

A Krishna Corner of the Caucasus

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Devotees of religious movement make their home in impoverished North Caucasian village. The village of Kurjinovo is situated in the mountains of Karachai-Cherkessia, surrounded by forests. On the journey from the regional capital Cherkessk, the mown fields give way to tracts of woodland, bright with autumn colours.

“There is almost no work here,” said elderly resident Maria Kravchenko. “Lots of people drink. What’s more, young people drink as much as the old ones do. And what else is there to do?” The village also has a drug problem and a declining population, as people leave in search of work and deaths outnumber births.

On the single asphalt road running through the village, we ran into two women, both dressed in long brightly-coloured dresses, with lengths of cloth draped over their heads - a sort of imitation sari and head-dress. Both were wearing trainers on their feet to cope with the roads and carrying umbrellas to ward off the snow. From their clothing and the red dots on their foreheads, it was clear that they were Hare Krishna devotees.

As we went together to the prayer house, it transpired that Masha was the young daughter-in-law of Nina, a smiling woman in glasses with thick frames.

Nina said that she had come here from the Rostov region to the north. “I knew that a lot of believers lived here and came to be with them ten years ago,” she said. She lives off her pension and her own smallholding.

Masha comes from Barnaul in southern Siberia. “My mother took me to the temple once so I could have a look,” she said. “At first I just liked the music and then I began to think about what I was hearing. I came here as a guest and in some way I didn’t notice, I stayed to live.”

The temple is in a small house on the edge of the village of brightly painted yellow and pink brick. Inside all is yellow and blue. Here prayer ceremonies take place every weekend, with worshippers coming from the entire surrounding region.

The president of the local Krishna community, who introduces himself as Yunir, came here with his wife and children from Mordovia in central Russia. Yunir, who works as a dentist, said that, after studying Christianity and Islam, he found that Hare Krishna had provided him with the answers he was looking for.

Kurjinovo is in one of the most depressed parts of Karachai-Cherkessia - which is itself one of the poorest places in Russia. Most people use bicycles to get around, with a motorcycle being for the better off. The old houses have peeling plaster and leaking roofs and are surrounded by tottering fences.

Kurjinovo used to be a centre for criminals serving small sentences. The population is mostly ethnic Russians and Cossacks. The mortality rate is almost twice as high as in other districts of the autonomous republic, alcoholism and the incidence of cancer are also high. There is very little economic activity. The population, which used to work in the main for a furniture factory, has halved to less than 5,000 since the factory closed. The population now survives mainly by picking mushrooms, collecting stones for house

building or working in small woodworking factories. But salaries are low and unemployment is around 80 per cent.

Yet in this depressed environment one community is thriving - the Hare Krishna devotees.

The religious movement - best known for its saffron robes and its chants - follows Hindu teachings but does not regard itself as a full religion. They were persecuted in communist times but still have thousands of followers in Russia.

The locals of Kurjino say the Krishna devotees started appearing here in the Soviet era some 25 years ago, when they were looking for a place of refuge far from curious eyes. They did not need to hide here and the locals were friendly.

Yury, who came here from the city of Kazan on the Volga, had another explanation, which surprises some of the locals.

"As far as I know, they found the ancient remains of Vishna here - one of the manifestations of God as a person. Holy places become holy, when holy people are present there. During the times when they were persecuted, Hare Krishna believers hid here in the mountains. Then, by the will of fate, when everything was permitted, devotees from all over Russia began to come here," he said.

No one knows exactly how many of them there are now, as many do not stay in one place for long. In winter there are 40-50 of them, in summer many more. Amongst them are a special group of "pure devotees" who are unmarried and do not spend more than three days in one place.

Members of the Hare Krishna community, which includes a number of different nationalities, say they are tolerant and that their way of life causes no harm to others.

"We have a good attitude towards everyone," said Yunir. "It's not important what path to God you choose, the main thing is to reach him. But not all the locals acknowledge us."

"One of my patients, when she comes into my surgery, first of all does the sign of the cross over the doorway, then the dentist's chair, then herself. And when I switched on some music, she covered her ears with her hands. What kind of believer is she if she cannot treat her neighbour as herself?"

One local woman, Marina Dmitrichenko, said she had been invited with her children to a feast-day dinner. "They sing beautifully and they have done nothing bad to us," she said. "So we have a normal attitude towards them."

Igor, who lives near the temple, is not so friendly. "They are all layabouts, wandering here and there," he said. "What interests me is where they get the money to live on. Lots of them don't work. They have nothing to do so they just torment themselves with this nonsense."

Others of the locals are surprised at the devotion of the incomers to a place that they themselves want to

leave. "There is nothing here for a normal person to do," said Artyom Reznikov. "There's nowhere to work or study. We have to get out of here. This is just a place forgotten by God."

The whole Hare Krishna community turned out to wish us goodbye, handing us incense, a cookery book, compact discs with singing and lectures and packages of fruit and sweets. "Come again," they said, as we left their small colourful oasis in the mountains.

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