

From New Delhi by Susan Maitra

Hare Krishnas, and Soviets

The Krishna cult is one of those international networks that flourish because they come in handy to intelligence agencies.

Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachov's proposal for reforms within the Soviet Union has created an uneasy tension among the Indian Marxists. While some of them are a bit skeptical of the final outcome of *glasnost* and *perestroika*, others are noticeably disturbed by what they consider as deliberate attempts to snub Marxist ideals. What happened in Calcutta recently is a case in point.

July 15 is a "holy" day in the Hindu calendar and particularly for followers of Lord Krishna. On that day, the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) organized a procession which involves pulling the chariot of Lord Jagannath. Every year, thousands of local devotees and ISKCON members come to participate in the event. But what made this year's Rathajatra Festival a "political event" was the participation of the Calcutta-based Soviet Vice Consul, Alexander Voulin.

Voulin's participation created a turmoil among local communists. Being in charge of West Bengal, the bastion of India's communist movement, the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M) could not afford to let this pass without notice. CPI-M State Unit Secretary Saroj Mukherjee was so furious that he maintained a stony silence. The Information and Cultural Minister of West Bengal indignantly told the press, "It is a pity that we had to see even this. It is unthinkable from a representative of a socialist country." No doubt the shock was numbing.

Reaction of CPI-M's partners in

the Left Front government varied from anger to disgust. CPI leader Biswanath Mukherjee said he was particularly unhappy with Voulin's act because ISKCON's "relations with American imperialism are well known." He added that his party cannot condone Voulin's action, and it has "naturally raised many questions in the public mind."

The secretary of the Forward Bloc, a partner of the Left Front, commented, "If this is done in the name of *glasnost* and *perestroika*, it is setting a dangerous example for our youth."

The same theme was repeated by another socialist leader, Mikhan Paul. He called Voulin's action "an un-Marxist display" and a "deviation from the theory of Socialism." He pointed out that Marx described religion as the "opium of the masses" yet here was a representative of a socialist country indulging in congregational faith.

What has apparently escaped the Indian communists is that ISKCON has been slowly establishing a firm relation with the Soviet leadership for many years. Being an international organization which functions under the umbrage of a religious movement preaching love and peace, ISKCON is a convenient vehicle for the Soviets.

ISKCON began its religious "teachings" in the Soviet Union almost 17 years ago. In spite of occasional "crackdowns," the Krishna followers were allowed to grow there. Over the years, according to ISKCON estimates, they have gained 200 members, 1,000 lay disciples, and 10,000 supporters. Reportedly, 90% of the Krishna followers in the Soviet Union

are university-educated.

The Soviet authorities have so far refused to recognize ISKCON as a religious organization. But, in light of the celebration of the Russian Millennium and Voulin's active participation at the Rathajatra Festival in Calcutta, *glasnost* may sweep away the ban.

Ban or no ban, ISKCON has been allowed to come out from its underground existence. Shaven-headed Soviet Krishna followers wearing flowing orange robes can now be seen chanting "Hare Krishna, Hare Rama." They also have circulated an 11-point declaration announcing their intention "to take part in the struggle for peace as a normal organization." The declaration was signed by 46 Krishna followers from nine Soviet cities. Earlier this year, they had converged in Moscow to ask Soviet leader Gorbachov for status as a religious faith.

ISKCON has different faces to offer in different countries. In the United States, where its members have been accused of gun-running, drug possession, child molestation, and even murder, it has built a golden New Vrindaban in West Virginia. In the tiny hamlet of Mayapur in West Bengal, ISKCON has built a grand temple and has acquired farms where the poor Bengalis farm barefooted using organic manure. Mayapur is now on the tourist map, and tourists are brought in from Calcutta by helicopter for a "comfortable religious weekend."

In Mathura, the birthplace of Lord Krishna, ISKCON has an omnipresence. Here, ISKCON is in league with other Hindu fundamentalists, who are threatening to "liberate" Mathura from Muslim "occupation." Already, these fundamentalists have claimed that a mosque has to be demolished in order to lay bare the place where Lord Krishna was born.