

Surviving Transplantation: The Brahma Kumaris in the Western World

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This paper examines the organizational and cultural responses made by the Brahma Kumaris to the challenges of transplanting an Indian spiritual movement to the West. Focusing on case materials from Australia, it shows that modifications to the hybrid "household collective"/"congregation" form of movement organization developed in India where the movement originated have facilitated BK survival and growth in an alien cultural environment. Demographic changes in the Australian branches combined with social structural adjustments have in turn encouraged the production of new interpretations of core beliefs. Because, as Stark's (1987) predicted, modifications by "locals" have been important to the survival of the imported movement, it is necessary to analyze the Indian and Western movements separately when attempting to identify factors associated with the success of the now international organization.

INTRODUCTION

The Brahma Kumaris¹ organization has been, as it were, twice born: once in the Indian subcontinent and again in the Western world. Founded in 1937 by the charismatic Sindhi businessman and spiritual teacher Dada Lekhraj in what is now Pakistan, the organization was relocated to Rajasthan, India in 1950. In the subcontinent the organization survived first intense persecution and later in 1969 the death of Lekhraj. Continuing to grow even after the founder's death, it became a notable if not especially heavily subscribed new variant of the Hindu tradition with branches all over India. The founding of branches in Western countries in the 1970s, however, meant making a second start in a very different environment and presented the organization with yet more challenges: how should the expatriate Indian gatherings respond to the interest of Westerners in their teachings? And

¹The full name is the Prajapita Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University; it is also informally known as "Raja Yoga."

once the pioneering Western members won acceptance for spreading the teachings beyond Indian ethnic enclaves, how was the broadened organization to recruit participants from societies with strongly contrasting cultural traditions into a movement whose stance of "world rejection" (Wallis 1979;1984) tended to generate substantial tension with patterns of everyday social life. Today the vigorous if small Brahma Kumari branches in 61 countries outside India testify to the movement's success in meeting those challenges.²

Attempts to account for the movement's success, however, will themselves fail if they do not take into account the radically different environments in which the movement has grown. This paper thus contrasts the process of organization-environment interaction of the BK movement in India to that of the movement in the Western context, using Stark's (1987) model of movement success³ to structure the comparison. Whereas in India BK beliefs have substantial continuity with pre-existing faiths, in the Western environment there is little continuity. In both India and the West, BK practices at first generated high tension with the social life of the wider society, moderating later on to medium tensions, but the particular practices

²BK information pamphlets from the early 1990s state that the organization has more than 1800 branches world wide. World membership figures are difficult to establish. Chander (1983:69) states that the organization had "over 80,000 members" in the early 1980s, and it now claims more than 100,000, but this must include people who are not full members in the sense of practicing all the purity rules and earning the right to call themselves "brahmins." Babb (1986: 130) reports an insider's estimate that there were only 700 such women in India in the 1980s and a smaller number of men, even though he described the Indian movement as "a well-established and conspicuous feature of the religious landscape in urban India" (1986:95). The Australian organization estimated there were 250 *brahmins* in the country in 1992. In Australia Raja Yoga is a familiar, if not conspicuous, feature of the urban scene (where the vast majority of the population lives) and is well connected with the Department of Ethnic Affairs and interfaith bodies.

³Stark defines "success as "a continuous variable based on the *degree to which a religious movement is able to dominate one or more societies*," where "dominate" is taken to mean "influence behavior, culture, and public policy in a society" (1987:12). By this definition, no recently established religious movement is especially successful, and as Stark points out, (1987:11) few old ones have been. However, as "success" can be taken as a continuous variable, it seems reasonable to speak of the Brahma Kumaris as relatively successful viewed against the field of other recently established religious, spiritual and human potential movement organizations. Survival, growth in numbers and a record of well-regarded activities involving the public can be taken as indices of "success" in this context. The objections of other authors to the effect that Stark's conception of success is too narrow to make a fair assessment of new religious movements (e.g., Wilson 1987:30; Johnson, Benton 1987:252) is engaged here to the extent that care has been taken to present the Brahma Kumaris' own objectives as regards expansion and perpetuation of the organization.

causing the most acute tensions in the two social environments have differed. In the Indian context the more readily distinguishable and less intensely involved laity balance the tendencies of the monastic core membership to isolate the organization. In contrast, in Western branches, where a laity is not readily distinguishable and most members have lived in BK residences where internal networks are dense, the organization has had to innovate compensatory mechanisms for reaching out to potential new members. In other respects the Indian and Western branches have similar advantages and liabilities as regards maintaining and expanding membership in the future: an early, but possibly temporary, resolution of leadership succession problems that might threaten mobilization; moderately favorable "ecology;" and practices which limit recruitment through reproduction.

This paper argues that the success of the BKs in the West is in part attributable to modifications of the Indian BK organizational pattern that have helped lessen problems encountered in the Western environment. Innovations in movement organization have also interacted with a normalization of age structure and disproportionate recruitment from amongst the well-educated to create pressures toward a more open attitude to the wider community. This in turn has widened the scope of theological interpretation to include less dramatically "world rejecting" variants that lessen tension with society for those who subscribe to such interpretations. A slide towards secularization that would undermine the attractiveness of the movement as an alternative to fully secular forms of social involvement (Stark 1987:23-24) is shown to be impeded, however, by the differentiation of the core spiritual activities of fully committed participants from activities concerned with service to the wider society.

The Western case materials utilized in this analysis derive from a study conducted by the authors on the Brahma Kumaris (BKs) between 1991-1994. The study was centered in Australia, one of the most active Western sites of BK activity outside India and a country whose citizens have made significant contributions to the development of the Brahma Kumari movement in the UK and many other parts of the world. In 1992 the Australian organization graciously facilitated the administration of a questionnaire to its membership on their social backgrounds, types and frequency of involvement with the organization and attitudes to spiritual and social issues. The authors concentrated most of their participant observation and in-depth

interviewing in Australia, but also visited BK centers and personnel in the UK, Europe and the USA as well as in New Delhi and Mt. Abu, the spiritual center of the organization in India.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND: THE BRAHMA KUMARIS MOVE TO THE WEST

Although insiders recall that the founder of the Brahma Kumaris, Dada Lekhraj, anticipated the spread of his movement outside of India, when he died in 1969 no one guessed that this would actually happen. The eventual establishment of the BKs outside of India occurred not by plan to, as it were, move into the Western "market," but rather in response to calls from Indian expatriates in London.⁴ Soon after Dada Lekhraj "left the body," as BKs prefer to understand his passing, Indian families in London who had been associated with the movement in India expressed a need to have an exponent of the organization sent to them for their spiritual guidance. In response, the organization sent them a series of senior "sisters" experienced in the foundation and guidance of centers in India but with no experience overseas. The first of these was a qualified medical doctor, Dr. Nirmala, followed by Dadi Ratan Mohini and then in 1974 by Dadi Jenki, who has remained the principle figure in London. She now oversees from that vantage the BK's Western-world operations.⁵ Initially concerned with the spiritual needs of only a handful of Indian families overseas, she is now responsible for an international, multi-ethnic community only a small minority of which consists of Indian expatriates. In Australia, for example, the authors found

⁴Source: personal interviews at BK Western headquarters, Global Cooperation House, London, 1993. According to his official biography, Lekhraj believed that everyone in the world should have the chance to hear about the "Godly Knowledge" that streamed through him (Chander 1983:156). Accordingly, after relocating to Mt. Abu in 1950 he began writing to notables in India (Mahatma Gandhi, Rabindranath Tagore, Chakravarty RajGopalacharya and British government officers) and overseas (including no lesser personages than Elizabeth, wife of King George of England, and President Truman). The intent seems to have been to attract their personal attention and conversion through the brochures that accompanied his letters (Chander 1983:203-208). These efforts, however, were not accompanied by sending sisters overseas to establish teaching centers. See also footnote 12.

⁵Source: personal interviews, Mt. Abu, February 1992 and London, March 1993.

that only 8.3% of committed members, or "brahmins," are of Indian parentage.⁶

Westerners first started to become involved with the BKs in London only after Dadi Jenki's arrival, that is, in 1975. The organization came to their attention through public notices of activities intended for Indian expatriates, but not pointedly meant to exclude others. The Westerners found a very spartan environment which nonetheless replicated the essentials of an Indian center: a place for "yoga" (that is, meditation), some teaching materials and a spiritual teacher. There were at first no concessions to Western cultural expectations, except for the availability of helpers who could assist with English communication.

By 1976 there were still only about a dozen Westerners who had made it through this cultural barrier.⁷ Some of them were drawn across that barrier by dramatic spiritual experiences that formed the basis of immediate and intense bonds with the teacher. But all had something in common sociologically: they were relatively well educated, creative and adventurous. A few of these Westerners, though by no means all, were what might loosely be described as "hippies": young people, among them travellers from Europe and Australia, looking to experience life, with little concern for moralistic and social conventions.⁸ The rest could be characterized as entertaining interests in "alternative" ideas and life styles.⁹ Given their social flexibility, combined with a capacity for discipline, they were ready to accept both the demanding regime of BKs (including dietary and sexual abstinence, radically

⁶The survey from which this information was gained was administered under the auspices of the Brahma Kumaris, Australia, at all of the major Australian centers to people considered by administrative officers to be "regular brahmins," that is people following all the BK purity rules and attending the centers for morning classes. Questionnaires were received from 194 of the estimated 250 Australian brahmins.

Note also that the UK is actually exceptional amongst the Western countries insofar as about two-thirds of committed BKs are of Indian descent. Whilst the organization has attracted substantial numbers of non-Indians, it has also grown amongst the British Indian population.

⁷Source: personal interview with one of the original cohort; London, March 1993.

⁸The term "hippy" was used as self-description by some interviewees associated with the BKs at the time.

⁹Source: personal interview with one of the original cohort; London, March 1993.

different hours of sleep, and regular meditation practice) and its embeddedness in a foreign culture.

Two of this early cohort were in their forties; the rest were under thirty with the majority being male.¹⁰ Their social profile (including their educational and attitudinal characteristics) thus contrasted with that of the Indian BKs in London, many of whom participated as families and who were struggling to establish themselves in the ethnically mixed and predominantly lower-middle class sections of north-west London.

From late 1975 British visitors and Australian travellers returning home after having become associated with the London BKs founded places of co-residence and community out-reach in Australia. The Indian sister who had pioneered the London center, Dr. Nirmala, was then sent to support the new outpost. A small but vigorous community grew up and produced many members (both Australians and temporary residents of European descent) who subsequently carried the BK teachings to other countries, not only in the Western world but in the Near East (Israel) and Asia (Japan, Hong Kong and Indonesia).

The foundation of BK centers in North America, under the initial guidance of sisters from the UK and India, proceeded with more difficulty, with the first US centre being founded in Texas in 1978.¹¹ Soon thereafter, in the same year, centers were established in New York and San Francisco (Streitfeld 1982:8 in Babb 1986:105). Ironically the USA, renown for the intensity and catholicity of its religious interests, has proven a less fertile ground for BK work than the UK and Australia.¹²

As the BK movement has grown and spread overseas, the delegation of committed and capable members to new centres away from their home countries, as well as geographical mobility for personal professional reasons, have greatly internationalized the middle-level leadership of the organization outside India. Thus, for example, Australian BKs reside, pursue their professions and serve the organization in established centers in the UK, Brazil, Greece, Germany and the USA, as well as in the newer non-Western centers they helped to found. The major regions or "zones" of operation are still overseen by Indian sisters associated with the organization since the time of Dada Lekhraj, but Westerners and other non-Indians now staff many of the national-level coordination posts as well as local centers.¹³

MOVEMENT ORGANIZATION AND ENVIRONMENT: CONTRASTING PATTERNS

Evolution of the BK Movement Organization in India

The BK centers formed in Western countries partially replicated a pattern of movement organization that had evolved in India as the founder's initial conception of his mission clarified and the organization matured in a difficult social environment. The culmination of this development is a structure which consists in India of a network of residential centers housing the core membership, some of whom engage in outside work, with non-resident participants visiting centers for study, meditation and service activities. This arrangement closely approximates Lofland and Richardson's "household collective" type of religious movement organization (RMO) hybridized with their "congregation" type (Lofland and Richardson 1984; Richardson 1988:9-12). Thus like the model "household collective" type of RMO, the Indian centers furnish core members residence, food and an explicit substitute for worldly family life, but they differ from the model in not leaving all ordinary work roles in tact.¹⁴ Also like the "congregation"

visited Hong Kong, Singapore and Malaya. Later, in 1971, a brother was sent, but no center eventuated until much later. Sister Maureen Goodman of Global Cooperation House, has called Japan "the driest ground" for the BKs.

¹³For example, the head of Australian operations now is an Australian of British descent. However, Southeast Asian operations (which include Australia) are overseen from the same center in Sydney by Dr. Nirmala, of Indian descent.

¹⁴ Lofland and Richardson (1984; Richardson 1988:99-12) define the "congregation" type of Religious Movement Organization as one where people come to a building provided

type, in which people come to a central place for religious activities but provide for their other needs at separate places of work and residence, the BK centers minister to non-resident members intermittently. This pattern of residential centers serving as places of congregational activity for core and non-residential members alike has enabled the mature Indian organization to serve a now geographically dispersed clientele. At the same time, this pattern preserves some of the intimacy of an earlier pattern of movement life, namely co-residence of all participants with the founder and leader supported by endowments from the founder and other residents. This earlier "colony" type of religious movement organization (Lofland and Richardson 1984; Richardson 1988:9-12) had itself evolved out of the traditional non-residential (in Lofland and Richardson's terms, "congregation" type) Hindu institution, the *satsang*, or informal devotional meeting around a guru or respected and knowledgeable householder.

The *satsangs* held by the successful diamond merchant Dada Lekhraj in his home in the 1930s would have seemed at first entirely conventional: homey businessmen's wives and children gathered for readings of the Gita and a socially respectable break from the confines of their homes. This folksy scene was electrified with new potentials, however, when Lekhraj began to have a series of extraordinary experiences. In them he saw the four-armed form of Vishnu, Shiva ("The Supreme Soul") and the coming cataclysmic destruction of the world. The Lord Shiva even began speaking through him on a daily basis, dictating the messages that became the focus for group study. Suddenly intimate with divinity, those gathered for the *satsangs* started being transfixed in their teacher's presence, experiencing visions of Krishna such as prove elusive to dedicated *bhaktas* and *sannyasis*.¹⁵

by the organization for religious activities but meet their other needs in other facilities not associated with the organization. The "household collective" type of RMO provides members a place to live, food and a "surrogate family atmosphere", but unlike the "work collective" type, leaves ordinary work roles in tact. The "colony" type of RMO undertakes an "ideal revision of the total round of human life" for the participants (Lofland and Richardson 1984:38).

¹⁵Source: personal interviews with Dada Lekhraj's contemporaries, Mt. Abu, February 1992. Chander (1983:51ff) also gives numerous stories of experiences reported by those who attended the Gita group after Lekhraj's own revelations began.

Bhaktas are "devotees;" generally the term points towards people practicing an emotive form of worship emanating from the Hindu "bhakti" tradition. This can be practiced at various levels of intensity by householders, but it has also been refined into a demanding path requiring the severance of worldly bonds, particularly when combined

These dramatic changes in the tone of the gatherings transformed the somewhat prosaic Gita group and greatly enhanced the popularity of the teacher. Spiritual appetites whetted, the followers sought more intense involvement in religious pursuits. This was met by the commencement of communal living and the formation of a school for the children. Thus emerged a small, intensely inward-looking group of individuals (primarily, but not exclusively female), intimately connected with their teacher through yoga, study, and communal living. The "colony" phase of movement life had begun, with movement pioneers entering into an "ideal revision of the total round of human life" (Lofland and Richardson 1984:38).

The evolution of Brahma Kumaris from a "colony" type of organization towards the more open "household collective" and "congregation" types came in response to life cycle changes in the organization. By the 1950s many of the little girls, carefully nurtured and schooled by "Brahma Baba" (as Dada Lekraj is now known) and the *brahmin* family, had grown up. Occasional visitors to the mountain home of the community called attention to the spiritual needs of others, and so Baba sent his "daughters," the Daughters of Brahma (which is the meaning of Brahma Kumaris) to cities elsewhere in India to establish residences (or "centers") as homes for people who wished to take up the life and as places of yoga and teaching for the public.

Although it has not been uniformly observed, the present common practice in Indian "centers" is for resident "sisters" to take charge of the primary teaching and spiritual functions (including cooking, which is understood to have high spiritual significance), while resident "brothers" earn money in outside jobs to contribute to the support of centers and assist sisters with center activities.¹⁶ These *brahmins* resident in centers are

with elements of the yoga tradition. BKs use the term "bhakti" in a special sense to refer to any religious activity consisting of "mere" worship of deities or gods. *Sannyasis* are people, prototypically and almost exclusively males, who have renounced the world to devote themselves to spiritual learning, austerities and meditation.

¹⁶Some Indian sisters did work, even in Baba's time and in one case reported to the authors, explicitly at his insistence. She was, however, not raised in the Mt. Abu community. The Mt. Abu headquarters is also somewhat exceptional: there a few very senior brothers, mostly those who have been *brahmins* long enough to have known and assisted Brahma Baba personally, receive full support in order to be free to give full time service to the organization. Significantly they are mostly in jobs that require technical or higher education, such as few of the senior women of the first generation had.

known as "surrendered" sisters and brothers, indicating a willingness to accept what can be provided out of their joint efforts and the good will of the wider, non-resident *brahmin* community. (Those non-residents also contribute financially to the centers on a voluntary basis, but Lekhraj forbade the sisters and brothers to accept money from non-*brahmins* (Chander 1983:216).) The seriousness of the commitment made by the center-resident *brahmins* in India is further indicated by the imposition of a trial period of six months upon new residents. This trial period, combined with the very special privilege and obligation of a surrendered sister to live from the support of the community, suggests that in India the move into a center is regarded as a choice for life.¹⁷

What Babb called the BK "lay members" (1986:131ff), who live and work outside the centers, join the surrendered sisters and brothers at the centers for meditation and spiritual study as well as to provide assistance maintaining the buildings and putting on special programs. The markedly different commitments of the laity and the surrendered sisters and brothers is visually marked by the fact that only the surrendered sisters and brothers wear all-white clothing. This difference in organizational role and dress, however, does not betoken a lesser spiritual status for the laity, as all those who observe the purity rules taught by Dada Lekhraj are considered full *brahmins* capable of spiritual perfection. There is even a particular respect and concern accorded the "mothers," that is, women who before becoming *brahmins* have married and born children. A kind of heroism is seen in the "mothers'" acceptance of the *brahmin* path, including chastity, while continuing to care for children and often husbands as well.¹⁸

Organizational Adjustments to the Western Context

¹⁷This is further suggested by the practice Babb (1986:131) reports of families giving dowries for their daughters to the organization. It may also be that Indian recruits to the status of surrendered sister are able to make a more deliberate life-time commitment than Westerners generally make upon adopting the purity rules and moving to a center since the typical Indian surrendered sister, according to Babb (1986:131), has been familiar with the Brahma Kumaris since childhood.

¹⁸Chander also reports that Dada Lekhraj gave "special attention to mothers because he said there is great injustice done to mothers" who have to move from their parental homes into their husbands' homes where they are subjected to the authority of in-laws (1983:204). Although Lekhraj's attitude is explained in terms of Indian patrilineal and patrilocal family arrangements, the solicitude towards mothers exists in the BK world outside India as well.

The Brahma Kumaris are now a formally constituted international organization with individual centers (mostly in cities) overseen by country and regional (or zone) heads. These in turn take direction from the central administration in Mt. Abu. The basic organizational structure is thus uniform from country to country, and even before faxes and email displaced the postal service, activities from the daily lesson to international public service projects were coordinated directly from Mt. Abu for all centers. Since the hybrid "household collective"/"congregation" form of movement organization had evolved by the time centers were established outside India, this became the model for all local units of the international organization. However significant adaptations have had to be made to this model to meet the needs of non-Indian members. We shall use the case of the Australian Brahma Kumaris to provide a detailed portrayal of these adaptations and to examine their significance for the movement's vitality in a Western context. Australia is a suitable example not only because it is one of the earliest and most active sites of the BK movement outside India¹⁹ and a source of teachers for pioneering new centers in other countries, but because its organizational adaptations are representative of those in other Western countries.

Distinctive adjustments to the Indian template were made early on in the Australian organization and have persisted up to the present day. One of these was the introduction of a requirement for *all* Australian BKs (other than the Indian sister provided to oversee the new branch) to earn an income through outside jobs. Center-resident sisters were thus not to be relieved of the necessity to support themselves. Clearly, in the earliest days when numbers interested in the BK teachings were extremely small, this was a sheer financial necessity. However, this requirement is still in place not only in Australia but in other Western countries, for all but the most senior administrators at the national level.²⁰ And even for these few the term "surrendered sister" (or "surrendered brother") is not commonly used, as if to discourage the idea that full-time service is a superior status to which all might aspire. This practice may relate to the greater acceptability for

¹⁹There are now about 250 Australian residents practicing the full set of BK purity rules and thus considered to be *brahmins*.

²⁰A notable but singular exception was one of the earliest English sisters of European descent. After "receiving the knowledge" she spent a long period of residence in India and then took the teachings to North America, living for several years there as a surrendered sister with another surrendered sister of Indian descent. She, too, now has part-time employment outside the organization.

Western women of employment outside the home, however it is usually explained by senior Indian BKs in terms of the lesser maturity of Westerners.

Another adjustment to the Indian organizational arrangements introduced early on in Australia was to draw a substantial proportion of the Australian BK family into communal living *outside* centers, in *bhavans*. A *bhavan* is a place of BK co-residence other than a center. (In India the Hindi term simply means "building," but in Australia the term differentiates one type of residential arrangement for BKs from another.) Although only 34% of Australian BKs surveyed in 1992 had ever lived in a center, 54.6% had lived in a *bhavan*.²¹ Perhaps in part because many more Australians than Indian young people live away from home and because there were no Australian families with BK affiliations when the organization was first established there, those wanting to practice the BKs' yoga (meditation) and prepared to adopt the purity rules readily sought to live with like-minded others. Living in a center, however, is highly demanding, since it is the place at which the administration, teaching and meditation functions for a whole area are carried out. The organization must see to it that its standards are met by having suitably capable people living in the centres; and individuals living in centres must be prepared to meet the constant demands on their time that are a part of the semi-public life of such places.

In Australia, further, there is no trial period for center-dwellers (or "center *basi*," as they are known). It may well be that residence in a *bhavan* (which normally precedes center residence) substitutes for such a trial period, insofar as it gives more senior *brahmins* an opportunity to closely observe and counsel those with potential to benefit the organization by moving into a more demanding role in a center. In any case, center residence does not entail financial support from the organization. Nor is it expected in Australia that the sister or brother entering a center will necessarily spend the rest of their lives in one or another such residences. Certainly the assumption is that one who becomes a *brahmin*, like a *sannyasin* in the mainstream Indian tradition, has renounced worldly weaknesses for life, however Australian *brahmins* do move in and out of centers according to their needs and that of the organization.

²¹Data are drawn from the 1992 survey of BKs carried out as part of the study being reported here and represent the current situation as well.

Because a high proportion of Australian *brahmins* have lived in BK *residences*, even if not in actual centers where congregational activities take place, and because nearly all *brahmins*, regardless of place of residence, provide for themselves financially and attempt to obey the same rules of conduct, the contrast between core members (center-dwellers) and others is not so great in Australia as in India. The term "laity" is thus actually inappropriate for *brahmins* living outside centers in the Australian context. This blurring of membership statuses finds symbolic expression in the wearing of white by everyone who comes to a center, except for those who have not finished the classes through which new-comers are introduced to BK teachings and except for those who wish to signal that they have not fully accepted the BK way of life. It finds practical expression in the participation of non-center dwellers and even non-*bhavan* dwellers in important administrative and teaching tasks of the centers and in their leading of the meditations.

In sum, adjustments made in Australia and other Western countries to the Indian form of movement organization made for a closer approximation to the "household collective" form of movement organization, its expansion to include more junior members and a strengthening of congregational activities for non-resident members.

FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO SUCCESS: CONTRASTING PATTERNS

Cultural Continuity with Conventional Faiths

Alterations to the social structure of the Brahma Kumaris in Australia helped address practical problems faced by the new organization in the early phase of recruitment. They also helped ease the transition of new members from a predominantly Judeo-Christian culture into a spiritual environment constructed largely out of Hindu elements. Although Australian centers visually present very little that is reminiscent of Hinduism or India,²² those

²²New pupils arriving to take the course use sitting rooms decorated much like ordinary Australian homes. The art work on BK themes is done by Western artists. Newcomers do not see large pictures of Brahma Baba until they finish the course and join lessons (*murli*) and meditation sessions ("yoga") in a room dedicated to this purpose. Even in the meditation room cultural foreignness is minimized. One sees meditators, sometimes in saris and kurta pyjamas and sitting cross-legged on the floor, facing another meditator on a low platform (the *gatti*) underneath a large picture of Brahma Baba. Above his image

who come to learn meditation are also taught a world view that includes concepts deriving from Hinduism, such as *karma*, *sanskars* and the cyclic nature of time with its division into four ages. In addition, they are introduced to Hindu deities like Shiva, Krishna and Brahma, albeit in the context of a monotheistic theology.²³ Finally, and crucially, incoming students of meditation are taught the purity rules, the most significant of which are vegetarianism (in its vegan form and omitting foods such as onions that excite the "lower" senses), abstinence from alcoholic beverages, chastity and non-commensality with people outside the organization. In India each of these rules has wide currency and, where appropriately adopted, prestige value. Yet all were strange to mainstream Australia in the 1970s when BKs first began teaching there. Thus in India vegetarianism and avoidance of alcohol are practiced by higher castes and were advocated for all by the nationalist leader Mahatma Gandhi; chastity is seen as part of the ideal Hindu life style for older people who have finished childbearing and for male renunciates of all ages. In contrast, in the antipodean land of sheep and cattle stations,²⁴ vegetarianism has become fashionable only recently and then only moderately so. Similarly, in the 1970s chastity was understood as appropriate only for Catholic priests and religious (already unpopular career choices) and unmarried women. Since then vocations to the celibate priesthood and holy orders have continued to decline, as has the popularity of chastity generally. As for alcohol, its consumption was and remains central to Australian male social behavior, whether in working-class rituals

is typically a red ovoid fixture radiating a pinpoint of white light (the symbol of Shiva or "The Supreme Soul," that is, God). Music is generally Western meditation music, interspersed occasionally with Indian devotional songs. (The Indian leadership finds the meditation music soporific but the Westerners quietly resist raising the percentage of Indian music that most find too peppy or jarringly romantic.)

²³In the standard introductory BK course, students are told that the objective of their meditation is to connect the "soul" to "God" or "The Supreme Soul." They then learn that Dada Lekhraj, or "Brahma Baba" as he became known after the revelations began, has merged with The Supreme Soul or Shiva. As such, he is Bapdada (Father and Elder Brother, or Shiva Baba *and* Brahma Baba). Thus a connection formed in meditation with "Baba" can become a link with God. BKs nonetheless protest against the idea that "God is in everything" and so reject the notion that God can be manifest in any number of people who have "realized" their divine natures. Thus Chander explains in Lekhraj's official biography that Shiva "is the Supreme Soul, the one and *only* God. No one had ever said that before. Even the gurus who claimed to be God were careful to qualify it by saying that God was in everyone" (1983:249).

²⁴Australia is a highly urbanized country but has been described as having a "rural ethos" (Western 1991:14).

of "mateship" carried out in pubs or in up-market business lunches; youth and female drunkenness, never negligible, are actually on the increase.

In Australia most single *brahmins* move into *bhavans* soon after they have committed themselves to the meditation practice and purity rules. In the company of fellow seekers they more readily become at ease with new concepts and have support for following culturally alien practices. Living with other *brahmins* also makes it easier to adjust one's daily schedule to wake at 4 a.m. for private meditation and attend the day's lesson, or *murli*²⁵ reading at the local center at 5:30 a.m.

While noting the substantial cultural adjustment that many new Australian members of the Brahma Kumaris have had to make, it is well to note that the first cohort was recruited largely from the small but long vigorous counterculture for whom the adjustment was not as great as it would have been for mainstream Australians.²⁶ This echoes Wallis's observation that "world-rejecting" movements in North America in the 1960s "possessed clear cultural continuities with the counterculture" there (1987:85). Further, that counterculture in Australia has been to a significant degree absorbed into mainstream culture. This dilution of Anglo-Celtic culture in Australia

²⁵BKs prefer this spelling of the Hindi word literally meaning flute (sometimes transliterated as *murali*). The reference to a flute alludes to one of the ways Lord Krishna charms his devotees. In this context "murli" means an inspired message offering guidance on spiritual development. Dada Lekhraj began writing them after his transformative visions. In the *murli* both he and Shiva speak to the "children." "Murli" is sometimes here glossed as "lesson" since the *murlis* are read daily as part of the shared devotions at BK centers.

²⁶ Present-day BKs from this first cohort report that their numbers included Australians as well as British subjects and Europeans who had traversed the globe on the young adventurers' trails from Australia via Southeast Asia and the subcontinent to Europe. They were open to experimentation and cultures different from their own, many following the free life style that had become a central feature of Western youth culture.

Although Australian mainstream society was narrowly Anglo-Celtic up to the end of World War I and insisted upon assimilation of the European Mediterranean cultures introduced by migrants after that war, the country has nevertheless had a small but vigorous minority interested in things "Eastern" and occult since 1870 (Roe 1986:xiv). This is evidenced by the Theosophy movement in Australia (Roe 1986), the country's role in the early development of the Liberal Catholics and even in the early support for the Indonesian mystical group, Subud [sources: personal interviews with members in Brisbane and Jakarta]. By the 1970s Australia already had followers of several Indian teachers, such as Prabhupada (leader of ISKON), Muktananda, Satyananda and Rajneesh (Aveling 1991; O'Brien 1983), plus assorted Buddhists (Croucher 1989) among the European-descended population.

can be traced to the revocation in 1973 of the White Australia Policy, the acceptance of unprecedented numbers of Asian migrants and the coming of age of the children of an earlier, post-World War II wave of Mediterranean migrants. Anglo-Celtic Australians now consume foreign ideas as readily as they consume foreign foods. Indeed Australians are as eager as other Westerners to buy "Egyptian" meditation balms or American Indian shaman calendars for friends for Christmas from New Age book shops.

Tension with the Wider Society

Even though Indian BKs share in a general way the Hindu culture of the surrounding community, the organization in its early years in India existed in a state of high tension with society. This tension has eased but did not disappear, a condition Stark actually considers favorable to movement success (1987:15-16).²⁷ In Australia the organization has never been under acute threat, but in its early years it did encourage a style of self-presentation to the public that made for more tensions than exist today. The BKs in both India and Australia, then, can be said to have experienced very high to high tension with their social environments that subsequently diminished to what can be called "medium" tension in recent years. As could be expected, however, the sources of tension differ in the differing cultural contexts.

In Australia the whole list of purity rules found little or no sanction in mainstream culture and had the combined effect of drawing *brahmins* out of relationships with old friends as well as family. Rules pertaining to food and drink are most powerful in discouraging *laukik* ("outsider" or "worldly") connections. Entertaining becomes difficult because a *brahmin* cannot offer the range of food non-vegetarians are used to (although non-*brahmins* who are prepared to make modest adjustments to their expectations may actually experience some culinary enticements). Yet more challenging are the difficulties *brahmins* face in accepting the hospitality of *laukik* friends and relatives, since they should refuse food cooked by non-*brahmins*. Beyond this, the demanding regime of early rising for meditation at home, attending the pre-breakfast lesson and meditation at a center, working a full day to

²⁷Stark argues that movements in very high tension with their environment find few people willing to bear the costs of involvement; on the other hand if tension is very low, it is likely that there is insufficient difference between the organization and other institutions to attract members (1987 15-16).

earn an income or run a household and then perhaps attending other devotions or service activities at a center in the evening leaves little time or energy for outside social life. To compensate for this, centers sometimes organize recreational activities just for the *brahmin* family.

The Australian organization has exercised great care in counselling members who find their new commitments are making difficulties with their *laukik* families and urges open discussion with all parties. It also helps to cultivate links with parents through activities such as Mothers' Day teas. However, painful rifts between BKs and their families are not uncommon, and no encouragement is offered for maintaining outside friendships.

It is in the area of workplace interactions that Australian BKs have experienced a diminution of tensions. Although the BKs have always promoted values useful in the workplace (such as disciplined effort, respect for others and self-reflection), in the early days of the movement in Australia it encouraged *brahmins* to wear their distinctive all-white, and preferably Indian-style clothes to work. This enabled them to visibly carry their spiritual identity into the company of those who did not share their commitments, both reminding themselves of their higher calling and quietly testifying to others. Such public display, however, is now seen as inappropriate. White is worn in public (that is, outside a BK residence or retreat) by people other than senior Indian sisters only when *brahmins* invite the public to a community service program. Even in such cases the norm is changing to ordinary neat and modest dress except for a few brothers and sisters who will exemplify the spiritual ideal by wearing white clothes.

In India (in contrast to the Australian situation) the purity rules were not of themselves problematic; rather it was encouragement offered to *women* to strive for spiritual perfection through early chastity in marriage and through celibacy that most inflamed conventional Hindus. In the wider Hindu tradition celibacy is not meant for women. It is part of the heroic path adopted by men who renounce the world, including caste and family connections, as a means to achieve higher spiritual realization.²⁸ Chastity in marriage is only esteemed for older couples past child bearing. Hindu women

²⁸A few remarkable women like the renown Mirabai are exceptions to this rule.

were traditionally seen as spiritually dependent on their fathers and husbands: a woman's husband should be her guru. Dada Lekhraj inverted these notions. Embued with an extraordinary sympathy for the women who came to his home for spiritual guidance in the absence of their itinerant often philandering fathers and husbands (Chander 1983:23; Babb 1986:97-98), he not only allowed the women to remove themselves physically from the homes of their menfolk²⁹ but invited them to assume a celibate life-style in his community. In consequence, the women followers were seen as rejecting the authority of males over the disposal of their sexual powers. To make matters worse, Dada Lekhraj came to see women as actually spiritually superior to males.

This radically unconventional approach to women's spirituality provoked a vehement response. In the early days of the organization many women were locked in their homes and viscosly beaten to prevent them from participating; the communal residences were repeatedly attacked, law suits filed and an assassin was even sent to murder Lekhraj. Opposition was organized through a group called the "Anti-Om Mandali Committee" (Om Mandali being a name by which the Lekhraj's group was known at the time). The "Anti Party" drew to itself support from high-ranking political figures and the press (Chander 1983:97ff). Although these threats receded after the expulsion of Hindus from Pakistan and the later move of Lekhraj's group to India, there is still a belief among BKs in an on-going secret counter-movement.³⁰

The diminution of tension caused by offering women such extraordinary opportunities can be related to the organization's recruitment history. In the very beginning, women came from families with wholly conventional expectations to a new, aberrant group; then there was the move from their initial home and isolation in a distant place; that was followed by the gradual establishment of links with new places through individuals attracted to the movement; and eventually there emerged BK families who saw the choice of a child to be a surrendered sister or brother as a positive life choice.

²⁹Because of the fierce outcry, Lekhraj began requiring women who would join him to produce a letter of permission from their fathers or husbands. The requirement was, however, relaxed in cases of extreme ill-treatment of the women.

³⁰Personal interviews, Australia 1993.

To some extent, also, changing attitudes in the wider society towards women's roles has played a part in the diminution of tensions. What was once a cause of vilification of the movement is now a valuable mark of progressivism in Westernized Indian eyes. The importance of the progressivist view has been reinforced since the 1980s by the BK leadership's cultivation of ties with senior Indian government officials and with international bodies such as the UN.³¹

While it has become somewhat more acceptable for women to pursue and independent spiritual life, this is far from widely accepted in India and the notion that women are actually the pre-eminent vessels of salvation is still far out of line with prevailing values. There are also other ways in which tensions are created with the wider society. Thus although BK teachings draw heavily on the Hindu tradition and the organization celebrates the major Hindu holidays, BK reinterpretations of Hindu festivals to serve as vehicles for their own teachings is seen as confrontational (Babb 1986:135).

Density of Internal Networks and Isolation

The purity rules, which qualify *brahmins* for the roles they will assume in the imminent Golden Age, tend to create tensions in relationships with non-*brahmins* that are often resolved by letting those relationships wither. The compensations are the opportunity to develop their spiritual practice with minimal discouragement from outside critics and the opportunity for regular, close involvement with their new "*brahmin* family."³² The Indian and Australian organizations differ, however, in the extent to which different membership statuses offer opportunities for such regular involvement and, correspondingly, in the extent to which BKs experience isolation from the wider society.

³¹Such ties confer legitimacy upon the organization, which in turn helps to diminish tensions with the wider society. Khalsa has noted that "legitimacy is a major concern for new religious movements" (1988:131). See also Bromley and Shupe (1980:33) on this point.

See below p.32 for examples of UN affiliations.

³²Robbins and Anthony have noted that the satisfaction of needs for a "surrogate extended family" is a common feature of New Religious Movements (1979:88-89).

Center-dwellers in both India and Australia bear the brunt of responsibility for organizing devotional and service activities, offering spiritual guidance and attending to the physical maintenance of the center. Thus of necessity they constantly interact with other *brahmins*, except when out earning an income. They are also more likely than others to be tapped for projects run by the national and international BK organization and, given their high level of commitment, they try to travel at least yearly to Mt. Abu on retreat. Further, they put themselves at the disposal of seniors to move to other centers or open new ones unless unusual professional commitments tie them to a particular location. When travelling, they, like other *brahmins*, tend to stay at centers or private BK residences, since eating and domestic arrangements are easier to manage that way. They thus form "dense network ties" (in Stark's terminology) within the centers as well as nationally and internationally within the BK organization.

The extent to which these "dense network ties" of center-dwellers isolate them from non-*brahmins* differs by country, since Indian surrendered sisters, unlike sisters running centers overseas, devote their full energies to the organization. This cuts them off from contacts in the workforce. Of course, absence of workforce ties does not necessarily mean that the surrendered sisters lack opportunities to meet the public. Teaching and service activities indeed necessitate this and are key elements in the organization's strategy for contacting potential new members. However, contacts with the public in situations where the organization is hosting and structuring the activity do not offer the same opportunities for engaging others on their own terms as workplace interactions do.

Patterns of non-center-dweller interaction in India and Australia offer even stronger contrasts than patterns of center-dweller interaction. This can be seen first in *brahmin* relationships with their *laukik* families. All of the first cohort of Australian BKs were single. In the '90s most BKs still are. Few Australian *brahmins* have children or spouses living with them. Of those surveyed only 19% had dependent children living with them and only 24% were living with an adult partner. 60% of the total were neither living with a partner nor caring for dependents. Consequently the majority live with other *brahmins*. In contrast, in India married lay *brahmins* with children seem to be common. Although there is no survey data available on the BK laity in India, families figure prominently in accounts of the life of

the organization, particularly after its "colony" phase. Thus, in the early days of movement expansion in India Lekhraj directed his young pupils to spread their "Godly Knowledge" to their families first.³³ The families that responded positively became important nodes in recruitment networks. Further, families that have been associated with the organization since Lekraj's time have been a significant source of vocations in India, supplying most of the surrendered sisters and brothers.³⁴

Looking at the laity as a whole in India, Babb has found that they are not uniformly well integrated into the organization. He goes so far as to diagnose the Indian BK laity as "anomic" (1986:132). He also suspects that many new members do not fully understand the nature or weight of the commitments they are expected to take on, as he found a sharply bimodal distribution in the length of time people were associated with the BKs there: quite new members and people long "in the Knowledge" predominated, with few people in the middle range (1986:131). Apparently many Indian new members do not survive the realization of the costs of their new way of life.³⁵

In Australia such a bimodal distribution in length of association with the organization is not evident, as shown in Figure 1. The proportion of people who have been BKs for over one half to one year (4.7%) is only slightly less than that of people who have been BKs for a half a year or less (5.2%), and the percentage of those who have been BKs for between one to two years (9.4%) is about twice that in the half year or less category. Apparently sufficient support is available to new BKs to carry them past

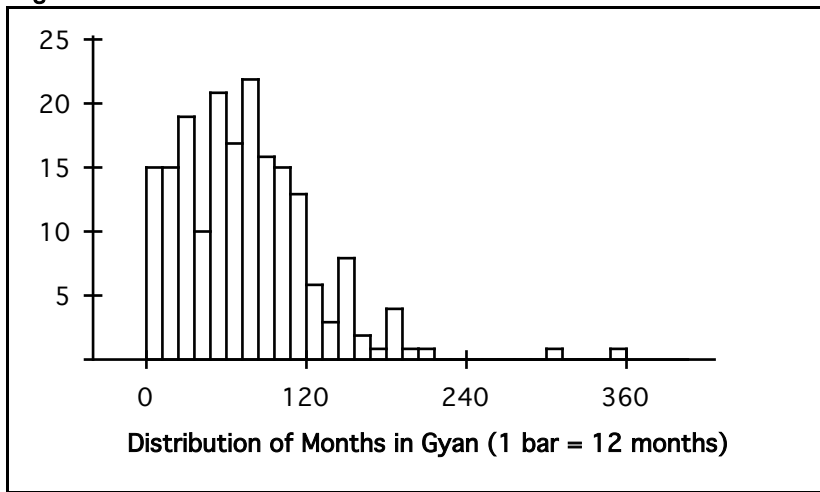
³³Thus a senior sister who became one of Lekraj's pupils before the group left Pakistan for India, Dadi Manmohini, reports how relatives who had once opposed the group later accepted it. She begins describing a visit to Bombay as follows: "The same people who had years ago battered our bodies and assaulted our minds with abuse...those very people were now anxious to hear the Knowledge...We were happy especially to teach our relatives, for Baba always said that 'charity begins at home.' 'A Brahma Kumari is one who can uplift both her father's and her husband's family.' Thus we were pleased that our relatives were following the counsel of God" (Chander 1983:185).

³⁴Personal interviews with Indian *brahmins* in Australia 1991 and 1992; India 1992. Also cf. Babb 1986:130.

³⁵The cost is not so much money, which is given on an entirely voluntary basis primarily by people who have participated in the organization intensely for some time, but a matter of worldly pleasures foregone to achieve purity and quality yoga, i.e., meditation.

their period of early enthusiasm into long term participation and commitment.

Figure 1



(Mean time in Gyan = 73.8 months)

The better integration of non-center-dwellers into the life of the Australian BK organization is also suggested by rates of participation. In Australia these are exceptionally high for the family as a whole, with only minor variations from city to city relating to size of city and consequent ease or difficulty of transport access to the centers. Participation rates are high not only in the main weekend services but also in weekday activities.³⁶ When interviewed 88% of respondents (N = 194) stated that they had attended Sunday morning *murli* session in the last week. 80% claimed that they had attended weekday morning meditation at least once in the past week, with 53% affirming that they had attended six times or more during this period (median attendance rate = 6).

The high levels of participation of all Australian *brahmins* are associated with a relatively good performance in member retention and are indicative of high levels of integration of members in the organization. There is, however, a cost to these high levels of integration of non-center-dwellers in the Australian organization: the diminished linkages of a much larger proportion of the *brahmin* population to the wider society from which new members might be drawn.

³⁶Weekend 'services' refers to the long (two hour) meditations held on Saturday and Sunday evenings and the Sunday morning *murli* reading and meditation after which notices are read and visitors are introduced.

Mobilization

In discussing mobilization strategies that make for success in New Religious Movements, Stark (1987:16) reiterates Shinn's (1984) view that groups focused on gurus have the advantage of being able to inspire high levels of commitment, but carry the notorious disability of being prone to disintegration upon the death of the leader. The Brahma Kumaris honour Dada Lekhraj as the bringer of a new and salvific spiritual understanding to humanity in its darkest hour. Source of revelations, gentle and loving founder of the spiritual family, and eventually linked with both Brahma and Shiva, "The Supreme Soul," he is the emotional and spiritual center of BK life. In many respects, then, the BKs appear to be a "guru movement." Yet there are paradoxes here: the BK movement is alive and growing more than twenty five years after the founder's passing. How is this to be explained?

As a preface to explanation, the BK "emic" view (Harris 1979:32-34) must be aired: *brahmins* reject the notion that Dada Lekhraj (or "Brahma Baba" as he is affectionately known) is their "guru." Distaste for this term is rooted in their theology, which contrasts the BK use of meditation and purity rules to achieve salvation with what they understand to be the wider Hindu community's "mere worship" of deities, what they call "*bhakti*."³⁷ "Gurus" are seen to be objects of worship or slavish devotion and hence are implicated in the "bhakti" complex. There is no doubt, however, that Lekhraj was a "charismatic leader" in the Weberian sense, and Weber himself called attention to problems of succession faced by charismatic leaders of all sorts (1968b).

There is, however, another sense in which the Brahma Kumaris might wish to be exempted from the category of a "guru movement" and from the implications that succession problems were inevitable for them. At the very outset of the life of the organization (in 1937) Dada Lekhraj devolved both his authority and personal fortune upon a formal body: the Managing Committee. Thus more than thirty years *before* his passing, Lekhraj took action that could minimize the organization's vulnerability to disruption in the wake of that inevitable event.

³⁷See footnote 15 above.

In Weberian terms (Weber 1968b), it could be said that Lekhraj attempted an early institutionalization of his own charisma. But Weber again sounded a caution relevant to this point: "The administrative staff of a charismatic leader," he asserted, "does not consist of 'officials'" (1968b:51). The staff of a charismatic leader, he observed, are chosen for their own charismatic qualities rather than for their technical competence; and they are appraised, promoted or dismissed according to their personal standing with the leader rather than on the grounds of objective performance criteria. Our ability to objectively assess the inner workings of the Brahma Kumaris Managing Committee in the years before Dada Lekhraj's death is limited, but from reports of early participants it appears that Weber's caution is both appropriate and overstated. The Committee did relieve Lekhraj of administrative duties under formally delegated authority. On the other hand, it is clear that he continued to set the direction for the organization and his pronouncements had overwhelming significance for everyone in the organization. Further, the members of the Managing Committee did indeed have their own charisma derived from their early association with Lekhraj, from their own reported experiences of the divine and from their very selection by the founder for the positions on the Committee. These very senior women who were companions of "Baba" are known as "the dadis."³⁸

Most remarkable of these early officers was Om Radhe, the head of the Committee from its formation until her death in the 1950s. To the post she brought a college education and personal qualities appropriate to an administrator (Chander 1983:58,76) but also a spiritual character that earned her the name Jagadamba Saraswati, "World Mother Goddess of Knowledge" (Chander 1983:58,76). To the others she became "Mama," alongside Lekhraj who was "Baba" (father).

Om Radhe and the other sisters installed on the Managing Committee could this be said to exercise both formal authority deriving from their offices and personal charisma in their own right. Both helped ease the trauma of Dada Lekhraj's passing in 1969 and the organization's loss of its incomparable head. However, administrative continuity and a body of loved

³⁸"Dadi" literally means "older sister," but when Western BKs refer to "the dadis" they are speaking about a small number of very senior sisters who were companions of Dada Lekhraj.

and highly esteemed associates of the founder were not the only keys to a successful succession. Through Lekhraj's death they had lost the medium who enabled God to speak directly to them, guiding the life of the *brahmin* family. Recovery from this loss was dramatically facilitated just a few days after the death, when the *dadis* were still in deep mourning: One of the senior sisters, in the midst of her meditation began speaking in the voices of Brahma Baba and Shiva, with whom Brahma Baba had become linked.

This sister, Dadi Gulzar, has been able to continue this service to the present day, enabling the senior management to avail themselves of the continuing guidance of the founder. She has also made herself available as a medium at scheduled times during the winter at Mt. Abu. Until recently this has made it possible for all *brahmins* visiting at the appropriate times to have personal meetings with their Baba. Now, however, the numbers of visiting *brahmins* are so great that Dadi Gulzar brings the voice of Brahma Baba to most *brahmins* only in country groups.³⁹

Given the importance of the personal authority of the *dadis* and the founder's continued channelled appearances, one has to regard the accomplishment of a "rational-legal" authority structure as partial. Further, insofar as the charisma of the *dadis* (and of Baba through one of them) now supplements the legal underpinnings of the organization, that organization has to be seen to be vulnerable to a future crisis. The *dadis* are now in their later years and yet work to demanding schedules, several of them with ill health. Indeed BKs themselves are deeply concerned about this, although in their minds is also the possibility that the millennium will resolve the issue of leadership transition before they have to deal with it.

Favorable Ecology

³⁹Dadi Gulzar is by no means the only *brahmin* to report trance experiences of meeting with Baba. However, she is the only *brahmin* who actually speaks in the voice of Baba to other *brahmins* and whose messages are taken as authentic by the organization. It was once common for a sister offering *bhog* at the Thursday morning meditations in Indian centers to go into trance on behalf of those assembled and "meet Baba." But Baba did not "speak through her," or indeed speak at all. Communications in these trance meditations were non-verbal. After finishing her meditation the sister would report her understanding of the communication to others. Now even these lesser trance communications through sisters other than Dadi Gulzar are prohibited.

Both India and Australia are relatively unregulated "religious economies" (in Stark's terminology), although levels of interreligious tension contrast sharply: in India they are acute; in Australia today they are minimal. In any case, the Brahma Kumaris do not become embroiled in the problems of the religious arena in either country. Both in India and Western countries they present themselves as a "spiritual university" rather than as a "religion." Whatever the practical benefits of this designation, it expresses a notion that might not be so cheerfully accepted if it were appreciated by the wider society: namely that "The Knowledge" embodies truths deeper than those of "the religions" (Chander 1983:223) and also superior to those of science.

Beyond the issue of legal standing there is the issue of how the organization presents itself to the public in its recruitment and public service activities. In Australia the BKs strongly emphasize the difference between themselves as a "spiritual" organization and religions. In India this contrast is not so strongly drawn for the public. Thus, in Australia the idea that the BK teachings are "not a religion" is important to many members who have been alienated from the conventional religions or never felt attracted to them. This relates to the fact that the conventional faith, Christianity, in its mainstream forms is weak in Australia. Many BKs come to the organization through public activities that do not suggest "religion." At BK public talks and stalls there are no images of God or gods that Australians would recognize.⁴⁰ Center signs prominently feature the organization's popular name, "Raja Yoga," which readily connects to the understanding of yoga as some kind of self-improvement technique. "Meditation," which BKs offer to teach at free lessons, also has acquired connotations more medical (as a stress reduction technique) or recreational than religious. Of course, when people actually take the meditation lessons they are taught that meditation is meant to connect a person to God and the more advanced lessons elaborate the BK understanding of God and the human drama.

In India, in contrast, the organization has promoted itself to the public primarily through visual displays of the story of world history as BKs

⁴⁰The orange ovoid shape representing Shiva appears as an insignia on brochures that are handed out to the public, but the symbolism is not understandable to outsiders. The texts of the introductory brochures describe the work of the organization in teaching meditation and promoting social causes like world peace.

understand it. These picture galleries line the walls of the larger centers (that are called "Spiritual Museums" as well as "Raja Yoga Centers") and mobile picture galleries are also taken into public places at festival times. Although the pictures tell the BK's particular "spiritual" message, the gods and goddesses of the Hindu pantheon are immediately recognizable in them. The public is most likely to visit the picture gallery first, and then if they are intrigued by the story they represent, they will attend a meditation class and do the introductory course. In other words, in India the first contact with the BKs is likely to be in a context that would be understood as "religious" by most people, since the gods of Hindu pantheon play major roles in the displays. Only after this do people generally move to involvement with the meditation, and even then meditation cannot easily be disassociated from religion by people from a Hindu background. This stronger linkage to the familiar contexts of religion in India may be understood in view of the fact that conventional religion remains vigorous there, although rather anarchic.

Recruitment: Reproduction vs. Outside Recruitment

The requirement that *brahmins* be chaste, and if not yet married, celibate, severely restricts the organization's ability to grow through internal reproduction. However, in India where chastity in marriage is a familiar concept (if not usually considered desirable for younger people) and the Brahma Kumaris have more members with families, the organization has more capacity for recruitment through children of members than in the West.⁴¹ The significance of the limited ability of the organization to grow in the West through giving birth to and socializing its own children is amplified by high levels of integration of the majority of Western BKs into *brahmin* family life and their consequent loss of ties to the wider society where future new adult members must mostly be found.

Demographic Change and Attitudes to the Wider Community

When looking at both the issues of mobilization and recruitment it became evident that while the organization has done well to date, the seeds of future problems can be identified: the legal structure underpinning leadership authority may not be strong enough to sustain a single direction

⁴¹Of course, Indian couples one or both of whom is a BK should not be producing *more* children once the commitment has been made to the BK way of life, but existing children can be drawn into the BK disciplines and world view.

in the event of loss of the *dadis*; and in the absence of any great numbers of BK children, particularly in Western countries, there is a constant need to draw new members from the outside if numbers are to be maintained and increased. Also, it was noted that the organization's own understandings of history and society tend to diffuse concern over the long-term future of the organization: the period of decline should be nearly over and the need for an organization to prepare souls for the Golden age soon will be gone. In the meantime, its role is *not* to save everyone: all souls have their own fates; they are born in the best age that they are suited to but must also be reborn into subsequent ages as a cycle wears down; at the end of a cycle, we are all here together in the most disastrous of times, but some will respond to the call to recognize their true nature and with the aid of Brahma Baba's teachings qualify themselves to be reborn in the happiest of times again with him. Thus it is service to the organization that is important, not service to the wider community except insofar as it enables certain others to identify themselves as prospective *brahmins*. Nor does service in the wider community confer value upon work in the world. One does not earn salvation through "good works;" one offers them simply as gifts of compassion from the riches one has already gained from purity and from the special access this gives to the divine.

In a limited way, however, the inward focus and millenarian orientation of the organization is being modified. This can be traced to the effects of demographic changes within the Western branches interacting with high level bridge-building by the Mt. Abu leadership with Indian government and international agencies. The most important demographic changes in this connection are changes in age structure, occupational background and education.

Long-term *brahmins* have reported that very young adults predominated in the first cohort of Australian BKs, but as this cohort came into their thirties (that is, in the 1980s) a wider range of age groups started to join the movement.⁴² This is reflected in the present age profile as evidenced in the 1992 survey which was distributed to all *brahmins*

⁴²Source: personal interviews with long-term participants in Sydney, June, 1992.

Note that Wilson (1987:39) has argued that the age distribution of the existing members of a NRM will have an influence on the age groups that are attracted to the movement, like tending to attract like.

considered old enough to have made a personal commitment to the requisite practices. Thus, discounting young children, who could not figure in the survey, there is a fairly normal age distribution ranging from 10 to 84 years with a median age of 35 and a mean of 36.5.⁴³

With the influx of people across a wider range of ages have come people with more diverse occupations. Whereas many of the young adults who entered the movement in the 1970s had not yet committed themselves to a trade or profession and were encouraged to find work that would not redirect too much of their time and attention outside the organization, the older people who started to come into the organization in the mid-1980s included many who had already established themselves in an occupation. We see from the 1992 survey that the *brahmins* now number amongst themselves an extraordinarily high proportion of professional people (17%) and people with other areas of high skill and training. Also, only a very small percentage of BKs were unemployed (1.0% in a country where the national rate of unemployment was around 10.5%) and unskilled (3.6%). Table 1 provides the survey breakdown for employment together with national employment figures taken from the National Campaign Against Drug Abuse 1991 National Survey of Australia.

⁴³Note that the Australian population in 1986 had a median age of 31.9 as reported by the Australian Bureau of Statistics. The BK figures are not far off for an organization in which children younger than preteens are not asked to participate in other than social activities.

Even though BK brahmins are celibate, many of their recruits already have children. The BKs in Australia actually resemble Australian Christian sectarian groups in terms of age distribution (cf. Mol 1985:75-76; Bouma 1992:126-127) rather than the established Christian denominations in which the twenty to forty year old age group are typically underrepresented.

Note also that the Indian notion of virtuoso religiosity appropriately being pursued in youth and after the age of child bearing is not evident here in this organization that generalizes the role of virtuoso to people of all ages and both sexes. The BK idea of family appears here in a distribution which includes all age ranges of a natural family except that from 0 - 10.

Table 1Frequency breakdown of **Employment**

Group	Count	% Survey	% NCADA
Business	5	2.58	NI
Clerk	31	16.0	9
Entertainment	8	4.12	NI
Home Duties	11	5.67	17
Management & Administration	22	11.3	7
Machine & Plant Operators	1	0.52	NI
Not Stated	5	2.58	NI
Pensioner	5	2.58	16
Professional	33	17.0	9
Sales & Personal Service	24	12.4	10
Self-Employed	2	1.03	NI
Student	18	9.28	8
Trades	20	10.3	15
Unemployed	2	1.03	5
Unskilled	7	3.61	5

Note: NI = Category not included in the NCADA survey. Pensioner = all in receipt of benefits from state; Student includes secondary and tertiary.

The levels of education reported reflect the predominance among BKs of people in jobs requiring high levels of skill and education. More than half report some tertiary education in a country where as late as 1981 only 3% of adults had a university degree (ABS in Mol 1985:88).⁴⁴

With the changed social profile of the organization has come a more open attitude to the wider community. This is evident in a range of areas, from greater acceptance of *brahmins'* involvement in and borrowing from other spiritual and cultural domains to further erosion of the insider-outsider "boundary" of the organization. The impact of the changed

⁴⁴The middle class educational and occupational profile of the BKs in Australia does resemble that of NRMs in other Western countries (Wilson 1981:v), but note that the contrast to mainline religious groups as regards education is not so stark in Australia as in Europe. In Australia, unlike Europe, the higher the level of education, the more likely a person is to be involved in some religious practice (Mol 1985:91).

social profile of Australian *brahmins* has been substantial because the older, professionally skilled and workforce-involved brahmins are not confined to lower membership statuses in the organization: they include sisters as well as brothers, center-dwellers as well as those living in bhavans and private homes.

Changed attitudes to the spiritual and cultural life of the wider community can be seen in a new readiness on the part of *brahmins* to make use of programs other than their own for physical and personal betterment. Until recently the Brahma Kumari teachings and way of life were considered wholly sufficient. Continued affiliation with the many other religious or spiritual groups in which BKs had participated before becoming *brahmins* was frowned upon. New exploration in these areas, or in alternative fitness regimes and healing programs, such as hatha yoga, Tai Chi, therapeutic massage or even swimming was seen as an unnecessary and probably deleterious competing interest.

Gradually, Australian *brahmins* have gained acceptance for some modifications to their own BK regimes (like cutting down on sugar, much beloved and symbolically significant for Indian sisters and brothers), as well as for modest use of some alternative health practices. There is, for example, moderate involvement by all *brahmins* (38.7% of all respondents) in other spiritual or personal betterment practices. However, people who have resided in centers (that is *brahmins* who have been role models and leaders in the family) report less than half that level of involvement (16.7%). Also, in spite of there being some participation in other spiritual and personal growth practices outside of the BK methodology, there remains little connection to other religions for *brahmins* in general (5.2% have such outside affiliations) and no reported connections for those *brahmins* who have lived in centers.

Looking at insider-outsider boundaries, some long term and highly respected Australian BKs whose professions oblige them to engage in business lunches have relaxed the prohibition against eating food cooked by people who are not fellow *brahmins*. Where work requires, they join colleagues in restaurant meals, but look for vegetarian items on the menu. In this way the *brahmin/non-brahmin* boundary does not become an issue and the *brahmins* in question see themselves as thereby having a greater

opportunity to be viewed sympathetically as they model more fundamental spiritual values in their work.

Insider-outsider boundaries have also been softened in other ways. Long-term *brahmins* in Australia have reflected on the lessening intensity of expectation in the last five to six years for people exposed to the BK teachings to either take the whole *brahmin* "package" or acknowledge that they are not meant to be one of the family and go elsewhere. Thus some centers today have occasional special activities of interest to people who have done "the course" (that is, the standard course where they would have learned the BK way of meditating and the basics of BK spiritual understandings) but do not follow all of the purity rules or come to a center regularly for morning meditations. These activities include meditations for world peace, as well as sessions where people learn skills for self-reflection, enhancing interpersonal communication and the like. They provide a means to keep in touch with sympathetic but not fully committed people in the wider community and promote a positive image of the organization.

Australian and other Western centers have also developed a wide range of programs other than their standard course for people who have never done that course and may never do so. Like the activities for non-*brahmins* who have done the course (and to an extent overlapping with them) these programs teach cognitive skills such as meditation and creative visualization removed from the doctrinal context of the standard BK course. In Australia these skills courses have been adapted and taken to special needs groups as diverse as stressed professionals and business managers, the unemployed, physical abuse victims and substance abusers. Similarly, Barker reports that in the UK the Brahma Kumaris have offered their positive thinking and meditation skills programs to police cadets and Members of Parliament as well as in schools and prisons (1992:169) where there is little or no expectation, at least in the short term, that people might make a total commitment to "The Knowledge" and become *brahmins*. While there remains the idea that these courses in general can be a means to draw to BK teachings people who would have been put off by a first encounter with its more foreign elements, the teaching is combined with a concern to help people in the variety of ways they might want to be helped, rather than strictly in the terms that BKs feel would be best.

Long-term BKs see the origins of these community service activities in the professional involvements of the older *brahmins* who started entering the organization in the 1980s. This group of people had to resist pressure to see their professional lives as being without spiritual significance and work to gain acceptance for using their diverse creative talents to wed their new spiritual understandings with their skills from the secular domain. Designing programs that could explain meditation in relation to the contemporary psychotherapies or cast the BK world view as a completion or enhancement of scientific cosmologies both helped the innovating *brahmins* integrate their spiritual and professional lives and domesticated some of the foreignness of the BK teachings for Western consumption.

Although there has been an element of resistance to de-theologized and Westernized programs produced outside India, an impetus to reach out to the non-*brahmin* world also came from the highest levels of the international organization itself. Thus the international leadership at Mt. Abu cultivated an association with the United Nations, winning affiliation with its Department of Public Information, listing on the roster of the United Nations' Economic and Social Council and consultative status with UNICEF. Beginning in 1985 the Mt. Abu leadership also initiated⁴⁵ a series of highly demanding international projects aimed at promoting conditions that will bring peace of mind and better quality of life to all people of the world. The first of these was the "Million Minutes of Peace" project (that operated in eighty countries in conjunction with the United Nations 1986 International Year of Peace). It was followed by the "Global Cooperation for a Better World" project run in 122 countries by the Brahma Kumaris in association with the United Nations as one of its designated "Peace Messenger" organizations. More recently, one of the Brahma Kumaris' top administrative heads, Dadi Jenki, also attended the Earth Summit in Rio as an invited participant.

Along with the BKs' greater willingness to make use of spiritual and cultural elements from the wider society and the blurring of lines between insiders and outsiders has come a growing range of interpretations concerning the significance of service for salvation. Alongside the classical position that world history takes its course regardless of the efforts of

⁴⁵The original idea for the Million Minutes of Peace Appeal actually came from BKs in Australia (The Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University 1992:2) but was authorized, developed and centrally administered from the international headquarters.

individuals and renders futile attempts to "reshape the world directly" (Babb 1986:151), we hear on the contemporary Australian scene people describing the need to *create* the new world, even as the old world crumbles around us. There is even evidence of a belief that non-*brahmins* have a significant role to play in this reconstruction and of a broader concern for them.

Long-term BKs sympathetic with these new interpretations thus note that inspiration for a change in attitude toward service to the world came from the highest possible source: the *murlis* (or daily lessons) that bring divine guidance to the family through the voice of the organization's official medium. In the mid '80s, they observe, the *murlis* began to stress that all humankind are Baba's children, even if some are special in the degree of commitment they offer him. As such they are deserving of "regard," and concern. The literature that accompanied the United Nations' projects also showed an evolution in attitude towards service to Baba's "other children." The Million Minutes of Peace fostered the conventional goal of encouraging all people to practice some technique for calming the mind as an aid to facing the perils of the times, but mobilized a high level of expertise to pursue this goal without coloring the project with BK theology. The Global Cooperation project then went further, asking people of all sorts to formulate their personal "vision for a better world." The summation of this project, a book published in conjunction with the United Nations, describes itself as "a manual for personal involvement in building a better world" (Brahma Kumaris Spiritual University 1992:8) and presents proposals concerned with such diverse areas as "living in balance with nature," "respect, understanding and tolerance," "science and quality of life" and "democratic government and people participation" from non-*brahmins*. The novel significance attributed to the efforts of non-*brahmins*, which *brahmins* can support and help refine, is highlighted in the preface where one of the organization's two chief administrators, Dadi Prakashmani, says, "The testimony of people from around the world, collected in the following pages, makes clear that the process of transformation from evil to good is under way. It is our hope that this book will help intensify and broaden it."

This new kind of service effort and new language accompanying it, have encouraged Australian BKs' interest in a wider range of speculation concerning the millennium and role their service to the world might have in it. Thus there is reflection on the suddenness of the total catastrophe - perhaps it will be somewhat drawn out? In any case, there will still be a

period of building - perhaps even fifty years or so - when the skills and talents of individuals will be needed to remake the society that will be the home for the reborn daughters and sons of Brahma in the Golden Age. This now makes "work in the world" *in order to make the world a better place* significant. It also gives room for the work of non-*brahmins*, as well as that of *brahmins*, to be significant in the reconstruction. In this emergent view, spiritual meaning is attached not just to acts of kindness towards Baba's lesser children (whose pain can be eased as they face the destruction of the world through learning to calm their minds), but also to acts of reforming and restructuring institutions by infusing them with new attitudes and values.

Secularization

In discussing the conditions that promote the success of religious movement organizations Stark argues that they "must not make [their] peace with this world too rapidly or too fully" (1987:23). If they do, the "secularized" movements lose their "market edge" (Ibid:23), offering too little that cannot be found in fully secular contexts more easily. In the case of the Brahma Kumaris, their attempts to offer others ways to spiritualize their lives without necessarily becoming *brahmins* carries the risk of an unintended reciprocal action: secularization of the movement itself. As boundaries between insiders and outsiders blur and as more effort is put into service activities that offer demythologized BK understandings combined with mainline psychotherapeutic and management techniques, the movement is faced with greater need to deal with outside influences. As these influences are largely Western in origin, and Westerners have been at the forefront of introducing them, the international organization also has to concern itself with tensions between culturally conservative Indian members and non-Indian BKs.

There are, however, impediments in the way of an accelerating slide toward secularization. These consist in the differentiation of activities that are open to participants who have made different levels of commitment and the reservation of a core set of highly significant spiritual activities only for the most committed members. Thus the new service activities using partially secularized teaching materials are counter-balanced by other, more restricted activities. The door to these is the standard "course" that teaches BK meditation techniques, purity rules and theology. The course is the entry point into the organization for those sufficiently interested, although, of course, many are not. For those who are, completion of the standard course

opens the way for participation in the regular BK meditations, *murli* readings and talks at local and national centers and retreats. While these activities are more open to non-*brahmins* now than in the past, they are still primarily for the *brahmin* family. Particularly at the early morning sessions, there is a strong sense of intimacy and explicit focus on elements of the tradition that are most challenging to non-*brahmins*. There the tradition is lived without apology, translation or dilution: one is there not in the first instance to relieve stress or to equip oneself to provide better business leadership but to be with God as taught and manifest through a particular Indian teacher.

Yet the most highly spiritually charged and most intimate of all BK activities is the pilgrimage to Mt. Abu and the actual meeting with Brahma Baba at the Madhuban retreat center through the agency of Dadi Gulzar. This cannot be done by anyone, not even any *brahmin*. It is true that the Madhuban facility has been opened to non-*brahmin* visitors in recent years as part of the effort to forge links with the wider society. Thus on what use to be known as "VIP retreats," selected visitors are given the opportunity once a year to participate in a special program on spiritual themes and learn something of the BK philosophy. But no visitors are allowed in Madhuban when Dadi Gulzar is scheduled to manifest the presence of Baba. Then only *brahmins* who have been following the purity rules for at least six months and have been vetted by their home centers are allowed to attend. The pilgrimage then becomes an affirmation of a commitment not only made but maintained⁴⁶ and an entrance into private mysteries: that one can physically go to, as it were, the center of the universe where the soon to be destroyed world will be reborn as a joyful kingdom of God;⁴⁷ that one can actually meet and talk to God. Even given some reinterpretation of how the millennium is to come and what its significance is for "work in the world," all this is very far from secularization.

⁴⁶In recognition of this sustained commitment, *brahmin* pilgrims to Madhuban are given rings with the BK symbol of "the Supreme Soul." These are normally worn all the time where a wedding ring would normally be worn. In place of the silver ring given new pilgrims, long-term *brahmins* who have given the organization distinguished service receive a gold ring.

⁴⁷Compare to Turner and Turner's characterization of Christian pilgrimages, and by extension, the paradigmatic pilgrimage of the salvation religions, as "a route to the liminal world where the ideal is felt to be real" (1978:30) as a "movement from a mundane center to a sacred periphery which suddenly, transiently, becomes central for the individual, an *axis mundi* of his faith" (1978:34).

CONCLUSION

Despite their manifest lack of concern to build an organization capable of expanding indefinitely in numbers and time, the Brahma Kumaris can nonetheless be seen to have achieved substantial success. They have survived the death of their founder and spread throughout India and overseas. The numbers of members in each country are not large, but those who count as full members, the *brahmins*, are both highly active and often effective in forging links with governments, the business and professional communities and the arts. This paper has demonstrated the utility of Stark's (1987) model in accounting for the BKs' success, but has shown that the assets and liabilities of the Western and Indian branches have not been the same and as a consequence the Western branches have evolved somewhat differently from their Indian counterparts in order to survive and grow. Chief amongst the differences in assets is the continuity BK beliefs have with conventional religious culture in India and their near, but not complete, lack of continuity with Western culture. That this has not been an insurmountable obstacle may well be in part attributable to the fact that the BKs had already survived the first major crisis of leadership succession and acceptance of their radical views in their home country first (cf. Stark 1987:15).⁴⁸ However, as Stark expected, the BK way of life developed in the home country had to be adapted in the new environment, not only to "include familiar cultural elements" (1987:15), but to incorporate members into the organization in somewhat different ways. In short, organizational structure as well as culture has had to be modified. The large role given to Westerners in creating cultural links to their societies has been cautiously encouraged by the Indian leadership, but not without concern for the integrity of the spiritual tradition and minor tensions in matters of artistic taste. However, we have argued that a serious threat to the integrity of the tradition through secularization is not likely to develop because secularizing elements of Western culture are incorporated mainly through service programs intended for non-members. Members can make use of their professional skills in creating detheologized renderings of

⁴⁸Compare to Stark's conjecture: "Is it impossible for a new religion to make its way if it lacks continuity with conventional religious culture? I am inclined to say yes, at least until a religion has succeeded in at least one society. Even then, religious movements will spread more readily to the extent that they build upon the familiar" (1987:15).

their spiritual path for outsiders, yet in different, more intimate settings they can continue to engage in an intensely religious practice.

We have also called attention to the temporary nature of the resolution of leadership succession problems. Even though the founder of the Brahma Kumaris established a rational-legal basis for leadership early in the life of the organization in the form of the Managing Committee, the senior "managers" on that committee inspire strong commitment to themselves personally as companions of the founder and spiritual leaders in their own right. Whether or not the bureaucratic structure of the organization will "hold" in their absence is an open question. There is also question as to whether the unity of the organization might suffer in the absence of the medium who brings the divine into the physical presence of committed members. Since all *brahmins* seek to encounter the divine presence through their founder in meditation and many feel they are successful in this, the organization has already had to deal with apparently authoritative pronouncements of Baba's wishes from too many sources. At present only the one senior sister is an accredited vehicle for Baba's voice. Should age deprive the organization of her vital services, however, there would be a question as to who, if anyone, could be accepted as providing a genuine connection to the founder and to God. Too many sources of messages would threaten unity; no acceptable successor could lend momentum to secularization since a crucial dramatic occasion for celebrating the possibility of standing in the presence of divinity would be lost.

The Western branches, that have developed some distinctive variations in institutional structure and modes of relating to the wider community in their home countries, also pose challenges to the international organization. One of these has to do with the increasing numbers of long term, experienced and dedicated Western *brahmins* who have not as yet had their talents utilized at the most senior levels of the organization. Questions also hang over attitudes of Western *brahmins* to purity rules. Given precedents for forming individual judgments on the appropriateness of non-commensality rules and more individual discretion in the area of dress and use of non-BK aids to personal development, it is inevitable that other purity rules will also come into question. Indeed the most crucial rule, that on chastity in marriage and celibacy, is already at issue in Australia. Although BKs are strongly socialized not to challenge the views of seniors, either in private conversations or in group lessons, some genuine discussion groups are now emerging on an

informal basis in Australia and may bring into the open opinions that in the past could not have been explored publicly. Whether changed views on such crucial values as chastity could be incorporated within the *brahmin* family without destroying it remains to be seen.

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