledge of their bureaucratic administrative staff comes close. Instead the Rajneesh movement was built on “charismatic grounds,”³⁸ one of the three “pure types of legitimate authority” Weber describes, and over time routinized into a traditional authority led by Sheela, whose will was enforced through a bureaucratic administrative staff. Even as this routinization occurred, however, many regular disciples still believed that Bhagwan himself appointed administrators for the Oregon commune, managers and Peace Officers, that the guru guided the commune administration, and he passed down every new rule and rule retraction at Rajneeshpuram. Sheela instituted a variety of powerful offices to manage the commune and was enforcing a complicated body of rules, which approach Weber’s criteria for a body of abstract law, but the system lacked consistency. Later, Rajneesh’s teachings were codified in the “Book of Rajneeshism,” as will be discussed further on, setting the foundation for what could have possibly become a strong series of precedents based on interpretations of Rajneeshism.

³⁸ Ibid., 328

Part 2: The Rajneesh Movement

“LEAVE YOUR SHOES AND MIND OUTSIDE,” From a posted sign outside the “Buddha Hall” in the Rajneesh Ashram in Poona, India, 1979.³⁹

The nature of Bhagwan’s charisma and its similarities to Weberian “charismatic authority” are vitally important to understand the connection Bhagwan had with his disciples. These men and women were typically adult professionals, with families and careers, who gave up their old lives to join Bhagwan’s movement in India and then dedicated themselves to the long and demanding task of building a city sized international center in Oregon. After illustrating the form of Bhagwan’s charisma, Sheela’s work to routinize his charisma into a traditional system can be better described and understood in context. Weber’s definition of a charismatic leader has already been described in part, but to summarize, this is a person with “exemplary” qualities, which are “very often thought of as resting on magical powers.” Weber describes this quality as being a real attribute of significance to both the followers and the leader’s self-perception. But the most important feature of a charismatic leader is “is how the individual is actually regarded by those subject to [their] charismatic authority.”⁴⁰ It would be helpful here to examine Bhagwan’s relationship to his followers in the 1970s, just as his popularity was peaking and he had officially founded his movement.

Observations from Poona

Lewis Gordon, a psychologist studying alternative therapies around the world in the 1970s and ‘80s, got to know the Rajneeshees while they were still in Poona, India

³⁹ Gordon, 20

⁴⁰ Weber, 359

and took an interest in their development all the way through the '80s. After the ranch dissolved in 1985, he wrote a book of observations, *The Golden Guru*, about the group's rise and fall. He spent years tracking individual disciples and visited the ranch during key events. He was fascinated by how devoted disciples were to Bhagwan and the origins of those loyalties.

During Gordon's visit to the Ashram, he saw Bhagwan's lectures, lived among the disciples and towards the end of his stay they actively tried to recruit him. According to Gordon, Bhagwan's followers believed he was a living Buddha, an "awakened one" who could in turn awaken them if they emptied their minds and allowed him to "work" on them.⁴¹ His "claim to have achieved enlightenment was the basis for his authority,"⁴² and what he offered was not a grand communal destiny, like Hitler promised his followers,⁴³ but a chance at individual "liberation from the repetitive round of neurotic thought and behavior, from life-denying apprehensions, and from fear of both death and life." Bhagwan told seekers that a "Buddha nature" lay dormant in each of them and if they followed him, he could help them unlock it.⁴⁴ His was a way to "enlightenment without renunciation" where disciples could "indulge and celebrate all all experiences in life."⁴⁵ He further preached that all other religions, spirituality, and gurus were illusions. Only he had the answers and the contradictions he

⁴¹ Ibid., 59

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Kershaw, Ian. *The 'Hitler Myth': Image and Reality in the Third Reich*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), 22.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 59

⁴⁵ Carter, 45

preached were a part of the “game” he was playing with his listeners in order to help them awaken.

Gordon describes the people he found at Poona as “in general, resourceful, sophisticated...independent and educated.”⁴⁶ The people coming to his Ashram were typically seekers of spiritual truths, influenced by the American counterculture movement or the European Student movement, the human potential movement, George Gurdjieff, and contemporary psycho-therapy theory.⁴⁷ Bhagwan set his organization apart from other gurus along the “Hippie trail” by selectively targeting these westerners and recruiting those who were either “wealthy or very loyal,” Carter writes. “The key to growth of the movement lay in developing a Western clientele.”⁴⁸ Though Bhagwan’s initial following in the 60’s was mostly middle-class Indians, by 1979, his disciples were predominantly middle-class to affluent westerners from America or Europe, but also Japan, South Africa, Brazil and Australia. Germans and Americans were particularly well represented within the movement. Most of these people were seeking spiritual enlightenment or escape from modern life in the wake of the 1960s counterculture movement, Carter argues.⁴⁹ Gordon’s opinion about disciples was “As a psychiatrist I recognize these are men and women in the throes of the midlife crisis...”⁵⁰ Bhagwan’s message of “enlightenment without renunciation” was an attractive “product,” as Carter terms it, and many seekers who planned to visit the Ashram for a few days might end up staying for years. Bhagwan’s command of English allowed him

⁴⁶ Ibid., 46

⁴⁷ Ibid., 48

⁴⁸ Carter, 112

⁴⁹ Ibid., 113

⁵⁰ Gordon, 47

to speak to this international following and later allowed him to intentionally push out many of those original Indian followers when he ceased giving lectures in Hindi. After judging a seeker ‘worthy,’ Bhagwan inducted them into his movement, called Neo-Sannyas International, by giving the disciple a new, Indian name, a beaded necklace with Bhagwan’s picture called a “Mala” and instructing them to only wear red or orange clothes. This was the beginning of “surrender” for many followers, a process where they sought to accept Bhagwan’s wisdom and instructions without doubt, and which also functioned as the recognition of charismatic qualities Weber describes. Followers placed their “absolute trust”⁵¹ in Bhagwan and regarded it as their duty to give of themselves to him. “The more they [sannyasins] gave to him [Bhagwan] and felt for him, the more they felt love...for themselves.”⁵²

Bhagwan’s Charisma

As previously stated, according to Weber, charismatic movements share five characteristics, including recognition of charisma, proof of charisma, the primacy of communal relationships, a disdain for economizing, and a revolutionary force. Let’s visit each of these in turn regarding the Rajneesh movement.

Addressing the first quality, most of Bhagwan’s followers on the Oregon commune had discovered him while travelling in India along the “Hippie trail”⁵³ and those who stayed at his Ashram formed a strong emotional bond to the guru. Each

⁵¹ Weber, 359

⁵² Gordon, 59

⁵³ Johnson, Mark. *What Happened To The Hippie Trail? The Legacy Of The Asia Overland Route*. (International Business Times. June 2012). <<http://www.ibtimes.com/what-happened-hippie-trail-legacy-asia-overland-route-701219>>

found a particular aspect of his words or meditations or persona to be “uniquely appealing, reassuring, or illuminating.”⁵⁴ Gordon says some were drawn to his “extraordinary” eyes and physical presence. Many sannyasins told him that their attraction to Bhagwan had been instantaneous. In her memoir, Sheela says that as an adult she “dissolved” the first time she saw Bhagwan, “I just sat there, drowned in Him, lost in Him. He and His feet were the last stop in my life,” she says, faintly conjuring an image of an apostle meeting Jesus.⁵⁵ Hugh Milne also reports a very strong and emotional reaction to meeting Bhagwan.⁵⁶ He writes that after he left the movement in 1983, he was asked repeatedly how “sensible” people could be “mesmerized” by Bhagwan:

The answer, as many sannyasins would agree, is that once you have been affected by his energy and experienced the sensation of being touched by it, you knew that there was nothing like it, no bliss to compare with it. Once you had experienced it, you had to go back for more, to try and regain that feeling of harmony and being at one with the universe. Bhagwan’s touch could be just as addictive as the strongest drug.⁵⁷

These reactions are typical examples of how many disciples reacted when they met with Bhagwan for the first time. They were usually primed for this encounter from reading or listening to his words or hearing stories from other disciples of Bhagwan’s spiritual power. The strong emotions he inspired by merely looking at or touching seekers could bring on convulsions, weeping, and feelings of bliss,⁵⁸ feelings that as Milne says people sought out again and again.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 48

⁵⁵ Sheela, kll. 1211-18

⁵⁶ Milne, 45. “From the moment I first met Bhagwan, I had the distinct feeling that I had finally met my real Father and Teacher...”

⁵⁷ Milne, 179

⁵⁸ Carter, 68

The second requirement for a charismatic leader is how they must continually prove their charismatic qualities. Carter argues the guru's philosophy had a built-in feature that preserved his charismatic authority:

While many sannyasins see themselves as intimately connected with Bhagwan and some impute special powers to him, the 'new age' imputation of 'divinity' to all individuals absolves the leader somewhat from the risk of demonstrating speciality to his followers in order to maintain their allegiance. The absence of promises, prophecies, and consistent ideology provides no criteria for followers to *evaluate* the authenticity of their leader's speciality; it is said to be enough that they simply 'know' Bhagwan's unconditional love for them and experience 'bliss' from that knowledge.⁵⁹

Carter points here to the inherently 'empty' nature of the Rajneesh movement, which in its original form was anti-institutional, anti-religious and even anti-rational.⁶⁰ This fits with Weber's assertion that "charismatic authority...is sharply opposed both to rational, and particularly bureaucratic, authority, and to traditional authority...or any other form..."⁶¹ Since Bhagwan was against everything organized or dogmatic, and regularly changed his stance on political and religious ideas, disciples did indeed lack hard reference points to "evaluate" his words. Paradoxically this was a source of continual frustration for outsiders and inspiration for insiders who could read almost any meaning or intent into Bhagwan's teachings. Bhagwan told them to rely on their intuition, their own feelings and ideas. What Bhagwan did demand clearly was that his disciples "shed their prior socialization"⁶² through conscious effort and a variety of therapies at Poona and Rajneeshpuram including "de-hypnotherapy," but all this could also arguably equate with "re-programming" within the culture of the commune.

⁵⁹ Carter, 276

⁶⁰ Ibid., 111

⁶¹ Weber, 361

⁶² Ibid. 48

Bhagwan's emphasis that the individual trust intuition over reason became in many disciples simply a habit waiting to let the guru tell them what was best. Carter's argument that Bhagwan's creed cunningly cancelled out the need for continual proof of his charismatic qualities may not wholly explain how his charisma was renewed. Carter doesn't mention that Bhagwan actually did issue a number of prophecies and predictions, including a 1983 declaration to his followers that the world would end before 1999 and that only his followers would survive in a "Noah's Ark of Consciousness."⁶³

Bhagwan proved his charismatic quality to followers continually through his eloquent sermons, called Darshans (literally "viewings"). His oratory was probably his greatest skill, the means he used to win over disciples and continually renew his connection to them. Carter writes that these lectures "were noted primarily for their repetitiveness (a single thought reiterated a dozen times with alternative metaphors), disciples sat in rapt attention apparently accepting each utterance with something like awe."⁶⁴ Gordon recalls from his own conversations with disciples that "Again and again sannyasins told me that in reading Rajneesh they had the sense that he was telling them what they already knew, confirming the fleeting thoughts, perceptions, or feelings that they had suppressed..."⁶⁵ Bhagwan was well versed in western literature, philosophy, and popular culture in addition to the eastern mystic traditions most travellers were seeking,⁶⁶ which allowed him to craft an attractive message that changed and adapted with current trends and events.

⁶³ *The Rajneesh Times*. (Rajneeshpuram, Oregon: Eds. 1982—1985), September 9, 1983. Vol. 2, #2.

⁶⁴ Carter, 68

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 49

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

The communal relationships Weber discusses in his thesis were another foundational part of the Poona ashram, but in Oregon a large bureaucracy—which in turn signals that a routinization of charisma is underway in the society—largely replaced these communal connections between guru and followers with bonds of patronage between higher ranking sannyasins and lower ranking sannyasins, ultimately with obedience owed to Sheela. In Poona, while Bhagwan was still active in the commune and his first secretary, Ma Yoga Laxmi had been in charge of day-to-day administration, and Milne describes the general attitude in the ashram as “if we were new people, shaping the future, showing the world how people could and should live.”⁶⁷ Milne writes about the “new society” Bhagwan was preaching, a feature that fits with Weber’s argument that “the genuine prophet...preaches, creates, or demands *new* obligations.”⁶⁸ By 1983, Carter notes that during a visit to Rajneeshpuram the “community consisted of residents who spent most of their day at work or seekers who were involved in highly structured therapy or meditation programs. In addition, there was a small elite corps who appeared to have no constraints on time or mobility...”⁶⁹ This stratification was a new feature in the Rajneesh movement and a constant part of daily life on the Oregon commune. Position and rank on the ranch were vitally more important for disciples because it strongly determined their quality of life. That rank in turn came to depend entirely on Sheela’s favor or the elites directly under her authority.

In Poona, Disciples were jealous of the guru’s attention, but as Gordon notes they shared a great sense of “kinship” after surrendering to the same master: “being a

⁶⁷ Milne, 149

⁶⁸ Weber, 361

⁶⁹ Carter, 20

sannyasin seemed like joining a family...a kind of multinational, psychospiritual Swiss Family Robinson. Here they were living in a fertile oasis of seekers, under the benign guidance of a Master ...many of them believed they—Bhagwan’s people—would be the model for the new Aquarian age of peace and harmony and enlightenment...”⁷⁰ However, even at this stage, “Most sannyasins refrained from criticizing Ashram rules and policies, the behavior of group leaders, or their work assignments. Everything became a device to raise awareness, to deepen surrender and their connection to their master.”⁷¹ The willing conformity sannyasins demonstrated in Rajneeshpuram, how they surrendered their doubts and even rationality, had already manifested in Poona under Bhagwan’s charismatic authority. This culture of shared destiny, which was cultivated and strengthened in Oregon, helped keep the commune functioning relatively smoothly.

The fourth aspect of a charismatic movement that Weber describes is a general disdain for economizing and a preference for existing outside routine economic concerns.⁷² Living in Bhagwan’s Indian Ashram, this was true to a degree. In the movement’s early days Bhagwan relied on donations from sympathetic and loyal contributors to keep his organization solvent.⁷³ This fits with Weber’s own contention that non-military charismatic movements often depend on large gifts or begging and that these constitute acceptable economic support.⁷⁴ By 1979 all seekers—as contrasted with disciples who had been accepted into Bhagwan’s following—needed to pay fees

⁷⁰ Gordon, 60

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 81

⁷² *Ibid.*, 362

⁷³ Gordon, 45

⁷⁴ Weber, 362

for therapy sessions and for accommodations at Poona, for food and even for entry into the ashram every day. Disciples could avoid many of the fees, because Bhagwan “has decided they are free enough of their past conditioning, ‘surrendered’ enough to him, to become a part of his commune.”⁷⁵ The disciples were encouraged to yield their property and wealth to Bhagwan as acts of surrender⁷⁶ and they also willingly fell into a more or less ascetic lifestyle where they felt their calling to learn under Bhagwan was now the most important aim of their life, a sacred “duty” as Weber calls it. Disciples became a part of the ashram ‘business’ and helped facilitate therapies, run services, prepare food, maintain the ashram and carry out other necessary activities. In this sense the ashram was both business and communal space where property and resources were shared among disciples who functioned as the ‘employees.’ Carter argued that the movement “Having no ideological constraints means that sannyasins need not develop ‘rationalizations’ for their economic activities.”⁷⁷ This capitalistic exchange nurtured and helped to fund the group’s routinization later in Oregon because followers were already, to paraphrase Weber, “making their living out of their calling.”⁷⁸

Finally, Bhagwan preached, and disciples believed strongly, that his was a revolutionary philosophy, unprecedented in world history, that had the potential to save humankind.⁷⁹ This idea culminated with Bhagwan’s desire to “build a buddhfield” where a “Homo Novus” or new man could emerge. This new man would be “beyond good and evil,” and unrestrained by rules or norms—an enlightened elite.⁸⁰ As stated

⁷⁵ Gordon, 73

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Carter, 283

⁷⁸ Weber, 367

⁷⁹ Carter, 66

⁸⁰ Ibid.

above, the movement began with Bhagwan's promise of individual enlightenment without any regard for a shared group destiny, like Hitler promised for Germany. In Oregon, the mission to build the Buddhafield and bring about a new, improved version of mankind became the daily focus of the community. This belief in the Buddhafield and Bhagwan's vision justified for many disciples their actions and behavior in Oregon, attributing the persecution they experienced in Oregon to the fear locals felt at their 'revolutionary' philosophy and at the same time giving disciples a sense of superiority over other groups.

O Bhagwan, Where Art Thou?

Before moving on from this discussion of Bhagwan's charisma to Sheela's efforts at routinizing it and consolidating the movement in the next section, a final note on Bhagwan's actual involvement with the Oregon commune. In Poona, Bhagwan cultivated a belief that everything that happened in his commune was intentional. He consistently claimed total knowledge and control over events at Poona, "Nothing happens in this Ashram without my knowing it... whatsoever happens here is happening with my knowledge."⁸¹ In Oregon, he issued statements that Sheela was acting in total accord with his will while he remained almost confined to his house. In her memoir, Sheela repeatedly shifts responsibility for her decisions to Bhagwan, saying that he was fully engaged in organizing the ranch, "Even if it was never publicly acknowledged, Bhagwan was the force behind all the rules. We had created the legal impression that He did not have the slightest clue about our worldly affairs. However, in

⁸¹ Gordon, 80

reality the smallest of instructions came from him.”⁸² However, multiple sources, including Sheela, confirm that Bhagwan actually spent most of his time watching movies,⁸³ breathing nitrous oxide, and taking Valium⁸⁴ from as early as November, 1981. Though Bhagwan was involved in ranch policy to some degree, this study can only speculate to what extent. For the purposes of this study, Sheela was the functional leader of the commune. She may well have consulted with Bhagwan regularly as she claims, but ultimately she gave the orders, worked with administrators that she appointed and settled day-to-day problems.

Though Bhagwan’s charismatic authority remained a vital component of the movement in Oregon, Sheela’s actions indicate she was routinizing the movement toward a stable organization that could function and survive after Bhagwan’s death. As mentioned before, Weber says the “disappearance” of a charismatic leader forces the problem of succession on a charismatic movement. The problem with succession in this study is complicated because Bhagwan didn’t die during this period thus making discussion of this question—which Weber indicates as very important to his theory of routinization—pure speculation. However, venturing briefly into that scenario, it is likely the Rajneesh movement would not have gone looking for Bhagwan’s reincarnation as Tibetan monks seek out the next Dalai Llama. Instead parts of the movement would have splintered off while the core membership would have most likely followed the highest ranking administrative staff member, Sheela at this time, in continuing their pursuit of enlightenment as

⁸² Sheela, kll. 2864

⁸³ Milne, 248

⁸⁴ Sheela, kll. 267-300; Milne, 230-233

directed by Bhagwan's teachings and also protecting their material interest in the movement's continued existence. I can speculate here with some confidence since that is exactly what happened when Bhagwan—who had changed his name to Osho—died in 1990. Many international communes broke away from the main organization, but continued following and preaching his teachings unofficially while his trustees now administer Osho's estate and guide his diminished following from Poona, India.

Part 3: Routinization of Charisma in the Oregon Commune

“The new commune... was a dreamland created by Bhagwan. It was His life’s work. And in His creation I was the boss, the queen...”

Ma Anand Sheela (Sheela, kll, 177)

Charismatic movements cannot last forever. Even if a charismatic leader can reconfirm their “gift of grace”⁸⁵ over many years and keep their organization intact despite continual challenges from both external and internal forces, their “disappearance,” as Weber calls it, always initiates the question of succession. How can the organization change from a “transitory phenomenon” into a stable organization? Weber’s answer is “it is necessary for the character of charismatic authority to become radically changed,”⁸⁶ either legalized or traditionalized, “according to whether rational legislation is involved or not...”⁸⁷ The Rajneesh movement lacked any mechanism for rational legislation and under Sheela was already predisposed to traditionalize. The group, young as it was, had established firmly that Bhagwan’s secretary was always the second most powerful person in the movement and in charge of the “routine” affairs of the commune. This was one of the few traditions or “precedents” the group respected, given its anti-institutional foundation. Sheela quickly consolidated her power after her appointment. She demoted fellow longtime sannyasins who might question her authority, appointed her loyal friends and followers to powerful positions within the movement, and expected her word to be taken as law. Furthermore, her position in

⁸⁵ This is another term Weber uses for ‘charisma,’ which in turn is the translator’s English translation of *Gottesgnadentum*

⁸⁶ Weber, 364

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*,367

Oregon was almost unassailable because she decided who could move onto the ranch, what they would do, and where they would live. She or anyone in her inner circle could easily determine and assign a disciple's status. She was a traditional ruler with traditional means, but she also built a large, pyramided shaped bureaucracy in order to handle the complex, demanding, and expensive development of the commune. This administrative staff, though made up of people loyal to Sheela, especially at the top of the hierarchy, approached in their technical knowledge and organizational ability the kind of "bureaucratic administrative organ" Weber describes as acting in a rational-legal entity. This arrangement bolstered her power, meshing her autocracy with an efficient means for action. Before discussing how Sheela traditionalized the commune, the geography of the ranch should be examined briefly, since the physical reality of the commune outlined the brewing conflict with the Oregonians and contributed to disciples' dependency on the movement.

The Big Muddy

Rajneeshpuram was built on a 64,000 acre ranch in southeast Oregon. Since the early 1900s, ranchers and cowboys had overgrazed the area. Gross erosion set in after the ecology was decimated and annual rainstorms ravaged the terrain, turning thousands of acres into a mud field, therefore the nickname "Big Muddy." The area around the Big Muddy had always been sparsely populated, home mostly to farming families or retirees.⁸⁸ The summers can be sweltering, often reaching over a hundred degrees

⁸⁸ Carter, 120-21

Fahrenheit while the winters could be extremely cold with temperatures falling below zero degrees Fahrenheit while the Rajneesh commune was active.⁸⁹

When locals learned in summer 1981 that someone had actually bought the land they assumed, based on the limited and misleading information Sheela provided them, that a wealthy, retired couple had bought the land.⁹⁰ Sheela, calling herself Sheela Silverman, said she had plans to restore the land and start a small farm with her husband at the time, John Shelfer a.k.a. Swami Prem Jayananda. This was the beginning of Sheela's long campaign to deceive and confuse neighbors and the state about the true scale and intention of the commune.

Sheela "fell in love with it [the ranch] at first sight" and offered to buy it immediately.⁹¹ The location was arid, scenic and within the commune's financial means, just as Bhagwan had requested. Sheela had her own requirements though. First, she presumably wanted an isolated site for the Buddhafield, which would mean greater security for Bhagwan. In India, the Ashram's proximity to the city of Poona had been the source of crime, overcrowding and clashes with orthodox Hindus.⁹² An assassin with a knife had infiltrated the commune and tried to harm Bhagwan once before, terrifying his disciples.⁹³ A remote site meant the commune could also evolve as Sheela saw fit, with far less outside interference. In the city of Poona, the ashram had been subjected to municipal, regional and national laws. In Oregon, the ranch was surrounded by wide mountainous national forests to the south, east, and west. High

⁸⁹ Milne, 227

⁹⁰ Carter, 135

⁹¹ Ibid., kll. 2397

⁹² Ibid., kll. 2069

⁹³ Ibid., kll. 3302

desert stretched all the way to the Columbia River in the north. The only road into the Big Muddy was a winding gravel track.⁹⁴ It can be argued that Sheela believed, erroneously, that this isolated spot in Oregon would free the commune from the institutional scrutiny the movement had attracted in Poona.

For commune construction, Sheela selected a site along the banks of the John Day River, technically within a canyon, but with a view of Mount Hood. The spot kept the sannyasins isolated from Oregon's people and society, a condition that also nurtured in the commune a sense of invulnerability. Anyone on their way to the ranch could be detected miles off and the one lane road was easily blocked. It seemed like the ideal location. Except Sheela had bought the land without knowing anything about Oregon's uniquely restrictive zoning laws, a miscalculation that would define her entire administration.

Sheela takes control

The control Sheela established in this early period set the foundation for the commune's daily functions over the next four years and began the routinization of Bhagwan's charisma. Once she obtained the land, Sheela took over managing every aspect of ranch development and had final say on which disciples could move in. She secretly informed a core group of 40 disciples in India about the land purchase, and began planning with them how to move Bhagwan and essential resources to Oregon. However, she swore them to absolute silence on the matter. The movement's new

⁹⁴ Carter, 121

commune and Bhagwan's impending move from India to America remained a secret from the Poona Ashram until the morning he left by car for the airport.

The first disciples allowed on the ranch were Sheela's close colleagues and twenty regular disciples flown into Oregon to begin construction in August.⁹⁵ Carter writes "She began to take on the authority of Bagwan in her relationship with these followers, telling them to surrender to her authority (or to leave)."⁹⁶ She told these disciples that "Some of you felt that you were special people in Poona... understand that nobody will be special on my ranch."⁹⁷ Milne recalls that Sheela dismissed the first team of disciples, calling them useless. "I will have no more cream puffs on my commune," he quotes her as saying.⁹⁸ These quotes come from Milne's portrayal of Sheela written years after the ranch dissolved, but it's not outside Sheela's own words. Writing in 2012, Sheela laments how too many disciples felt they should have received "special" treatment and were above the hard labor she demanded. "For many people in the commune work was not connected to spirituality. They did not know the good ol' joy of working."⁹⁹ But work on the commune was fundamentally different than in Poona. At the Indian Ashram some of the hardest jobs were kitchen work or bathroom cleaning, but in Oregon work assignments came to include driving bulldozers, digging ditches, irrigation work, construction, and farming, all from about 7 a.m. to 7 or 8 p.m. Indoor work assignments, especially administrative work, were coveted in Oregon and

⁹⁵ Milne, 206

⁹⁶ Carter, 72

⁹⁷ Milne, 206

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Sheela, kl. 3047

usually reserved for disciples who had a friendship or favor with one of the elites or coordinators.

From late July 1981, when the land deal was completed, to September, the Oregon commune grew extremely fast, going from Sheela and a few assistants to a population of nearly 300 in about two months. More disciples were flown into the ranch in early August and by August 28, the first major structure was completed: a mansion for Bhagwan. Having satisfied the charismatic leader, Sheela instructed the disciples to begin construction on permanent shelters for themselves and a cafeteria for meals. By that time, Jefferson and Wasco counties had issued the commune 53 total permits for “farm-related” dwellings.¹⁰⁰ Just a few weeks later in mid-September 1981, at least 250 disciples were living on the ranch and working 12 hour days, seven days a week.¹⁰¹ Meanwhile Sheela told locals and newspapers that 40 people lived on the slowly developing “farm”.¹⁰² Sheela says she “played small tricks to divert attention of the locals” because she didn’t want to alarm them to the true scale of the project, correctly assuming there would be opposition.¹⁰³ Carter best summarizes the thinking: “Rather than accommodating to the constraints of development in Oregon, or eroding those constraints slowly, Rajneesh leaders became so fixed in their goal of an immediate international center, that their tactics alienated successively broad segments of the population and the combined pressures from these [groups] forced retrenchment or escalation .”¹⁰⁴

¹⁰⁰ Carter, 136

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Ibid., 137

¹⁰³ Sheela, kll. 2528

¹⁰⁴ Carter, 124

The Queen in her court

The ranch's decision making process came to occur mostly in Sheela's living room. It became a routine, ceremonious affair lasting from morning until the late afternoon, as stylized as the court of any "Indian Maha Raja."¹⁰⁵ Sheela lived in a luxurious prefabricated house called Jesus Grove at the center of the commune. "My house...had more than thirty rooms...there was also a huge living room of about 350 square meters and wide corridors everywhere."¹⁰⁶ Only Bhagwan's Lao Tzu House was bigger and more richly furnished than Sheela's mansion in Jesus Grove. The commune leadership and organizers streamed through her home every day, presenting their problems and issues. Disciples had to arrange an audience with her, in the presence of her favored elites who typically lived in Jesus Grove with her. Throughout the day they would sit beside her, complementing her on decisions or embellishing points like good courtiers.¹⁰⁷

Gordon spent two days with Sheela in August 1982 and recorded how these meetings went both days:

On each of the days I am with Sheela, she calls a meeting of the coordinators of all the ranch departments. They pack her living room, people covering every inch of couch and chair and floor space. Sheela clearly relishes these meetings. As she issues directives and responds to queries from the motor pool, construction workers, the architects, the medical clinic, she resembles a great hitter... She sends the ball sharply in every direction and rarely misses.

Sheela, draped in silk and satin robes, reclining in the Roman style on a couch, would listen, ask questions and often decree a solution. During her audiences she "liked to

¹⁰⁵ Gordon, 111

¹⁰⁶ Sheela, kll. 2558

¹⁰⁷ Gordon, 111

create impromptu little dramas about herself” and sometimes act seemingly on impulse, “give a sudden gift, delay an airplane others were waiting for, change her mind about a project, and express her anger...”¹⁰⁸ This fits with Weber’s description of a traditionalized ruler who “is free to confer ‘grace’ on the basis of his [or her] personal pleasure or displeasure...personal likes and dislikes, quite arbitrarily...So far as his [or her] action follows principles at all, these are principles of substantive ethical common sense, of justice, or of utilitarian expediency.”¹⁰⁹ Sheela was inclined to make many of her most important decisions based on “utilitarian expediency” because of her commitment to “protect His Teachings and His commune,”¹¹⁰ but also because this was the only “rule” she had to obey. Only Bhagwan could reprimand or contradict her and nothing of that nature happened until November, 1984. Her leadership became reactive and ad hoc, an effective approach on the ranch where resistance could be fixed by expelling the rebel. Sheela granted or denied requests as they were made with no formal review process except, in the case of more difficult or contentious matters, when she promised to bring a matter to the attention of Bhagwan, the ultimate authority.

Weber argues in his description of traditional authority that “the obligations of obedience on the basis of personal loyalty are essentially unlimited” and the commands of the leader are “legitimized in one of two ways: partly in terms of traditions...in so far as this is true, to overstep the traditional limitations would endanger his [or her] traditional status...in part, it is a matter of the chief’s free personal decisions.”¹¹¹ All disciples were obligated to heed Sheela’s orders on the basis of their loyalty to

¹⁰⁸ FitzGerald, 280

¹⁰⁹ Weber, 342

¹¹⁰ Sheela, kll. 314

¹¹¹ Weber, 341

Bhagwan since Sheela, appointed by the guru to make the right decisions. Bhagwan was the only limit on Sheela's authority, having already ceded to her every necessary power to protect him and the ranch. Though he lived on the commune, the guru was almost totally unreachable by regular disciples. So the limits he imposed on her day to day decisions are difficult to discern since she was the only one who could have reported on those limits and Sheela, unsurprisingly, says she always relayed his words perfectly. Gordon argues that "In Sheela's hands Rajneesh's words became tools to justify the tactics she had used to establish and enlarge the ranch, the extraordinary measures she would take to protect it from...dissent and doubt from within." Bhagwan's words in other words, most of them from discourses he delivered in the 1970s, became the commune's traditional "precedents" on which Sheela exercised her authority. Sannyasins could always appeal Sheela's decisions by asking for Bhagwan to intercede, they could send him letters, make complaints or question Sheela's decisions—those options were always open—but the appeal had to go through Sheela.¹¹²

Building the Ranch

The process of administering ranch policy was kept deliberately secret for most of the commune's brief history. Frances Fitzgerald, journalist and author, took an interest in Rajneeshpuram in 1983, and eventually included an in-depth profile of the commune's function and history in her book *Cities on a Hill: A Journey Through Contemporary American Cultures*. At the commune, she was mystified as to how the

¹¹² Sheela, kll. 2104; Gordon, 110

ranch was actually organized because of the vague and drawn out answers from sannyasins she questioned:

To ask how the ranch was organized was to elicit answers having to do with spontaneity and awareness. When I asked Videh, the water manager, how decisions were made in his department, he said, “Technical decisions are made by technical people and whoever else is concerned. It’s a personal thing....” What they did say was that Ma Anand Sheela...was the “mother” of their family and made the major policy decisions in consultation with Bhagwan. So much was clear enough. Sheela was—observably—the queen of Rajneeshpuram.¹¹³

The talk of ‘awareness’ FitzGerald experienced was a typical response from disciples when quizzed by outsiders about life on the ranch. They dodged direct questions, provided vague assessments of life on the ranch and always circled back to matters of spirituality and ‘awareness.’ They had a lot of reasons for the vague responses. For example, many sannyasins were living on the ranch with expired visas and the ranch was under increasing scrutiny by the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service.¹¹⁴ The ranch was building many of their city structures on land that was legally zoned for farming, not residential or industry uses, which led to a series of court battles between the commune and 1000 friends of Oregon, a land use advocacy group.¹¹⁵ Bhagwan himself had come to America on a medical visa, which expired in early 1982 and for years the commune tried in vain to get him a visa as a “refugee religious leader”—an effort complicated by his continuing public silence.¹¹⁶ All these factors meant Sheela and the ranch leadership forbade any disciple to give details on how the ranch operated, the actual population, or where Bhagwan was at any one time because of security

¹¹³ Ibid., 278-79

¹¹⁴ Carter, 140

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

concerns. When cornered with legal questions, disciples might state “We leave that to the attorneys.”¹¹⁷ Carter noted that if a sannyasins became very talkative, another one might interrupt and remind them they “should return to worship (work).”¹¹⁸ Only the commune’s PR team the Hostesses, also known as the Twinkies, were authorized to answer outsider’s questions in detail, but their ‘answers’ could be at odds with visible evidence or complete nonsense.¹¹⁹

In reality, after Sheela gave an order, her will was implemented through a large bureaucratic administrative staff made up of various departments, “coordinators,” and officials, all of whom worked at various levels of a pyramid-shaped hierarchy. Every disciple worked, and every working disciple worked under a coordinator of some kind. The coordinators in turn reported to higher ranking coordinators, department heads, the mayor, a commune leader or Sheela. FitzGerald notes that disciples acknowledged Sheela as a mother-like figure, the coparental figure with Bhagwan as the “father”, and if she was the mother of the commune, that implies the regular disciples fit the role of “children.” Indeed by 1984, Sheela officially changed the title of “coordinators” to “Moms.”¹²⁰ Weber argues that a traditional ruler recruits their administrative staff from personal “favorites,” ties of loyalty, and family members as well as for their technical expertise. Sheela did emphasize loyalty when recruiting her officers, but she also selected for technical knowledge. Her chief of finances, Ma Prem Savita, was a former charter accountant. The mayor of Rajneeshpuram, Swami Krishna Deva, was a low-ranking disciple before

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 148

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 17

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 149

¹²⁰ Gordon, 135

Sheela's ascension, but quickly gained status because of his knowledge of U.S. zoning regulations. Ma Prem Isabel, head of the commune's Public Relations and Editor in Chief of the Rajneesh Times, was a former PR expert. Lawyers in particular came to occupy many of the most important places in commune bureaucracy. Because many professionals had been drawn to Bhagwan in the first place Sheela did not lack for talent when building her bureaucratic structure.

Sheela's Bureaucracy

"Sheela appears to know as much about who is sleeping with whom—and whether or not it is good—as she does which crews are overworked and where infighting and power plays are affecting production. Nothing seems too small or too personal for her notice. She has, she says...her sources." James Gordon¹²¹

Building Rajneeshpuram would have been impossible without the specialized, complex bureaucratic administration Sheela built in the commune's first year. The ranch was essentially an expansive, continuous building project between 1981 and '84 that involved more than 2,000 laborers and managers working 12 hour days, seven days a week. In the movement's short history, the task was unprecedented. The commune spent tens of millions of dollars on earth moving equipment, building materials, and irrigation piping. They built an earthen dam, an airstrip, a medical laboratory, an industrial printing press, and cultivated several thousand acres of farmland. In 1984, the ranch had the fourth largest public transportation system in Oregon.¹²² Managing all of

¹²¹ Gordon, 111

¹²² FitzGerald, Frances. *Cities on a Hill: A Journey Through Contemporary American Cultures*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1986), 244.

this frenetic development was a pyramid-like bureaucracy under Sheela. The bureaucracy, though it was assembled piecemeal, became an ‘administrative organ’ with the characteristics Weber describes. Though Sheela ruled like a queen, a traditional ruler under Weber’s typology of authority, her reign was implemented through this sophisticated bureaucracy.

K.D, also known as David Henry Knapp, had joined the movement in 1978 after reading one of Bhagwan’s books. He had lived in Poona and in July 1981 Sheela had him flown to the ranch. The reason he was one of the first disciples allowed on the ranch, K.D. believes, was because he had worked in California property law during the ‘70s and had specialized knowledge about zoning restrictions, which had turned into a major legal obstacle for ranch development. He quickly moved into Sheela’s inner circle and was soon unanimously elected as mayor of Rajneeshpuram. When Sheela left the ranch in 1985 he left to for a few weeks, returned briefly and then disappeared. When Bhagwan left the ranch a month later, K.D. resurfaced. He had turned evidence for the FBI to avoid prosecution and a place in the Witness Protection Program.

Consider that K.D. was a specialist raised suddenly from a regular member to commune leader, without any evidence of Bhagwan’s involvement, to become a commune leader and a part of Sheela’s inner circle. One of the criteria Weber lists for a true bureaucracy is that individuals are “selected on the basis of technical qualifications.”¹²³ Though Sheela didn’t have any specific expert knowledge of her own—she had studied arts at a small college in New Jersey before joining

¹²³ Weber, 333

Bhagwan¹²⁴—she did have an eye for talent and a talent for putting people into the right positions. Most of the women (and two men) in Sheela’s inner circle, which served as the commune’s elite leaders, had specialized skills. In Poona, Disciples with expert knowledge had usually been no more likely than untrained disciples to gain special privileges or positions in the commune. In Oregon, technical knowledge became extremely valuable and disciples with degrees and practical knowledge of use to the commune’s development were usually elevated above their peers.

The commune bureaucracy was organized into a strict hierarchy with Sheela’s closest colleagues, the elites, exercising almost as much authority as she did. Beneath and separate from what Weber would call their “spheres of competence”¹²⁵ were coordinators, assistants, and city officials with their own responsibilities. In turn these administrators were empowered with authority to complete their tasks on the ranch. Confrontations and complaints with higher ranking sannyasins on the commune were classified as ‘negativity,’ which in turn could mean a hard talk with an official or a variety of punishments, the worst of which would be Sheela’s official expulsion of a member from the commune and movement.

Weber requires in his description of rational-legal authority a sophisticated organization of offices or a “continuous organization of official functions bound by rules”¹²⁶ which make up the bureaucratic administrative staff. As already stated, the Rajneesh movement never fully developed into a rational-legal authority, instead becoming a traditionalized authority under Sheela, but the structure of Sheela’s

¹²⁴ Sheela, kll. 1174

¹²⁵ Weber, 333

¹²⁶ Ibid., 330

bureaucratic administrative staff points to how this system was evolving into a functional bureaucracy even as Sheela took on the powers of an autocrat. Followers became loyal not only to the charisma of the leader, but the success of the group, thus pushing the organization into a more stable form as a traditional system.

Despite this clear hierarchy, which Carter argues came close to a “caste system,”¹²⁷ the word hierarchy was eventually banned on the ranch in 1984, as both speech and in printed materials,¹²⁸ because of course there was supposed to be no hierarchy on the ranch.

Recruitment, “Rajneeshism” and Sheela’s Priests

Weber writes that the nature of recruitment under a pure charismatic authority differs from what occurs during the routinization process. “The original basis of recruitment is personal charisma. With routinization, the...disciples may set up norms for recruitment.”¹²⁹ Before Oregon, Bhagwan had always initiated members, but after the movement resettled in Oregon, joining the Rajneesh movement was as simple as a mail order. Rather than gaining a new name from Bhagwan and having a mala draped around their neck, new recruits could, “for a small fee,” apply through the mail and receive their name with their mala and a small booklet of instructions in a package.¹³⁰ They would join a mailing list and be encouraged to buy more of Bhagwan’s teaching materials.¹³¹ This change in recruiting was both practical and cost effective for the

¹²⁷ Carter, 209

¹²⁸ Gordon, 135

¹²⁹ Weber, 367

¹³⁰ Carter, 61

¹³¹ McCormack, Win. *The Rajneesh Chronicles*. (Portland, Oregon: Tin House Books, 2010), 66

commune, given that Bhagwan was secluded and the commune was now so isolated. The ultimate goal for any member in the movement, be they from the original group in India or a newer “mail order sannyasin,”¹³² was to join Bhagwan on the commune. They had to send in an application, and a small fee, and were usually approved based on technical skills they could bring.¹³³ In this way the movement was relying less on personal charisma and much more on administrative priorities.

Perhaps Sheela’s biggest change to the movement, a clear indication of her power and how she was stabilizing the society in the long term was how she turned the anti-religious commune into a “religionless religion” called “Rajneeshism.” Bhagwan’s teachings, sayings, and sermons were codified and a multi-tiered priesthood established wherein Sheela was high priestess and boddhisatva. The change was a dramatic turn from Bhagwan’s fervent rejection of all religious institutions, but that year, through Sheela, Bhagwan announced “the religion of Rajneeshism.” In July 1983 religion was codified when a new commune department, “The Academy of Rajneeshism,” of which Sheela was president, published several thousand copies of “Rajneeshism: An Introduction to Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh and His Religion.”

This was the most important step Sheela could have taken towards routinizing the movement towards a traditional authority. In codifying Bhagwan’s teachings, Sheela laid the groundwork for introducing a “definite order” into the commune and thus adapting the still charismatic administrative staff, and the commune’s “principles of administration” to “everyday conditions,” which as Weber writes is the “most

¹³² Carter, 61

¹³³ McCormack, 63

fundamental problem” in the routinization of charisma.¹³⁴ Further, turning Bhagwan’s words into precedents, and not everything he said but specific parts that were selected and edited by the Academy Sheela organized.

Carter writes that the Rajneeshism book signaled a “dramatic shift in the movement’s orientation,” but also notes that many of the changes the book heralded had been accumulating since Sheela started the Oregon commune. The book identifies Bhagwan as a “new Buddha” and the commune as his “energy field” for making a new society. It includes an interview with the guru from that year¹³⁵ where he states his religion had a major advantage over Buddhism, Christianity, Islam or any other world religion: hindsight. Since Bhagwan had come after these prophets, he had learned from their mistakes and his religion, grounded in history, would be the first to unite ‘the materialism of the west with the spirituality of the east.’ Bhagwan announces here that all other religions would eventually “disappear into Rajneeshism as all rivers disappear into the ocean.”¹³⁶ The small, red book, shorter than many of Bhagwan’s other published works, emphasized his vision of a world near destruction, which can only be saved by a “Homo Novus” or new humanity guided by Bhagwan’s teachings. The book codified Bhagwan’s words, established three levels of ministers, prescribed ceremonies for birth, and marriage, burial, and defined a host of religious practices, including the wearing of the mala, red robes, and meditation. These changes turned the obligations Bhagwan had asked of his disciples into routine practices and his charismatic lectures

¹³⁴ Weber, 371

¹³⁵ Gordon 130

¹³⁶ Ibid.

into codified precedents. For the first time disciples could be termed, according to the book, “Rajneeshees,” a word, which Gordon adds, many disciples “gagged on.”¹³⁷ During court dispositions in 1983 and 1984, Rajneeshees were allowed to swear on the Book of Rajneeshism instead of the bible. Though it did not set down a canon law, it could have been the basis for such a system. In its final form the little red book was a collection of famous Bhagwan sayings, specific instructions on routine practices expected from adherents and organizing the new trained priesthood Sheela headed.

The new priesthood of Rajneeshism was divided into three levels, with each higher level possessing the powers of the lower levels:

- Arihantas could perform birth and marriage ceremonies.
- Siddhas could also perform death ceremonies
- Acharyas could perform all ceremonies and are empowered to initiate new disciples into neo-sannyas.¹³⁸

This new priesthood effectively provided Sheela with a new class of powerful disciples under her control, and further routinized positions of authority into well defined offices, a commune development that fits neatly with Weber’s prediction that “...the ‘laity’ become differentiated from the ‘clergy; that is, the participating members of the charismatic administrative staff which has now become routinized.”

What were the motivations for distilling Bhagwan’s teachings into a religion? Carter writes that it is difficult to ascertain answers, but then provides several “cynical” reasons that, given Sheela’s opportunism, do not seem so unlikely.¹³⁹ A close look at the major changes Rajneeshism introduced demonstrate Sheela gaining more authority

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ Carter 186-187

¹³⁹ Ibid.

and the new institution seemed well suited to address several of her biggest problems, including keeping Bhagwan in America on an expired visa.

However, Carter does not account here for the organizational benefits of creating an order of ministers and codifying Rajneeshee practices. The change presented an opportunity to further routinize the guru's charismatic authority into a traditional religious institution, from a cult into a more permanent organization. The Rajneesh priests were automatically higher status than other sannyasins and they did not have to receive their commission from Bhagwan. With Bhagwan's teachings now prescribed into ritual, ceremony and edict, for the first time there was only one "right" way to practice Rajneeshism, that is the way set forward in the book and endorsed by Sheela's academy. Carter speculates that the Academy would have created "a basis for legitimacy independent of Bhagwan."¹⁴⁰

¹⁴⁰ Carter 186

Conclusion

“Madness and destruction spread to the whole commune after I left... Why was my good work and respect so easily destroyed and even more quickly forgotten?”

*Ma Anand Sheela*¹⁴¹

The events at Rajneeshpuram have challenged observers and scholars to make sense of an unusual conflict in Oregon history and why the commune ultimately failed. The common narrative is that Sheela’s schemes failed to empower the commune and when Bhagwan intervened in 1985 the ranch was so badly positioned and under so much legal and political strain that it was doomed to collapse no matter what happened. On September 13, 1985, Sheela left the ranch forever, taking a commercial flight off the ranch to Zurich, Switzerland.¹⁴² She was followed by more than a dozen of the commune’s top administrators, including the chief financial officer, the head medical officer, the head of work assignments, the chief investments officer, the corporate treasurer, and more. In effect, the commune’s “bureaucratic machinery” was gone.

Bhagwan held a press conference two days later telling the world that Sheela and her “fascist gang” had been deposed and now the commune and the disciples were free from her “Stalinist regime.” His words demonstrate a direct attack on the system Sheela had created, the bureaucracy itself. He claimed total innocence of anything she had been doing for four years, saying that he had been completely confined to his house and ignorant of everything and anything happening on the ranch. He condemned Sheela, revealed a number of plots and conspiracies, and claimed she had even tried to kill him

¹⁴¹ *Sheela, kll. 3120*

¹⁴² Fitzgerald, 375

with poison. However, now that Sheela was gone, Bhagwan declared that he would be personally running the movement again. He repudiated the rules and regulations she had crafted for the ranch, burned every copy of the “Book of Rajneeshism” on the commune and appointed a new secretary. He told disciples they didn’t even have to wear “sunrise colors” anymore and didn’t have to work on the ranch if they didn’t want to. However, the commune could not survive this transition. The power structure Sheela had created, which depended on fear of her expulsion powers and the bureaucracy she had created, was gone. Matters for the commune went from bad to worse: disciples, disillusioned more than relieved by the revelations, began leaving the ranch in large numbers. Ranch construction, always incessant on the commune, ceased completely. Work assignments were ignored and no one knew who was in charge of commune departments anymore because coordinators and administrators were the first to leave, either with Sheela or surreptitiously after Bhagwan’s press conference.

Evidently, Bhagwan’s charismatic authority was not a powerful enough substitute for the efficient bureaucratic administrative staff Sheela had built, the technical knowledge those bureaucrats had accumulated or the complex system of rules Sheela had enforced. Without these systems, the commune quickly fell apart despite Bhagwan’s renewed presence, active lecturing and attempts to reconcile with the commune’s neighbors. His charismatic authority had diminished to a perception, an idea that was not supported by the man himself. While Bhagwan’s charismatic authority established the Oregon commune, it could not sustain it. This proves both Weber’s assertions that charismatic authority “exist[s] only in the process of originating”¹⁴³ and

¹⁴³ Weber, 364

that “For all types of authority the...continual functioning of an administrative staff is vital.”¹⁴⁴ In the span of time from when he entered seclusion to when he reasserted himself as leader of the commune, Sheela had routinized the commune, and provided new daily structures of life. Her departure, the collapse of the bureaucracy, and Bhagwan’s attempt to appropriate those powers while also abolishing the rules and precedents she had established destroyed the commune in the end.

Weber’s thesis is a succinct description of how humans tend to organize and coordinate their activities under different kinds of authority. The case of Rajneeshpuram is significant because of how clearly it follows many of Weber’s predictions about routinization of charisma, and the differences between a traditional and charismatic authority. However, Weber doesn’t really account for the presence of a sophisticated bureaucratic administrative staff run by an absolute dictator. This situation has developed in several cases during the 21st century, but has usually involved nation-states. Seeing it occur on a small scale over a very short time period reveals if anything how easily this kind of structure can evolve during charismatic routinization so long as the right talent is present and recognizes the authority of the successor to the charismatic leader. The ranch in many ways was very successful, and ultimately failed because of how Bhagwan attempted to reassert his authority without recognizing that the “magic” was gone.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 383

Appendix A: chronology of Rajneeshpuram

Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh was the founder of a spiritual movement in the 1970s and 80s that blended western materialism and technology with eastern spirituality, meditation, and yoga. Based in India, Rajneesh declared his philosophy “the first religion in the history of the world. All the others are just premature experiments which have failed.”.

Bhagwan’s greatest skill was his oratory. Long before he gave himself the name Bhagwan, meaning “divine being,” he was Mohan Chandra Rajneesh,¹⁴⁵ an energetic, teacher of philosophy with a Masters in the subject. Colleagues and students considered him a clever debater, logician, and lecturer.¹⁴⁶ He became a travelling lecturer in 1960 and quickly gained a reputation for his eloquence as a public speaker in Hindi and his command of English. However, he quickly gained a public reputation for controversy. He maintained in his speeches that all of India’s religions were “dead,” that socialism was a dead loss, and that the country’s entire attitude toward sex and marriage was perverted.¹⁴⁷ He went further, attacking and mocking the orthodoxy of his family religion, Jainism, and labeled Gandhi a manipulative “masochist.”¹⁴⁸ These claims of course drew huge crowds and inspired media stories in every city he went. By 1964 he was regularly addressing crowds of several thousand, mostly middle-class Indians drawn by his bold criticism of orthodoxy and institutions.¹⁴⁹ However, as soon as he picked up followers, the young lecturer, now styling himself a guru, would drop them in favor of wealthier or more influential disciples. He changed the character of his

¹⁴⁵ Carter, 42

¹⁴⁶ Gordon, 25

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 26

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 27

audiences by raising prices to keep out poorer Indians, and years later by switching from Hindi to almost entirely English lectures to draw more westerners and put off Indian disciples. By the time Shela became his secretary in 1981, she was one of the few Indian disciples actually left in the movement and she considered herself more of an American than Indian, according to her memoir. By 1979, most of his disciples were westerners, including many Germans and Americans. This gave the movement huge reach internationally, a broad base of support and great deal of wealth, all factors that allowed the movement to pull off the very risky and expensive move to Oregon. Besides the official Ashram in India, small Rajneesh centers were started in the 1970s in England, Germany, the Netherlands and Australia. By 1980, there were several communes and meditation centers operating in the U.S. as well and the majority of Rajneesh's followers were now westerners.

Rajneesh drew on religion, doctrine, and philosophies from across the world and from any time period to inform his movement, including Buddhism, Nietzsche, , Christianity, and many others. From Buddhism, Bhagwan seems to have taken principles of submission, but ignores the belief system's ultimate goal of self-annihilation, preferring to stress an idea of "Zorba the Buddha" or the argument that one could achieve enlightenment by embracing worldly things in order to move past them rather than denying their attraction. He was influenced by what appear to be Nietzsche's work on the "Übermensch" and made the remark himself several times that a super man was necessary for human progress. Bhagwan wrote an analysis of his own on Christ's teachings called the Mustard Seed, but this book has proved elusive. Bhagwan's expansive syncretism led to numerous contradictions or changes in his

previous teachings, but he covered this by saying anything he stated was only true in the moment, "I am going to be contradictory to myself many times for the simple reason that I am trying to bring all the religions to a higher synthesis," he said in *I am That*. This became perhaps the only formal part of his teachings known as "atomistic truth" or the idea that truth can exist in discrete packages without contradicting other discrete truths.

In early 1981, Rajneesh took a vow of silence, which his followers called "the ultimate phase" of his work. Bhagwan's secretary, Sheela, said he was doing this because However, he still spoke to his personal secretary Anand Sheela, formerly Sheela Silverman, who he had vested with all his temporal and religious powers and bade to lead the followers he had amassed. One of his last instructions, before his vow, had been to entrust his disciples with finding a site to build a new, larger commune to replace their overcrowded Ashram in Poona, India. Though high-ranking Rajneeshees scouted many sites, Sheela was determined to be the one to find their new haven. She had settled on America, and learned about the barren Big Muddy in Oregon.

By 1983 the ranch was growing with more than 2,000 residents and their activities made the Oregon nightly news every week. When the commune violated its original zoning rights, the state got involved. Legal battles erupted over allegations of libel, harassment, and prejudice. Unable to obtain building permits, the commune moved into the tiny town of Antelope, population 75 with 43 registered voters, by moving in and taking all the seats on the town council in 1983. They renamed the city Rajneesh and earned the undying anger of many Oregonians who felt they had invaded Antelope. Still unable to acquire the building permits they needed, Sheela made plans to elect two

Rajneeshees as County Commissioners, effectively turning Wasco County into Rajneesh controlled territory. The first plan was to incapacitate Oregon voters with a strain of salmonella Sheela helped purchase. A test run in the Dalles sickened more than 750 people, but for unknown reasons the strategy was not put into effect before election day, despite the commune pretty much getting away with it. The second strategy was to bus in hundreds of homeless people from across the nation, as far as New York, to take advantage of Oregon's short voter registration periods. The homeless were given room and board at the ranch and made to agree to vote for Rajneeshee candidates. However, this strategy failed too when the Oregon Secretary of State used emergency rules that stopped any new voters from participating in the county election unless they were cleared by a civic board first. Sheela abandoned the election plan and she abandoned her homeless voters, ordering them to be moved off the ranch and dropped off all over rural Oregon.

In November 1984, Bhagwan cancelled his vow of silence. He was allegedly furious with Sheela's failure to win the commune commissioner seats in the Wasco County Commission. Her plans to bus in thousands of homeless voters had failed. Whether Bhagwan was angry with her unethical actions or just her failure to get results is still a matter of speculation. Bhagwan invited a small circle of Sannyasins to councils where he gave more orders and heard about issues on the ranch, effectively ending Sheela's autocracy. Bhagwan pushed her away physically, preferring the company of his mistress, doctor, and gardener. Sheela went from daily two hour meetings with Bhagan to seeing him exclusively in council meetings. For a movement that prized Bhagwan's time and attention as the most valuable resources, this change devastated Sheela's

authority and prestige. Some Rajneeshees who had pushed back against Sheela without getting banished were invited to these councils.

By 1985, "My body was sick and in pain. My heart felt heavy," Sheela wrote. According to her biography, Sheela resigned because she was tired and no longer felt "joy." She claims she did not want to see Bhagwan before leaving and sent her resignation letter to him via her still loyal lieutenants. It is equally possible she could not get an audience with Rajneesh. On September 13, she resigned as Bhagwan's secretary and as the president of RFI. The next day she flew to Zurich, Switzerland, quickly followed by her "Moms."

After she left, Bhagwan was quick to condemn Sheela and "her gang." He said Sheela had "become addicted to being famous." He accused her of poisoning his physician, other Rajneeshees who displeased her, and behind every illegal operation the ranch conducted.

However, Rajneesh and the disciples he appointed to fill the lost management for the commune could not keep the demoralized Rajneeshees on the ranch. Sheela was "the glue that kept the ranch together," and after her departure the ranch began falling apart administratively and socially. Not long after that, Bhagwan also flew out of the ranch unexpectedly, and was arrested by the FBI in North Carolina on charges of immigration fraud. He eventually plead guilty, paid \$400,000 in fines, was deported and eventually resettled in India. In early 1986, his sent agents visited the remains of Rajneeshpuram to dissolve the city and sell the assets. The Rajneeshees clinging to life there were made to leave.

In 1985, Sheela was arrested in Germany and brought back to the US to stand in

court. She plead guilty of attempted murder, assault, telephone tapping, immigration fraud, and product tampering. She was sentenced to 20 years in federal prison and fines amounting to \$470,000. After 29 months she was paroled for good behavior and since her Green Card had expired she was made to leave the US permanently. She moved to Switzerland where she now owns two retirement homes. Sheela writes in her biography from 2012 that she feels no regret for her actions or a sense of accountability. She too claims total innocence of causing any harm.

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Birnstiel, Sheela; Sheela, Ma Anand. *Don't Kill Him: The Story of My Life with Bhagwan Rajneesh*, 1st ed. (New Delhi, India: Prakash Books, Kindle Edition, 2012). Sheela wrote down her version of the Oregon experiment in 2012. The memoir, though somewhat repetitive, is a critical resource for this study and though many sources completely disagree with her version of events, there's a great deal of promise where they do agree. Other memoirs from Rajneeshes accuse Sheela of acting like a queen and a having total power on the ranch. Sheela describes herself, several times, as queen of the ranch and totally in control, though she denies any knowledge of wrongdoing, and credits Bhagwan with "crazy allegations." Without this memoir, such a study of Sheela and Bhagwan's partnership might not be possible, but with it in hand, I can address the allegations against Sheela with her own arguments, and version of events.

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- Los Angeles Times. *L.A. Resident Gets 20 Years for '83 Bombing of Hotel Rajneesh*. (United Press International, 1985). <http://articles.latimes.com/1985-11-10/news/mn-3387_1_three-pipe-bombs>
- McCormack, Win. *The Rajneesh Chronicles*. (Portland, Oregon: Tin House Books, 2010). A collection of articles and features carried in Oregon Magazine during the Oregon experiment. Edited by Win McCormack who also ran Oregon Magazine in that period. The magazine was very critical of the commune and its coverage was usually negative, but their reporting was thorough and carried stories about the commune that no other publication seems to have looked into.
- Milne, Hugh. *Bhagwan: The God That Failed*. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986). A memoir written by Bhagwan's former bodyguard who went by the name Swami Shivamurti. This memoir is considered the most influential of the dozen or so published after Rajneeshpuram, but is widely reviled by loyal Rajneeshees, probably because it did attract such a wide audience and because of the authors closeness to Bhagwan for many years. Milne took a dim view of Sheela and argued she was a tyrant. However, Milne also writes that Bhagwan was still very active in the ranch's operation and endorsed many if not all of Sheela's decisions and plans.
- Mullan, Bob. *Life as laughter: following Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh*. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983). Written in the midst of the Oregon experiment, Mullan sets out to give "as accurate a picture as possible of the movement, together with an analysis and evaluation." His references to Sheela are scant, but he provides an excellent, contextual study of the Rajneesh movement, which focuses on their beliefs, intellectual origins, Bhagwan's central role in the movement and Rajneeshism was practiced at the time. He's a sympathetic academic, who ponders the future of the movement as a spiritual system while questioning the stability of its international network and finances.
- The Rajneesh Times*. (Rajneeshpuram, Oregon: Eds. 1982—1985). The weekly newspaper on the ranch. It reported stories on the ranch, local and national news, wrote opinion, carried letters to the editor. Its tone of writing, and use of blatant political cartoons and fear-mongering may be important to analyzing what the community knew and and might have thought about the outside world and their place in it.

Rise and Fall of Rajneeshpuram. 9:01, posted by Justin Weiler. January 15, 2007.

<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3cDgOf2Om28>>

This short documentary spells out the history and highlights of the ranch. It has a variety of interviews with important actors like David Frohnmayer, and journalists who covered the commune. Also original footage of the meditations and the ranch life. The interviewees' remarks make for useful quotations, including one videographer who comments on how quickly the commune fell after Sheela left at 7:00

Shree Rajneesh, Bhagwan. *Rajneeshpuram, the first press conference after Sheela left*.

(Youtube video, 65:00, posted by Rajendra Swami in 7 parts. February 10, 2013). <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4MpK-V1uEw0>> This press conference after Sheela left was the first time Bhagwan spoke publicly since leaving India. He denounces Sheela, accusing her of trying to isolate him, kill his doctor and poison Oregonians. He claims total ignorance of what "Sheela and her gang" were doing, yet he does seem to know an awful lot about what they did. This recording of Bhagwan may be missing the first of 7 parts, but it still provides insight into how Bhagwan tried to unify the community after Sheela left and may hint at what his actual role was before her departure.

Shree Rajneesh, *Bhagwan. Zorba the Buddha*. (Antelope, Oregon: Rajneesh Foundation International, 1982). Originally published in Antelope, Oregon, this is one of dozens of hand bound books produced by Rajneesh Foundation International and available in the UO Library. Like most of his writings from the time, the book takes the form of a transcript from the Ashram in Poona before Rajneesh's vow of silence in 1981. Rajneesh gives names to followers, debates their reasons for staying or leaving, and waxes philosophical. This manuscript, along with several others including *I am that*, and *Don't Bite my Finger, Look Where I am Pointing* will offer some insight into the core philosophy of Rajneesh.

Toelkes, Philip. *A Master's Flight*. (2005). Accessed last December 1,

2014. <<http://www.oshoviha.org/connection/2005-nov-dec/niren.htm>>

A retelling of Bhagwan's flight from the Ranch in late October, 1985 by the attorney Philip Toelkes who went by Swami Prem Niren as a Rajneeshee. He was married to Ma Prem Isabel who led the ranch's PR and newspaper. Noted as an "ambitious man" by Sheela, Niren's commentary is important as context from a Rajneeshee perspective on Bhagwan's leaving the ranch and his subsequent prosecution by the US. He's also still involved in the Rajneesh legacy and might be a good contact for interviewing. As a lawyer, he could have important counter-arguments to Frohnmayer's opinion.

Weber, Max. *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, Translated by A.M. Henderson and Talcott Parsons. (New York: Oxford University Press. 1947).

Wright, Charles. *Oranges and Lemmings*. (Victoria, Australia: Greenhouse Publications, 1985). A bitter account of an Australian Rajneesh disciple turned skeptic. The small book levies many allegations of fraud and infighting within the commune. Represents the view of a disciple who became strongly anti-Bhagwan.

Zaitz, Les. *Rajneeshees in Oregon: the untold story*. (Portland, Oregon: The Oregonian Newspaper, 1985). Oregonian newspaper reporting from 1980 to 1986 along with contemporary takes on the commune. A 20 part series. The Oregonian's timeline and reporting on the history of Rajneeshpuram. Offers insight into many key events and decisions within the commune. Includes many sources unavailable in other studies. <http://www.oregonlive.com/rajneesh/>