

# LIFE

**New Weapons  
in America's  
Arsenal**

**Glories on Film:  
The First Color**

**Today's Jack the Ripper  
Murderer  
Most Foul**

April 1980/\$1.50

**Children  
of a  
Hare  
Krishna  
commune**





# Children of a Harsh Bliss

IN A WEST VIRGINIA COMMUNE,  
AN EXTRAORDINARY LOOK  
AT LIFE AND LOVE  
AMONG THE KRISHNAS



The children with the outstretched hands have already begun their training as lifelong members of the sect of Hare Krishna, whose robed and tonsured followers have become familiar sights in U.S. cities. Their schooling is taking place in New Vrindavan, an austere commune in the West Virginia hills, and their principal teacher is Swami Bhaktipada (*right*), the community's adored leader. It is his fond hope to build seven more temples just like the \$500,000 palace (*above*) his people completed last year and to turn their 2,000-acre spread into a "spiritual Disneyland" where tourists can come and be amazed—and possibly converted. The sect of a quarter million Americans has 52 temples and six other rural communes like this one. At New Vrindavan 99 children live among the 150 adults and are the first generation to be raised in the U.S. according to the ascetic practices of this ancient Hindu denomination. The elders hope to prevent their children's "contamination" by the culture outside. "Their contemporaries have no idea what life is about," the swami says. "To them, it's all TV and apple pie."

*Formerly Keith Ham of Peekskill, N.Y., and the son of a Baptist minister, Bhaktipada, 43, is considered the nearest thing to a spokesman for Krishna by his flock. He is the determined architect of ambitious expansion programs at New Vrindavan.*

**Photography: Ethan Hoffman**  
**Reporting: Hillary Johnson**







As one of New Vrindavan's holy men makes his way over the rutted landscape, lesser devotees pay homage. Almost everyone carries a cloth bag filled with

a string of 108 beads. For each bead, they must say a mantra. The process can be considered spiritually advanced and wear orange dhotis.



Morning worship starts at 4 a.m. Devotees chant, sing, offer food to their deities, listen to the swami's sermon and pray.

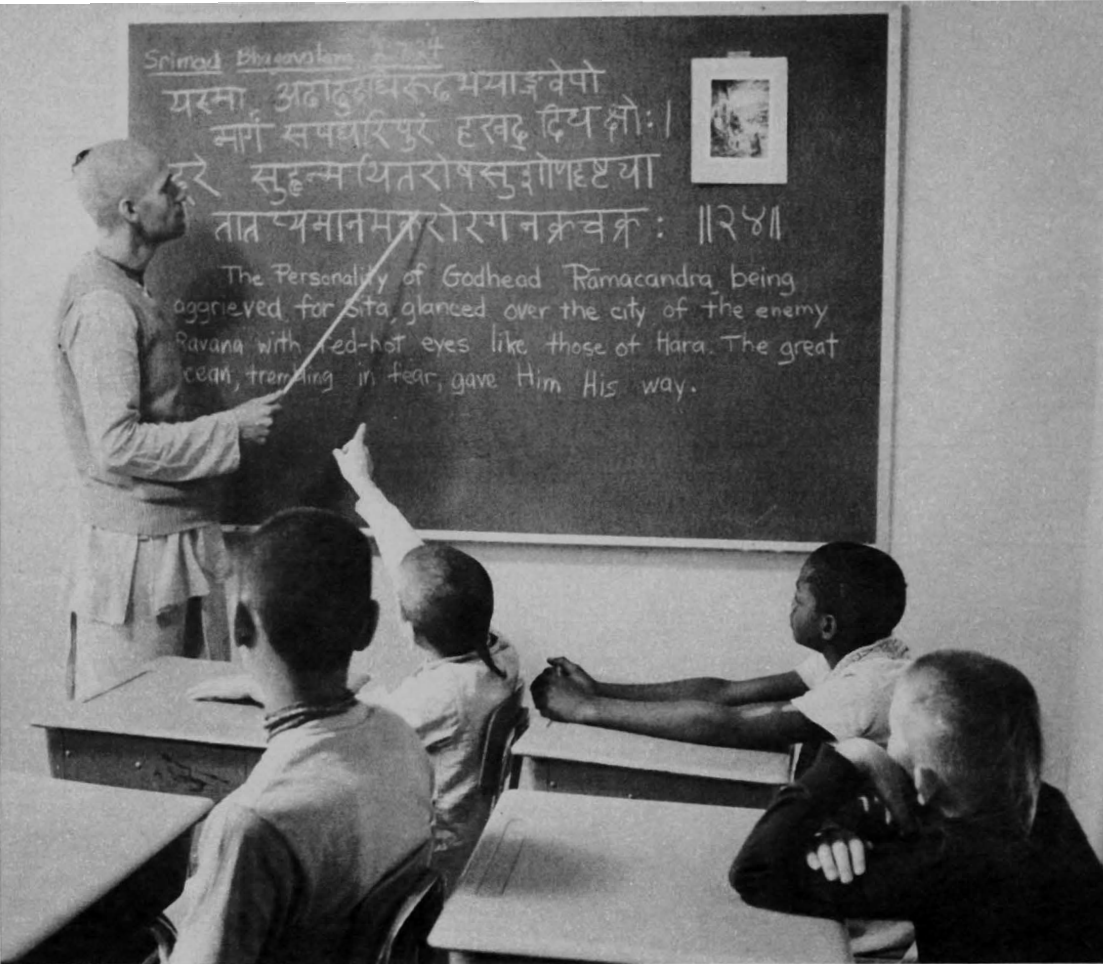


Males keep their heads shaved to foster humility and discourage vanity. This little boy reveled in having all his hair removed.

Inside the palace, followers visit a life-size plastic replica of Swami Prabhupada, the Indian guru who brought their faith to the U.S.

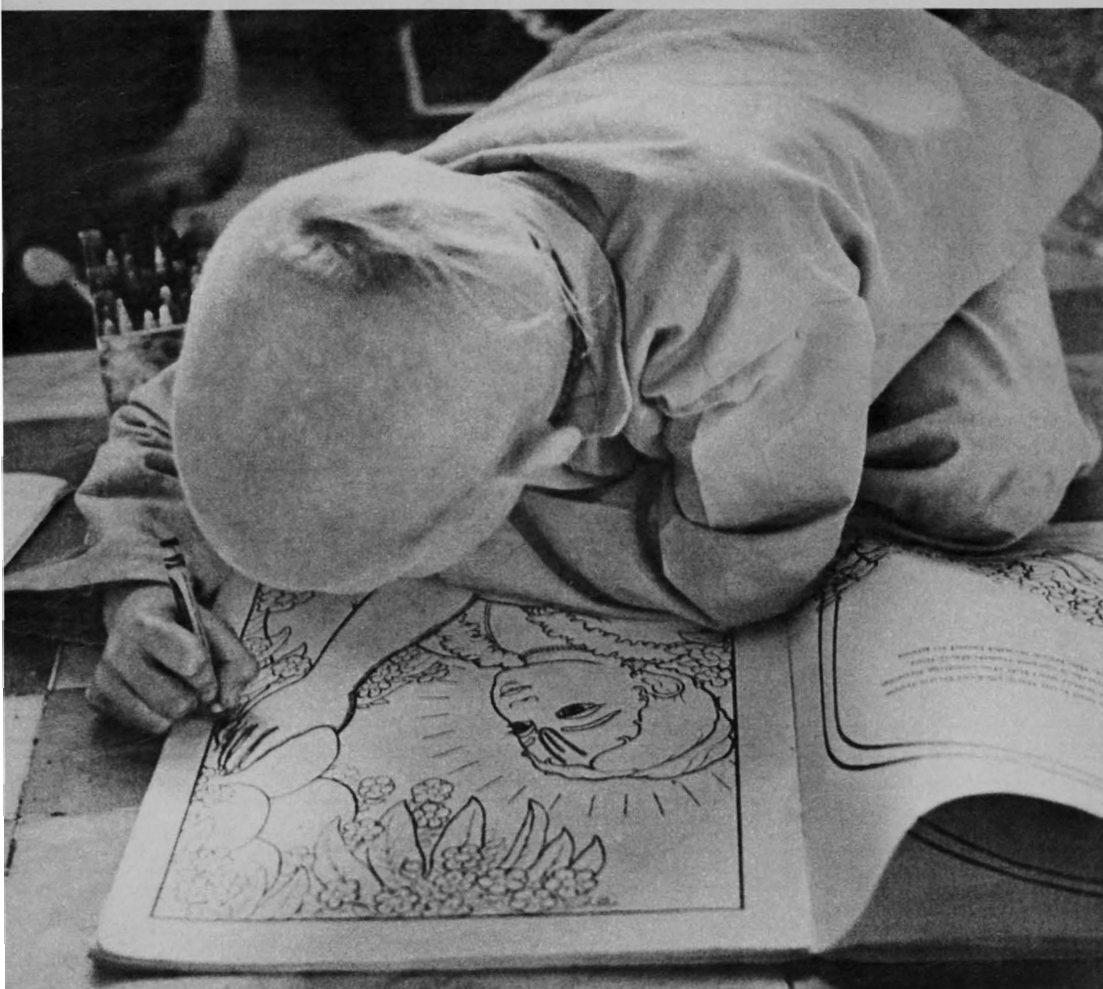






Boys study Sanskrit so they may read the Hindu scriptures in their original form. One teacher is learning the language along with the students. Before class children must chant and pray. Meals are eaten quietly while a tape of the swami's latest lecture plays.

Krishnas believe that children raised in an ascetic environment are happier adults. To prevent the children's "corruption" by the "material world," adults restrict the books, photos and television programs the children see. Here a child draws in a Krishna coloring book. What if the children question the process? "That's okay. We think we have better answers than anybody else."



Most of those at New Vrindavan, including the children, sleep in sleeping bags on the floor. "Beds? They are very expensive and impractical," a devotee explains. Children are sent to sleep as early as 5 p.m., since they must rise at 3 a.m. to prepare for services. Above, boys listen to a classmate who reads from a sacred text. The teacher, one of four in the boys' school, says that several boys here are better readers than their peers in public school. Some parents, who reside elsewhere, simply have left their children to live among the devotees.

## THE STUDY OF SANSKRIT IN A CLIMATE OF FEW COMFORTS

When children are five, they leave their parents' care and move into the boys' or girls' boarding schools, ramshackle houses that the swami bought from the farmers who left when the Krishnas moved in 10 years ago. Toddlers and infants spend their days in a nursery above the cattle barn. Sam Black, 13, has lived here one year. "In pub-

lic school, they just teach you how to drink, eat meat, lie and cheat. And they don't teach you anything about God. I like this school better," he says. According to Sam's teacher, the children are taught "some history and geography—not that we feel this is so important—but so that they won't be considered fools." West Virginia school officials seem unconcerned. "If the Hare Krishnas are in the business of education," one says, "they must know what they're doing." And the swami asserts, "These children will be able to handle themselves anywhere."





## STRICT RULES TO SEPARATE THE SEXES

"In the beginning, usually all women resent their status because they don't understand it," explains a woman, 28, who has adopted the Sanskrit name Katila. At New Vrindavan, the virtue of chastity is repeatedly impressed upon the women, and the sexes are segregated whenever possible. During worship services, women and girls stand behind a balustrade (above). In school, girls receive less instruction than boys. "The girls are not as far along as the boys," one teacher says, "but girls don't have an inclination toward philosophic exploration." At left, a girl is taught sewing. Although celibacy is considered the ideal state, marriages are allowed. But couples are expected to ask the swami's permission to bear children. If they do not, they may be "punished" by giving birth to a female baby. "Bhaktipada says that feminism is a trap," one woman explains. "Women need men to protect them." ♠

*The 14-year-old at right, caught in a reflective moment, was married recently. "She was developing a lot of crushes," a devotee explained. Her sister, 16, is married and pregnant. "Some children produced here are very special," the swami says. "The parents' souls are pure and they attract a pure soul into the womb." So far there are 34 toddlers and newborns at New Vrindavan.*





