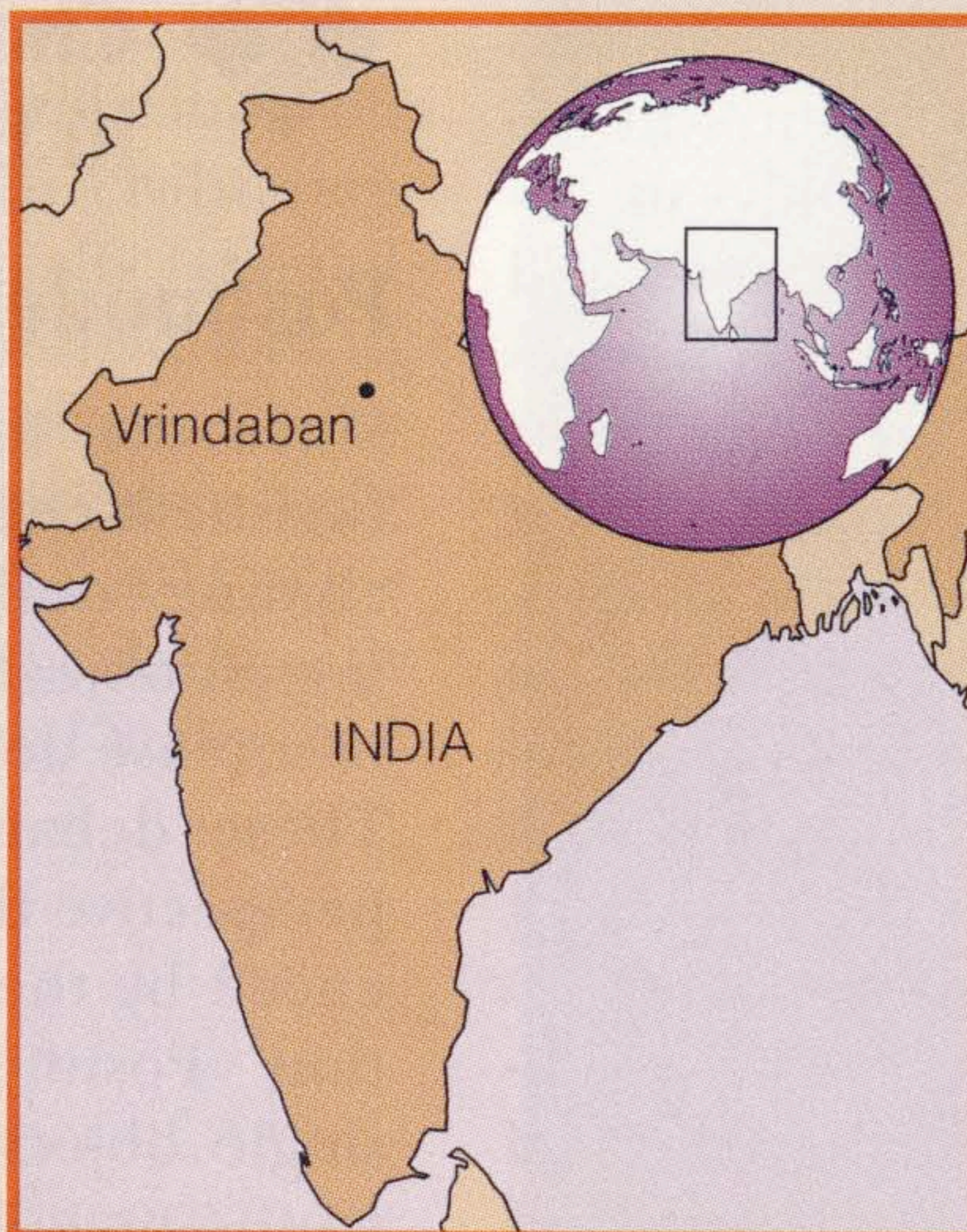




## Ethnography

### An Ethnographic Field Study in India

Charles Brooks is an American anthropologist who carried out field research on the impact of foreign Hare Krishnas in India. The followers of Hare Krishna, with their orange robes and shaved heads, their public processions and festivals featuring drums and cymbals, and their vegetarian food, are well known in the United States. Brooks worked not in an isolated, small-scale society, but rather in a large town in the very complex society of India. The following description of his fieldwork shows what



anthropologists actually do as they go about understanding cultures. Although each fieldwork project is different, there are certain common steps: choosing the problem, choosing the site, locating consultants, gathering and recording the data, and analyzing and writing up the results.

#### Choosing the Problem

Like much contemporary fieldwork, Brooks's approach to the culture he was studying was holistic, yet focused on a number of specific questions. Through his graduate study, Brooks had become interested in religion and change in India. This interest formed the background of his research. Brooks was also aware of the most visible representation of Indian religion in the United States, the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), also called the Hare Krishna. The Hare Krishna movement began in India as a way of spreading the worship of the Hindu god Krishna. In this religion, devoted worship of Krishna is the main path to religious or spiritual enlightenment. Krishna worship was brought to the United States in the 1960s by an Indian monk, Swami Bhaktivedanta, who aimed to save Westerners from what he saw as their materialism and atheism. His movement was very successful in the United States and Europe, attracting many converts from the counterculture of the 1960s. As part of their com-

mitment to their new religion, many of these people went to India to help spread Krishna consciousness in the land where it originated.

Brooks was fascinated by this process, and his research was guided by an overarching question: How did a Western cultural version of Hare Krishna fit itself into the religious culture of India? In order to answer this large question, Brooks broke it down into smaller questions that would actually guide his research. These questions included: "In

what specific types of situations did foreign and Indian Krishna followers interact?" "What were the similarities and differences in how foreigners and Indian devotees understood the symbols, rituals, meanings, and goals of Krishna worship?" "How did Indians react to foreigners who claimed they were Hindus—and Hindu priests at that?" "What opinions did Indians have about Westerners who were in India to spread the word about a religion that was originally Indian?" "Because Hindus believe that foreigners cannot become Hindus, as ISKCON members claim they have become, how was this paradox resolved?" and "How did ISKCON's presence in India affect both Hindu religious culture and the Indian and Western Krishna followers who encountered each other?" In sum, Brooks was interested in the subjective experience of individuals from two different cultures who had come together through participation in the same religion.

#### Picking the Research Site

Sometimes anthropologists have a particular site in mind when they begin their fieldwork, but in many cases they have only a general idea about a location that might suit their research interests. The ultimate choice involves some practical matters, such as the availability of housing, health care, and transportation, but the major considera-



tion is whether the site will allow the researchers to answer the questions they are interested in. Because Brooks wanted to study social interaction between foreign and Indian devotees to Krishna, his main criterion was to find a location where such interaction took place.

Anthropologists generally use the first month or so of their fieldwork to look over possible sites. (This has changed somewhat today thanks to cheaper airfares; many graduate students take an initial trip to pick a research site, and then return for the longer fieldwork trip.) Brooks's initial choice for his research was the sacred pilgrimage town of Vrindaban, where Krishna is said to have been born and lived for part of his life. This town has many temples and religious sites dedicated to Krishna worship, and Brooks knew that ISKCON had set up a temple there. He made an initial visit to discover whether significant social interaction took place among the Indian and foreign pilgrims and residents in Vrindaban and whether any Indians worshiped at ISKCON's temple. When he saw that such interactions did occur, and that the ISKCON temple attracted many Indian pilgrims, Brooks decided that this would be an appropriate site for his fieldwork.

Brooks chose as his residence a place where many foreign and Indian people stay while they are on pilgrimage at Vrindaban. As a neutral site, it would not associate Brooks with any particular religious faction. This would allow him greater access to a variety of social situations than if he had stayed at a place identified with a particular religious sect or temple. In addition, this residence was centrally located in the town and situated near a principal pilgrimage destination where Brooks could observe from his rooftop rooms the constant movement of pilgrims and the many cultural performances that were held in the adjacent public courtyard. Having found a suitable place to stay, Brooks turned his attention to beginning the research project.

### Collecting and Recording Data

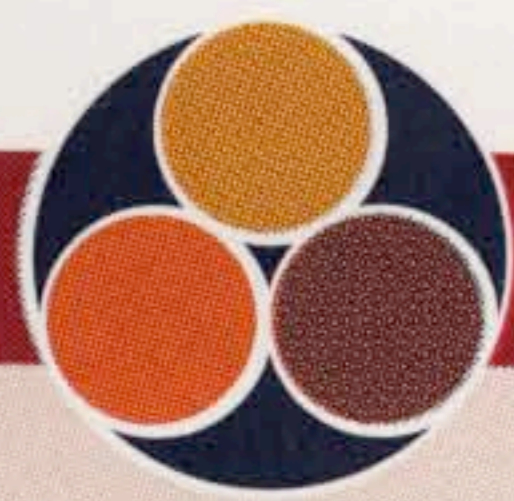
In anthropology, as in every science, method is connected to theory. The way we collect our data is

related to the questions we hope our research will answer. Because Charles Brooks's main interest was in the way people create meanings for their behavior through social interaction, participant-observation was his major method of collecting data. Only in this way did Brooks feel he could develop the "intimate familiarity and sensitivity to the social world" he wished to understand (Brooks 1989:235). In order to do this, he also had to take into account his own role as an anthropologist in these interactions.

Because the initial step of participation is to find a role through which to interact with others, Brooks defined his role as someone looking for personal development, and also as a research scholar who had been certified by the Indian government to study Vrindaban's culture and history. Both these roles were familiar and valid to pilgrims and town residents. In order to more effectively participate in the religious culture of the town without identifying himself with any particular faction, Brooks wore Indian clothing and accessories that were typical of Indians in Vrindaban but were not specifically identified with any particular religious sect. Because of the public nature of many of the religious interactions Brooks wished to understand, gaining entry to these situations and observing behavior was not difficult. And because he had learned Hindi, the main language used for social interaction in this part of India, he rarely needed an interpreter. But recording his observations presented more of a problem. Many anthropologists use tape recorders or take notes at the time of observation, but in some cases this hinders interaction. On one occasion early in his research, when Brooks was recording an interview in a small notebook, one of his key consultants, a guru, told him, "When you are ready to learn, come back without your notebook." From that point he stopped taking notes on the spot and waited until an encounter was over before writing it up. To help him remember and keep track of the many details of an interaction and record them in a consistent way, he developed a schematic flowchart into which he could fit his daily observations. He kept a

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## Ethnography—continued

different flowchart for each separate interaction, and each chart incorporated information on the actors, the content of their interaction, the symbols used, the goal of the interaction, and its conclusion. In addition, he also recorded his experiences in a more impressionistic way in a journal.

Second to participant-observation in its importance for collecting data, Brooks used unstructured, open-ended interviews. The goal of these interviews was to explore a particular topic in depth, such as the meaning of a particular symbolic object used in religious practice. Many of his interviews were with groups of consultants. These were helpful in comparing the ways different individuals interpret a symbolic object or act, whereas in the individual interviews people could speak about more private matters. This was the format he used for collecting life histories. The individual interviews were taped and were more structured, organized around preset questions, but Brooks also allowed the conversations to develop on their own if a consultant showed a particular interest in or knowledge of a subject. Twenty-two of these life histories were collected, and they were particularly valuable in giving information about the backgrounds from which consultants developed their interpretations of religious phenomena.

Brooks also used random verbal surveys to discover the castes and backgrounds of the pilgrims and town residents, and to learn their opinions and attitudes toward the foreign devotees in Vrindaban. He initially tried to use a written questionnaire to gather this kind of information but dropped that method as counterproductive. First, written questionnaires were foreign to Vrindaban culture and thus not very effective. Second, although Brooks assured consultants of their confidentiality, many people were nervous at the idea of writing down private information. Finally, the use of such formal documents might be interpreted to confirm the belief of many Indians that all Americans in India are working for the CIA.

Hardly any anthropologist could be found today who does not take a camera to the field. Brooks used photographs in several specific ways related to his research project: documenting the physical aspects of Vrindaban's religious complex, such as the temples and pilgrimage sites; documenting the different people who visited and lived in Vrindaban so that their clothing and appearance would serve to preserve a record of cultural diversity; and photographing the sites and participants of social interactions as an aid to remembering and interpreting them.

### Analyzing and Interpreting the Data

Brooks's data indicate significant interaction between Indians and foreigners in Vrindaban. The ISKCON temple is accepted as a legitimate place of worship for Indian devotees of Krishna, and ISKCON members are accorded legitimacy as Krishna devotees by Indians. The interaction of people from different cultures in the religious complex of Krishna worship has led to changes in the meanings of the symbols involved in this worship.

On a more theoretical level, Brooks's research challenges some popularly held conceptions about Indian culture and society, especially concerning the importance of caste in social interaction.

As the study uncovered some ways that outsiders—the foreigners—could be accepted in a Hindu religious and social universe, it opened up new perceptions of social organization in India. Brooks found that in religious settings, caste identity, which is normally essential in social interaction, could be subordinated to evaluations of the sincerity of a person's devotion. The acceptance of foreigners as Hindus and even Brahmins highlights the complexity of Indian culture and demonstrates its flexibility—its ability to deal with novel and contradictory situations. Thus caste, which has popularly been viewed as a rigid hierarchy, can be deemphasized, superseded by other social statuses, or held irrelevant for determining individual social position.



In the case of Vrindaban, as is true in many other parts of India, religion is of prime importance in determining individual social position and social interaction. Religious competence and extreme devotion can actually override caste as indicators of rank and status. The fact that foreigners can be considered Brahmins in India shows that our understanding of caste may be incomplete and even incorrect—that Brahmin status, for example, may be achieved as well as acquired by birth.

Like all good ethnography, Brooks's study of one town in India has a wider application; it reveals the processes by which social reality is transformed into a meaningful universe. As people from different parts of the world increasingly

come into contact with one another and participate in common social systems, they are forced to rethink traditional cultural concepts and their own and others' cultural identities.

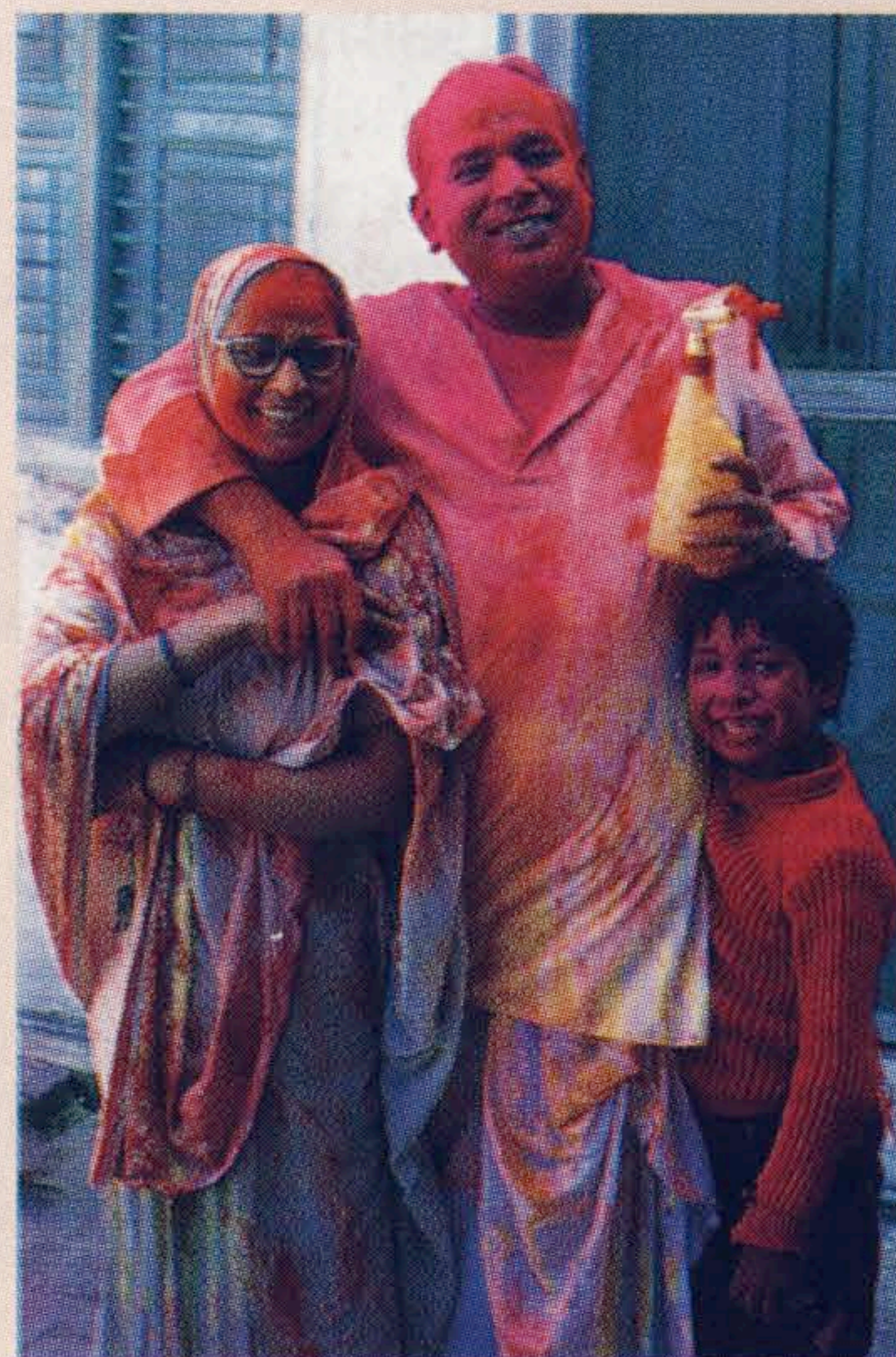
### Critical Thinking Questions

1. How might the social processes revealed in Brooks's study apply to the multicultural society of the United States?
2. If you were to study a situation in the United States like the one Brooks studied in India, what groups would you study and why?

*Source:* Based on Charles Brooks, *The Hare Krishnas in India* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989).



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Courtesy of Charles Brooks

The hare krishna movement (left) has spread widely through Europe and the United States. Charles Brooks's ethnography is aimed at understanding how Western Hare Krishna devotees were integrated into the Indian city of Vrindaban, a center for Krishna worship. One of Brooks's key consultants (right) was Govind Kishore Goswami, a Brahmin priest and the owner of the Pilgrim's Hostel where Brooks lived during his research. Here Goswami is pictured with his wife and son during Holi, a festival in which people sprinkle each other with colored water.