Amnesia and Remembrance in a Hindu Theory of History

By

LAWRENCE A. BABB
Amherst College, Amherst

I. INTRODUCTION

My subject is the historical theory of a modern Hindu sect.[1] The sect is the *brahmā kumārī* movement, the "Daughters of Brahmā," and their theory of history is a modified version of the more general Hindu conception of cyclical world degeneration and renewal. This theory, it seems to me, raises in a particularly interesting way the question of what we mean by "historical" consciousness. Do we, or should we, mean only the historical awareness of the modern West? Or is more than one form of historical consciousness possible?

The Brahmā Kumārī have an intense and systematic interest in things that happened in the past. Their conception of the things that "happened," however, and also their conception of the "medium" in which such things happen—that is to say, their conception of history itself—are at the very least different from the common sense of the modern West, and may even be said to invert certain Western ideas. If nothing else, the Brahmā Kumārī show us that there is more than one way to be aware of history, and more than one kind of history of which to be aware; they also teach us that the kind of meanings that are read into history may reflect a stance toward the world that is not, in itself, historical at all.

The Brahmā Kumārī movement was founded in 1937 by a wealthy Sindhī businessman by the name of Dādā Lekhrāj. Though small, the movement is an extremely conspicuous part of the modern religious scene in urban India, especially North India.[2] Its "Raja Yoga Centres" are situated in many major urban concourses, and large numbers of people are exposed to their newspaper advertisements and visit—or

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at least see out of the corners of their eyes—the many " exhibitions " sponsored by the Brahmā Kumārī on festivals and other occasions. They are certainly the most vigorously proselytizing of all Hindu sects, and are quite well known. During a recent stay in Delhi (1978–79) I met few people who had not at least heard of the Brahmā Kumārī, and many had formed definite opinions about them, usually hostile.

The movement began as a result of a series of divine visions (*sākshātkār*) experienced by Lekhrāj himself. In these visions he learned that the world was soon to be destroyed, and that following this destruction a new and perfect world would be created, to be inhabited by a very few souls of special purity and virtue. Impressed by the imminence of the approaching calamity, he immediately began to impart his divinely inspired *gyān* (" knowledge ") to others. Gradually a following came into existence, at first from within his own family, later from outside, and it is on this basis that the movement grew. Those who joined did so in the hope of themselves being included among the virtuous ones in the better world to come. From the very beginning his following consisted mainly of women, and for this reason the sensibilities of women have contributed in very important ways to the ideology of the movement, which may be described as " feminist " in at least some respects (Babb, forthcoming). Although men belong to the movement, it has remained oriented toward women to the present day, a fact that has much to do with the Brahmā Kumārī conception of salvation (as we shall see), and probably contributes to the disesteem in which the movement is held in the eyes of many nonmembers.

My object in this paper is to concentrate on the Brahmā Kumārī portrayal of the history of the world. Essentially what the movement is all about is a certain conception of the human situation. This conception is based upon a coherent theory of history, a theory that explains the world we know now and also provides justification for hope in eventual salvation. This theory seems to be an elaboration of certain ritual themes, specifically those of symbolic death, separation, and regeneration through rebirth; in this respect the Brahmā Kumārī view of the world is not only linked with other forms of Hinduism, but can be seen to reflect a pattern that is very general in the religious life of humankind. What is of particular interest about the Brahmā Kumārī, however, is their conception of " memory " in relation to history, an idea that also seems to represent a derivative of more general Hindu ideas. For the Brahmā Kumārī, as we shall see, to be in history is to " forget," and truly to remember is, in a sense, to leave time.

II. The Soul and its World

The career of the soul. Fundamental to the Brahmā Kumārī world-view is their conception of soul (*ātmā*). The Brahmā Kumārī say that the universe consists of two utterly dissimilar elements: material nature (*prakriti*) and a vast number of souls. Material nature constantly shifts and flows; it is incessantly in motion and this motion is the history of the world. Our bodies are made of coarse matter and belong entirely to material nature, but although we tend to identify with our bodies, actually we are souls. Unlike material things, souls are indestructable (*avināshī*). Each soul is a massless point of brightness and power which has been drawn into engagement with matter, and it is the soul's mistaken identification with material bodies that is at the root of all human problems.

Souls have a "true home," and this is a region of perfect peace and absolute silence at the top of the universe known as *paramdhām* or *brahmlok*. While inhabiting *paramdhām* souls are in a state of dormancy, and though "liberated" from the world, they are incapable of experiences as such, neither of pleasure nor of pain. To experience anything at all, souls must engage with matter, and this is something that all souls do sooner or latter. When they do so they descend from *paramdhām* to this world to become encased in human (never animal) bodies and enter the process of history.

According to the Brahmā Kumārī, history occurs in endlessly repeating cycles of world-degeneration. Certain highly deserving souls enter the cycle at its beginning when the world is perfect, and they experience utter happiness in a condition known as *jīvan mukti*, or liberation in life. However, they must also experience unhappiness and pain later on when the world begins to deteriorate. Other less deserving souls enter history when the world is no longer perfect, and although they will experience some happiness, it will be much less than those who came earlier. All souls, whether they come early or late, must remain in history, transmigrating from life to life, until the historical cycle has finished and the world is destroyed, at which point they will return to *paramdhām*. This is our predicament. We are souls who have descended from *paramdhām* into history. In so doing we have "forgotten" our "true home" (*paramdhām*) and our real nature, and we find ourselves wandering through the ceaseless flow of the material world. In other words, we have forgotten who we really are, and this forgetfulness is what it means to be in history.

Presiding over this entire process is the Supreme Soul (*paramātmā*), also known as the Supreme Father (*parampitā*), or, more usually, as *shiv bābā*. He is omniscient and all-powerful but not omnipresent,

since he is entirely separate from material nature and the historical process that is peculiar to material nature. Yet he is concerned with the welfare of souls, his " children," and it is because of his abounding love that a small number of especially deserving souls enjoy pure happiness at the beginning of history. At the end of the cycle—that is, in the present era—he imparts, to those few who will listen, " knowledge " (*gyān*) concerning the human situation and what one may do to attain *jīvan mukti* in the next cycle. He does so by speaking to the world through the mouth of Dādā Lekhrāj, the founder of the Brahmā Kumārī movement. The Brahmā Kumārī are simply those who receive this " knowledge " and act on it. In so doing they " remember " who they are, and those who remember will be saved.

The career of the world. The Brahmā Kumārī say that the history of the world occurs in 5,000-year cycles, each an exact replica of every other. Each cycle (*kalpa*) is in turn divided into four eras of 1,250 years each.

History begins with an era of perfection, the *satyug*. During this first of the four eras the earth is a paradise. There is no cold or excessive heat, nature is benign, and food and wealth are available to all without limit. Death is painless; souls simply leave old bodies for new ones. There is no competition or conflict, and days pass in happy play and idleness. The souls that inhabit the *satyug* are entirely worthy of this world. They are absolutely pure, and because of their purity they are *devātmā* or " divine souls," which is to say they are gods and goddesses. Among them there is no religion in the sense of supplication to deities: they are themselves deities; they are *pūjya*, " worthy of worship," rather than *pujārī*, " ones who worship." These, in fact, are the very beings, dimly remembered through texts, who are worshiped as deities today. And of course these deities still exist in the world; they are to be found among the membership of the Brahmā Kumārī movement.

At the outset of the *satyug* there are but 900,000 individuals, with 16,108 of special ruling status, although this number will grow as new souls (slightly less virtuous than those who came at first) descend from *paramdhām*. Their social order is totally harmonious. There are no religious divisions, for " religion," as we now know it, does not exist. Nor is there political discord, for there is but one pair of sovereigns in existence at a time. The first king, in fact, is Dādā Lekhrāj in the form of Nārāyaṇa. There is but one language and one *dharma*, the *ādi sanātan devi-devatā dharma* (" the original and eternal *dharma* of goddesses and gods "). There is a ranking system, for souls of the

highest virtue will have the highest places. But the resulting hierarchy will be of a benign kind that merely reflects the innate capacities and dispositions of individuals. This concord of function and innate nature is exemplified especially in the principle of " double-crowned " sovereignty that prevails in the *satyug*. The rulers of the *satyug* are adorned with both crown and halo, as we see in pictures of deities even today, symbolic of the complete identity of sovereignty and virtue. This is a social order, in other words, in which inner nature and outer action are at one. Thus there can be no conflict or competition and social life is conducted entirely in accord with " divine law " (*divya maryādā*).

One of the most important features of the *satyug*, as the Brahmā Kumārī conceive it, is the nature of sexual difference. Men and women are sexually distinct, but they are also entirely equal. There is no sexual intercourse, for this would be inconsonant with the absolute purity of gods and goddesses. Children are conceived within marriage, but by means of yogic powers retained by their parents from their practice of *rāj yog* during the previous world-cycle, a matter to which I shall return later.

Finally, those who enter the *satyug* do so in a state of innocence. By this I do not mean merely that they are without vice, but that they have no *gyān*, no " knowledge " of their actual historical situation and of their true nature as souls. " In the *satyug*," as one of my informants put it, " you don't know why you're there." Those who live in the *satyug*, as in all the ages of the world, have no memory whatever of *paramdhām*, no idea at all of the Supreme Soul, and no recollection of any previous state of earthly existence. This amnesia continues throughout the entire world-career of the soul, and is only ended, for a very few, when the Supreme Soul speaks through Lekhrāj's mouth at the end of the cycle. The *satyug* is the beginning of history, and to be in history is to forget.

The next age in the cycle is known as the *tretāyug*. During the *satyug* souls of slightly less perfection than those who came at first continue to descend from *paramdhām*. The firstcomers too lose some of their virtues over time, with the result that by the end of 1,250 years the general level of purity has descended from sixteen degrees (perfection) to fourteen degrees (very pure, but less than perfect), and with this the *tretāyug* begins.

The beings of the *tretāyug* are still deities, although because of their slightly lower degree of purity they are said to belong to the *kshatriya varṇa* as opposed to the *devi-devatā varṇa* of the *satyug*. In general life in this era is very similar to that of the *satyug*: nature is kind and bountiful, and life is free from conflict and want. Men and women

remain equal, and sexual intercourse is still unknown. There are, however, certain manifestations of degeneration, and one such is the proliferation of sovereigns. Where there was but one king and queen at a time before, there are now one hundred in every generation. But virtue and sovereignty continue to coincide, and the *tretāyug*, like the *satyug* before, is a fortunate era in the history of the world.

The next age is the *dvāparyug*. During the *tretāyug* souls continue to descend from *paramdhām*, and by the end of this period the population of the earth has risen to 330,000,000. The Brahmā Kumārī say that this is why there are 330,000,000 deities in the Hindu pantheon. At this juncture the general level of purity has declined to eight degrees, half that of the beginning of the *satyug*, at which point the *dvāparyug* begins.

In the *dvāparyug* the quality of *rajogun*, " passion," prevails rather than the " purity " (*satogun*) of previous ages, and this is symptomatic of the transition that has occurred. Unity and harmony disappear. " Double-crowned " sovereignty is finished; mere power supplants true authority. There are now many languages and separate political communities. Competition for wealth commences and becomes increasingly severe as the population, fed by new and vice-prone souls from *paramdhām*, continues to grow. This is the age when devotional religion (*bhakti*) originates: no longer *pūjya* (worthy of worship), the inhabitants of the *dvāparyug* are merely *pujārī* (ones who worship). And those who live in the *dvāparyug* are no longer *kshatriya*, but belong to the *vaishya varṇa*, a low estate in the Brahmā Kumārī view, consistent with their degraded nature.

But perhaps most important of all is the fact that with the beginning of the *dvāparyug* what the Brahmā Kumārī call *deh abhimān*—" body pride " or " body consciousness "—comes into existence. That it does so is a matter of historical necessity, because at the conclusion of the *tretāyug* the yogic power hitherto utilized for human reproduction becomes exhausted. Sexual intercourse is now necessary, and lust and other vices associated with it cause souls to sink into ever-stronger identification with the bodies they happen to inhabit. Marriage now becomes debased, as women become mere objects of lust, and with this the subjugation of women begins.

The trends emergent in the *dvāparyug* are simply continued and augmented in the present age, the *kaliyug*. This is an age in which all perfections are lost; it is a *vikār sāgar*, an " ocean of vices," a time when harmful distinctions, contrasts and conflicts run riot. The earth is now flooded with human beings who are divided into thousands of linguistic, political and religious groupings. " Passion," the predomi-

nant quality of the *dvāparyug*, now gives way to torpor and ignorance (*tamogun*), and all the people of the world belong to the lowest estate, the *shūdra varṇa*. The "five vices" hold full sway, and if women are mere slaves and sex objects, all of humanity is also bound by chains of false identification with the body. In an inversion of Hobbes, life at the end of history is nasty, brutish and (because of a diminution of the human life span) short. This is our present condition.

The *kaliyug* is the nadir of history. At its conclusion the population of the world will rise to six billion, by which time all of the dormant souls of *paramdhām* will have come to earth, and those who came at first will have completed 84 lifetimes of earthly existence. At this point the world will be destroyed in a vast conflagration. All souls will then ascend to *paramdhām*, after which the entire cycle will begin anew.

III. Knowledge and Metaphors

The world cycle occurs within time, and in a sense *is* time. But for the Brahmā Kumārī there is also an out-of-time existence, and it is with this that the Brahmā Kumārī movement is principally concerned. They call it the *sangam yug*, the "confluence age." It exists only for some people, and for them it occurs just at the end of the *kaliyug*; that is to say, it occurs now. This is the point at which the Supreme Soul gives, to a few worthy souls, the "knowledge" by means of which they become goddesses and gods in the *satyug* to come. This "knowledge," in turn, centers on three metaphors: 1) the metaphor of the drama, 2) the metaphor of rebirth, and 3) the metaphor of childhood. These metaphors are the key to the Brahmā Kumārī view of the world.

The metaphor of the drama. The world, the Brahmā Kumārī say, is a "drama" (usually the English word is used) in which each soul plays a particular "part" of its own. The drama is the cycle of history, and each individual's part is his or her world-career, consisting of a chain of *janam* (births) commencing at the time the soul in question descends from *paramdhām*.

Each part, the Brahmā Kumārī say, is absolutely predetermined. That is, in each world-cycle a given soul goes through exactly the same sequence of births, and in each life does exactly the same thing as in every other cycle. Each soul must play its foreordained part because the "script" is indelibly impressed upon it in the form of *sanskāra*, or inclinations toward certain kinds of action which are, in turn, the products of previous actions. The soul is thus enmeshed in a net of cause and effect. The Brahmā Kumārī sometimes say that the drama is a "movie," the same film being screened over and over again.

The Brahmā Kumārī regard this insight as a consolation. On balance, life in the *kaliyug* is filled with tribulations and pain. But these are misfortunes that apply to the body, and not to the soul, and that we consider them " ours " is a consequence of our false identification with our bodies. We have, they say, " forgotten " who we really are, and we must " remember." And in so doing we must cultivate the attitude of an " actor." " I am," one must say to oneself, " merely an actor, on stage, playing a role." One must, in other words, recollect one's real life offstage. Doing so, one becomes a detached spectator, a mere " witness " (*sākshi*) of the passing scene; the misfortunes are happening, but not to one's essential self. Thus, the metaphor of the drama becomes a " shield " (*ḍhāl*) against the moral and physical chaos of the *kaliyug*.

However, if the Brahmā Kumārī find consolation in the idea of the drama, they do not view it as a sanction for resignation. This is a crucial point, for Western writers have often viewed South Asian determinism as mere fatalism. This is no more true for the Brahmā Kumārī than it is for other forms of Hinduism. They say that the idea of the drama should only be applied to the past, never to the future. One may find comfort in the idea of the ineluctability of the world-script, and of one's essential detachment from it, but one may not on that account subside into inaction or acquiescence. The goal is to be reborn in the *satyug*, and to be reborn with as high a " status " as possible. For this goal-directed effort (*purushārth*) is absolutely necessary. In other words, even though everything that happens is predetermined, one must strive.

This contention derives its convincingness, I believe, from a fundamental aspect of the karmic theory of destiny: the hypothesis of amnesia. The point is, although we know the future of the world in general outline (mainly on the basis of divine revelation), the individual cannot, at the present time, know his or her own future (what the Brahmā Kumārī call the " final results "), or at least never directly so, and this is because we cannot fully know the past. It is true that the future is predetermined, on karmic principles, by the past, and thus if we could know the past then we would know the future as well. But we are historical beings, and to be in history is to forget. The present, of course, gives us a glimpse of the past, because the things that happen now are the effects of causes that operated in the past. But this can never be a complete revelation of the past, for there always remains an unknown karmic debt, the nature of which can only be revealed through things that have not yet happened. To know the future one must know the past; yet to know the past one must know the future. Thus,

the future is open. If the world is a drama, we are in the position of actors who remember the script only as they pronounce the lines. The result is a curious amalgam of absolute determinism and absolute openness. Everything is fixed, and yet from the standpoint of the individual nothing is settled. Since we cannot " remember," we must therefore wander blindly through the world, between a mostly hidden past and a wholly hidden future, and we can assume nothing whatsoever about our ultimate destination. This being so, we must do something about our salvation, for the spectacle of our own efforts and our hopes for their ultimate consequences are the only basis we have for any confidence, however partial, in the future.

Our basic problem is one of memory. Dādā Lekhrāj was certainly no philosopher, and he tended to see the human situation in essentially human terms. For him the question was never " Do you know what the world really is? " but rather, " Who are you? " We are, he said, " lost children "; we have forgotten our " true home " and are playing a false role in an alien place. All we have to do is remember who we are. But this is not a simple matter; we cannot remember merely by wishing to. Amnesia is in some way built into our situation. To be in history is *not* to remember, and thus truly to remember we must in some sense leave historical time. To remember we must see ourselves as we " really are," that is, we must know ourselves as we are known to the Supreme Soul, who is outside of time. Thus, the remembrance we seek is quite unlike ordinary memory, involving a radically altered stance towards ourselves and the world. To remember in this way one must become a different *kind* of person, a person who is outside history as well as in. This is what it means to enter the *sangam yug*, the " confluence age," and to make this transition one must be reborn.

The metaphor of rebirth. The Supreme Soul gives us " knowledge," and in part this is historical knowledge. Therefore at one level the Brahmā Kumārī movement is a kind of school for the teaching of world history. The movement identifies itself institutionally as the *Prajāpitā Brahmā Kumārī Īshvarīya Vishva-Vidhyālya*, " The Prajāpitā Brahmā Kumārī Divine University." In each " Raja Yoga Centre " " classes " are given in " divine knowledge "; these classes consist of lessons on the nature of the historical cycle, what goes on in the four ages, how one should act in the present era, and so on. Students sit in neat rows, women on one side of the room and men on the other, and listen quietly to discourses given by one of the resident " sisters " of the Centre (less commonly a " brother "). The discourses are usually those of

Lekhrāj himself as they were written down during his lifetime, occasionally supplemented by discourses delivered in seances by a medium who has acted as Lekhrāj's surrogate since his death in 1969.

But history lessons, in themselves, are not enough. This is because although knowing history causes us to realize the context and nature of our difficulty, historical knowledge cannot actually suffice to overcome our difficulty. Our ignorance of our situation, for which "knowledge" is the corrective, is not passive; it is an active, willed ignorance that arises from our desires. It is ignorance of "who we are." We have forgotten that we are souls, and, in fact, attracted by material nature and its blandishments we *want* to forget, and this forgetfulness has become the most ingrained of our habits of mind. What is required of us is not simply assent to the historical theory of the Brahmā Kumārī, or to the proposition that we are souls and not bodies, but an actual change of self-awareness. In order truly to "know" we must eradicate "body pride" or "body consciousness" (*deh abhimān*) and cultivate "soul consciousness" (*dehi abhimān*) instead, which means that we must see ourselves, and our relationship with our bodies, in a completely new perspective.

In part this is a matter of changing what we do, and in particular, avoiding behavior that is an especially dangerous source of further entanglements with the body and nature. Meat, alcohol, smoking, excessively hot foods—all such things and their like must be avoided. But above all, sexual intercourse is forbidden. Lust (*kām vikār*) is, to the Brahmā Kumārī, the *ur*-vice. It, more than anything else, draws the soul into material engagement, thus entrenching the soul in ignorance. Absolute celibacy is therefore the *sine qua non* of the virtuous life as understood by the Brahmā Kumārī.

Even proper conduct, however, is not sufficient to remove ignorance, although it is an absolute precondition for doing so. True self-knowledge, rather, is achieved through something the Brahmā Kumārī call *rāj yog*, and if part of the curriculum of the Brahmā Kumārī "University" is world history, the other part is the teaching of this technique. The actual pedagogy is easy to describe, at least superficially. One sits before a teacher and is told to "think of yourself as a soul" or to "think of me [the teacher] as a soul." Pupil and teacher gaze into each others' eyes while the pupil tries to imagine him or herself as "bodiless" and in communion with the Supreme Soul. The teacher's own yogic power is believed to help in drawing the pupil into the teacher's frame of reference, with the result that the student comes to see himself as the teacher sees him, as a soul and not as a body. With practice he will be able to "fix" himself in soul-consciousness on his

own, and if truly successful, will be able to maintain this condition to some degree all the time. Even as he acts in history, he will be disengaged from his actions, not merely believing, but *knowing* that actions are things of the body alone to which he is but a witness.

As in other forms of Hinduism, the emphasis is not just on knowing, but on knowing-as-an-experience. Were this not the case, then knowledge of our situation would suffice by itself. But in fact what is at issue is not what the world is, but what *we* are in relation to the world. It is not a question of learning that the world is not what it seems to be, but of cultivating the ability actually to experience existence in the world in a new way. It is not conviction that counts, but the experience of being changed in relation to the world, an experience that at one and the same time validates the Brahmā Kumārī portrayal of the world, and justifies the soteriological hopes of the individual. Are you going to be reborn in the *satyug*? And what will your status be? " Service " (*sevā*) to the movement gives some indication of this, as does successful adherence to the movement's rules. But mere action in the world is not, in itself, enough. It is the person who experiences him or herself as a soul whose *sanskāra* are appropriate for the status of a deity, and such a person's destination is the *satyug*. Knowing this, and existing (ideally) in the afterglow of periodic experiences cultivated in meditation, a man or a woman may, even as he or she acts in the world, remain apart from it, and in this way achieve " true peace of mind " (*sacci man kī shānti*). In this way too, one generates the yogic powers that make possible the fortunate ages of the world, which is to say, one participates in the creation of the very heaven one hopes to inhabit.

Such a person is one who " remembers." The Brahmā Kumārī constantly employ the idiom of remembrance in discussing these matters. The soul has " forgotten " its real nature and has identified with the body. In meditation one should turn this upside down by " forgetting the body " (*sharīr ko bhul jānā*) and remembering the Supreme Soul (*shiv bābā ko yād karnā*). In this most fundamental act of recollection, that is, in cultivating awareness of the Supreme Soul, one becomes aware of one's own soul, which is to say, one becomes body-forgetful. And in such a state one finds happiness (*sukh*), peace (*shānti*), and confidence in salvation, a confidence which, for reasons we have already touched upon, is unavailable for those who remain in the world.

Those who remember are in the *sangam yug*, the " confluence age," so called because it is on the boundary where the *kaliyug* and the *satyug* converge and meet. The *sangam yug* does not exist for all, but only for those who receive " knowledge " and cultivate soul-awareness. The

opportunity to do so is limited to an historical window of about one hundred years. The vast majority of humanity will not seize this opportunity and will remain in the *kaliyug*, but a few select souls, the same souls that have done so countless times before, will undergo this radical change. These souls are said by the Brahmā Kumārī to be reborn. No longer the children of earthly parents, they become the daughters and sons of Brahmā.

Such persons enter a condition of death-while-alive (*marjīva janam*). One is, the Brahmā Kumārī say, " dead " to the world; one is *nyārā*, separated and distinct from the rest of society. The Brahmā Kumārī, needing no lessons from van Gennep on liminality, themselves characterize this condition as being neither of this world nor the next; one is *bīch men*, " in between." Their sense of separation from the *kaliyug* is a powerful theme in Brahmā Kumārī life. They are encouraged not to form strong attachments outside the movement (even with members of their own families), their white dress is distinctive, they refuse to take food prepared by others, and so on. They have been born into a new kind of existence, one in which even the most basic attachments of the old world count for little.

The Brahmā Kumārī and Kumār (female and male members of the movement) are reborn as " Brāhmans." Each age has its own *varṇa*, and those who belong to the *sangam yug* are the " true Brāhmans," reborn as such. The aperture of their birth is a mouth, the mouth of Dādā Lekhrāj, through which issues the knowledge that causes their rebirth.[3] They are thus " mouth-born Brāhmans," and Lekhrāj is identified with the creative deity Brahmā, since it is because of his utterances, inspired by the Supreme Soul, that the process leading to the rebirth of the world is begun. Therefore, Lekhrāj is known within the movement as *brahmā bābā*. Reborn through his mouth, his children are the daughters and sons of Brahmā.

The metaphor of childhood. The *satyug* is not only the childhood of the world, it is also an age of children. In the *satyug* there is perpetual springtime, without work and without worry. There is marriage, but without sex. And while it is true that the gods and goddesses of the *satyug* must ultimately shed their bodies, there is little said among the Brahmā Kumārī about the old age of the deities.

Likewise, the movement itself infantilizes its members, or at least does so at a symbolic level. During Lekhrāj's lifetime his followers were treated as his daughters and sons, and the life they led together was powerfully shaped by this. He was the paterfamilias of what was, in effect, an adopted family for committed members of the move-

ment. He and his principal disciple (a woman known as Sarasvatī) presided as father and mother, and Lekhrāj himself always addressed his followers as his " children," or " sweet children," or by using other terms of parental endearment. He distributed *prasād* as a father might distribute sweets to his children, he took them on picnics and other excursions, and one informant (male) very emotionally recalled to me being taken, as an adult, on Lekhrāj's lap.

There were—and are today—other symbolisms too. Lekhrāj was not only conceived as parental Brahmā, but also as playful Krishna, which form he is believed to take when first reborn in the *satyug*. His discourses were, and are to this day, called *murli* in reference to the flute with which Krishna attracted the women with whom he sported in Brindaban.[4] But the dominant image seems to have been that of Lekhrāj as father, and the daughters and sons of Brahmā remain his children today. They continue to be addressed as " children," or " sweet children " by the Supreme Soul (still through Lekhrāj, but now in mediumistic seances). And although the movement has assumed the institutional persona of a university, in many ways the prevailing atmosphere is far more that of a primary schoolroom with its emphasis on classroom decorum and mild scoldings for the disobedient. Whatever else the movement may be, it is a family into which one is reborn as a child of Brahmā.

Quite apart from its obvious connection with the idea of rebirth, this emphasis on childhood is also symbolically consonant with the importance the movement places on the condition of women. In the Brahmā Kumārī view there is a direct relationship between the status of women in the world and the condition of the world itself. As we have seen, it is with the beginning of the *dvāparyug* that sexual intercourse enters the world, and it is at this point that the world turns from heaven (*svarg*) to hell (*narak*). There is thus an analogical relationship between the existential bondage of the soul in the world and the bondage of women in what the Brahmā Kumārī call " worldly marriage," that is, marriage with sexual intercourse. To put the matter slightly differently, if the *satyug* is the childhood of the world, then it is when the world grows up that the trouble begins, and the same might well be said of women. Thus, liberation must be the renunciation of adulthood, a release from " worldly marriage."

This view has obvious cultural roots. For the Brahmā Kumārī, to be saved is to become a deity, and it is also to become a child. In Northern India it is a cultural fact that women are goddesses in their childhood prior to marriage. The Brahmā Kumārī attach great significance to the fact that *kanyā* (virgin girls) are worshiped as earthly

embodiments of the goddess Durgā during the rites of *navrātra*, a privilege they must forgo after marriage. In other words, unmarried girls are present-day examples of what we all hope to become in the *satyug*, namely, beings who are *pūjya*, worthy of worship. And just as women become *pujārī*, worshipers, after marriage, so all of humanity loses divinity when " worldly marriage " becomes part of the human scene.

This in turn seems to be connected with the great emphasis the movement places on fatherhood, both on Lekhrāj as father within the movement, and the Supreme Soul as Supreme Father. At the time of marriage a young woman leaves her father's house for a new one where she is daughter-in-law rather than daughter. The transition is proverbially a drastic one, for as a daughter-in-law a woman has a role quite different from that which she enjoyed in the house of her father. It is this role, that of married woman, that the Brahmā Kumārī see as symbolic of the human condition in the present era and they portray it as a role of onerous servitude. Bondage, in other words, is to live in separation from one's father, and liberation is to dwell with one's father as daughter of the house.

In entering the *sangam yug* one is reborn into a new family, and one has acquired a new father. Or, more accurately, one has returned to one's true father's house, for the Brahmā Kumārī believe, as we have seen, that the family attachments of worldly life are but part of the make-believe drama of the historical world. In other words, by becoming a child one returns to one's real father's house, that is, the Supreme Father's house, and it is in this father's house that one finds liberation. In *this* world one can return from time to time to one's father's house, but one cannot remain there, for there is no permanent role for an adult woman in her natal family. But earthly families are not real families, and our earthly home is not our true home. We have totally forgotten our true home and are wandering in bondage as " long lost children." All we need do is remember who we really are, and if we do so we will recover our true nativity. In so doing one can become a real daughter of a timeless father and in this way one can become free, though not forever, because sooner or later we always forget.

What, then, is the view of history expressed in all of this? One of its most obvious features is surely that it conflates two different " kinds " of history. One may speak of the life-history of the individual and the universal history of the world as separate and separable matters. But here they seem to be conceived in the same way, and, most important, as the same *kind* of thing. Each reflects the same process

of moral and physical decline, from perfect childhood to corrupt and benighted adulthood. The point is to escape this process. That is, the point is to recover childhood, and the childhood that is recovered is at once the " true " childhood of the individual and the childhood of the world. Life-history and universal history fuse, and at a moment when the world is made to stop—the *sangam yug*—the individual and the world are reborn.

Brahmā Kumārī life is not rich in ceremony. Their emphasis is on *gyān*, on knowledge, and on the words, texts and discourses through which knowledge is conveyed. The observer is thus struck with the poverty of their ritual life when compared to that of popular Hinduism more generally. But at the same time it is evident that they have made use of an essentially ritual logic as the underpinning of their view of the world and their soteriological strategy. Their object is to stop and restart time, to recover the childhood of the world by reclaiming their own " true " childhoods as individuals. The malleability of time in religious thought is a notable feature of many cultures, as Eliade (1971) and others have shown, and it is especially within certain ritual moments that this magic is done. The Brahmā Kumārī attack the problem of our bondage in history by conceiving the history of the world in the same terms as the history of the individual, and then applying the logic of rebirth. World and person are reborn together, as if in a rite of passage. To be reborn one must first be unborn, and so the Brahmā Kumārī must die to the world, and become ahistorical even as they continue to live and act in an historical world. For a time they are out of time, betwixt and between, but ultimately they will rejoin history as children at the dawn of the world. It is true that among the Brahmā Kumārī the ritual sources of this reasoning have become sublimated and disguised. The ritual moment of liminality is expanded into a sustained experience of contemplative detachment in which the self is said actually to experience itself as atemporal. But, and perhaps more essentially, the Brahmā Kumārī are engaged in what amounts to a rite of renewal for themselves and for the world at large.

IV. Conclusion: History and Evolution

Our subject is history: things that happen as they are distributed in time. Quite evidently the Brahmā Kumārī account of history is simply one version of a more general South Asian theory of the cyclical degeneration of the world. It is a greatly accelerated version of what, in other South Asian traditions, is viewed as a cycle of majestic slowness, as so vividly described by Heinrich Zimmer (1962) and others. There

is little doubt that the speed at which the Brahmā Kumārī have set the cycle has much to do with the proselytizing urgency that Dādā Lekhrāj felt from the time of his first divine visions.

It is a conception of history that is not without isolated counterparts in the imagination of the West. For example, their concept of history as " movie " reminds me of nothing so much as Samuel Butler's description (in *Erewhon*) of the Erewhonian theory of time as a panorama unwinding between two rollers; all is fixed, but because we retain little of the scenes that roll by, our knowledge of the past is imperfect, and the future remains totally obscure. Their view of history is also rather reminiscent of the second law of thermodynamics, at least in a loose sense. Time is one-way for the Brahmā Kumārī, and moves in the direction of disorganization. History begins with a concentration of yogic power, and this moral energy, upon which procreation depends, is gradually dissipated over time. As this happens the world " runs down," and this running down of the world is history.

Because they invert the values, what the West has come to see as evolution the Brahmā Kumārī see as devolution, but there is little argument about what actually takes place, at least in the short run. Like perfectly good social evolutionists, they see history as manifested in increasing differentiation of the human world over time. The world, they say, develops something like a " tree "; there is an ever-increasing ramification of branches and twigs, as distinctions, all harmful, are heaped on other distinctions. And even the moral flavoring of the Brahmā Kumārī conception is not unfamiliar to the West. They are dismayed by increasing population growth, increasing competition for the world's scarce resources, increasing human conflict, and the increasing momentousness of human conflict, all of which is in vindication of the grim prophecies of the founder of the movement. In all of this they perceive a growing alienation of the spirit. We have, they say, lost touch with our true nature, and the distance grows greater through historical time.

However, to press the analogies beyond this point would be misleading. It has often been suggested that the main difference between the Hindu conception of history and that of the modern West is that the West situates itself on a scale of linear progress while the Hindu theory, in apparent opposition, is one of cyclical decline. While this is true, at least in general terms, it seems to me to be just a bit too formulaic to get at the essential difference. It is not just a question of one view of history as compared with another, but of world images that differ in the most fundamental way, each generating its sense of what is important about the things that are said to have happened in the

past. Let there be no mistake about one thing: the Brahmā Kumārī are by no means indifferent to history. Their interest in history is truly intense, and even their soteriology, though atemporal in method, is historical in its goal: they strive for a heaven which, for them, is a time within time. However, for all of their interest in history, the Brahmā Kumārī, unlike the Hebrew Prophets and their intellectual heirs, do not see history, in itself, as a revelation (see esp. Eliade 1971). It is true that their *gyān*, their " knowledge," is in part a knowledge of things that happened in history as they understand it, but so long as this knowledge is *merely* historical the Brahmā Kumārī view it as incomplete. History is the context of our predicament, but in the end historical knowledge teaches us only the limits of historical knowledge. True memory, for the Brahmā Kumārī, is ahistorical memory. To remember " who we really are " is to see history, and the self in history, as they are seen by the Supreme Soul, and this means to see them from outside history. Therefore, one must become dead to the historical world. In other words, the world is such for the Brahmā Kumārī that the living forget, and only the dead-in-life can remember.

NOTES

1. The field research on which this paper is based took place in Delhi between July, 1978, and May, 1979, and was concerned with modern sectarian movements, of which the Brahmā Kumārī sect is an outstanding example. The work was supported by an Indo-American Fellowship. The data presented here were gathered during several months of contact with a major movement center in New Delhi. An important supplementary source was the literature of the movement, especially the items noted in the Bibliography. I acknowledge with gratitude the help of many members of the movement. I would also particularly like to thank colleagues in the Department of Sociology of the Delhi School of Economics for the hospitality and intellectual companionship so generously given during my stay in Delhi. Final responsibility for conclusions rests, of course, with me.

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2. The Brahmā Kumārī claim a membership of 75,000. There are, however, many levels of possible involvement, ranging from intense commitment and grading off into casual interest. A more realistic figure would probably be in the low tens of thousands, though this is impossible to verify.

3. Thus, though Lekhrāj is above all a father, he is, curiously, a mother as well, who gives birth to his/her children through the oral canal. This seems to be a subordinate theme, but one that I hope to explore in another essay.

4. There are clearly erotic overtones in this. It is difficult to know what to make of them, although the movement's critics—and there have been many—have suspected the worst from the very start. In symbolic terms there is no necessary con-

tradiction between the image of Lekhrāj as Brahmā and a potentially erotic image of Lekhrāj as Krishna, for in some accounts Brahmā's world-renewing act was an incestuous union with his daughter. Whether anything more than symbolism was ever involved I cannot say. My informants within the movement say not. It must be remembered that the Brahmā Kumārī have been vilified by outsiders from the very beginning, in my judgement mainly because of the implicit challenge the very existence of the movement poses to the traditional role of women, and also because, on occasion, involvement with the movement on the part of women has resulted in their refusal to accept the sexual attentions of their husbands. On a related subject, many persons not in the movement have alleged to me that the Brahmā Kumārī engage in sexually shocking rites in the secrecy of their centers. All that it is possible for me to say is that I witnessed no such rites, and that my informants within the movement stated that no such rites take place. For present purposes these questions are not of great moment anyway.

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