

Der tanzende Spiegel – Bhagwan und die Deutschen 1970–2020

(The Dancing Mirror – Bhagwan and the Germans, 1970–2020)

Reviewed for H-Soz-Kult by Pascal Eitler, Centre for Contemporary History in Hamburg

In this book, Martin Papenheim presents a study of the history of the West German Neo-Sannyas movement that is as comprehensive as it is multifaceted – always with a focus on its ever-present founder, who changed his name several times: Chandra Mohan Jain, also known as Bhagwan or Osho (1931–1990). Within this framework, the author draws on a very wide range of sources: In addition to pamphlets, speeches, scene magazines, self-help guides and newspaper articles, he also draws on personal accounts such as letters and interviews with contemporaries. He focuses on the individual participants and on organisational issues within the movement, particularly the evolving residential projects and business models of the Sannyasins. The study is organised chronologically; its first three main chapters are devoted to the most significant developments between the mid-1970s and the mid-1980s, whilst the movement's subsequent history up to the present day is covered much more briefly. The author then devotes two chapters to the public perception of the Sannyasins and their vocabulary.

The book begins by focusing on Bhagwan and the founding of the movement in India in the early 1970s. Like many other gurus, he too placed meditation at the heart of the self-knowledge and self-liberation he advocated. However, as Papenheim demonstrates, unlike many other gurus, Bhagwan did not rely on asceticism and discipline within this framework, but rather on a supposedly new form of community and pleasure, lust and fun. It was not 'denial of life' but 'affirmation of life' that lay at the heart of his teachings. One of the ways in which he distinguished himself was by turning his attention to psychotherapy and the emerging therapy scene in Western Europe and North America, such as Wilhelm Reich's much-discussed work on the 'sexual revolution'. In this context, however, Bhagwan focused primarily on dancing and its purported meditative or therapeutic significance. He himself spoke of 'dynamic' meditation, which placed the body at the centre of attention. In 1974, Bhagwan founded an ashram in Poona (now Pune) that soon became famous: a large commune with several thousand residents and visitors – including a rapidly expanding administrative staff. Within a very short time, Poona became the epitome of this now global movement, with an estimated 100,000 members by the early 1980s.

It is only afterwards that Papenheim turns his attention to the West German Neo-Sannyas movement. In doing so, he essentially distinguishes between three phases of development: a phase of formation and establishment lasting until the early 1980s ('The Dream of a New Life'), a phase of peak activity and restructuring lasting until the middle of the decade ('Work on the City of the Future'), and finally a phase of gradual dissolution ('Productive Fragments').

In the mid-1970s, the Neo-Sannyas movement also began to gain a foothold in the Federal Republic of Germany, at times with great success: by the early 1980s, the author estimates, it had around 30,000 followers. Papenheim rightly contextualises the Neo-Sannyas movement within the alternative scene and the simultaneously booming, diversifying therapy scene. He emphasises, however, that the Sannyasins pursued self-knowledge and self-liberation not as the result of a painful process, but as an expression of a joyful form of therapy. Although Bhagwan's statements were often simplified and, in some cases, misunderstood, it was this interpretation of his teachings that made them particularly attractive to an ever-growing number of teenagers and young adults around 1980. Consequently, the movement was characterised by its comparatively great diversity and openness. The new form of community they sought to create emerged primarily from local or regional initiatives. This gave rise to numerous small and large-scale housing projects – including a commune with over 300 members – and a wide variety of business models, such as several collectively run nightclubs. Such initiatives were assessed and legitimised by the authorities, yet

overall, during this phase, the movement was subject to little control or sanction – in comparison with some other New Religious Movements. Whilst many sannyasins did give up their private property for the sake of the movement, donations to it were by no means compulsory. Membership of the movement was confirmed or refused from Poona, but apart from the dress code binding on all sannyasins – only red or orange clothing was to be worn – there were no other binding daily routines or rituals. The sannyasins therefore ultimately lived together according to quite different rules.

This phase came to an abrupt end in the early 1980s when Bhagwan left the ashram in Poona, together with the administration and numerous other members, to found his own city in the USA: Rajneeshpuram. This project confronted the movement with enormous costs, which now had to be generated worldwide. Papenheim demonstrates how, in this context, a process of restructuring – or rather, forced homogenisation – also began within the West German Neo-Sannyas movement. This affected not only the more efficient organisation of the various business models, but above all the housing projects, which had hitherto been relatively unorganised. Many smaller communes were merged into larger ones on the administration's instructions; the lives of the members became increasingly regulated and entirely geared towards working for the movement; Sannyasins were sent from one commune to another depending on labour requirements. Finally, a standardised, nationwide diet plan was even imposed on all communes in order to save further costs. Isolated criticism was now systematically punished, and those involved were ostracised.

Following scandals that attracted widespread international attention – in particular numerous cases of abuse against women and children – Rajneeshpuram was abandoned in the mid-1980s. Bhagwan returned to Poona, and the movement's administration, which had become all-powerful, effectively collapsed. Just as suddenly as the enforced homogenisation had begun, so too did it come to an end. Many of the remaining West German communes were dissolved by the end of the 1980s; ownership of housing projects and business ventures was largely privatised; and the once-mandatory dress codes were abandoned. According to the author, the West German Neo-Sannyas movement lost a third of its members within a very short space of time. Today, there are said to be only a few thousand members left. Although the movement experienced a brief and modest resurgence in the early 1990s (following the death of Bhagwan / Osho), strictly speaking it can no longer be described as a movement. Like some other New Religious Movements, this one too has almost entirely been absorbed into the ever-expanding therapy scene and the closely linked health market – so the conclusion goes.

The two much shorter chapters on public perceptions of the sannyasins and, subsequently, on their vocabulary – a 'special language' (p. 305) – seem somewhat tacked on and contribute little to the flow of the study. Rather, the great strength of this book lies in its careful and multifaceted reconstruction and analysis of the history of the West German Neo-Sannyas movement, focusing on the individual actors and drawing on organisational issues. However, the author occasionally becomes too bogged down in the chronicle of events surrounding the various initiatives and the escalating conflicts, particularly in their dealings with the authorities. By contrast, readers learn surprisingly little about the pleasure, the joy or the fun that this aspired-to new form of community was intended to convey and foster. Although the body was the focus of interest, Martin Papenheim devotes too little attention overall to it, its use and its history – this does not make the study any less impressive, but it does mean it is less readily connectable to a contemporary history of the body and emotions, the senses and taste, everyday life and leisure.

<https://www.hsozkult.de/publicationreview/id/reb-152879>