

# Sex cults and salmonella: the bizarre true story behind Netflix's documentary Wild Wild Country

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In the 1960s and 1970s, the youth of the world - specifically, perhaps, the youth of the West - were inflamed with a desire for change. For some, this was expressed through protest movements: through the rise of civil rights, second-wave feminism and other socio-political causes.

But others sought a less tangible kind of fulfilment. They wanted to change not just the world but their own inner selves. For these spiritual idealists, Eastern religions held an appeal, a wisdom - and an exoticism - that plain old Christianity just couldn't live up to. But alongside the spread of reputable movements, such as Western Buddhism, many more niche groups took hold - groups peddling a significantly sexed-up version of spirituality.

Then it's not that surprising to learn that in the 1970s a number of people began following a self-appointed Indian guru and mystic named Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, known for his departure from tradition and his radical endorsement of "free love".

Uprooting their lives (and in some cases, their families) to join him in Poona, India, Rajneesh's followers wore orange outfits and engaged in energetic, violently cathartic group meditation sessions. Later, after pressure from the Indian government threatened the existence of their ashram, the guru bought a large ranch in rural Oregon in the US, establishing his own (theoretically) utopian city there in 1981.

A new six-part Netflix documentary, Chapman and Maclain Way's **Wild Wild Country**, tells the bizarre story of what happened next to "the Bhagwan" and his city. The turbulent battles between the new settlers and local residents would eventually lead to the deliberate poisoning of over 700 people with salmonella, several alleged attempted murders, and a lurid (and admittedly anecdotal) plot involving ground-up beaver carcasses and the local water supply. Needless to say, this wasn't your average sex cult.

Were they a "sex cult" at all? While this kind of sensationalist labelling would have been considered a gross oversimplification by Rajneesh's followers, there was some truth to it. The guru's core ideas took inspiration from Hinduism and Buddhism, but, in contrast to many traditional religions, he embraced human physicality, and endorsed the idea that lots of sex (with lots of different people if needs be) was good for you.

Repression, he felt, was dangerous: people needed to welcome their natural desires. He didn't ask his followers to deny themselves - and, in contrast to many of his fellow countrymen, he was happy to endorse both birth control and abortion.

Former followers (more on them later) have confirmed that, while committed marriages took place, partner-swapping was common within the group. This was a pathway to spiritual freedom

that liberated Westerners, many of whom were already querying monogamous ideals, could wholeheartedly embrace.

**Wild Wild Country** takes an effective, slow-burn approach, introducing us first to older residents of the tiny town of Antelope, the nearest neighbour to the Wasco County ranch where the settlement, known as Rajneeshpuram, would be established.

These Antelope residents, men and women so palpably all-American they feel as if they must be actors playing small-townners (they're not), were understandably suspicious about the intentions of the new arrivals. "People had no idea what they were really doing."

They were, they said, tolerant up to a point - happy for just about anyone to farm the 64 acres of land - but were less happy when it became clear that Rajneesh was building a 7000-person strong city, complete with its own roads, sewer works, medical services and plenty of homes.

The archive footage used in the film showcases some of the unintentional humour of the clash: the sex lives of the Rajneeshpuram inhabitants, for instance, seem to have been a source of prurient fascination for their neighbours (look out for a clip of a horrified woman discussing the dreaded nightly "noises"). But while plain old-fashioned bigotry certainly lay behind some of the opposition, it's hard not to feel some sympathy for the bemused Antelopians - especially as their essential argument, that Rajneeshpuram was a cult, was arguably true.

Rajneesh himself, known to his devoted followers as **Osho**, has divided cultural historians. Was he really a shameless, manipulative con artist, or a sincere and genuinely revolutionary spiritual teacher? The documentary doesn't make any explicit judgements, but it's hard not to avoid the impression that, like many known cult leaders, Rajneesh was doing extremely well out of the whole thing.

He amassed a large personal fortune, a collection of jewellery and a flamboyant fleet of Rolls Royce cars, which he seems to have had a particular passion for. When Rajneeshpuram finally came to an end, he was found to have had 93 of the vehicles - the bulk of which would later be bought up by a wealthy Texan .

That said, as the archive footage shows, Rajneesh's followers weren't unaware of their leader's financial status, and some considered his passion for the finer things in life a natural extension of his teachings and openness to pleasure. He never, after all, pretended to be an ascetic - and in some of the footage, his fiery personal secretary, Mo Anand Sheela, gleefully acknowledges the car collection to local press. Critics of his wealth, she seems to be saying, are missing the point. They're the greedy, small-minded, car-obsessed ones. It's remarkably a convenient argument.

**Wild Wild Country** in fact focuses less on Rajneesh, who died in 1990, than it does on the Indian-American Sheela, a woman who would emerge as the public face and figurehead of Rajneeshpuram - thanks in part to the fact that Rajneesh was upholding a vow of silence during much of his time there.

Born Sheela Patel, the gentle, grey-haired 68-year-old cuts an enigmatic figure in the documentary. It's impossible not to have some sympathy for her: she met Rajneesh when she was just 16 (he would have been 34) and was deeply impressed by his spiritual power, considering him a bona fide second Buddha. While it's hard not to look for sexual exploitation, given Rajneesh's reputation as a "sex cult leader", this doesn't seem to have taken place.

Instead, Sheela was flattered by the potential for leadership he later saw in her, and by the trust he placed in her after she became his assistant in 1981. She suffered tragedy in her personal life, losing her first American husband at a cruelly young age, and seems to have thrown herself into her work for Rajneesh, later finding a second husband among his followers.

As the footage shows, however, back in the 1980s she cultivated an aggressive, witty and combative public persona, and was determined to fight her corner when spearheading the group's move to America. Her defensiveness was inspired in part by the hostility she encountered from Antelope people and other Oregon residents: a local protest group, for instance, was determined to have the newly-constructed settlement torn down. There was also a bombing attack upon a hotel where Rajneesh followers were staying (carried out by a militant Islamic group, but which Sheela saw as part of a wider pattern of hostility and resentment).

"The world has assassinated me and my character so often I have nothing to lose," the present-day Sheela says at one point in the documentary, with rueful sadness. She seems to have viewed herself as a reluctant warrior, responding to bigotry and religious oppression with necessary steeliness and resolve - but only because she absolutely had to.

The facts, however, are a little less palatable. Under Mo Anand Sheela's direction, Rajneesh's "peaceable" cult were armed - this was America, after all - and took part in daily target practice. One follower, Australian Catherine Jane Stork (Ma Shanti Bhadra), who would later write a book about her experiences, describes in the series how Sheela was delighted by the fact she already knew how to shoot.

As the battle with Oregon locals intensified, the measures Sheela took became more and more extreme. The documentary recounts a particularly unpalatable episode, for instance, in which busloads of homeless people, fired up by the chance to exert their constitutional right to vote in the state of Oregon, were shipped in by Sheela in order to swing local elections in favour of Rajneeshpuram in 1984.

Attempts made by those in authority to restrict the rights of these men, who were ultimately prevented from registering as voters, may indeed have been constitutionally wrong. But Sheela seems to have had little personal empathy for the homeless people themselves. Her callous way of dealing with them once they became rowdy - and once it was apparent they could no longer be used to boost the Rajneeshpuram voting pool - was to secretly drug them and bus them back out again once they were incapacitated.

Her most infamous attempt to influence the 1984 Wasco County elections, however, was the deliberate poisoning of nearby salad bars with Salmonella, cultured in a specially-built on-site

Rajneeshpuram laboratory. Sheela and those close to her visited local restaurants and introduced the pathogen to the open salad bars, apparently as part of a trial run for a wider plan that would be carried out around the time of the November elections, in order to incapacitate hostile local voters.

Their reckless actions, which saw local 751 people infected in the September of 1984, mercifully led to no deaths - but a few victims came close, including a newborn baby. Two Wasco County commissioners, visiting Rajneeshpuram the previous month, were also targeted directly, with salmonella introduced to their water. The attack, as demonstrated by the news footage shown in the documentary, led to widespread fear and panic. It was an act of terrorism; the largest bio-terror attack in US history.

Fingers were pointed at Rajneeshpuram almost immediately, but a full investigation of the crime wouldn't take place until the October of 1985, when an intensive search of the new town (and its labs) was carried out. The findings confirmed that Sheela and others had carried out the terror plot - she would later be captured, after fleeing to Germany, and extradited to face trial in the US - and led to the eventual collapse of the Rajneeshpuram community.

It was also discovered that Sheela and her followers, including Stork, had planned the murder of State Attorney Charles Turner, the man heading up some of the investigations, although they eventually abandoned this plot. Stork, under Sheela's direction, had also been pressured into the earlier attempted murder, with an adrenaline-filled syringe, of one of Rajneesh's doctor - a man that Sheela believed was a threat to her beloved **Osho**. A toxic system of poison, paranoia and conspiracy was being unearthed.

**Wild** rumours, too, began to fly, adding to the atmosphere of terror. Was it really true that, prior to the Salmonella plot, Sheela and others had planned to secretly introduce beavers into Wasco County reservoirs, knowing that the animals were host to large amounts of bacteria? And that, after discovering that releasing the live animals would be too difficult, they had the newly-acquired beavers ground up into a meaty paste, intending to use this instead? The local official recounting the story seems to doubt its veracity - but, he says, it's something he was certainly told about. Where Rajneeshpuram was concerned, nothing was beyond the realms of belief.

Rajneesh himself, who had decided it was high time to start speaking aloud again, soon publicly distanced himself from Sheela, claiming no knowledge of her actions and denouncing her crimes. He was, he claimed, a victim of her deception, as were the majority of his followers.

Sheela herself would spend time in jail, serving just 29 months of a 20-year sentence, but Rajneesh, who returned to India after being deported from the US, never faced any charges relating to the mass-poisoning, despite his alleged tacit approval. It was claimed, by Sheela, that he had advised her that, while killing was generally to be avoided, it was sometimes necessary.

Since Rajneesh's death, a number of unsavoury details about life in Rajneeshpuram and in the former Poona ashram have emerged. Stork's 2009 book *Breaking the Spell: My Life as a Rajneeshee and the Long Journey Back to Freedom*, exposes how the "free love" ideology

espoused by members was often a front for exploitation. Sexual diseases were rife among Rajneesh's followers - 87% of residents had an STD - and abortions were encouraged and perhaps even enforced, regardless of how the pregnant women themselves may have felt. Stork, whose devotion to Rajneesh was so strong she was coerced into murder on his behalf, also discovered that her daughter, Kylie, had been abused by other members of the community.

"To come to terms with that much self-delusion is really difficult," she said in a previous interview with the Sydney Morning Herald . "It's a long, slow, painful process."

Stork's revelations, particularly those about the abortions, fit in with some other concerns about some of Rajneesh's beliefs. There's some evidence that, when he wasn't preaching about free love and enlightenment, the "spiritual" leader had an unhealthy interest in euthanasia and the possibilities it offered - and he certainly envisaged a world free of disability (an ableist world-view uncomfortably close to that of the Nazis).

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Either way, however, perhaps the documentary's greatest strength is the way it acknowledges that Rajneesh himself - possible conman, probable cult leader, definite car aficionado - was never the most interesting thing about the Rajneeshpuram story. Instead, it's the profound influence he exerted over his followers - the monstrous devotion that led two women to attempted murder - that takes centre stage.

Stork, who eventually returned to the US to face charges, after finding out that her son was dying of a brain tumour - travelling to Australia would not be possible with an extradition order hanging over her head - cuts a quiet, contemplative figure in the film, struggling to come to terms with her past self.

Sheela, publicly renounced by her former master, seems less remorseful. She lives in Switzerland these days, pouring her zeal and passion into her work as the manager of a nursing home, and enjoying the hands-on caring the role offers; the chance to again offer hope to the desperate. It's hard to tell, from the film, just how much guilt she really feels over her past actions, or how real her claimed later-life redemption really is.

Most hauntingly of all, both women seem to harbour a certain nostalgia for the community they helped build. Even as they acknowledge that Rajneeshpuram probably was a cult, they seem to miss it.

Credit: By Rebecca Hawkes