

Religious group finds a home

Society builds its 1st center in U.S.

By Lorry Williams

Staff writer

In one small section of the spacious meeting hall, a floor lamp casts a dim light over the portrait of a man who thousands believe is a living saint.

The man is Gurinder Singh, the leader of the Radha Soami Society Beas-America, a 100-year-old Eastern religion based in India. A portrait of his predecessor, Charan Singh, is nearby.

The portraits look out into the heart of the meeting hall. The hall, which sits off U.S. 301 south of Fayetteville, is the first center built by the group in the United States.

Early efforts to build the center were met with opposition and questions. Radha Soami is still a mys-

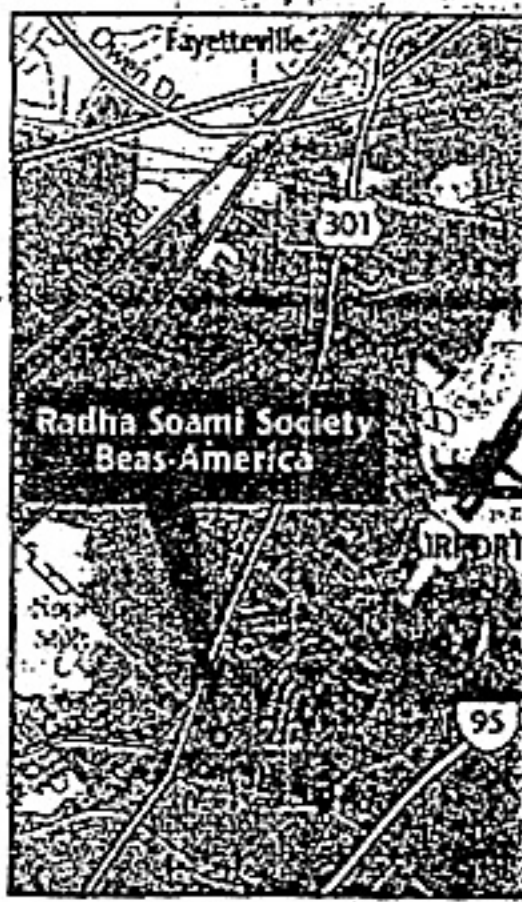
tery to some, but since the initial publicity the group has quietly settled into a new home.

Seventy to 100 people meet here every Sunday. They come from different religious backgrounds, but they all believe that following the Radha Soami faith will help their souls return to God.

"It's the best thing I've ever found," said Herb Fuller, who studied other religions before joining the Radha Soami in 1980. "I've tried to find something wrong with it, I really have. But it just keeps getting better and better."

The term Radha Soami means "Lord of the souls." Those who adhere to the faith are called satsangis. The center in Fayetteville is referred to as a Science of the

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Souls Study Center.

The Radha Soami are vegetarians. They don't drink alcohol or take mind-altering drugs. They believe in living a moral life. And they meditate 2½ hours a day. Members also believe in karma and reincarnation.

"The idea is that every living thing ... as part of the creation is part of God and therefore has a soul," said Dr. John Templer, a retired professor and the group's eastern U.S. spokesman. "And when this particular life ends then you will come back again into something else. It may be another human, or it may be a tree, or a flower, or a dog, or anything that's alive."

There are no prescribed number of lives a person has to go through. A person's destiny is related to his karma, or good and bad actions. A human being is the highest form in which a person returns.

"The reason the human form is the highest form is it's really the only life form that has discretion, that is, the power of making good or bad choices," Templer said. "Therefore we are the only form which is ultimately able to return to the creator. You can't go back if you're in the form of a cow, or a dog, or a tree. You've got to wait until you get to the human form."

Many questions

Herb Fuller is a retired mechanic for a vending machine company. He moved to Hope Mills from Philadelphia about three years ago. He spends a few days a week at the center, which also serves as a regional distribution center for books, videos, tapes and other materials.

Fuller said that as a teenager he had many questions about God and religion.

"I used to drive the minister crazy with my questions. Why this and why this," Fuller said. "And he'd just put his arm around me and say 'Well, have faith, my son.' But I kind of wanted a little more of an answer than that."

Fuller was introduced to Radha Soami through his ex-wife. He was going through some problems when his former wife told him she had found a guru. She encouraged him to attend a meeting.

Fuller was skeptical. He remembers thinking: Yeah, right. Just what I need, a guru.

But Fuller did go to a meeting. He read a book explaining the group, and several months later, applied for initiation.

Those seeking initiation must be a vegetarian for a year. They can't take alcohol or drugs. And they have to lead "the biblical good life." They must also read about the group to better understand it. Once that is done, they ask to be initiated by filling out a form. Applications are approved by the guru, or leader.

"The initiation is typical in all spiritual paths," Templer said. "Sometimes it's called christening, sometimes it's called bar mitzvah and so on."



Staff photo by Mike Spencer

Members of the Radha Soami Society Beas-America gather at their center off U.S. 301 south of Fayetteville for a Sunday meeting and fellowship.

temperament and are not interested in winning converts. At times they are hesitant to talk about themselves, but they will explain their beliefs and philosophies when pressed.

People usually find out about Radha Soami either through books or by accident.

Templer falls into the latter category. He was having dinner at the home of friends and found out they were vegetarians. When he began asking questions they eventually told him why.

"They weren't particularly forthcoming because they didn't want to be pushing their views," Templer said. "And I suppose I'm pretty much the same."

Templer said he will answer people's questions, but he doesn't try to influence them. "And I think that's the way it's supposed to be," he said.

"I keep thinking of that quote in St. John: 'You have not chosen me, I have chosen you.'"

Members appreciated that when they were first studying Radha Soami. They were able to ask questions, they said, without ever feeling pressured to accept the teachings.

Steve Clouse, a professor at N.C. State University, was initiated in 1974.

Not pushy

"One thing that attracted me about this path was that no one was trying to push it on you," Clouse said.

Renee Hutcheson, an architect from Cary, was initiated in the Jewish faith. She learned about the Radha Soami through an older sister more than 20 years ago.

"To me, God was some entity in heaven," she said. "There was an uncertainty about how he was connected to me and me to him."

Radha Soami, she said, "has made me more personally connected."

People don't give up their more orthodox religions when they are initiated. Templer, for example, was reared by an Episcopalian priest. He still considers himself a Christian even though he adheres to the Radha Soami beliefs.

follow the teachings of Christ in a way that wouldn't have been possible to me before," he said.

The Radha Soami movement began in India in 1861 as an offshoot of Sikhism, a 500-year-old religion based on Hinduism. Sikh beliefs are based on the teachings of 10 saints. Unlike Sikhs, Radha Soamis believe that human saints, or gurus, are still being born and can pass along new teachings.

In the 1800s, the Radha Soami split. Many of the followers rejected the guru chosen by the group's leaders and instead began following Jaimal Singh, who settled in the Indian city of Beas. There, Radha Soami Satsang Beas was born.

Chapters began organizing in the U.S. in 1911. There are an estimated 14,000 members in the United States and more than 2 million worldwide, Templer said.

Unlike some religious sects, the Radha Soamis do not turn over their earnings or possessions to the guru. The gurus, or masters, earn their own living. Two served in the military, one was a university vice principal, one was a lawyer. The current master, Gurinder Singh, was a businessman.

Many times, Templer said, the gurus are retired from their professions by the time they take over as leader.

Like the Radha Soamis themselves, the study center was not designed to draw attention. The blue and white metal building resembles a business more than a religious center. A simple wooden sign at the driveway reads "RS." The building sits on a 60-acre plot with a creek, natural trails wind through the property. The landscaping is a blend of flowers, trees and shrubs that help create a calm, peaceful atmosphere.

There are two homes on the property: one for the caretaker and another for visits from Gurinder Singh or his representative. Gurinder Singh comes to America about once every three years.

Events and meetings

Members of the local chapter use the center every Sunday. But it was built primarily to provide the

place to hold regional or national meetings. The larger events, held about twice a year, draw people from across the country and can last three to four days. The events can draw an estimated 1,200 to 1,400 people. The number swells when Gurinder Singh is leading the meetings. When Singh was here last August, an estimated 4,000 people attended the meetings.

Before the center opened in 1985, the group rented space in arenas and coliseums. Local members traveled across the state to meet in private homes or in hotels for their Sunday fellowship.

On a recent Sunday morning, members walked around the grounds or drank tea in the kitchen while waiting for the meeting to begin. Five minutes before 11, a man walked to a microphone and began singing shabds, devotional poems or songs praising God. Some are sung in Hindi-Punjabi, a language native to India.

The meeting begins promptly at 11. Fayetteville businessman Rajan Shamdasani, an Indian national who led the effort to build the center here, is the speaker. He is one of about a dozen who rotate the responsibility.

He tells members that whatever good or bad they do in this world, they must suffer the consequences. During the lecture he refers to Jesus, Muhammad and the Bible. He uses parables to help convey the message.

At times Shamdasani is questioning, encouraging members to think about how they live their own lives. Some nod in agreement as they listen to the words.

The meetings are similar to sermons preached in more traditional religious services. The speaker talks for about 55 minutes. Before the meeting ends, members listen to a recording of Charan Singh answering questions about the path. Afterward, members have a potluck lunch. Some work around the grounds, or walk the trails.

"This path ... we get together in fellowship and love," said Shanti Natarajan, who lives in Charlotte. "Regardless of the place, that always exists."