

RAJNEESH

Rajneeshees' Utopian dreams collapse as talks turn to murder -- Part 5 of 5

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Rajneeshees in Oregon -- The Untold Story: In 1985, the Rajneesh commune dissolves after death plots and botched assassination attempts target outsiders and insiders alike.

Ma Anand Sheela's gaze swept over the commune leaders seated on the floor before her. She was in an especially dark mood.

"Are you people cowards or are you sannyasins of Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh?" she asked.

The day before, a jury shocked the commune by awarding \$1.7 million to a former Rajneeshee for an unpaid loan. The judgment was part of ever-worsening developments for the eastern Oregon compound.

Sheela said the verdict showed the Rajneeshees couldn't count on fair treatment from U.S. courts or anyone else. The commune's enemies had to be stopped, she said.

They had to be killed.

That night, Sheela was an exhausted and nearly defeated woman. For four years, she had done the bidding of Rajneesh, an Indian guru who pressed Sheela to build him an international commune. Sheela chose to do that on a 64,000-acre ranch an hour's drive north of Madras.

Many of those seated before her had helped. The mix this May night in 1985 included the presidents of the commune, its investment corporation and its medical operation. The mayor of the sect's city was there, as were a handful of operatives who had secretly executed most of Sheela's plots.



After Sheela spoke, another leader gave what amounted to a pep talk, supporting Sheela's startling call to action.

One woman raised her hand. "I can't kill anybody, but I support you if you do it." Two men protested that the idea of murder was insane. They were browbeaten as cowards.

Others, startled by Sheela's proposal, kept their qualms to themselves because of growing mistrust among the insiders. The meeting proceeded to identifying enemies for a growing hit list.

So far, outrageous acts hadn't helped the Rajneeshee cause. The secret squads poisoned several hundred people in The Dalles. They set fire to the county planning office. They exploited homeless people, costing Oregon taxpayers \$100,000 in bus fare to return them to their cities of origin.

Murder didn't make much sense, either, but the judgment of the leaders was crippled by exhaustion, isolation and their unwavering faith in the guru.

More meetings followed the extraordinary session in Sheela's bedroom, the scene for much of her plotting. She went to the guru for help stiffening the resolve of those participating. She returned with a tape of her conversation. Although the quality was poor, the commune insiders heard Rajneesh say that if 10,000 had to die to save one enlightened master, so be it.

Their top target was Charles Turner, the U.S. attorney for Oregon. His prosecutors were investigating immigration fraud at the commune. A federal mediator disclosed to the Rajneeshees that criminal charges were likely and might include the guru himself. He also disclosed that Sheela probably would be charged.

Sheela thought killing Turner would somehow derail the investigation.

A plan evolved to gun him down on his way home. One of the assassins traveled the country with another sannyasin, buying pistols that couldn't be traced. Others set up a safe house in Portland, which became the base for scouting Turner's home. On one occasion, two assassins sat in a McDonald's in Downtown

Portland across from Turner's office, sipping coffee and monitoring his movements. They considered gunning him down in a parking garage but couldn't figure an easy way to escape.

Dave Frohnmayer, the state attorney general, was targeted as well. To determine with certainty where he lived, one Rajneeshee posed as a Bible salesman to reach his front door. Others staked out Frohnmayer's office in Salem.

A team of three went to Portland to kill James Comini as he lay in St. Vincent Hospital, recovering from ear surgery. As a Wasco County commissioner, Comini had been critical of the Rajneeshees, and he kept up his criticism after leaving office.

There was danger for enemies on the ranch as well. Much of the planning focused on killing two of the guru's personal staff: his doctor, Swami Devaraj, and his caretaker, Ma Yoga Vivek. Sheela convinced the others that the two were a threat to the guru. As proof, she played a secretly recorded conversation in which the doctor agreed to obtain drugs the guru wanted to ensure a peaceful death if he decided to take his own life.

The assignment to kill Vivek went to Ma Anand Ava and Ma Anand Su, president of the sect's investment firm and also known as Susan Hagan. The two set out late one night to catch Vivek in her room. They carried an ether-soaked rag to render her unconscious. In anticipation, Su trimmed her fingernails so no flesh would get trapped as evidence if Vivek fought.

The plan was for Ava to inject her with a lethal combination of potassium and adrenaline. They never got the chance because they couldn't unlock Vivek's rear door. They had the wrong key.

That was followed by a more elaborate plan to kill Devaraj, a British doctor also known as George Meredith. The attempt came the morning of July 6, 1985, when the commune was thick with sannyasins visiting for the annual world festival. The venue for the attempt was the massive lecture hall at the ranch, pulsing with sannyasins dancing to pounding music.

Devaraj, sitting cross-legged on the floor, considered joining the dancing. Then, a woman named Ma Shanti Bhadra, also known as Jane Elsea, leaned over his shoulder and whispered in his ear. He felt a hot sting in his buttock. She had jabbed him with a miniature syringe concealed by a handkerchief.

He whirled on her. "Oh, so this is what it's come to, has it?" he asked as he got to his feet. Shanti Bhadra walked with the doctor.

"What's wrong? What's wrong?" she asked in feigned surprise.

Devaraj made it out of the lecture hall and was flown to a Bend hospital. He nearly died from the injection of adrenaline.

The attack was a shock. Up to now, the episodes had seemed like pranks or justified acts of self-defense. But now the Rajneeshees had nearly killed one of their own. The guru himself ordered Shanti Bhadra to be drugged and questioned, an order Sheela ignored.

Ma Yoga Vidya, one of the commune's top executives who was also known as Ann McCarthy, thought other murder plans had been scrubbed when she heard two others discussing the Turner plan.

Vidya had fought Sheela in private about such plans. Sheela brushed aside her concerns but kept Vidya loyal by threatening to kill her husband.

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Now, discovering that murder was still part of the operation, Vidya snapped.

She made her way to Sheela's room, interrupting a meeting.

"It's got to stop. I can't stand this talk of killing anymore. I can't stand it. I can't stand it," Vidya said. She collapsed on the floor, convulsing and crying.

Sheela summoned Shanti Bhadra from an adjoining room, asking her to calm Vidya. Shanti Bhadra was the one who had tried to kill Devaraj, and she was assigned to shoot Turner. She snapped when she encountered Vidya.

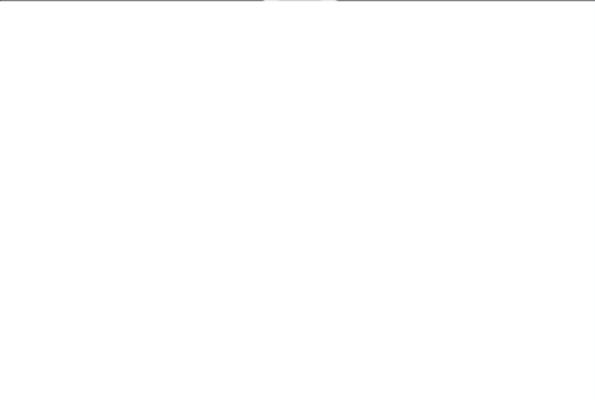
"I will not be killing anybody," Shanti Bhadra said. "No one will be killing anybody."

The turning point had come, for the commune and for Oregon.

The murder plots ended, as did other dirty tricks. Soon after Labor Day 1985, Sheela quit her posts at the ranch. She fled to Europe with selected taped conversations involving the guru, sect promissory notes and miniature hypodermic needles such as the one used to attack Devaraj. A dozen of her allies also quit the commune, joining her in Germany or fleeing elsewhere.

The ranch quickly fell apart.

At a news conference, the guru described a litany of crimes he attributed to Sheela and her "gang." Both Oregonians and Rajneeshees were stunned.



New commune leaders hired outside lawyers, who questioned sannyasins about what had gone on. The guru told his followers to be truthful. They were unsparing in their recollections.

At the same time, state and federal investigators rushed in, gathering evidence and interviewing Rajneeshees. Soon, two of Sheela's most trusted insiders struck deals. That included Krishna Deva, the Rajneeshpuram mayor, and Ava, one of the key members of the commune's dirty tricks squad.

Both gave lengthy statements that astonished investigators. The summary of Krishna Deva's statement, given over eight days, ran 96 pages.

In the coming months, one sannyasin after another trooped into court, admitting criminal conduct on behalf of the sect. The charges included attempted murder, assault, arson, immigration fraud, wiretapping and conspiracy.

Sheela, nurse Ma Anand Puja and Shanti Bhadra struck deals that included federal prison time.

The guru made a cross-country dash on a chartered jet to escape, but was caught in North Carolina as he was about to leave the country. He was hauled back to Portland in handcuffs, booked into jail like a common criminal. He ordered his lawyers to cut him a quick deal, and he was soon deported as a convicted felon, guilty of immigration crimes.

Courthouses were busy with civil matters as well. Rajneeshee corporations went bankrupt, poisoning victims sued and the state pressed the case against the city of Rajneeshpuram.

The insurance company holding the ranch's mortgage foreclosed, selling the ranch to a wealthy Montana rancher. He later turned it into a camp for Young Life, a Christian youth organization that now brings in busloads of youngsters from throughout the West.

Rajneeshees scattered about the planet, the guru ending up back in India. Renamed Osho, he died in 1990, but the faithful keep alive his spirit, running meditation centers across the world. Elsewhere, some of those most deeply involved faded back into civilian life, giving no clue to their former allegiance to the sect.

Now in Switzerland, Sheela blames Oregonians for much of what happened at Rancho Rajneesh. She'll talk about her days in Oregon, but not her crimes. She doesn't budge when pushed to do so.

"Leave me alone."

-- Les Zaitz: email him at specialreport@oregonian.com; visit the [Rajneesh Report page on Facebook](#)

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