CHAPTER 1

"India's Most Dangerous Guru"

Rajneesh and India after Independence

I teach utter rebellion. . . . If we want to change society, society is going to be offended.

—Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh

Osho is the most dangerous man since Jesus Christ. . . . He's obviously a very effective man, otherwise he wouldn't be such a threat. He's saying the same things that nobody else has the courage to say. A man who has all kinds of ideas, they're not only inflammatory—they also have a resonance of truth that scares the pants off the control freaks.

—Novelist Tom Robbins

From his first public lectures, Rajneesh presented himself and his ideas as radical, iconoclastic, and dangerous. Never conforming to the traditional model of a "guru" who had sat at the feet of another enlightened master in a long line of teachers stretching back into the hoary past, Rajneesh claimed instead to be a self-enlightened being, a radically new sort of guru who had no teacher of his own, but discovered spiritual awakening through his own initiative and self-experimentation. Similarly, the message he brought was a powerfully iconoclastic one, mocking the great religions of the past and challenging his followers to find their own way to inner truth. Known variously as "the fiery teacher who destroys age-old myths and beliefs, traditions and teachings"[1] and even as "the most dangerous man in the world,"[2] Rajneesh was famous for infuriating everyone, from theologians and journalists to politicians on both ends of the political spectrum. As his first official biographer

Vasant Joshi put it, he "refutes Marx and socialist ideas, criticizes Freud and Jung, cracks jokes at the people in the Vatican . . . and does not disguise his contempt for politicians. The Hindus condemn him as a hedonist, the Communists belittle him as a spiritualist, the journalists describe him as a 'sex guru,' and one scholar called him 'the Hugh Heffner of the spiritual world.'"[3]

In order to understand Rajneesh's iconoclastic religious spirit, however, we need to place him within his larger historical, political, social, and economic context, in the new state of India in the decades after independence. Rajneesh claimed that his enlightenment experience occurred in 1953, just six years after India became independent, at a time of tremendous religious, social, and political turmoil in the fledging democracy.[4] The two nation-states of India and Pakistan had just barely been created, demarcated in large part along religious boundaries, and India was struggling to negotiate its role within the complex Cold War landscape dominated by the United States and the Soviet Union, striving to navigate a middle way between "the capitalist West and the communist soviet block."[5]

Rajneesh's bold and at times abrasive message was in many ways a direct challenge to his Indian audience during the decades of the 1950s and 1960s. Even as modern India was shedding the bonds of its British colonial masters and struggling to negotiate its identity in relation to America and Europe, Rajneesh was calling for a more radical shedding of all bonds to any masters—political, social, or spiritual. And just as India in the postindependence era was beginning to open up to a wide array of non-Indian cultural and intellectual influences, so, too, Rajneesh was sharing his remarkably eclectic teachings, incorporating not only a vast array of ideas drawn from Hinduism, Buddhism, and Sufism, but also elements of European psychoanalysis and philosophy. That these different influences sometimes conflicted with or contradicted one another was not really a problem for Rajneesh. Indeed, his message was in many ways deliberately contradictory, resisting any kind of system, coherent ideology, or dogma: "I am a man who is consistently inconsistent," he noted. "[Consistency] is impossible for me: I live in the moment, and whatsoever I am saying right now is true only for this moment. I have no reference with my past and I don't think of the future at all."[6]

Even Rajneesh's own biography is something of a confusing pastiche. As Lewis Carter notes, the narrative of his life offered by Rajneesh and his followers is less a simple historical document than a kind of "reconstructed

Mythos" that imaginatively re-presents his various transformations of identity, his shifting personas from young Chandra Mohan Jain to "Acharya Rajneesh" to "Bhawgan Shree Rajneesh" to "Maitreya," and finally to "Osho."[7] In this sense, his biography is not unlike those of other new religious leaders, such as L. Ron Hubbard or Madame Blavatsky, who also fashioned a kind of "hagiographic mythology" around themselves, woven of various threads of historical and imaginative narrative.[8]

With his iconoclastic, parodic, and paradoxical teachings and his mytho-historical biography, Rajneesh is thus not just the first truly global guru but also perhaps the first "postmodern guru" of the twentieth century. As we saw in the introduction, the term "postmodernism" has been used in wildly different and often contradictory ways; however, as authors such as David Harvey suggest, postmodernism is characterized above all by its emphasis on play, chance, irony, and indeterminacy over the ideals of purpose, design, and determinacy.[9] And this focus on fragmentation, play, and indeterminacy extends above all to the idea of the self or subject, which is likewise seen as multiple and shifting rather than singular and homogenous. As Michel Foucault famously put it in 1966, "Man is an invention of a recent date. And one perhaps nearing its end," destined to be erased like a face drawn in the sand at the edge of the sea.[10] In the wake of Foucault, a variety of postmodern theorists would continue to deconstruct and dethrone the idea of a unified or "sovereign subject," articulating "an emerging post-humanist epistemic space."[11] As Frederic Jameson observes, "Not even Einsteinian relativity, or the multiple subjective worlds of the modernists, is capable of giving adequate figuration to this process, which . . . makes itself felt by the so-called death of the subject, or more exactly, the fragmented and schizophrenic decentering of this last."[12]

Rajneesh's early following emerged almost *simultaneously* in the 1960s with the postmodern turn and its "incredulity toward metanarratives," along with its embrace of play, irony, and indeterminacy over purpose, design, and determinacy.[13] Yet Rajneesh also challenged the very idea of a fixed, permanent selfhood or identity, instead calling for the birth of a "new man" who would be "a liquid human being," constantly flowing, resisting all fixed attitudes, orthodoxies, and above all religious dogmas.[14] As we will see in chapter 2, this paradoxical ideal of a "liquid" and constantly shifting identity would become the basis for a new, equally "liquid," fluid, and flexible community in the 1970s and 1980s. All of this would make Rajneesh an extremely attractive figure in the rapidly changing young India of the decades after

independence, but also one deeply threatening to those who supported the status quo.

FROM CHANDRA MOHAN JAIN TO BHAGWAN SHREE RAJNEESH

Part of the difficulty in reconstructing Rajneesh's biography is that it is in many ways not the story of just one person. Rather, the figure that emerges from Rajneesh's narrative is a fluid, shifting, and often contradictory one, less a singular being than a kind of playful trickster who experimented with multiple identities at different moments for different audiences. As former follower James Gordon recalls, "As I listened to Rajneesh's tapes and read his books, I thought of Proteus, the elusive mythical shape-changer; of Lao-Tzu, the Chinese sage; and of Ba'al Shem Tov, whose ecstatic celebration of the divinity in daily life illuminated the eighteenth century Hasidic movement."[15] Even his posthumous *Autobiography of a Spiritually Incorrect Mystic* describes Rajneesh's many personas as "the many faces of a man who never was," and these faces include his various labels as the "sex guru," the "con man," the "cult leader," the "joker," the "Rolls-Royce guru," and the "Master."[16] In the words of Indian journalist M. V. Kamath, quoted at the end of Rajneesh's first biography, Rajneesh is such an iconoclastic figure that he is better understood not as one man but as multiple, shifting identities:

> There has been no other man like this before. . . . Like Whitman, Rajneesh is an iconoclast, a maverick, a hater of cant, superstition, snobbery and holier-than-thou-ism, and a lover of the good things of life. He will make a most remarkable statement of purpose and philosophy and illustrate it with the most outrageous joke or story picked straight from *Playboy* or *Penthouse*. There is no way one can compartmentalize this man. It would almost seem that he is not one man but many men. . . . Rajneesh is Moses, Walt Whitman, Buddha, Jesus Christ and Ramana Maharshi all rolled into one. . . . It is ridiculous to try to define this man. He challenges definition. His technique is to put everything upside down on its head . . . and make you look at the world from that vantage point. He is a disturbing man because he makes you question the validity of all your principles.[17]

Likewise, Rajneesh's biography is also a complex and shifting sort of postmodern narrative. As Rajneesh himself argued, historical "facts" don't really matter in the creation of a biography; what matters is the deeper spiritual truth and the evolution of an individual's consciousness, which may not necessarily correspond to fact in a historical sense:

> The first thing you have to understand is the difference between the fact and the truth. Ordinary history takes care about the facts—what actually happened in the world of matter, the incidents. It does not take care about the truth because truth does not happen in the world of matter, it happens in consciousness. . . . One day we will have to write the whole of history with a totally different orientation, because the facts are trivia—although they are material, they don't matter.[18]

While Rajneesh initially eschewed the idea of writing an autobiography, he did include numerous personal vignettes in his lectures. Many of these were later woven into a biography by Joshi in his 1982 book, *The Awakened One,* and then reworked in various other official narratives.[19] While in Oregon, Rajneesh dictated a series of anecdotes from his early life (from a dentist's chair while under the influence of nitrous oxide, according to one close disciple),[20] which was published in 1985 as *Glimpses of a Golden Childhood*. In 2000, the Osho International Foundation released *Autobiography of a Spiritually Incorrect Mystic,* which edited and repackaged the guru's life story from the perspective of the current Osho movement. The most exhaustive and also most hagiographic biography appeared still later in nine volumes and 3,600 pages in Hindi under the title *Ek Phakkad Messiah* and was later published in a single, abridged English volume as *The Rebellious Enlightened Master* (2006).[21] Finally, there are also a few "dissenting" accounts of Rajneesh's early life, such as the critical narrative provided by his former bodyguard, Hugh Milne. After visiting Rajneesh's family members in the village of Drug, Milne found that they had rather different recollections of the young Rajneesh, which departed significantly from the official accounts.[22]

In sum, Rajneesh's biography is not so much a singular, linear narrative of one individual but rather a far more protean, fragmented, shifting patchwork of multiple narratives and identities. Some of these identities, according to his recollections, even preceded this particular lifetime and included past lives dating back many centuries. For example, he recalled having been a previous spiritual master in the twelfth century, who had established a mystical school in a mountainous area and then died at the age of 106 after a twenty-one-day fast.[23]

In his twentieth-century identity, however, he was born Chandra Mohan Jain in the small village of Kuchwada, Madhya Pradesh, in 1931. Nicknamed Rajneesh, he was raised by his maternal grandparents, an elderly Jain couple, who gave him remarkable freedom and treated him as a "rajah" or king.[24] As his biographer Joshi recalls, Rajneesh was

from his earliest years a rebellious and antiauthoritarian figure, who also had a fascination with danger and the limits of mortality: "His school years are described as a period of rebellion against all authority, organizing gangs to terrorize villages and reckless 'experiments' in which he would lead or push others into life-threatening circumstances."[25]

It is perhaps not insignificant that Rajneesh was born to a Jain family and raised during the 1930s. As Christophe Jaffrelot notes, the Hindu Nationalist movement, which had emerged first in the nineteenth century, really began to expand and crystallize as an ideology in the period between the 1920s and 1940s. The same period also witnessed increasing tensions between Hindu nationalists and Muslims, which would help lead in part to India's partition and its violent aftermath.[26] Coming from a Jain background, Rajneesh was not only an outsider to these divisions, but also deeply cynical toward all forms of religious or political orthodoxies throughout his life.

If there is any one recurring theme in the various accounts of Rajneesh's early life, it is his preoccupation with and experience of death. Long before postmodernists and deconstructionists in Europe began to talk about the idea, Rajneesh was fascinated with the possibility of the "death of the subject" (an idea also discussed in the Buddhist tradition 2,000 years earlier, we should note). Thus he recalled that an astrologer had predicted at his birth that it was "almost certain that this child is going to die at the age of twenty-one. Every seven years he will have to face death."[27] So his parents were also said to have been concerned about his possible death throughout his childhood. In his youth, Rajneesh then had several actual encounters with death that would have a profound impact on him. The first was the death of his maternal grandfather when Rajneesh was seven years old, an event that left a permanent emotional scar. He recalled watching his grandfather die slowly for three days, after which he himself refused to eat or get up for three days. As Rajneesh put it, "His death became for me the death of all attachments. Therefore I could not establish a bond of relationship with anyone. . . . Since then, I have been alone."[28] A second early experience was the death of a childhood girlfriend in 1947, which pushed him into a deep state of depression that lasted several years. Preoccupied with the question of mortality, he spent large amounts of time in cremation grounds observing dead bodies and following funeral processes. "Death," he put it, "is such a beautiful phenomenon, and one of the most mysterious"; and from an early age he recalled thinking about the day of his own death.[29]

Rajneesh was also remembered for hurling himself into life-threatening situations, such as jumping into a dangerously flooded river and leaping from a seventy-foot bridge. Yet he is also said to have been fascinated with observing others confront the fact of their own mortality. For example, he recalled holding a friend who was unable to swim under water until he became desperate, and then eagerly asked him about the experience afterward.[30]

As a student, Rajneesh appears to have been constantly butting up against authority and getting into trouble with teachers and university administrators. At age nineteen, he began his studies at Hitkarini College in Jabalpur, but after conflicts with an instructor soon transferred to D. N. Jain College. Here he was apparently so disruptive that he was not required to attend classes but only to take exams, and so he used his free time to work for a local newspaper and begin public speaking. As Rajneesh himself later recalled, he seemed almost compelled to cause trouble and generate arguments with his instructors, even if only for his own entertainment: "With or without reason, I was creating controversies. . . . There seemed even if just for fun a necessity to create controversies."[31]

Rajneesh's first major spiritual transformation took place in the early 1950s. After a long period of intense physical and emotional distress, he underwent a profound experience that he described as full enlightenment. As he later recounted the episode, he had gone through a period of intense questing, during which he challenged and discarded all religions, philosophies, scriptures, and any other systems of truth. Krishna, Buddha, Mahavir, Jesus, the Vedas, the Koran—nothing seemed to provide a stable foundation for certainty, and he was left spiritually adrift in a kind of "dark night of the soul." As he put it, "Questions remained without any answer. . . . I was as good as mad. . . . I was in a deep sea. . . . without any boat or bank anywhere. . . . My condition was utter darkness. It was as if I had fallen into a deep well. . . . My condition was full of tensions, insecurity and danger."[32] He then went through a period of intense asceticism and physical austerity, during which he went for days without feeling hunger or thirst, running five to ten miles every morning and evening, until all those around him also thought he was mad.[33] His distressed parents took him to one physician after another, trying Ayurvedic doctors and religious specialists.

At last, on the brink of complete despair, he simply gave up and stopped struggling. On the seventh day after he had given up his discipline, in March 1953, his enlightenment experience occurred. Like the historical Buddha, who had also first tried extreme asceticism before

abandoning that path, he simply allowed his own enlightened nature to manifest itself spontaneously within him. As he later recalled, this experience was a kind of inner explosion that burst inside of him like a ball of blissful energy and illuminated the entire universe around him in an incredibly and intoxicating ecstasy (which, interestingly enough, he also described, using Western counterculture language, as being "high"):

> These seven days were of tremendous transformation, total transformation. And the last day the presence of a totally new energy, a new light and new delight, became so intense that it was almost unbearable, as if I was exploding, as if I was going mad with blissfulness. The new generation in the West has the right word for it: I was blissed out, stoned.[34]
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> And the day the search stopped, the day I was not seeking for something, the day I was not expecting something to happen, it started happening. A new energy arose—out of nowhere. It was not coming from any source. It was coming from nowhere and everywhere. It was in the trees and in the rocks and in the sky and in the sun and in the air. . . . The day effort ceased, I also ceased.[35]

He would also describe this experience as a profound sort of death and rebirth—the dissolution of his old identity and the birth of a new man, in which his entire former body and experience of the world were shattered and replaced by a new selfhood and a new experience of reality. In many ways, this was the culmination of his early obsession with death, now fulfilled in his own experience of psychological death. While postmodernist philosophers of the 1960s and 1970s would later talk about the "death of man" and the "death of the subject" in abstract terms,[36] Rajneesh appears to have undergone his own personal deconstruction of the rational ego and ordinary human consciousness:

> I became non-existential and non-existent. That night I died and was reborn. But the one that was reborn had nothing to do with that which died. . . . The person who had lived for many, many lives, for millennia, simply died. . . . Another being, absolutely new . . . . started to exist.[37]
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> The whole day was strange, stunning, and it was a shattering experience. . . . I was becoming a nonbeing, a what Buddha calls *anatta*. Boundaries were disappearing, distinctions were disappearing. Mind was disappearing; it was millions of miles away.[38]

As Rajneesh himself notes here, the idea of the loss of ego or extinction of the self is a traditional one and lies at the very heart of the Buddhist ideal of *nirvana* (snuffing out). Yet, as we will see, Rajneesh's particular articulation of the death of the self was also in many ways a rather postmodern one, giving birth to a new series of fluid, protean, playful identities that he would experiment with for the next forty years.

It is also significant that Rajneesh's enlightenment experience took place in 1953, less than six years after India's independence. As Ramchandra Guha notes in *India after Gandhi,* this was a period when the fledging nation was struggling with a variety of social conflicts on multiple axes of caste, language, class, and above all religion.[39] Just a few years before, during the anguish of partition, much of the nation had been torn by massive rioting between Hindus and Muslims. Meanwhile, the new democracy was negotiating its complex relationship with the capitalism of America and Europe and the socialism of China and the Soviet Union. As we will see in the following chapters, all of these currents are embodied in Rajneesh's teachings, which at once reject all religious orthodoxies and call for radical reform of India's economic policies.

Ironically, despite having become fully enlightened at the age of twenty-one, Rajneesh actually continued his studies and received his BA and MA in philosophy in 1955 and 1957. He then went on to teach philosophy, first at Raipur Sanskrit College. Already a controversial and widely known figure, Rajneesh continued to antagonize his fellow teachers and superiors. As one administrator at Raipur Sanskrit College put it, "This man is dangerous. He will destroy my students' morality, character, and religion."[40] And Rajneesh himself embraced this "dangerous" image, presenting himself as a radical, provocative, iconoclastic, and refreshingly original teacher who challenged his listeners to remember that the very idea of "God" or "the divine" is itself a potentially threatening thing: "God is very dangerous. There exists no other dangerous word comparable to God. God means to live a life of spontaneity, of nature."[41]

Rajneesh subsequently moved on to teach at Jabalpur University in 1958 and also began traveling and lecturing throughout India under the title Acharya [teacher or professor] Rajneesh. During this period, he began to hone his style as a deliberately provocative, controversial, but also entertaining lecturer, creating his own Indian version of a countercultural revolution that in many ways mirrored the countercultural movements emerging in America, England, and Europe. As James Gordon reflects on this period in Rajneesh's career,

> In the 1960s, Rajneesh's mood, like the times, changed. While a graduate student and lecturer at Jabalpur, he stormed across India, provoking like some itinerant anarchist organizer. These talks revealed Rajneesh's affinity with the contemporary Western rebels who would soon be drawn to him. . . . Like Ken Kesey spiking fruit punch with LSD he was trying to disrupt conventional patterns of thought and behavior.[42]

Rejecting not only the austere Jainism of his family but also all religious orthodoxy, Rajneesh was beginning to craft his own unique brand of iconoclastic spirituality, which would later flourish in the 1970s and 1980s. Indeed, the Jainism of his childhood had become for him really the "prototype for the narrowness and stupidity of all organized religion," and he would later embrace all those things that Jainism had rejected: sensuality, sexuality, material enjoyment, and wealth.[43] At the same time, he would also present himself as a kind of "anti-guru" or "guru-less guru," an enlightened being who came from no established lineage of masters and taught a radically antiauthoritarian message. While most other religious teachers in India had certified themselves by connection to a guru and to a lineage that might stretch back beyond written history, ideally to a deity such as Shiva, Vishnu, or the Goddess, Rajneesh was one of the first to proudly declare that he had no teacher. The true "Master" in his view was not someone who makes you feel better or gives you all the answers, but instead the one who confuses you, makes you question yourself, and creates intense internal conflict:

> When you come to a Master like Jesus you come for peace. You are blissfully unaware that you have come to the wrong person. . . . This is the way you can know a false master from a true Master: a false master is a consolation. He gives you peace as you are; he never bothers to change you. He is a tranquillizer. He is just like sleeping pills. . . . A true Master will create more turmoil, more conflict. He is not going to console you.[44]

By the late 1960s, Rajneesh had indeed become a "Master of conflict," cultivating a national reputation for his irreverent and confrontational style. Thus in 1969, at the Second World Hindu Conference, he took an apparent delight in offending not only Hindu leaders but also almost everyone else, criticizing all organized religions and their self-serving priests. So provocative were his comments that one of Hinduism's most important spiritual authorities, the Shankaracharya of Puri, attempted to have the lecture stopped.[45]

It is not easy to summarize Rajneesh's philosophy, which was rooted in his reading of a vast range of European and Asian philosophy and was articulated through his own deliberately confusing, ironic, and often self-contradictory teaching style. A voracious, eclectic, and wide-ranging reader, Rajneesh quoted freely both from great spiritual figures such as Buddha, Jesus, Kabir, Guru Nanak, and Lao Tzu and from modern philosophers and psychologists such as Nietzsche, Wittgenstein, Freud, Jung, and Reich, fashioning his own unique sort of post-

modern bricolage.[46] However, one of his recurring themes was the idea that we are all, at our core, divine beings and even Buddhas: "You are all buddhas," as he put it. "Whether you know it or not, it doesn't matter. . . . At the very core of your soul, you are a Buddha."[47] Yet our inherent divinity has been progressively covered over by layers of conditioning by family, society, politics, and religious institutions, leaving us like sleeping, brainwashed automatons. Therefore, the goal of Rajneesh's bold and often jarring techniques is a kind of *dehypnosis* aimed at shocking us into awakening, often in ways that seem contradictory or confusing: "What is the business of any Buddha? To shake us up. To shock us out of our stupor we mistake for conscious life into a sudden ecstatic awareness of the enlightened consciousness that is our intrinsic nature."[48] In the words of one follower, this process is a kind of *de-programming* or *reverse brainwashing* that undoes the layers of conditioning that have covered our divinity:

> You are programmed by family, acquaintances, institutions. Your mind is like a blackboard on which the rules and other programming are written. Bhagwan writes new rules on the blackboard, he tells you one thing is true and the next day that its opposite is true. He writes and writes new things on the blackboard of your mind until it is a "whiteboard." Then you have no programming left. Bhagwan frees the individual from all prior constraints and norms.[49]

Another follower, Swami Prabodh Dhanyam, put it even more succinctly in an interview in late 2013: "To me [his] message is Freedom: freedom from all the conditioning in your mind, which has been planted there from childhood on."[50] As we will see, however, there is some debate as to whether Rajneesh really freed his disciples from all conditioning or rather imposed new forms of (sometimes more problematic) conditioning.

RAJNEESH AND THE "CRAZY WISDOM" TRADITION

One of the key themes that runs throughout Rajneesh's teachings from his early lectures of the 1960s until his final works before his death is that of "divine madness" or "crazy wisdom." In Rajneesh's view, we are all so programmed and brainwashed by social institutions that any genuine holy man would have to appear "mad" by mainstream social standards. Conversely, only the most outrageously "mad" techniques would help shock and shake us out of our mundane, comfortable lives: "To teach man I have to devise and use all sorts of mad games, so that

the accumulated madness could be acted out, catharted out, thrown out."[51] In his opinion, we are all already "insane," so the task of the true Master is simply to help us become "consciously insane" and so purge ourselves of our own insanity:

> Those who repress their neuroses become more and more neurotic, while those who express it consciously throw it out. So unless you become consciously insane, you can never be sane. . . . You *are* insane, so something has to be done about. What I say is to become conscious of it. . . . Allow it to come out; that is the only way toward sanity.[52]

However, Rajneesh's radical and at times offensive style of teaching was always combined with a sharp sense of humor and a love of jokes—even raunchy jokes—as a means of waking up his audience: "I have to tell jokes, because the things that I am saying are so subtle, so deep and profound that if I simply go on telling you those things you will fall asleep, and you will not be able to listen. . . . The more profound the truth I have to tell you, the worse joke I choose for it. . . . Even a dirty joke can be helpful—more so because it can shock you to the very roots, to the very guts. And that's the whole point!"[53] Ultimately, the greatest joke of all is the idea of "enlightenment" or spiritual awakening itself. From Rajneesh's perspective, we are all already Buddhas, we all already Christs, so the idea of going out somewhere looking for enlightenment from someone else is the most laughable thing of all: "Enlightenment, the very idea of enlightenment, is the greatest joke there is. It is a joke because it is trying to get something which is already there. It is trying to reach somewhere you are already. . . . It is an effort which is ridiculous."[54]

More than one observer has noted that Rajneesh's controversial teaching style has much in common with many other iconoclastic spiritual teachers through the ages. The idea of a kind of "holy madness" or "crazy wisdom" runs through many religious traditions, from Indian movements such as the Bauls (the wandering minstrels and "madmen" of Bengal) to Tantric Buddhist masters who are known for their mad and shocking techniques to the Eastern Christian ideal of the "holy fool" to various New Age gurus who appear insane or bizarre by mainstream standards.[55] In many ways, Rajneesh's often shocking ideas have much in common with those of other contemporary "crazy wisdom" teachers, such as the modern Tibetan teacher Chogyam Trungpa, the American guru known as Adi Da, and others who similarly combined spiritual shock tactics with humor, parody, and free sexual experimentation.[56]

FIGURE 3. George Ivanovich Gurdjieff.

One of the most important of these crazy wisdom figures for Rajneesh was the charismatic and controversial Armenian mystic George Ivanovich Gurdjieff (1866–1949; fig. 3). While Rajneesh cited relatively few figures as significant influences on his thinking, he did name Gurdjieff as one of his favorites; and it is not difficult to see many fundamental similarities between the two men.[57] Like Rajneesh, Gurdjieff was a radical, iconoclastic, and controversial figure who took a certain delight in annoying religious and political orthodoxies; like Rajneesh, Gurdjieff was incredibly eclectic, having explored and drawn from a vast array of religious, spiritual, and mystical ideas, ranging from Eastern Orthodox Christianity, Tibetan Buddhism, and Sufism to modern dance and music; and perhaps most like Rajneesh, Gurdjieff's primary task as a spiritual teacher was to "shock" his followers into an intense experience of awakening to their own true and full potentials.

In Gurdjieff's view, most human beings live their lives in a state of "sleep," drifting through the world in a semiconscious state and rarely if ever glimpsing the true possibilities of existence: "The chief feature of a modern man's being which explains everything else that is lacking in him is *sleep*. A modern man lives in sleep, in sleep he is born and in sleep he dies. . . . If a man really wants knowledge, he must first think how to

wake."[58] The state of enlightenment is what Gurdjieff called the "fourth state," which lies beyond the normal conditions of sleeping, dreaming, and waking consciousness (which is itself closer to sleep than to actual "waking"). This fourth state is "an objective state of consciousness" in which "a man can see things as they are. . . . In the religions of all nations there are indications of the possibility of a state of consciousness of this kind which is called 'enlightenment.' . . . The fourth state of consciousness in man means an altogether different state of being; it is the result of inner growth and of long and difficult work."[59]

To awaken his followers from their normal slumbering state, Gurdjieff used a variety of "crazy wisdom" techniques aimed at jolting them into a sudden recognition of their true nature and the possibility of enlightenment. Gurdjieff's techniques—called "the Work"—tended to focus on the body and the senses, such as music, physical movement, and manual labor: "He had used ancient Christian chants . . . and meditations learned from Tibetan yogis and dervishes, physical disciplines, sexual excess, and abstinence, exaggerations and lies, even alcohol and violence—anything that worked—to wake his followers from their habitual ways of seeing and reacting to the world around them."[60] Dance also was a central part of the work (as it would also be for Rajneesh), and Gurdjieff often referred to himself as a "teacher of dance." Also known as the "Fourth Way," Gurdjieff's method addresses the totality of the human being. Whereas other spiritual paths focus on just one aspect of the human being, such as the body (the way of the fakir), the emotions (the way of the monk), or the mind (the way of the yogi), the Fourth Way embraces the total human being, offering the most balanced and also most rapid path to enlightenment. Significantly, Gurdjieff also emphasizes that the Fourth Way does not demand that the seeker renounce ordinary life, family, or work. It can be practiced while still "in the world," without sacrificing the usual relations and pleasures of daily social existence. As Gurdjieff's Russian follower and popularizer P.D. Ouspensky described it,

> The fourth way requires no retirement into the desert, does not require a man to give up or renounce everything by which he formerly lived. . . . The beginning of the fourth way is easier than the beginning of the ways of the fakir, the monk, and the yogi. On the fourth way it is possible to work and to follow the way while remaining in the usual conditions of life, continuing to do the usual work, preserving former relations with people, and without renouncing or giving up anything.[61]

Many aspects of Gurdjieff's teachings, we will see, would be absorbed into Rajneesh's eclectic work. The emphasis on the body, the impor-

tance of dance, music, and movement, the idea of an integrated "total" approach, the application of radical "crazy wisdom" techniques, and the use of often biting, satirical humor as a teaching method can all be found in Rajneesh's movement from the late 1960s onward. Not only did Rajneesh himself cite Gurdjieff as one of his favorite authors, he used much of the same language of "awakening" and "shocking" his disciples from the "sleep" in normal life; and he similarly enjoyed the fact that his teachings were alarming, controversial, and outrageous to many in mainstream society. In this sense, he embraces the title of a "spiritual terrorist," who uses his shock tactics to jolt us into waking:

> I don't have any weapons, I don't have any nuclear missiles. But I have something greater and something far more effective. It is not to kill. It is to bring life to those who are living almost as if they are dead. It is bringing awareness to those who are daily like somnambulists. Walking in their sleep, talking in their sleep, not knowing exactly what they are doing and why they are doing.[62]
>
> I certainly enjoy disturbing people. Because there is no other way to help them. When somebody is asleep, the only way to wake him up is to disturb, shake him, throw cold water on him. Of course he will be angry . . . I enjoy disturbing people for the simple reason if they are disturbed, then there is a possibility of changing their minds.[63]

Not surprisingly, the similarities between Gurdjieff and Rajneesh have been noted by many observers and admirers. As novelist Tom Robbins put it, in a quote that continues to be featured on the Osho.com website,

> Wit and playfulness are a tremendously serious transcendence of evil, and this is one thing that Osho understood better than any contemporary teacher that I can think of. Gurdjieff had an element of that in his teachings, but certainly in the past fifty years there has not existed a teacher in the world who understood the value of playfulness and wit quite so well as Osho.[64]

In many ways both more ambitious and more eclectic than Gurdjieff, Rajneesh would soon combine elements of the Fourth Way with a wide array of other spiritual and psychological ideas ranging from Freud to Tantra, weaving them into his own playful new mix.

"RELIGIONLESS RELIGION" AND THE BIRTH OF THE "BHAGWAN"

By the mid-1960s, Acharya Rajneesh had begun attracting a number of important and increasingly affluent followers. While conservative Hindus

FIGURE 4. Rajneesh and Ma Yoga Laxmi.

saw Rajneesh as an outrageous fraud, a self-styled "guru" who came from no spiritual lineage and openly mocked India's greatest national and religious heroes, many of the newer class of upwardly mobile businessmen found his message refreshing, inspiring, and liberating.[65] As Gordon recalls this period in Bombay, Rajneesh seemed—to some, at least—to be the new, modern, urban face of India in the 1960s: "Rajneesh's fiery presence and the freshness, indeed the outrageousness of his message attracted the curious and adventurous. . . . These were Indians whose heterodox opinions or social concerns or questioning minds were already putting them in conflict with their religion or their family. They saw Rajneesh as a modern man, critical, sexually liberated. . . . Cosmopolitans, . . . speculators, bureaucrats, performers, . . . wealthy urbanites—all came to listen."[66] Beginning in 1964, Rajneesh received financial backing from a group of wealthy businessmen who helped support his teachings and set up his first meditation camp in the hills of Rajasthan.[67] A group of four Bombay businessmen, including Ishverlal N. Shah, began to see Rajneesh "as a comer if not a fully developed commodity," and formed the first formal Rajneesh organization in 1965—a trust registered as Jivan Jagruti Andolan or "Life Awakening Movement."[68] Resigning from his academic post in 1966, Rajneesh took up residence in an apartment in Bombay, where he began to draw his first long-term devotees.

Foremost among his early disciples was Laxmi Thakarsi Kuruwa, a well-connected young woman and the daughter of a key supporter of the Nationalist Congress Party with close ties to Nehru, Moraji Desai, and other political figures (fig. 4). Laxmi met Rajneesh at a lecture in a small

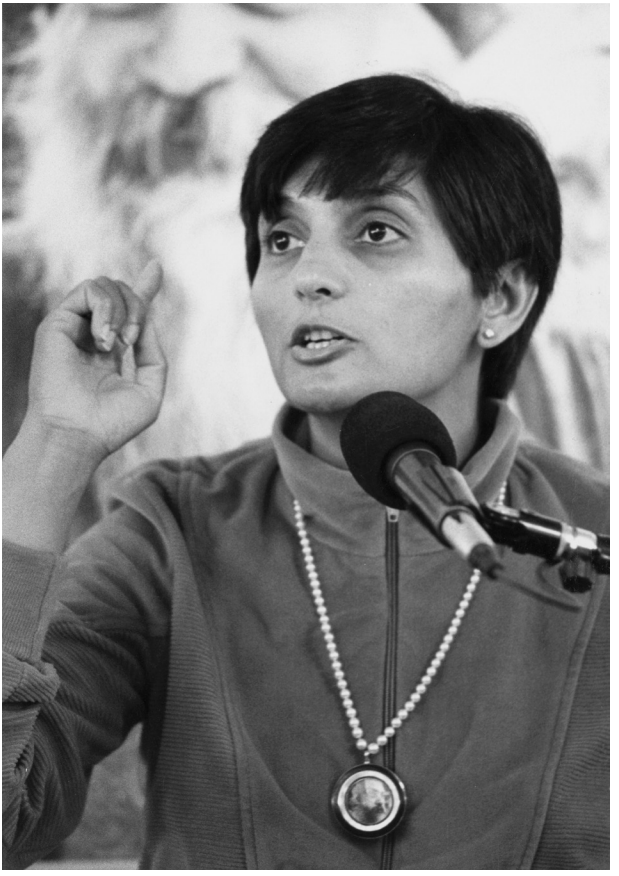

FIGURE 5. Ma Anand Sheela. Max Gutierrez photo, Oregon Historical Society, bb 011956.

hall in Bombay and apparently fell in love with him at first sight. His first real "groupie," Laxmi would become a key figure in Rajneesh's national emergence as a spiritual leader and his growing appeal among affluent Indian businessmen in the rapidly growing metropolis of Bombay.[69] Another key figure in the early days (later displacing Laxmi in the 1980s) was Patel, who had been sent to school in New Jersey and married a wealthy American named Marc Silverman. Later taking the name Ma Anand Sheela, she would bring significant resources to the movement as each of her three husbands also became followers of Rajneesh (fig. 5).

With Laxmi's business savvy and Sheela's connections, Rajneesh began to draw not only wealthy Indian followers but also a growing

number of European and American tourists, who found his mix of Indian spirituality, Western psychology, and attacks on the establishment to be a refreshing alternative to their own troubled lives back home. While the United States was still in the throes of the anti-Vietnam protests and the end of the 1960s counterculture, Rajneesh seemed to offer something wildly new and exciting. Like other new religious movements of this period (such as ISKCON, TM, and many others), the early Rajneesh movement appealed in particular to young people who had experimented with psychedelic drugs, radical politics, and other countercultural ideas but were still searching for a more lasting form of self-transformation. As Gordon recalls,

> In the early 1970s, just as the antiwar movement and the student rebellions in the West were exhausting themselves, Rajneesh was fresh. He wanted . . . to create a community, to start his own movement. The Westerners who were drawn to him were discovering the limits and limitations of leftist politics, the sexual revolution, psychotherapy, feminism and psychedelic drugs. They felt the need to take a journey into themselves that would definitely alter the fearful or selfish . . . ways they had been relating to their friends and families, their political goals and sexual experiences.[70]

The movement in these days was thus an odd mixture of well-to-do Indian businessmen and long-haired, shabbily dressed American and European hippies: "The Indian crowd was mainly of affluent upper class India," Ma Anand Sheela later reflected on those early days, "The western crowd was . . . mainly hippy and new age group. The westerners dressed in . . . Indian kurtas and lunghis, not very neat with long unkempt hair. . . . The westerners' appearance was scruffy, dirty and always had the feel of a traveler."[71] Rajneesh's teachings during this period also began to increasingly mix elements of Indian philosophy with ideas drawn from European psychology, such as post-Freudian psychoanalysis, bioenergetics, and Gurdjieff's eclectic mysticism.[72]

By 1971, Rajneesh had adopted yet another new identity—that of Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh; he would use the new name for the next fifteen years. Derived from the Sanskrit term *bhagavat,* Bhagwan means "holy, glorious, venerable, or divine," and is also a traditional name of God.[73] Shree is essentially an honorific title, meaning literally "light" or "radiance," but also signifying high rank, power dignity, or auspiciousness. As Rajneesh later put it, his adoption of this new title was a deliberate attempt to provoke conventional religious believers. By assuming a traditional name for God, he was at once radically transforming its meaning and also suggesting that we are all, in fact, already blessed ones or "gods":

> I have been calling myself bhagwan just as a challenge—to the Christians, to the Mohammedans, to the Hindus. They have condemned me. . . . I have tried in my own way to transform the word, but the stupid Hindus won't allow it. I have tried to give it a new name, a new meaning, a new significance. I have said that it means the blessed one, a man with a blessed being.[74]

With Laxmi's shrewd organizational skills, the movement also began to move in a much more visibly "religious" direction, and Rajneesh made more explicit references to religious themes in his public talks. As we will see in chapter 2, he would also institute his own tradition of initiation and a new form of religious life called *neo-sannyasin*. This "religious turn" indeed seemed an ironic move for a man who had cultivated a national reputation as an iconoclast who mocked all organized religious institutions and infuriated religious leaders. After all, this was the same teacher who once said, "My effort is to take away all traditions, orthodoxies, superstitions, and beliefs from your mind, so that you can attain a state of no-mind, the ultimate state of silence, where not even a thought moves."[75] However, even his idea of religion was itself a uniquely "anti-religious" one—one he called a "religionless religion," which might ironically use the trappings of a traditional faith but employ them to liberate rather than bind the individual to any kind of dogmatic system or institution:

> My whole effort is to create a religionless religion. . . . Now my effort is . . . to dissolve religion also. Leave only meditation. . . . There is no God and there is no religion. By religion I mean an organized doctrine, creed, ritual, priesthood.
>
> For the first time, I want religion to be absolutely individual. Because all organized religions, whether with God or without God, have misled humanity. . . . Organization is really a political phenomenon, it is not religious. It is another way of power. . . .
>
> My effort is to destroy the priesthood completely.[76]

Rajneesh was also quite up-front about the fact that what he was doing with this religionless religion was very much a *fiction*. Like a good myth, it was a fictional but useful *story* that might help others to make the difficult step from the "lie" of conventional life to the "truth" of self-realization and enlightenment. Thus, when asked about his "way of religion" by a disciple in 1976, he replied:

> I am creating a fiction here: the fiction of the Master and the disciple, the fiction of the god and the devotee. It is really a myth, but very alive. And there is no way to come to the truth unless you pass through a great

> mythology. Man is lost in lies. From lies there is no direct way to truth. Myth is a bridge between the lie and the truth. . . .
>
> This is a tremendous Poona fiction story. Whatsoever is happening here is very fictitious—these people in orange, and so many crazing things going on . . .
>
> Man lives in lies, God lives in the truth; but how to bridge both? . . . Myth is the way—fiction, yes, a spiritual fiction. All the religions are fictitious, all the mythologies are fictitious, but they are of tremendous help.[77]

It is also impossible not to compare Rajneesh's religionless religion with what Jeffrey Kripal has called the "religion of no religion" that emerged at the Esalen Institute in California during the 1960s. Like Rajneesh's early movement in India, Esalen was experimenting with new combinations of Eastern meditation and Western psychology, developing a powerful new form of alternative spirituality that drew from traditional religions, yet refusing to be bound by any orthodoxies (though we will see in chapter 3 that Esalen's cofounder, Dick Price, had a far more ambivalent reaction when he visited Pune in 1978).[78] Even today, the Osho community in Pune calls itself "the Esalen of the East."

MEETING THE BHAGWAN: THE "DEATH OF THE SUBJECT" IN THE EYES OF THE MASTER

Virtually everyone who describes meeting Rajneesh in those early days—even ex-followers who became disillusioned and left the movement—recalls the encounter as a profound and transformative experience. "Osho had a *Presence,*" Joshi said in an interview in 2013. "I found him not just a person but a phenomenon, which one could feel, love, celebrate, but could not measure in any qualitative or quantitative terms."[79] Practically every narrative contains the same tropes: the sense of being lost in his eyes, the feeling that he had always known the individual, a sense of trance or hypnosis through his soothing voice, an experience like falling in love, and a sense of complete dissolution of the ego in his sublime depths. For example, Sheela Silverman (Ma Anand Sheela) had first met Rajneesh briefly in 1968 and then encountered him again with his first disciple, Ma Anand Laxmi, in 1972. As she recalled that second encounter, it was like an intense combination of falling passionately in love, of rapturous possession, and of mystical loss of self in the divine:

> That moment all disappeared. All that existed was me and Bhagwan. Everything in me melted. I had never experienced such feelings in my life as

> these. . . . I felt elated. There was a certain glow in my face for days which I could not explain. . . . After this meeting all I could do was breathe for Bhagwan, eat for Bhagwan, sleep for Bhagwan, be for Bhagwan . . . I was possessed by the passion for Bhagwan.
>
> What happened between me and Bhagwan was . . . passion. I had never felt it before, yet it was so intense I did not care to define it. All I wanted to do was to drown in it and indulge.[80]

Rajneesh's former editor and press officer, Jack Allanach (Swami Krishna Prem), described a similar first encounter in Bombay in 1973. As he recalls, when he first walked into his luxury apartment in the affluent Malabar Hill section of the city, he found Rajneesh reading none other than *Zorba the Greek*. This was not anything like the sort of stereotypical, otherwordly Indian guru he had expected to meet. Indeed, Allanach made particular note of Rajneesh's fair-skinned "European" complexion and strong virile physique, in contrast to the frail, skinny yogi he had imagined that he would meet: "He doesn't appear Indian at all. His complexion is pale, almost European, as if he never sees the sun. . . . This is not the frail ascetic I'd expected. This man's body is stocky, compact. It gives the impression of power, of virility, of strength."[81] Allanach recounts that he was struck by Rajneesh's spiritual power from his first look into his eyes, experiencing a kind of ecstatic inner explosion and a glimpse into the "superhuman" possibilities that this master had discovered and that also lay within his own soul:

> The second our eyes met I'd exploded inside, my ears filling with an all-consuming roar. And then, like a far off sound cutting through the crashing waves of emotion, a distant voice had repeated a single word over and over again: Superman! Superman! Superman!
>
> As the storm abates I realize with a new clarity that I am sitting in front of a being unlike any I have ever encountered before. . . .
>
> "I couldn't believe anyone like you existed."
>
> He chuckles, a deep rumble that seems to bubble up from his very toes, "What I am, you are also," he says quietly, leaning toward me, his eyes holding mine. "The only difference between you and me is that I have recognized it. If you allow me, I will help you recognize it too."[82]

Even Hugh Milne—Bhagwan's former bodyguard who later left the movement in disgust—recalled his first encounter with the master as an overwhelming and incredible spiritual experience. Though he eventually concluded that Rajneesh was a charlatan, he still recounted his first meeting with the master as a tremendous experience of awe and compassion:

> From the minute I made my initial nervous steps into his . . . beautifully furnished room, I had the overwhelming sensation that I had come home. Here was my spiritual father, a man who understood everything, someone who would be able to convey sense and meaning into my life. It was a truly magical feeling. I was overawed, transported, and felt instantly that Bhawgan was inside my mind as no one else had ever been. . . . He radiated a palpable sense of unconditional love, which was simply electrifying. I was swept off my feet, enchanted, afloat in a sea of compassion emanating from this wholly original, unique being.[83]

In sum, these narratives of the encounter with Rajneesh follow a similar pattern, which in many ways mirror the narratives of Bhagwan's own enlightenment experience: the individual undergoes a radical dissolution of the ego and a loss of self within the sublime depths of the infinite, like a drop of water merged with the ocean—again, a "death of the subject." The recurring metaphors in these accounts are those of "drowning," "possession," "becoming lost," "floating in the sea." Yet always this narrative of ego loss is accompanied by a narrative of love, passion, and intense—at times quite erotic—intimacy.

CONCLUSIONS: MAKING SENSE OF RAJNEESH—A POSTMODERN GURU FOR POST-INDEPENDENCE INDIA

Given his ironic, playful, and self-contradictory personality, it is not surprising that there have been many conflicting attempts to make sense of Rajneesh. To his many admirers, Rajneesh was an enlightened master with a profoundly new message that was largely misunderstood by an ignorant society; yet to his many critics, he was a charlatan and con man, deceiving his naïve followers and concocting a superficial mishmash of Indian mysticism and Western psychology. At one end of the spectrum, there are more sympathetic authors such as Vasant Joshi, the early biographer of Rajneesh and still today a strong supporter and active teacher. In Joshi's view, Osho-Rajneesh was such a radically iconoclastic figure that he could only have been demonized by mainstream society; and it is perhaps only with time, once the initial controversies and scandals have died down, that we will really appreciate the true genius and originality of his message:

> Osho describes himself, as "one man against the whole history of humanity," and as it follows fairly naturally that, he has been the most misunderstood. The misunderstanding arises mainly because most people see only one

> snapshot of what is really an adventure movie. They see a pool rather than a river of consciousness. . . .
>
> As time goes by and our understanding of the full implications of that river increases, his unique contribution to humanity will continue to gain worldwide recognition. What is most striking in his contribution is the *process*—the process of self-transformation.[84]

Many ex-*sannyasins,* such as Rajneesh's former bodyguard Hugh Milne, have a more mixed and complex perspective on the Bhagwan. In Milne's view, Rajneesh was indeed a man of incredible intelligence, insight, and charisma; but he was also a man driven by the need for power and adoration, whose own egotism and greed would eventually lead to the disastrous collapse of his commune: "Rajneesh is not a simple man. The commune that arose around him reflected his complex and macabre personality. He undoubtedly possessed remarkable gifts, but at the same time he was in the grip of a need for power and wealth that was nothing short of megalomaniacal."[85]

My own view is that Rajneesh is best understood neither as a pure, enlightened master nor as a megalomaniacal manipulator. Rather, he is in many ways a kind of embodiment and even microcosm of the time and place in which he emerged: India in the first decades after independence. In a profound sense, Rajneesh was as successful as he was because he came along at "the right time and right place."[86] Despite his iconoclasm, his finger was always very much on the pulse of this newly developing nation as it struggled to find its identity amid the sometimes violent conflicts between Hindus, Muslims, and other religious communities, and as it navigated its relationship with America and Europe in a Cold War landscape "dominated by the United States and the Soviet Union."[87] Rajneesh's message as "India's most dangerous guru" was clearly crafted as a response to the dominant political and religious ideologies of postindependence India. Rejecting all dominant political systems and mounting a scathing attack on all religious orthodoxies, Rajneesh articulated a vision of a "religionless religion" that made a direct appeal not just to India's new business classes but also to a growing audience of American and European young people.

Yet perhaps reflecting the incredible diversity and rapidly shifting nature of India itself in these decades, Rajneesh was also a remarkably protean and fluid sort of guru. Already by the 1970s, the complex character of Rajneesh had undergone a number of identity changes, evolving from Chandra Mohan Jain to Acharya Rajneesh to Bhagwan. Yet this was entirely in keeping with his own ideal of the "new man." According

to Rajneesh, the new man would be a "liquid human being" who would reject all orthodoxies and fixed identities, living perpetually in a fluid, ever-shifting present. Such a being would perpetually re-create her/himself at every moment. As he put it,

> The new consciousness is going to be counter to all orthodoxies. Any kind of orthodoxy, Catholic or communist, Hindu or Jain . . . is a kind of paralysis of the mind. . . . You stop living. . . . An alive person has to be flowing; he has to respond to the changing situations. And situations are constantly changing. How can you remain fixed in your attitudes when life itself is not fixed?
>
> The new man will be creative. Each moment he will find his religion, each moment he will find his philosophy. And everything will remain growing. He will not be obedient to the past . . . he will be obedient to the present.[88]

While Rajneesh does not explicitly use the term "postmodern" or "poststructural" to describe this ideal of the new consciousness, his ideas do very closely parallel those of European theorists who were writing at almost exactly the same time. For example, in 1972, just one year after Rajneesh took the title Bhagwan, French authors such as Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari would likewise reject the idea of a unified, self-identical ego or "sovereign subject," instead celebrating a kind of "perpetually renewed 'nomadic' subject always different from itself, a kind of 'permanent revolution' of psychic life."[89]

As we will see in chapter 2, Rajneesh's iconoclastic teachings were also closely tied to his larger social and economic views, which were soon put into practice in his early spiritual community during the 1970s. Not only did he launch a bold attack on Gandhian asceticism and Nehruvian socialism, calling instead for an embrace of American-style capitalism; he also put his "religionless religion" into living practice through the establishment of a wholly new kind of spiritual life, the *neo-sannyasin,* and then through his unique social experiment, the first ashram in Pune.