

The Neo-Sannyas Tradition in the Modern Russian Culture

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Abstract—*The article deals with the features of the evolution of the neo-sannyas, neo-Hinduism movement, created by Sri Rajneesh Chandra Mohan (Osho) in 70-80 years of the 20th century. Special attention is paid to the history of neo-sannyas in Russia. The author identifies three generations of Russian neo-sannyasins with different aims and interests of participating in this movement.*

Keywords: *Neo-sannyas, Neo-Hinduism, Shree Rajneesh, Osho, Russian neo-sannyasins, New religious organizations of Russia, dialogue of cultures.*

1. INTRODUCTION

One of the typical features of the modern cultural life in Russia is the rather stable interest of the wide masses to the Oriental world. One can assume that this could be linked, on the one hand, to the process of establishment of the common universal culture and the acknowledgment of the value and unique character of different cultural traditions. On the other hand, this tendency is defined by the intensifying contradictions typical for the modern Russian culture that is gradually becoming aware of the discrepancies between the basic values of the European civilization and the spiritual needs and interests of the Russians. In his or her search for true spirituality, the typical Russian more and more often turns not only to the national spiritual and moral roots and the cultural memory of their people, but also to the heritage and experience of the religious traditions of the East, mainly the Neo-Hinduism ones.

Of all the variety of Neo-Hinduism organizations that appeared in Russia in the forefront of everyone's enthusiasm about the exotic East and promoting, with different variations corresponding to their views, the main ideas of Indian

philosophy, of the most interest is the Neo-Sannyas movement which was headed until 1990 by the charismatic guru and philosopher Shree Rajneesh, more widely known as Osho.

2. THE HISTORY OF RUSSIAN NEO-SANNYAS

The Neo-Sannyas movement itself appeared in India in the 1970s. It is considered to have been founded on the 26th of September 1970, when Shree Rajneesh introduced his first group of his closest disciples to the Neo-Sannyas in Span Resort in Kullu-Manali. The main principle of his Neo-Sannyas was not the way of reclusion, religious ascetics or renouncement of life (traditionally understood under the term *sannyas*), but, on the contrary, the complete acceptance of life [10].

By 1972 the number of Shree Rajneesh's disciples who had taken on Neo-Sannyas reached 3,934 people [10, p. 47]. This group included well-educated and well-to-do people from India, Europe and the USA.

Nowadays the Neo-Sannyas movement exists as a creative developing culture of lively and free communication. Apart from the International Sannyasin Community in Pune founded by Shree Rajneesh, a huge number of ashrams and meditation centers exist all over the world and offer various programs and meditation techniques.

The interest to Shree Rajneesh and his movement in Russia was rather late in comparison to the US and European countries, appeared only in the early 1980s. Shree Rajneesh started introducing his first disciples from the USSR to Neo-Sannyas only in 1979 [8], the period that coincided with the intensification of censorship and control over the spiritual life of the Soviet society. Furthermore, in 1981 Shree Rajneesh with his disciples moved to the USA, a country forbidden for the Soviet people. Due to this, in the 1980s the number of Osho followers from the former USSR who had the possibility to contact their guru was small. The "Russian Neo-Sannyas" gained a more or less stable position only in the 1980s after the *Perestroika* (reformation period), when Shree Rajneesh's books could finally be published officially and he himself gained even more popularity.

3. THREE GENERATIONS OF RUSSIAN NEO-SANNYASINS

One should distinguish between three generations of Shree Rajneesh's followers in Russia.

The first generation got acquainted with Neo-Sannyas directly from Osho himself in the Pune ashram or from his disciple Swami Anand Arun in the ashram located in Kathmandu (Nepal). These were people from Russian largest cities, Moscow and Leningrad (currently St. Petersburg), mainly with a liberal arts degree (in

philosophy, art history or philology). For them joining the Neo-Sannyas movement was not a way to solve their psychological problems, but rather came from their own interest to the ideas and personality of Shree Rajneesh. They found in his works the spirit of protest against every repressive culture, including the Soviet one, which corresponded to their own feelings. Many of them left for the USA or Germany, having spent a number of years in Osho's ashram. They did not have a goal of founding an Osho center or ashram in Russia, they mainly distributed books that were composed from audio and video recordings of Shree Rajneesh's discourses among University students interested in the exotic Oriental culture, and organized discussions of his teaching in their own apartments [6, pp. 39-40].

After the fall of the "iron curtain" in the USSR and the beginning of an ideology pluralism era, the first Russian Neo-Sannyasins managed to organize an exhibition of Shree Rajneesh's photographs and books that took place from the 4th to the 14th of September 1987 in Moscow. At that time the interest to Shree Rajneesh's teachings grew immensely. Furthermore, on the 2nd of February 1989 the Soviet spectators watched a film on the International Sannyasin Community made by director Sergey Alexeev. The film provoked deep sympathy to the ideas, practices and the personality of Osho in the audience [8].

The second generation of Russian Neo-Sannyas resembled the first one. Its members were also active and well-educated. The main thing that made them different from the previous generation was the fact that they had mostly engineering or science degrees. Besides that, they were not so much interested in the philosophical talks of Shree Rajneesh as in the methods of work with one's consciousness suggested by him, and also the work in therapeutic groups created by him that combined the Eastern idea of meditation and the Western concept of psychotherapy. It was this generation of Neo-Sannyasins that opened the first Osho centers in Russia after their return from Pune [6, pp. 41-42]. For instance, such a center opened in 1993 in one of Russian biggest cities, St. Petersburg. It was the spiritual center "Novyi vek" (*The New Age*) founded by Amana, an astrologer, psychotherapist and participant of many Osho trainings. Now this center is called "Osho-tsentr Amany" (*Amana's Osho Center*). Amana herself has been spending every half a year in Pune and teaching at Osho Multiversity for the last ten years. Her work in St. Petersburg mainly includes organizing trainings for Osho therapists [2].

The second generation of Russian Neo-Sannyasins also gave special attention to organizing summer meditation camps, the goal of which was to recreate a temporary mini community that would correspond to Shree Rajneesh's ideas concerning the ideal social structure and the special space for relaxation,

meditation and creativity. Such a camp has been functioning in Russia since 1997. It is a tent camp that Neo-Sannyasins set every year from the 1st of July until approximately the middle of August not far from the village of Petäjärvi at the Karelian Isthmus. In their almost 20-year experience of organizing this kind of camps the Russian Neo-Sannyasins managed to make the accommodation truly comfortable [3]. The camp has its own kitchen, a bathing house and a power generator to charge mobile phones; it is also possible to rent a tent or a sleeping bag. The daily program is based on dynamic meditation in the morning, evening Kundalini meditation and Satsang. Each weekend is dedicated to the practice of a certain technique. For instance, such as Tantra and Neo-Tantra, Sufi practices or the practices described by Shree Rajneesh in the collection of meditation techniques of different cultures, the Orange Book.

The third generation of Russian Neo-Sannyasins appeared in the early 2000s. These were mostly well-to-do young people, familiar with different Oriental religions and cultures. They were equally interested in Shree Rajneesh's philosophy, as well as in all kinds of Osho trainings and meditation sessions. The characteristic feature of the third generation of Neo-Sannyasins is that, while focusing on Shree Rajneesh's philosophy, they are open for other Neo-Hindu movements and often participate in their programs. For instance, they take part in groups connected to the teachings of Satya Sai Baba, Aurobindo, Ayengar yoga as well as Tantric/Neo-Tantric movements and so forth.

Besides, they lay great emphasis on creativity and organize different creative workshops (in painting, dance, singing, music, stage performance, martial arts lessons and workshops) [6, pp. 42-43]. For example, in May 2016 the ninth concert featuring Deva Premal and Miten, alumni of Osho's Multiversity, worldwide famous musicians and mantra reciters accompanied by modern musical instruments and a sitar, took place in the Lensoveta House of Culture.

4. CONCLUSION

To conclude, we should mention, that the reasons why Shree Rajneesh's movement became attractive for all the three generations of Russian Neo-Sannyasins are similar to the reasons of its popularity with Americans and Europeans. First of all, people were drawn to it because of the concepts of Shree Rajneesh's philosophy, his critique of the modern consumerist civilization, his strive to create an alternative society based on love, creativity and consciousness. Another reason was the call for a drastic change in the conditions of human life, free from politics, ethnic background, religion, traditions and customs of the past. In addition, Shree Rajneesh always had a positive attitude towards the hedonistic practices of human society and did not advocate for the ascetic way of life or

renunciation from the world. Nowadays the creative legacy of Shree Rajneesh also embodied the popular idea of synthesis between the Eastern and Western traditions, cultures and religions.

With that in mind, it is obvious that, while the reasons for interest in Shree Rajneesh's ideas in the West and in Russia may be similar, the Russian Neo-Sannyas movement has a number of its own characteristic features. One of them is the prevalence of foreign (mainly American, German or Italian) teachers, workshop hosts, musicians and so-called Osho therapists within the groups. It is mostly explained by the fact that the Russian disciples of Shree Rajneesh, due to economical reasons, did not have a chance to participate in life of an Osho ashram in India or in the USA on their own as well as nor study at the Multiversity. Still, while a significant decline of interest towards the Neo-Sannyas movement can be observed now in the West and in the USA, we cannot talk about a major decline in Russia, although there is no feverish demand for information about Osho and his movement either.

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