Once in the shadows, Hare Krishnas now seek to shake off the past

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SINGAPORE: It is 7.30pm on a Saturday. The sun sets on a short stretch of road at Tuas South. Slowly, about 20 foreign workers arrive on their shared bicycles. They greet each other with a slight bow, palms pressed together in prayer.

Like clockwork, they begin to lay a blue-white tarpaulin on a patch of grass at a road junction, and over that spread a red-gold carpet. Others drape a scarlet satin over the barbed wire fence and in front of it set up a makeshift cardboard altar with pictures of the Hindu god Krishna.

As the sky completely darkens, a street lamp lights up. The workers huddle around Mr Prem Vikas, 42, a Bangladeshi who works at the nearby Tuas shipyard and leads them in prayer.

He takes a look around, as if waiting for more to join. “Workers come and go. But we never stop praying,” he said. “Good or bad, we continue to seek God here.”

Then, in unison, a faint, collective chant of the Hare Krishna mantra – or Hail Krishna – pipes through a speaker and ripples through the cool night air.

A few Chinese workers walking back to their dormitories stop to stare, but pay little attention and continue going about their daily business. The occasional cars that pass by the industrial area slow down at times, their drivers shoot curious glances.

But the group is undisturbed. They sing Bengali hymns and dance in a trance-like manner to fast drum beats and clashing cymbals.

The workers are part of the Hare Krishna movement, an offshoot of Hinduism that worships Krishna over other Hindu deities. The weekly Saturday prayer group at Tuas has been running for the past 10 years, providing them a transient place of worship and spiritual solace in a foreign country.

The Hare Krishna movement has historically struggled to get mainstream and state approval in Singapore, but in recent years, in a bid to gain greater acceptance and dispel myths, it has worked its way around regulations and carved out its own worship spaces.

Started 53 years ago (1965) in the US, the faith’s founding organisation, the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (Iskcon), is banned here. The religion had a contentious background in its early years and was closely linked to drug use in the US, as many of its early recruits were from the hippie communities. In its heyday in the US and other parts of the world, Hare Krishna devotees were out on the streets in full force, chanting. Some were arrested for causing public disorder.

The movement even found its way into popular culture. One celebrity Krishna was George Harrison of The Beatles. The band popularised the Hare Krishna mantra in their songs My Sweet Lord – an ode to Krishna and a worldwide hit – and Living in the Material World.

Controversies around the religion reached our shores too. Foreign Iskcon monks were denied entry into the country in the '70s and attempts by devotees to officially register Iskcon here had failed.

But today, devotees in Singapore, such as the prayer group at Tuas, have found their ways to continue to worship by operating within boundaries.

For one thing, Hare Krishnas here avoid affiliating themselves with Iskcon. Instead, they register their societies under different names. One group is the Sri Krishna Mandir, the most visible Hare Krishna temple in Singapore located at Geylang.

“People thought the religion was something extremist. They thought we were a cult,” said Mr Tattvavit Dasa, 31, a monk at Sri Krishna Mandir. “Youngsters were joining in the thousands in the US in the 1970s. The government here thought that if the youths were mobilised, there would be an uprising, there would be a revolution.”

He added: “Yet, in those days, programmes here were going on, unofficially. There were classes at devotees’ homes. Slowly, the government got a better impression. Now, they allow us to conduct our activities. At its core, the religion teaches us to do good. Eventually, they realised that we are not as bad as they think we are.”

Dr Mathew Mathews, a senior research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS), said that back then, Singapore took a cautious approach to unconventional religions.

“In the 70s, there was a lot more careful management of religious groups that might shift the social fabric in Singapore,” said Dr Mathews. “We were in a period of nation building and the state was careful about religious groups who had operations elsewhere that were going against general norms.”

According to Mr Rodney Sebastian, a researcher at the department of religion at the University of Florida, who has spent about five years examining the Hare Krishna community in Singapore, it is estimated that there are about 3,000 Hare Krishna devotees here today. A large portion of them are professionals from India and labourers from Bangladesh.

“The religion has undergone various forms of transformations in its struggle for survival and expansion to fit in with Singapore’s sociocultural milieu,” said Mr Sebastian. One way was to work with local Hindu temples and hold programmes there, he added.

An example is the Gita Reading Society – another Hare Krishna group – at the Gauranga Centre in Serangoon, which seeks to integrate into the mainstream.

“There is an association that Hare Krishna is a fanatical movement,” said Mr Siva Kumar, 48, the spokesman for the Gita Reading Society. “But here, we are a group of people who emphasise

study of the Bhagavad Gita (holy Hindu text), and how to use the Gita in practical, daily living – such as its principles of non-violence and meditation."

"The western-based Iskcon has become a creature of its own, which we do not affiliate with," he added.

Today, Hare Krishnas in Singapore openly celebrate festivals like the prominent ratha yatra parade.

During the annual festival, chariots of Hindu deities Jaganatha, Baladev and Subhadra are pulled along public roads in major cities of the world. In Singapore, while the devotees have yet to succeed in organising the festival on such a large scale, they have progressed from having previously held it in isolated farms and within temple premises to conducting it in sports stadiums.

Since 2006, devotees have been conducting the parade at Yio Chu Kang, Toa Payoh and Bedok stadiums. Thousands turn up for the events.

"We want others to have a better understanding of us," said Mr Dasa. "But even if they don't, it's okay. Our lives still go on. To us, all life is suffering. There will always be struggles and challenges."

Reactions towards the movement are still divided today.

Dr Mathews said: "There were questions about what the Hare Krishnas were doing. The public assemblies, chanting and spiritual high were fringe behaviours, which may raise red flags. But they have learnt to manage themselves within the space, shed some of their past misgivings and co-exist."

He added: "The state's stance has always been clear. Any religious groups can operate as long as they do not flout public order."

As the night wears on back in Tuas, Mr Vikas and his group wrap up their kirtan, or song and dance worship, and begin this week's sermon. Today, they compare being good citizens to being good sons of God.

"The Bhagavad Gita teaches us not to drink, waste money, harm others, gamble or womanise," said Mr Vikas. "Every day, we remind ourselves to be humble and help each other. We don't disturb others, so others let us be."