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The Rajneeshees Supplied to Society's Demand

In America, religious communities ebb and flow through a turbulent and ever-changing cultural landscape. The 2018 Netflix documentary *Wild Wild Country* details the development of Rajneeshpuram, a spiritual commune in central Oregon whose members called themselves Sannyasins and followed the wisdom of Bhagwan. In 1981, the group relocated from the constraints of their ashram in Poona, India, to the "thousands of hills"[1] of their Oregonian commune largely due to the work of Bhagwan's secretary, Sheela. They had arrived at "the promised land,"[2] yet faced years of local, state-wide, and national pushback. Nonetheless, the Rajneesh marketed an appealing product; an alternative to the chaos, individuality, and strictness of society. When society threatened this product and their community, the Rajneesh used ways of self-preservation that were incompatible with their values. This inconsistency led to disunity and the eventual dismantling of their commune.

The Rajneesh community provided a desired sense of belonging for people who were disillusioned by the chaos of the Cold War era. The series tells the community's story largely by relying on the firsthand accounts of several important Sannyasins. The first was Bhagwan's lawyer, Swami Prem Niren. Prior to his involvement with the Rajneesh, Niren worked "his ass off"[3] at "the fastest-growing law firm in the United States."[4] Although he was successful

[1] *Wild Wild Country*, Part 2, 4:05.
[2] Ibid 4:21.
[3] Ibid, Part 1, 21:33.
[4] Ibid, 21:09.

according to societal standards, he "was done."[5] When a friend showed him tapes of the Bhagwan, Niren "knew that [his] life was changed."[6] In turning to the Rajneesh community, he was seeking shelter from a conventionally successful life. Prior to joining the community, Jane Stork similarly unsuccessfully grasped at the dreamy vision of a traditional. She began feeling "resentful" and angry" as she and her husband experienced "real issues in [their] marriage."[7] When a friend introduced her to the Rajneesh, she soon picked up her life and moved to the ashram in India. In turning to the Rajneesh community, Stork sought escape from restrictive societal expectations. Both Niren and Stork "bought" the Rajneesh vision because they needed an alternative and a shelter from the culture. The Rajneesh successfully provided this shelter and, in addition, a very powerful sense of belonging. The dynamic meditation, a central part of their spirituality, required "rigorous breathing" and simultaneous "HOO[ing]."[8] By focusing on "emotionally arousing events and experiences," the community "[forged] a sense of shared identity, common purpose, and belonging."[9] As the "nuclear family emerged as a powerful symbol of the 'American Way of Life,'" more people experienced "widespread disillusionment with the institution of marriage."[10] Becoming a Sannyasin freed you of these restrictions. As Sociologist Peter Berger explains in *The Sacred Canopy*, all individuals seek "protect[ion] against the nightmare threats of chaos."[11] To Sannyasins like Niren and Stork, society was this threat. The Rajneesh community provided a "sacred cosmos"[12] which shielded them from the "empt[iness] and meaningless[ness]"[13] of man. And as Berger describes, humans instinctively

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[5] Ibid, 21:37.
[6] Ibid, 22:06.
[7] Ibid, 16:10.
[8] Ibid, 18:21.
[9] Asprem, "The Magical Theory of Politics," 30.
[10] Johnson, "Marabel Morgan Defines 'The Total Woman,'" 30-1.
[11] Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, 9.
[12] Ibid.
[13] *Wild Wild Country*, Part 1, 34:04.

separate themselves from the "disorder, senselessness and madness" of "meaninglessness."[14] The Rajneeshees were selling an appealing product.

Beyond offering an alternative to society, the Rajneesh movement used other well-established strategies for drawing people in. First, Bhagwan used the language of a jeremiad, a strategy long used to unify people under a common call to action.[15] Bhagwan's messaging employed all three parts of a jeremiad. He "lament[ed] the moral condition of a people"[16] by claiming "the Western man is half" and was "falling apart."[17] He "fores[aw] cataclysmic consequences"[18] by describing the "empt[iness] and meaningless[ness] of man."[19] He "call[ed] for dramatic moral reform and revival"[20] with his desire to create "the whole man" and "a promised land" with "spirituality"[21] at its center. By structuring his message as a jeremiad, Bhagwan captured and kept the attention of thousands. In addition, the Rajneesh messaging was gnostic. In Gnosticism, "there [exist] truths *they*...do not want *us*, the people, to perceive."[22] The Rajneesh mystified their movement through their deliberate narration, which drew even more people into the religion. The series narrates: "this is going to be a lot of trouble…[millions more are coming]."[23] By warning of future trouble, the Rajneesh could provide the "secret pathways to spiritual truths"[24] and the answer to that "trouble." Their knowledge was only for the devoted, which "let the elites and ivory tower fools wallow in their 'expertise.'"[25] Every gnostic possesses a key to the secret knowledge, "hence, [their] responsibility is great because [they] will be

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[14] Berger, 8.
[15] Harding, "The Moral Majority Jeremiad," 162.
[16] Ibid, 161.
[17] *Wild Wild Country*, Part 1, 34:08.
[18] Harding, 161.
[19] *Wild Wild Country*, Part 1, 34:04.
[20] Harding, 161.
[21] *Wild Wild Country*, Part 1, 34:05.
[22] Sharlet, "Inside the Cult of Trump."
[23] *Wild Wild Country*, Part 1, 37:11.
[24] Sharlet.
[25] Sharlet.

preparing the way."[26] The steady stream of red that leads to Bhagwan knows something that you don't.

However, the Rajneesh still had to sell their product. In contrast to other seemingly similar religious groups, Bhagwan recognized that "the only way for [the commune] to live is for it to be rich."[27] They must, in short, "be part of the marketplace."[28] And to be part of the marketplace, they had to diverge from some of their beliefs. While the Rajneesh valued "liv[ing] in harmony with one another and with nature,"[29] in building Rajneeshpuram, they "push[ed] tons and tons of earth"[30] and "carv[ed] away at the side of the canyon."[31] Although they claim they "brought back nature,"[32] they had to destroy what nature built to build their vision. In the process of setting up their city, they also put the mediation on pause. They needed manual laborers, therefore, "meditators [were] a later priority."[33] Although dynamic mediation was a central part of community belonging, they deviated from their values to build their "promised land."

When the media began skewing their product, the Rajneesh continued to stray from their values, all in the name of self-preservation. Many religious movements use media to "carefully [design] both [their] message and its media,"[34] however, that's a privilege that many fringe religious groups often can't rely on. Upon arrival in America, the Rajneesh were alienated by their neighbors and the media. People claimed the "Rajneesh people were living in darkness."[35] When those outside the community began engaging politically, the Rajneeses felt they had no

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[26] *Wild Wild Country*, Part 1, 37:13.
[27] Ibid, 43:20.
[28] Ibid, 43:06.
[29] Ibid, 23:21.
[30] Ibid, Part 2, 9:52.
[31] Ibid, 10:05.
[32] Ibid, 15:20.
[33] Ibid, 7:35.
[34] Sinitiere, "Joel Osteen's Tel-e-vangelism: The Message and Its Media," 136.
[35] *Wild Wild Country*, Part 2, 28:30.

choice but to "play [the] game"[36] and engage in politics themselves. They brought in "street people"[37] and deliberately sickened a community with salmonella[38] to sway an election. They bought guns to "be ready to take whatever action [was] needed to protect [themselves]."[39] Although they stood for "love" and nonviolence,[40] poisoning people and arming themselves with guns seemed far from compassionate. While they claimed these steps were taken for "survival,"[41] the group still deviated from their foundational values. In addition, although the Rajneesh saw marriage as restricting the free expression of sexuality, they used the legal framework of marriage to facilitate "the largest immigration fraud case in the history of the United States."[42] Initially, these digressions from their values did not undermine their unity.

Eventually, however, as they strayed further from their values, they began to experience internal struggle. When the homeless people they had brought in began acting out, the city doctor sedated all of them with Haldol.[43] Because the homeless could not serve their political purpose to the original Rajneesh community, they were drugged and discarded. The group was beginning to splinter, and Bhagwan and Sheela's relationship was next. As Bhagwan let more and more of the "Hollywood crowd"[44] into his inner circle, Sheela felt this threatened her position. Within Sheela's circles, "there was talk of killing people to get what you wanted."[45] Eventually, she demanded that Jane Stork, one of her closest devotees, kill Bhagwan's doctor Deva Raj because he was supposedly about to help Bahgwan commit assisted suicide. Sheela left the commune not long after.

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[36] Ibid, Part 3, 0:50.
[37] Ibid, 44:44.
[38] Ibid, Part 4, 5:56.
[39] Ibid, Part 2, 1:01:11.
[40] Ibid, 6:20.
[41] Ibid, Part 3, 9:17.
[42] Ibid, Part 4, 29:02.
[43] Ibid, Part 3, 1:00:05.
[44] Ibid, Part 4, 12:32.
[45] Ibid, Part 3, 1:03:59.

Bhagwan then blamed Sheela for any previous violence and decided to dissociate from "the trappings of organized religion"[46] to protect the group from all the external and internal threats. The Rajneesh community was facing the consequences of its actions in the form of serious legal accusations and challenges. When Sheela left, Bhagwan broke his three-and-a-half-year silence to publicly express his anger at Sheela and project all the looming accusations onto her. Essentially, Bhagwan aimed to preserve the community by sacrificing Sheela. This self-preservation aspect of sacrifice is not unique to the Rajneesh. As Kathryn Lofton describes in her book *Consuming Religion*, groups sacrifice "someone who isn't them to keep going."[47] By pushing her away, Bhagwan made Sheela an easy target and defined her as an outsider. By burning her robes,[48] Bhagwan "rituali[zed] and dramatiz[ed]"[49] the sacrifice. The sacrifice was made "for the sake of [the community] and on " behalf of [the] social body."[50] In this way, sacrificing Sheela temporarily protected the group from external threats. Bhagwan continued by rejecting Rajneeshism as a religion.[51] By shedding the past understanding of the community, he renewed a sense of purpose among his followers. This renewal reaffirmed the commitment of his followers and united them under a newly packaged product. In turn, this renewal fostered temporary unity in the community.

After law enforcement caught up with Bhagwan, he moved back to India, which allowed him to, once again, renew his vision. As detailed above, during the Rajneeshees' time in America, they deviated from some of their core values to preserve the community. When those tactics overtook the vision and splintered their group, Bhagwan's return to India breathed new air

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[46] Ibid, Part 5, 36:37.
[47] Lofton, "Sacrificing Britney," 115.
[48] *Wild Wild Country*, Part 5, 37:46.
[49] Lofton, 117.
[50] Lofton, 115, 119.
[51] *Wild Wild Country*, Part 5, 38:08.

into their "product." He stopped speaking and took the name Osho,[52] and since only his most devoted followers made the long trip with him, he rid the ashram and his vision of many impurities. In Luis León's *Metaphor and Place*, one can draw several significant parallels between his borderlands analysis and the Rajneesh exile from America. First, León characterizes borders "as peripheries that must be surpassed to arrive at a place with greater promise."[53] Before moving back to India, the Rajneeshees were divided and disillusioned. Bhagwan brought "greater promise" to his vision by picking it up and reestablishing it away from America. In this way, the border was an empowering tool for Bhagwan.

León also tells of "Santa Teresa," who "was forced across the [U.S.-Mexican] border."[54] Upon crossing, "her life was transformed," and she "became a symbol for exile, struggle, and power."[55] She "was marketed as an American commodity to be purchased and consumed."[56] As León describes: "[c]rossing the border marked for her a passage through religious chronology. She was, in effect, out of time."[57] Bhagwan's exile reflects a similar commodification. Many were relieved when the Rajneesh left America and returned to India,[58] and resultantly, the narrative changed. To the outsiders who so fervently fought the commune, Rajneeshpuram became a marketable story. Books, TV series, and movies brought the "experiment"[59] into the past tense. In America, Rajneeshism was "out of time."[60] Back in India, even Bhagwan himself reflected on Rajneeshpuram as "a beautiful experiment that failed."[61] While the crossing allowed

[52] Ibid, Part 6, 45:45.
[53] Ibid, 544.
[54] Ibid, 562.
[55] Ibid.
[56] Ibid.
[57] Ibid.
[58] *Wild Wild Country*, Part 6, 32:50.
[59] Ibid, 44:36.
[60] León, 562.
[61] *Wild Wild Country*, Part 6, 44:36.

for the movement's reinvention in India, it also facilitated its transition between the present and the past in America.

The Rajneesh believed in and defended their product. Although this defense ended up fracturing the community, they successfully marketed their product as an alternative to the disorder and confusion of the dominant society. In the words of a Rajneesh: "America has lost its heart. Its heart is right here in Rajneeshpuram now. It's not out there. Rajneeshpuram is now saying to America, 'bring us your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to be free.'"[62] The most vulnerable in our society found belonging in the Rajneesh community. Today, a Christian youth camp fosters community on the same land as the Rajneesh commune. Kyle, an attendee, described the Christian camp as the place "where I can be myself— broken and all—and I can trust that I will be loved and accepted for who I am."[63] Although the camp isn't asserting itself politically like the Rajneeshees, the Christian camp faces almost no local resistance or national media coverage. One cannot help but wonder if this difference in local, state, and national resistance stems from America's blatant favoring of Christian values and long history of discriminating against minority religious groups.[64]

Word Count: 1981

[62] Ibid, Part 3, 45:29.
[63] "Young Life."
[64] It is significant to note that some members have called the series flawed because it failed to address several credible accounts of sexual violence and abuse. These factors definitely impacted the way people viewed the Rajneesh community and, resultantly, resisted its existence.

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