The following abbreviations are used for frequently cited works:

S. B. Poetry Soamiji Maharaj. 1976. *Sār bachan rādhāsvāmī, nazm yānī chhand band*. 14th ed. 2 vols. Soami Bagh (Agra): Radhasoami Satsang.

S. B. Prose Soamiji Maharaj. 1973. *Sār bachan rādhāsvāmī, nasar yānī bārtik*. 14th ed. Soami Bagh (Agra): Radhasoami Satsang.

S. B. Poetry is internally organized by chapter, hymn, and verse (with some prose material). Citations will be indicated by chapter, hymn, and verse numbers. The same format will be followed in references to Huzur Maharaj's *Prembānī* (Huzur Maharaj 1972).

S. B. Prose consists of two parts, each divided into brief numbered sections. Citations will be given by part and section numbers.

Introduction

My subject is the Hindu religious imagination. By this I mean a distinctive spiritual disposition, a culturally informed capacity to invest the world with religious meaning in certain characteristic ways. As a capacity or propensity, it is not expressed as any particular interpretation of the world, but in the Hindu tradition's ability to generate multiple and various interpretations within a common frame of reference. It is not static but endlessly protean and full of creative possibilities.

In pursuit of this elusive quarry I examine three contemporary religious movements in the Hindu tradition, each representing a distinct interpretation of the world and the human situation. My object is to discover common perspectives in the midst of this diversity, perspectives that unify what are, finally, quite different systems of religious belief and practice. I trace through my three examples the threads of certain shared concepts: ideas about the composition, perceptions, interactions, destinies, and—most of all—identities of selves entangled in a world of ceaseless historical flux. Consensus on these basics (and doubtless others not caught in my net) enables this tradition to 'say' quite different things about the human predicament, but in a common spirit. My story also has a moral, which is that cultural distinctiveness should not be mistaken for human uniqueness. If what we find in common between these three belief-systems is profoundly Hindu, it also suggests links between the inner Hindu world and universals of human experience.

Does Hinduism exist? The answer to this question has always seemed obvious, yet never quite clear. Of course Hinduism exists—but then what exactly is it? This is probably the most enduring puzzle of South Asian studies. The confusion begins with language. Hindus were first called 'Hindu' not by themselves but by foreigners; the word comes from Persian. *Ism*, in its turn, is a perfectly useful suffix, but it belongs to no Indic language. That it has found its way into a

marriage with *Hindu* tells us at least as much about the ups and downs of imperialism as it does about the spiritual life of the Indian subcontinent. Yet matters can hardly be dropped here. The existence of a coherent Hindu tradition—'Hinduism'—is intuited by insiders and outsiders alike, and this intuition is far too immediate and powerful to collapse under a little etymological nit-picking. Whatever the origin of the word, Hindus mean something when they call themselves that, and what they mean goes deeper than mere matters of subcontinental politics or cultural chauvinism. To this we must add that when non-Hindus become acquainted with the Hindu tradition, they have the giddy sense not only of being on the outer perimeter of something quite 'other,' but also of being in the presence of a tradition that is—for all of its inner variation—held together by common qualities of otherness.

The basis of such intuitions is the issue; and it is, of course, the immense diversity of the tradition that makes the problem so intractable. What links the austere, world-disenchanting piety of the northern *sant* tradition with the rich magicality of the omnipresent healer-mediums? Or what connects either of these with the fussy ritual formalism of the Shrī Vaishṇava priest? We sense that something does, but just what that something is remains elusive and obscure. The vast web of historical connections between the tradition's many manifestations (near and remote, and sometimes partial or indirect) is obviously an important aspect of the problem, but tracing such connections is not, in itself, a fully satisfying solution. Our real target is a certain unity of outlook for which historical links are certainly a precondition, but of which they are not the present essence.

But where do we find this unity? One thing at least seems clear: if there are common denominators, we will not find them at the level of formal doctrines. We must not be fooled by the 'ism' that history has affixed to the tradition, for there is not now, nor has there ever been, a theology or philosophy that commands anything remotely resembling a consensus in the Hindu world. This tradition shelters highly diverse and endlessly contending schools of thought, and the relationship between such theological systems and popular belief and practice is itself highly complex and often indirect. Certainly no one of them can, on its own, stand as representative of the tradition.

Still, there are other possibilities. Theology aside, certain symbols and ideas seem to bear relatively stable meanings within the widest variety of contexts, cutting across linguistic, geographical, and social

boundaries. Various candidates for this unifying role have been suggested: the major Hindu deities, the purity-pollution opposition, basic concepts such as ***dharma*** and ***karma***, and so on. This is a far more promising domain in which to seek the threads that bind the whole together, since at this level of the tradition commonalities can indeed be shown to exist. In fact this is the general approach, roughly speaking, of the present volume.

But here, too, matters are far from simple, and the difficulties take us right to the heart of our problem. Take, for example, the deity Krishna. In the Radhasoami movement (one of the cases discussed in this book), Krishna is said to be an incarnation of Brahm, who in the Radhasoami view is not the Supreme Being, but the lord of an intermediate celestial level—and who is identified, moreover, with a being called Kāl, who is the personification of time and death. In arriving at this conception, the Radhasoami gurus were clearly drawing on a common store of meanings (including Brahm and Kāl, as well as Krishna) shared with others in the Hindu world, but hardly in a way Krishna's devotees would commend. And yet to the deity's devotees the Radhasoami view is at least intelligible, and in this sense Radhasoami teachings and Krishna's devotees have in mind the 'same' deity. Or do they? Obviously Krishna 'means' something both different and the same to his devotees and the Radhasoami tradition. But one need not stop here, for there is the same potential for disagreement about who or what Krishna really is between Krishaite sects. The accord is no doubt greater, but this is essentially a matter of degree.

Similarly, though in a far narrower field of view, when we learn that devotees of the miracle-working Sathya Sai Baba (discussed in part III) believe that his alleged paranormal abilities demonstrate that he is an *avatār* (an earthly descent of God), we are not surprised. Nor do we find it surprising to learn that many Hindus who admire him, but are not devotees, believe that the miracles are genuine, but not evidence of divinity. What is more startling is the fact that many of his severest Hindu critics likewise accept his miracle-performing ability as given and indubitable—though, of course, they certainly do not believe these abilities are divine. Obviously devotees, nondevotees, and critics are all operating in the same world of thought and discourse, but at varying levels of disagreement. Are believers, admirers, and skeptics seeing the same 'miracles'? Yes and no.

What these instances (and many more of the same sort could be

given) seem to suggest is that at both macrolevels and microlevels of the Hindu tradition consensus and nonconsensus coexist in a very complex relationship. Certainly one implication is the futility of trying to locate the unity of Hindu religious culture in agreement on any surface particulars; the tradition is vast, and there are fissures of disagreement everywhere. But an even more important implication is that, given the potential depth of disagreement, any search for linking concepts or principles must take variation not simply as a kind of inconvenient fact to be analytically boiled away, but as one of the principal dimensions of its 'findings.' Stated somewhat differently, a valid concept of this tradition's coherence sees continuity manifested in discontinuity, and does not make the tradition seem to be more uniform than it really is. It is not enough merely to point to 'linking concepts'; what has to be shown is *how* such concepts can function in different religious interpretations that might in some respects disagree radically.

There is, of course, no reason why this should be impossible in principle, since disagreement and coherence are not necessarily inconsistent. But in order to show their potential consistency, one must distinguish between different levels of cultural reality. To move momentarily to a different (though related) cultural domain, there are important lessons to be learned from studies of caste. According to some studies, in local settings there can be considerable disagreement about the relative ranking of specific castes, but this disagreement itself can be grounded in a general consensus on the principles utilized in determining and expressing caste rank (see, e.g., Moffatt 1979). Here unity is not necessarily expressed as concord and harmony; it consists, rather, of agreement on certain cultural ground rules that can be invoked (if only implicitly) even in debate and conflict.

There is no prima facie reason why matters should be otherwise with religion. In this sphere, too, it should be possible for dissent and consensus to coexist at different levels within a coherent tradition. While similar religious beliefs or practices probably reflect a more basic agreement on true fundamentals, the reverse does not follow. Quite diverse religious interpretations of the world can also rest on the base of common principles. Below the visible surfaces of particular beliefs and practices, there may be a half-visible or even hidden consensus consisting of shared ideas so basic and accepted as to be beyond the reach of doubt or debate.

In the broadest sense this is how the Hindu tradition ought to be

conceived. There is no such thing as a Hindu world-view, or at least not in the narrow meaning of this expression. Rather, the tradition is itself a vast religious world, which has ample room for the most diverse constructions of the cosmos and the human situation. What makes it *one* religious world, rather than many, is the fact that even at its most radically various it can be shown to exemplify common thematic concepts. These common themes—not always explicit, and frequently manifested differently in different contexts—impart to the tradition its characteristic inflections, and in so doing constitute a critical dimension of its living unity.

I have utilized the materials presented in this book as illustrations of this vision of the tradition's ordered diversity. Each of the three movements described here represents an integral system of belief and practices quite distinct from the others. In this respect each movement affords a particularly clear view of specific facets of the wider tradition, which is a point that I'll enlarge upon shortly. In my presentation I have attended carefully to these distinctive emphases. However, I have also tried to sift from the distinguishing features of the three movements common elements bridging the gaps between them. I certainly do not pretend to have produced a true inventory of unifying Hindu themes. Even between my three movements there are commonalities I have not explored, and as far as the wider tradition is concerned, my examples represent something closer to strategic 'soundings' than a survey. Within the limited universe of my three examples, I have tried to discover a few important aspects of what might be called the 'Hindu way' of supplying the world with religious meaning.

Difference is the key to my method. Instead of trying to base my inquiry at the tradition's center—assuming that such exists—I have concentrated on what may seem to be its farthest outposts. Religious movements such as those discussed here are not, by most reckonings, characteristic of the wider tradition, nor are the highly focused soteriological interests of two of the movements central to the tradition at the popular level. Two of the movements, indeed, do not actually regard themselves as 'Hindu.' But they *are* Hindu, and deeply so. I have assumed that the limits of a concept are best tested by cases near or at its boundaries, and it is in the open space between ostensible marginality and underlying continuity that this book operates. Atypicality and divergence are treated not as obstacles, but as allies, because extreme diversity gives us the clearest possible contrast between varying externals and the constant inner core.

The result is not the discovery of a universal Hinduism, since it is not there to be discovered. If these materials suggest one notion above all, it is that one can draw spiritually from the Hindu tradition in fundamentally different ways. In this sense the movements I describe challenge the conventional notion of 'Hinduism'; but in so doing they also confirm the more important and interesting truth that this tradition combines underlying continuity with astounding richness. Depending on context, its essential elements can be emphasized in different permutations and degrees, and turned to quite unexpected purposes. To say that the Hindu tradition is diverse is to understate the case; what is really notable is its apparently endless capacity to surprise.

There is another lesson too. Although the tradition's exterior face might seem quite exotic, its innermost elements turn out not to be as unique as the outside observer might at first suppose. It is as if the deeper we go into the tradition and the more clearly we see its unities, the more insubstantial its outer boundaries become. At its heart we encounter principles of self-discovery that are as social as they are religious, and as generally human as they are specifically South Asian. The Hindu tradition thus not only teaches us about the variousness of religious experience, but may also hint at its common sources.

Three Religious Movements

I encountered and studied the three religious movements described in these pages in the course of field research on modern expressions of the Hindu tradition. The research took place mainly in Delhi, New Delhi, and the vicinity, with occasional excursions further afield. Two of the movements are established sects, and the third is a personal cult centering on a well-known living deity-saint. All three draw their main constituencies from urban India's middle and upper-middle classes.

The Radhasoami movement, the first of my cases, is probably the best described in the scholarly literature (e.g., Barthwal 1978; Gold 1982; Juergensmeyer 1978, 1982, and forthcoming). Because some of the Radhasoami subgroups have been vigorously internationalizing for years, it also has the most established presence abroad. Among the Radhasoami movement's many features of interest is its highly elaborated cosmological system. Quite apart from this system's almost

science-fictionesque appeal as an imaginative construct (which I hope my readers will come to appreciate), it is directly relevant to certain key issues in contemporary South Asian cultural studies. Currently there is intense interest in South Asian constructions of personhood, especially in relation to patterns of interpersonal transactions, and in fact these are among the most important concerns of this book. To a striking degree these matters are central to Radhasoami world-imagery. If for no other reason than this, the Radhasoami movement has a strong claim on the attention of students of South Asian culture.

Since the Radhasoami world is large and various, any investigation of the Radhasoami movement must decide which subgroup or combination of subgroups to consider. The major split in the movement is between the groups associated with Agra, where the movement originated, and the Punjab, where a separate Radhasoami subtradition flourishes today. In my account of the movement I have referred to the Punjab tradition (with which I had relatively little direct contact) as a background of reference, but have concentrated on one of the Agra groups. Headquartered at Soami Bagh on the outskirts of that city, this group was the source of most of the information reported in this book.

In my inquiries into Radhasoami matters there was an important barrier I could not cross. I was an interested outsider, a student of Indian society and culture investigating the contemporary religious scene. As such, I could not become an initiate. This was an impediment, because some of the most important practices in the Radhasoami tradition are disclosed only to initiates. But this was fair enough; there was much to learn in any case. Even as an outsider, I was permitted to attend congregational services (*satsang*), which I did on a regular basis. Many movement adherents, moreover, were extremely generous with their time and knowledge, and gave me what I believe to be a good understanding of this tradition as it is manifested outside the esoteric sphere accessible only to insiders.

The literature of the movement was another valuable source. The Radhasoami tradition, and especially the Agra wing of the tradition, has produced a massive body of sacred and semisacred texts. These texts, consisting largely of the poetic compositions and prose discourses of past gurus, are sung and recited during congregational services and are integral to the faith as conceived by most devotees. As will be seen in the next three chapters, this literature—read against

the background of my own observations and conversations with devotees—turned out to be a rich ethnographic mine indeed.

Unlike the Radhasoami movement, the Brahma Kumari sect, the second of my cases, is hardly known to Western scholarship. It certainly deserves more notice than it has thus far received. To begin with, the Brahma Kumaris are strongly millenarian. This is unusual in the Hindu world, and indeed is regarded by some scholars as antithetical to the inner spirit of Indic religions. The Brahma Kumaris not only show us that Hindu millenarianism is possible, but demonstrate *how* it is possible. Another notable feature of this movement is that from its start it has had a distinctly feminist coloring. This, too, is exceptional in the Hindu tradition, and invites inquiry on that account. It should also be of interest to anyone concerned with gender issues in cross-cultural perspective.

For a period of many months I regularly attended 'classes' (described in chapter 5) and participated in a variety of other activities in a large Brahma Kumari 'Raja Yoga Center' in New Delhi. This, in turn, led to after-hours contact with individual adherents with whom I discussed Brahma Kumari doctrine and their own perceptions of the movement. As in the case of the Radhasoami tradition, the Brahma Kumaris' abundant literature was another important source of information. During the period of my contact with the movement I read extensively in these materials, bringing questions as they arose to the 'teachers' at the center and other movement members.

The third of my cases is the cult of Sathya Sai Baba, a much-celebrated holy man who is one of modern India's most important religious leaders. With a growing international network of devotees, this movement has become fairly well known in the West. Although most of the available writing on the movement is essentially hagiographic, it has also been reported in a small but good scholarly literature (Swallow 1982; White 1972). Because this cult is so closely associated with the English-educated and very wealthy, it might appear at first glance to be culturally unimportant. But this is far from correct. Sathya Sai Baba's main constituency is in some ways culturally alienated, but this circumstance is itself observationally useful because it establishes a frame of reference in which certain aspects of the Hindu tradition can be seen with special clarity.

One of the most striking features of Sathya Sai Baba's cult is the immense importance his followers attach to his physical miracles (his apparent magical production of substances and objects, his miraculous

cures, and so on). Such phenomena receive no emphasis at all in the Radhasoami and Brahma Kumari movements. The question is, why should magical performances be so crucially important in a religious movement so firmly grounded in a sector of modern Indian society that is—to all appearances—the most averse to what is frequently called (in India as well as elsewhere, though with different connotations) 'superstition'? As it turns out, this question is an avenue to more basic issues concerning the general meaning of 'the miraculous' in the Hindu world.

I never met Sathya Sai Baba himself. My concern was only marginally with him in any case, and I seriously doubt whether any outside observer will ever get close enough to him or the inner circles of his cult to learn anything ethnographically useful. For that, perhaps, we must await memoirs. Instead, my inquiries were devotee-oriented and centered on his local (Delhi) following. My object was to discover what his devotees made of him, themselves, and their relations with him. I attended cult-related activities regularly and interviewed many devotees. I also investigated one of the cult's 'miraculous households' (discussed in chapter 8). Though not as central as it was in my investigations of the Radhasoami and Brahma Kumari movements, the cult's literature was another important resource.

In my accounts of these three movements I have treated them not as descriptive ends in themselves, but as means to an end. My object has been to present them as contrastive religious styles, each with its own inner coherence and logic, but each also sharing with the others certain constant themes. Complete institutional descriptions have not been attempted, though I have been attentive to wider institutional and historical matters as they bear on the present-day face the movements offer to their followers. As far as their constituencies are concerned, the focus of my research was mainly on local groups of devotees in Delhi and environs. A more intensive study of any one of these movements would necessarily be more concerned with its extralocal (and even international) dimensions, but for present purposes a local context is sufficient. Temporally, my descriptions are located in what is sometimes called the 'ethnographic present.' I use the present tense to describe the realities of 1978–79 when I was in direct contact with the movements. Accounts based on data collected at the time of this writing (mostly 1984) would differ in some particulars but would not, I believe, support substantially different conclusions.

There is no pretense here that I, as an observer, can report my

materials from the point of view of an 'insider.' It is one thing to enter, let us say, a village community and assume the role of a participant in its life. Given sufficient powers of empathy and the community's goodwill, such participation can become the basis for something approximating an insider's perspective, and perhaps even an insider's privileges of judgment. But in the case of religious movements the situation is different in principle. To become a full participant in a religious movement requires assent, at some level, to a particular body of beliefs, even if there is no formality of initiation. One can, of course, participate in various activities as an outsider as I did, but to go further would necessitate what can only be called a spiritual commitment, which cannot and must not be feigned. Such commitment would probably be inconsistent with an observer's status anyway, because it is far from clear that the conviction necessary to be a genuine participant in these movements is compatible with reporting in a way that preserves any semblance of detachment. My accounts of these movements are not, nor should they be, accounts that believers would render.

Themes

The main perspectives of this book are established in part I, which deals with the Radhasoami movement. Each of my three movements has its own characteristic preoccupations, and in the Radhasoami case this is a pervasive concern with questions of succession to the spiritual authority of past gurus. Using succession issues as a general frame of reference, I utilize the Radhasoami materials as a means of introducing the principal themes to be pursued in subsequent sections of the book. Of these, the most important is the theme of identity, false and true. In the Radhasoami case, as elsewhere, the problem of identity is closely associated with matters of history, memory, vision, and the self's interactive relations with others in a fluid, ceaselessly changing world.

In the Radhasoami tradition questions of succession and the self's identity directly converge in what I have called the principle of devotional 'recognition.' Radhasoami obsessions with the question of who is, and is not, a legitimate guru turn out to be more than mere matters of sectarian politics; they are in a fundamental sense soteriological. Given Radhasoami assumptions about the way the cosmos works and their implicit notions about the logic of interpersonal

transactions, inward recognition of a 'true guru' can be a medium for a special kind of redemptive self-recognition. This involves a social-psychological dimension of religious experience that we shall see exemplified, though differently, in the other movements too.

Millenarianism and feminism are features of the Brahma Kumaris' belief system that distinguish this movement from other manifestations of the Hindu tradition, and these are the principal concerns of part II. We shall see, however, that Brahma Kumari distinctiveness is less extreme than it might seem at first. Brahma Kumari millenarianism represents a particular adjustment, however radical, of the selfsame historical ideas that appear in the Radhasoami tradition, and that are, in fact, nearly omnipresent in the Hindu world. Brahma Kumari feminism can by no means be taken as a given fact; it is expressed in idioms very different from those employed by Western feminists, and part of my task is to show that the Brahma Kumari critique of the contemporary world can be translated into terms familiar to Western feminism. But in the end it remains a very Hindu critique, and the idea of women's (and men's) liberation supported by it is one that could only arise in the Hindu world.

Once we penetrate to the symbolic subsurface of the Brahma Kumaris' millennial expectations and gender concerns, we find ourselves in the presence of themes and principles we have already encountered in the Radhasoami tradition. Here also, identity is finally the key issue, and here too the question of identity implicates matters of history, memory, vision, and interpersonal transactions. In both traditions we find a similar stress on the recognition of spiritually significant others as a basis for a deepened or transformed sense of self.

Sathya Sai Baba and his cult, described in part III, defy any simple characterization; his publicly projected persona is ambiguous and mysterious. Ostensibly his cult focuses mainly on magical performances of a sort that many would regard as religiously superficial. Closer examination of the attitudes fostered by the cult, however, shows that Sathya Sai Baba's magicality is but a special format for the exemplification of certain enduring Hindu ideas of divinity and divine-human relationships. The miracles mobilize transactional principles already seen in the Radhasoami and Brahma Kumari traditions; they also tell a tale to devotees about the meaning of the uncertainty of human life in general. In these materials, too, the theme of recognition is pivotal. Sathya Sai Baba's miracles are crucial

to his devotees' recognition of him for what he 'really is,' an incarnation of God. This recognition, in turn, supports an altered sense of self as the beloved of God, and also establishes a special context for devotees' relationships with the world. Through their relations with Sathya Sai Baba, devotees learn to trust a playful, apparently capricious deity; in so doing, they learn to trust existence itself.

The concluding chapter is directly concerned with the issue of deep continuities. Here I examine what I call 'images' shared by the three movements—basic ideas of what the world is like that can be embodied in religious constructions of the human situation that are very different on the surface. These include concepts of cyclical history and the amnesia of temporal beings, unstable personhood in a fluid world, and the special powers of seeing and learning to see anew. The chapter ends with some reflections on the recovery of 'true' identity by means of special transactions with those who are 'recognized' as extraordinary beings. This principle, one that seems to operate somewhere just below the threshold of considered awareness, provides a bridge from the heart of Hindu religious culture to certain general features of human social life. The type of spiritual awakening sometimes characterized as 'self-realization' has a social-psychological basis in the apparently universal process by which self-awareness arises through social interaction.

1. Spiritual Recognition and the Radhasoami Faith

4. Dada Lekhraj and the Daughters of Brahma

Doom

The end of the world by the combined means of natural catastrophe, civil strife, and (apparently) nuclear holocaust was predicted by an Indian religious visionary in the late 1930s. The prophet was an elderly Sindhi businessman of Hindu background named Dada Lekhraj. In what he took to be divinely inspired visions, he foresaw the destruction of the world in a series of vast calamities. His visions also revealed that following the great destruction a paradise will be established on earth. This paradise will be a world quite unlike the one we know now. Its population will be tiny, and there will be food in abundance for all. There will be no competition, and therefore no strife. Nature will be kind: never too hot, never too cold, each day perfect. Death will be a painless shedding of bodies to be followed by rebirth and resumption of perfect happiness. This will also be a world—and this was a point to which Lekhraj gave much emphasis—in which the sexes will exist in perfect equality.

The message was clear: prepare now for the end to come and the new world thereafter. The end, Lekhraj said, is imminent; preparations must be made quickly. All, or nearly all, of the vast population of the globe will be consumed, and only a small spiritual elite will be able to inhabit the heavenly world to come. Very few will hear God's warning. Fewer still will act on it. But for those who can truly hear the call, and who have the inner strength to 'purify' themselves and to persevere in the face of the world's disbelief and disapprobation, a heavenly kingdom is waiting.

Lekhraj's warnings and promises ultimately became the core doctrines of a Hindu sect that outlived its founder (who died in 1969) and flourishes today. They are known as the *Brahmā Kumārīs*. The group does not usually translate this name into English, but when

they do, they prefer to render it as 'Daughters of Brahmā.'[1] It is regarded primarily as a women's movement, although it has many male adherents. The sect has adopted the institutional persona of an 'educational' institution devoted to the teaching of yoga and what is called spiritual 'knowledge' (*gyān*). In consonance with this image, its official name is *prajāpitā brahmākumārī īshvarīya vishvavidyālaya*, that is, 'The Prajapita Brahma Kumari Divine (or 'Godly' in their own English rendering) University.' The headquarters of this institution are at Mt. Abu in Rajasthan.

With a claimed membership of 100,000, the movement is not large by Indian standards. It is, however, a well-established and conspicuous feature of the religious landscape in urban India, especially in the north. It is particularly active in Delhi. In recent years it has been vigorously internationalizing, and movement centers now exist in Britain, Australia, the United States, and many other countries. It has also managed to become affiliated to the Department of Public Information of the United Nations, and the UN logo is displayed on some movement publications.

In urban India, as a result of its extremely energetic proselytizing, the movement has a visibility out of proportion to its size. As far as I am aware, **no Hindu sect has ever sought converts with the single-minded dedication of the Brahma Kumaris.** This activity is associated with an institutional style quite distinctive of the movement. They are inveterate sponsors of exhibitions, often associated with Hindu festivals, to which they give wide publicity in newspaper advertisements. These exhibitions are designed to bring outsiders into contact with the rudiments of the Brahma Kumari belief system as portrayed in displays of vivid poster-sized pictorial illustrations. These depict the destruction of the world, the paradise to come, and many other points of Brahma Kumari doctrine. Visitors are shown the pictures, encouraged to purchase literature, and urged to visit one of the movement's many local centers. The movement also sponsors elaborate conferences, often on the theme of world peace, for which

[1] In the Hindu pantheon Brahmā is the deity responsible for the creation of the world. His various attributes are described in standard works on the pantheon (see, e.g., Danielou 1964). As we shall see, Lekhraj is identified with this deity and is regarded as the 'father' of movement members. *Kumārī* can also be rendered as 'maiden' or 'princess.' As will be seen, these meanings are also consistent with the movement's teachings. A female member of the sect is a *brahmā kumārī*; a male member, a *brahmā kumār*. From this point forward I shall give the sect's name without diacritics, as they themselves do in their English writings.

massive publicity is generated. A common feature of these occurrences is the legitimacy-conferring display of Indian and foreign dignitaries and foreign members of the movement. Probably most people become aware of the movement's existence as a result of these and similar activities.

The true heart of the movement is in its local centers, of which there are said to be some eight hundred, large and small. The larger centers, usually called **'Rāja Yoga Centres' or 'Spiritual Museums,'** are located at major urban concourses, and are readily identifiable as Brahma Kumari institutions. Facing the street is typically a large example of the movement's distinctive artwork and a sign identifying the movement center within. The central feature of such a center is likely to be a gallery of pictures, the 'museum.' During visiting hours movement members conduct visitors from picture to picture, explaining the points of doctrine that each picture illustrates. Congregational meditation and classes (discussed in more detail in chapter 5) are also held in the morning and evening. The purpose of the museum is to persuade visitors to attend the classes and meditation sessions, which are where the real life of the movement takes place. The center is also the residence of a few fully 'surrendered' movement members, typically women, who conduct the classes and maintain the building.

The Brahma Kumari movement is regarded with considerable suspicion by many in Indian society, which is probably not always fully appreciated by foreign adherents. When the sect was formed, it was bitterly opposed by outsiders and Lekhraj was considered by many to be a kind of evil magician whose main motive was to engage in sexual misconduct with his female followers. Similar attitudes continue to linger around the movement today. 'I am afraid of them,' the daughter of a recently converted elderly couple bluntly said to me, and in doing so she expressed what seems to be a widespread feeling. Most nonmovement middle-class informants with whom I discussed the Brahma Kumaris expressed negative attitudes.

At first glance it is not at all clear why Lekhraj's movement should evoke such distrust. On the surface the movement's symbols are very familiar ones in the Hindu milieu and are surrounded by a halo of highly conventional legitimacy. The Brahma Kumaris are advocates of yoga, which they say will bring peace of mind. They urge vegetarianism, abstinence from tobacco and alcohol, and celibacy. In none of this is there anything truly novel or objectionable. Yoga, or

at least the idea of it, is deeply respected in Hindu India. Vegetarianism and teetotalism are practiced by millions for reasons of caste custom and/or religion. While celibacy has always been regarded with some unease in Indian civilization, it is nonetheless a time-honored religious value (though by no means, as some believe, a supreme value). Lekhraj's warning of imminent doom might be construed as bad tidings, but whether such a prediction is regarded as lunatic or merely realistic, there is nothing in it that touches especially sensitive nerves in the Hindu world.

The source of the tension, rather, is at a somewhat deeper level. It has to do with women. From its earliest days the movement has been mainly associated with women. This in itself raises no problems. In many ways women have always been the true custodians of what is called 'popular Hinduism.' However, the involvement of women in a movement that advocates celibacy is quite another matter. As we shall see, this constitutes a direct challenge to the prevailing imagery of who women are and what they should be in the social order. Dada Lekhraj characterized the present human situation as an 'emergency.' Doom is imminent, and every remaining moment counts; drastic measures are required by drastic times. In the little time left the only way to gain a place in heaven is by means of *radical* self-purification. Therefore, the celibacy that was in the past reserved for the *sannyāsī* (male world-renouncer) is now required of all who wish for true salvation, male and female alike. The result was, and remains, what many outsiders see as a kind of madness or worse.

Sind Workis

The cultural and social setting out of which the Brahma Kumari movement emerged was the 'Sind Worki' (*sindhvarkī*) merchant community of Hyderabad in the region of Sind (now part of Pakistan). Belonging to the Lohāna trading caste (on which see Aitken 1907, 185–86), the Sind Workis emerged as an elite class of merchants during the second half of the nineteenth century. They began as hawkers of Sindhi handicrafts ('Sind Work') in European settlements, and they prospered greatly. By the time the sect started to form, their businesses had taken them to other parts of India and overseas, where many had made quite sizable fortunes (Thakur 1959, 37–38). Informants characterize the Sind Worki men of those days as being rather conservative culturally, but because of business opportunities outside Sind, many were also quite cosmopolitan.

But if the world was wide for Sind Worki men, for their wives and daughters matters were very different. Their world was the household, within which most of them were secluded. Excursions beyond the house were customarily limited to family gatherings and ceremonials, and visits to religious institutions. The education of these women tended to be desultory at best, and in general their lives were circumscribed by the many restrictions of movement and contact with outsiders characteristic of northern India's upper castes and classes.

There is some evidence suggesting that the women's world of household and family was a troubled one at the time the movement began. At the root of this was the commercial life of Sind Worki men. Because of business activities abroad, these men often lived away from home for years at a time, and the result was a pattern of absentee husbandship. The statistical incidence of this pattern cannot be determined from existing evidence, since the society in question was long ago dispersed by the migration to India at the time of the partition between India and Pakistan. However, the accounts of older Sindhi informants and the Brahma Kumaris' own portrayal of the period suggest that absentee husbandship was at least pronounced enough to have disrupted some families, and also to have generated strong negative stereotypes of the life-styles of Sind Worki men and of family life in the Sind Worki community more generally.

For example, at the time the movement began to form, popular belief held that absentee husbands formed extramarital unions while abroad.[2] Although a double standard of sexual morality was certainly nothing new in India, and although we have no way of knowing to what degree such allegations were true, it is reasonable to conjecture that these images of the lives of absent husbands could have been quite damaging to the morale of their wives and daughters, and also to the esteem in which they held the patriarchal family as an institution. This would certainly be consistent with the importance the idea of the libertine husband was to assume in the Brahma Kumari critique of the family.

Another stereotype of the time, reported by informants, is the sex-starved wife languishing at home while her husband has his good times abroad. This also might or might not have been the case, but judging by autobiographical accounts of the period, some women in this community were evidently quite dissatisfied with their lives in

[2] Informants presented such allegations to me as facts.

traditional families.[3] Women were expected to fulfill the usual obligations of wives and mothers in traditional seclusion. However, the families within which they were expected to do so were sometimes truncated because of the absence of key male figures. More importantly, rumor and local stereotype proclaimed that the men in these families were leading lives of sin when away and out of sight. Indeed, according to the Brahma Kumaris, these men were habitually given to vices of all kinds even at home.

The matter of male corruption seems to have been much on the minds of the women who composed the early core of the Brahma Kumari movement. What they stress in their depiction of the period is the moral hypocrisy inherent in the marriage relationship (see esp. Chandar n.d., 11). Husbands, they say, were supposed to be 'gurus' and 'deities' to their wives (this is, in fact, a standard Hindu usage), but their behavior was often brutish and quite ungodlike. They treated women as 'dolls' for sexual enjoyment, and were certainly unworthy of worship by their wives. The extent to which men ever really adhered to the rules of virtuous family life is another matter, but it is apparent that by the 1930s they were perceived by some women not to be playing by the rules, which called into question (for some) the legitimacy of the game itself.

Visions

Dada Lekhraj was a wealthy jeweler who was born in 1876 to a family belonging to the Kriplānī clan. His father was a schoolmaster in a village near Hyderabad, and Lekhraj himself was a reasonably well-educated man. He was fully literate in Sindhi, of course, and could read religious writings in Hindi with ease. He was also able to read the *Guru Granth Sāhib* (the sacred book of the Sikhs) in Gurmukhi, and could follow English newspapers. He apparently had a sizable English vocabulary, for his recorded discourses are peppered with English terms (though tightly embedded in Hindi constructions). His later notoriety seems in no way to have been foreshadowed by his life prior to the formation of the sect. He is said by older Sindhi informants to have been quite an ordinary man, just another rich Sindhi merchant.

It is probably significant, however, that his trade was jewelry.

[3] These accounts are preserved in Lekhraj's official biography (Chandar n.d.). The following discussion of the movement's history is based mainly on details given in this book, supplemented by conversations with informants inside and outside the movement.

A jeweler is a specialist in women's ornaments, and we may surmise that Lekhraj, therefore, came into more intimate contact with women who were nonkin than would have been normal for a man of his class and time. It is conceivable that this contact could have fostered a more than ordinary insight into women's problems. His business also brought him into contact with another group that seems to have played a major role in his revelations: royalty. According to his biographers (Chandar n.d., 12–14; *Pitā shrī* n.d., 1–2), Lekhraj was regarded with extraordinary friendliness and respect by the Rajas and Maharajas (Udaipur and Nepal are mentioned specifically) to whom he sold jewelry, and was even allowed more or less free access to their palaces, including the women's quarters. These accounts may exaggerate, but they do indicate that he probably had a fair degree of familiarity with some of the surface aspects of palace life. As we shall see later, royal symbolism is central to Lekhraj's conception of heaven, just as the life-style of worldly and cosmopolitan Sindhi merchants provided the foundation for his concept of hell.

Dada Lekhraj became a prophet late in life. Although he was a lifelong vegetarian and teetotaler (or at least is represented as such in the movement's hagiography), and a man of strong if conventional piety (apparently of Vallabāchārī background), it was only when he was about sixty years old that he began to acquire prophetic insight, which became manifest for the first time in a series of startling and totally unexpected visions (*sākshātkārs*). In sudden transports he saw Vishnu in his four-armed form, and also Shiva as a *jyotir lingam* (a column of light). But the most significant of all was a horrendous vision in which he witnessed the destruction of the world. He reported that he saw civil strife, vast natural calamities, and monstrous weapons being used in a cataclysmic war. He saw tens of millions of the souls of the dead flying upward 'as moths flutter in the direction of a light' (Chandar n.d., 22)

Much jolted by these strange experiences he began to wind up his business affairs. After settling accounts with his partner in Calcutta, he returned to his native Hyderabad where he had further extraordinary visions. On one momentous day he quite suddenly rose from a congregational ceremony occurring in his house and retired to his room. He was followed there by his wife and daughter-in-law, who (they later reported) were astonished to see that his eyes were glowing as if there were a red light burning within his head. His face and the whole room, they said, were suffused with red luminescence. When at

last he descended from what was clearly a trance of some kind, he said that he had seen a strange 'light' emanating from a vast power and a 'new world' where 'stars' descended to become princesses and princes. A mighty being, he said, was instructing him to 'make such a world as this' (ibid., 26).

In any case this is what we are told of Dada Lekhraj's earliest revelations. The problem, of course, is that all that we know of these experiences has been filtered through his own recollections and those of his followers. These recollections are certainly conditioned by the complex Brahma Kumari doctrinal system, which took time to mature, and in which they later became embedded. What Lekhraj made of his experiences at the time he had them (for there is little doubt that he did have visions of some kind) cannot really be known. In retrospect, the tradition represents Lekhraj as having been quite puzzled at first, but soon coming to a divinely inspired recognition of the meaning of what had been happening to him. He was being given *gītā gyān*, the true 'knowledge,' of the *Bhagavad Gītā*.[4] Its source was Shiva, the Supreme Soul (in the Brahma Kumari view), who had chosen Lekhraj to be his earthly medium (*sākar madhyam*). Like Arjuna in the *Gītā*, he had been shown the Lord's true form in both benign and terrible aspects. From Shiva he also learned that persons are really immaterial selves or 'souls' (*ātmās*), not the bodies they seem to be. The world that we now know is soon to be destroyed, sending these souls heavenward like the moths in his earlier vision. But some souls, the stars, will descend to rule a new and heavenly world. These lucky few will become deities in the world to come, and Lekhraj himself will become the deity Nārāyaṇ.[5]

These extraordinary occurrences and revelations must have thrown Lekhraj's household into a considerable uproar. We are told that family members at first could not understand what had come over him. His behavior was odd indeed (these details from ibid., 28ff.). He began saying to all of his friends and relatives, 'You are a soul' (*tum ātmā ho*); and then he began writing out 'I am a soul, Jasoda is a soul, Radhika is a soul,' and so on. For several days he remained in his house, and people began to come to sit and listen to his discourses. At

[4] The *Bhagavad Gītā* is an extremely important Hindu text—said to have been Lekhraj's lifelong favorite—that forms part of the epic *Mahābhārata*. Consisting of a dialogue between Arjuna and his charioteer, the deity Krishna, the text announces a theistic religion based on devotion to God and the renunciation of the fruits of action.

[5] One of the names of Vishnu, a major Hindu deity.

first came relatives and friends, and then strangers. Retrospection proclaims that they came because he had a 'hidden power,' that his discourses gave 'coolness' to the troubled heart, and that there was an 'unearthly light' in his 'gaze' (*drishṭi*) (ibid.). But of all the attractions, the greatest was almost certainly that under Lekhraj's influence others began to enter what they called *dhyānāvasthā* (a contemplative state) and to have visions similar to his.

Most of those who initially came to Lekhraj seem to have been women from the wealthy business families of Hyderabad. This social class was his natural milieu, and that it was women whom he mainly attracted is not surprising. Women, particularly older women, often provide the principal constituencies of lesser saints and gurus.[6] From this standpoint Lekhraj was initially little more than just another minor religious visionary with a certain local renown. His followers called him 'Om Bābā,' and the group around him began to be known as the *om maṇḍlī* (*om*, a sacred syllable representing the Absolute; *maṇḍlī*, 'circle' or 'association'). This was the core of what was to become the Brahma Kumari movement. In 1937 Lekhraj established a Managing Committee of several women followers, with his principal disciple, a woman known as Om Radhe, named as 'In Charge.' In early 1938 he turned his entire fortune over to this group.

These events created an immediate sensation in the surrounding society. An elderly Sindhi informant, an adult at the time of the events in question, recalls his own impressions of what happened as follows (I paraphrase):

> Then we learned that he [Lekhraj] had given up his business. We heard that he had come into contact with some *yogī*, and started a religious organization known as *om maṇḍlī*. Furthermore, it was learned that young married women were going to his *āshram*. We also heard that there was a vow of chastity involved. Now the community, especially the merchant community, was not really ready to absorb this. These were men with a lot of money; they were interested in good living, and this included sex. There was a lot of resistence from husbands. There was a real 'hue and cry' both in the city [Hyderabad] and in the province as a whole.

Backlash

It is not clear when *brahmacharya* (celibacy) became one of Lekhraj's teachings, but it was apparently very early in his prophetic career.

[6] For a good discussion of this pattern in another region of India, see Roy's *Bengali Women* (1975).

What is clear is that this tenet provoked an immense uproar. Husbands would return from long stays abroad only to discover that their wives had made vows of chastity and wished to change their homes into 'temples.' Wife and husband, these men were told, should live as 'Lakshmī' and 'Nārāyaṇ' and should love each other with pure 'spiritual love' (*ātmik sneh*), that is, with asexual love.[7] These and similar confrontations created great and painful disruptions in many families.

The result was a savage reaction. Husbands and their families frequently responded with beatings, wife expulsions, and lawsuits for the reinstatement of conjugal rights. Lekhraj himself was regarded with deep suspicion. Some accused him of sorcery, and many believed that he was a man of inexhaustible sexual appetite whose real motive was the seduction of his female disciples. One informant, a boy at the time, told of being ordered by his mother to avert his eyes from Lekhraj's āshram as they passed by. Irate and despairing relatives of movement members formed an 'anti-om maṇḍlī' association, and the local press undertook a campaign against the sect. Families of members were threatened with caste excommunication, and some of Lekhraj's women followers were forced to eat meat and locked in solitude by their families. Street rowdies insulted and intimidated members, and in 1938 an angry mob set a movement building afire.

In actuality the issue was never simply the denial of sexual pleasures to men, which in itself, in the Hindu context, might well motivate, but could hardly justify, the ferocity of the backlash that greeted the movement. A more fundamental issue concerned the family and the position of women within the family. In the Hindu world for an as yet unmarried or married woman to renounce her sexuality is for her to express a radical and unacceptable autonomy. It means withholding her maternal power, which she denies in the first instance to her natal family, whose right it is to bestow that power on another family in marriage, and in the second instance to her conjugal family, into whose service marriage consigns her.

Because the Brahma Kumari movement began in such tumult, its initial consolidation occurred in a seclusion necessitated by the hostility of the surrounding society. In effect driven from Hyderabad, Lekhraj and his followers sequestered themselves in Karachi. Here there were further confrontations with hostile outsiders, but in the end they were left in relative peace to develop their own style of life as

[7] Lakshmī is the wife of Nārāyaṇ (Vishnu), and the Hindu goddess of prosperity. According to the Brahma Kumaris, their union is chaste.

a religious community. Lekhraj and Om Radhe (later also known as Sarasvati) ultimately presided as surrogate father and mother over a predominantly female following numbering about three hundred. Money was apparently not a problem. Lekhraj's personal fortune was large, and although donations were not solicited from outsiders, sympathetic relatives of members (such did exist) must have contributed something. It is also likely that some converts brought wealth of their own into the movement.

Isolation and Reemergence

During the ensuing years the doctrinal system and subculture of the movement matured into their present forms. A major theme, one that informed practically everything Lekhraj said, was that of separation from the surrounding benighted world. He told his followers that in joining the movement they had undergone a 'death-in-life' birth (*marjīva janam*). They had 'died,' he said, to their 'worldly' (*laukik*) families, and had been reborn as children in a 'divine family' (*īshvarīya kul* or *īshvarīya kuṭumb*). He therefore gave them new (and divinely inspired) names. He characterized the movement as a fiery 'sacrifice' (*yagya*) in which members would purify themselves and acquire spiritual power, thus becoming worthy to inherit the kingdom to come. He also revealed that he himself was Brahmā (the creator-deity of the Hindu pantheon) and the agency of the Lord's creation of the new world. Many other details (which will be discussed in chapter 5) were disclosed as well. Those among his followers who had the gift of 'divine sight' (*divya drishṭi*) also had visions in which they saw every detail of life as it would be in the coming paradise, and much else too.

This small and highly insular community was a first-class psychological pressure-cooker. Most members had little contact with the outside world, and within the community, life was rigidly ordered. Members would arise to the sound of recorded devotional music. Early mornings were devoted to the practice of yoga and listening to Lekhraj's daily discourses. These discourses were called *muralīs*, in reference to the flute with which Krishna summoned the *gopīs* of Braj. The remainder of the day was given over to the various daily tasks necessary to maintain the community, with some time off for rest in the afternoon. The evening hours were again devoted mainly to yoga and religious instruction. There were occasionally weeks of 'silence'

during which some members would subsist entirely on fruit and engage in uninterrupted yoga.

The pressure to conform was evidently very great. The *sandesh putrīs* (message-daughters), as they were called, would often have visions of the secret delinquencies and hidden unworthy desires of other members. The guilty parties were openly confronted with such revelations. These visionaries also saw the divine punishments (to be inflicted by 'Dharmrāj,' the god of death as King of Justice) that awaited sinners, which they vividly described to the community. We are told that from time to time a 'court' (*kachehrī*) was held in the evening. Those who were guilty of some failure or infraction during the day were expected to confess their guilt to Lekhraj and Om Radhe before the entire community.

Under the circumstances it is scarcely surprising that, perhaps at the price of considerable personal anguish (of which we are told nothing), a community of extraordinary solidarity emerged. Had Lekhraj and his followers been left alone at the start (a cultural impossibility, given his teachings), the result might have been quite different. However, the reaction of the surrounding society forced Lekhraj and his followers in upon themselves in a condition of nearly windowless isolation. A community evolved that was deeply consensual and essentially indifferent to the disesteem of the rest of the world. Its image of itself was familial, and its discipline was quasi-military. The military reference is not farfetched; the Brahma Kumari movement often characterized itself as the *pāṇḍav senā*, the 'Pāṇḍava Army,'[8] engaged in nonviolent war with the vices and impurities that characterize life in the present world.

An important legacy of this period in the movement's development was doctrinal, for this was when the full systematization of the Brahma Kumari belief system occurred (though fine-tuning continues even today). But an even more critical legacy was the development of bonds among those at the core of the movement that were deep and lasting enough to enable the movement not only to survive, but later to enter a new phase of vigorous expansion. It is likely that the intensity of the Brahma Kumaris' communal life reinforced the plausibility of Lekhraj's vision of the future. As E. J. Hobsbawm has pointed out (1959, 62), in millenarian movements the believability of the idea of the complete transformation of the world is supported by

[8] The Pāṇḍavas are the five sons of Pandu, king of the Kurus, and the heroes of the *Mahābhārata* war.

adherents' perceptions of the utter changes the movement has created in their own lives.

In 1947 partition came, and Hindus began leaving Sind, which had become part of Pakistan. The Brahma Kumaris were unmolested, but finally in 1950 they moved to India and their present headquarters at Mt. Abu. By this time their financial condition was very precarious, but I was told by a movement informant that they were rescued by a large anonymous donation.

Following the move, they first resumed their former seclusion. Gradually, however, a change occurred in the general outlook of the sect. Lekhraj had previously stressed the image of the movement as an isolated 'sacrifice,' but now he began to emphasize active proselytization. It is likely that this resulted in part from the concern that he and his followers must have felt about the future of a movement of celibates. In part, too, he was probably encouraged by the fact that the movement no longer had to confront the entrenched prejudices of Sindhi society. In any case, he began to speak of the former seclusion, which he compared to the Pāṇḍavas' exile in the *Mahābhārata*, as a period of necessary preparation for the real mission of the movement. This was to be the awakening of the *bhakta*s (devotees, or in this case, nonmembers of the movement) from their ignorance and spiritual slumber.

To some degree Lekhraj had already gone public. He had published pamphlets almost from the start, and he was an inveterate writer of letters to important public figures (Gandhi, the king of England, and many others) in which he interpreted the meaning of contemporary events in the light of his revealed knowledge. He began to intensify all of these activities, and some of the most gifted movement members began to visit major Indian cities to spread the word. The first permanent 'Rāja Yoga Centre' was established in Delhi in 1953, with centers in other cities soon to follow. By the time Lekhraj died in 1969, the outer persona of the movement had changed fundamentally. What was previously a highly reclusive sect had become an aggressively proselytizing movement. Internationalization was begun in 1971 with the establishment of centers in Hong Kong and London, and by 1978 beachheads had been established in New York and San Francisco (Streitfeld 1982, 8).

A nonmovement Sindhi informant recalls reacting to all this with astonishment. For years, he said, Dada Lekhraj's om maṇḍlī seemed simply to have vanished, but then it suddenly popped up again under a new name, the Brahma Kumaris. And as if this were not enough,

this once-despised group had somehow managed to become a worldwide organization.

Following Lekhraj's death the leadership of the movement was assumed jointly by two senior women members. As far as an outsider can tell, this arrangement has worked smoothly. There was apparently some confusion at first concerning authoritative access to divine commandments. Prior to his death, Lekhraj was the medium through whom Shiva, the Supreme Soul, spoke to the movement. I was told by a movement informant that in the immediate aftermath of his death there was an upsurge in visions and trances in various movement centers. In effect, this represented a potential dispersal of sacred authority. This threat was dealt with by stipulating that Shiva would only enter the body of one particular woman (a senior movement member), and would do so only during specified periods at Mt. Abu. I do not know how compliance with this injunction was gained. During the period of my contact with the group a warning against unauthorized trances was appended to one of the morning sermons that are distributed in mimeograph to all local centers from central headquarters at Mt. Abu. This suggests that centrifugal forces continue to be perceived as a potential problem.

Within the framework of this organization a religious subculture of remarkable uniformity has continued to evolve. A movement center in Madras or Bangalore can hardly be distinguished from one in Delhi. The uniformity of the movement has two foundations. One is the close ties that core personnel maintain with Mt. Abu, as reinforced by frequent visits there. The other is the complete standardization of the movement's teachings through the medium of the morning sermons. Dada Lekhraj is said to have produced a muralī, a discourse, every day of his life subsequent to his enlightenment. Not all of these were recorded, but thousands exist, and are mailed from headquarters to local centers to be read to congregations on a daily basis during morning services. As already noted, after Lekhraj's death Shiva continued to speak to the movement through a senior woman member. These discourses are also distributed to be read at local centers. What is stated in the muralīs constitutes the principal standard of doctrinal orthodoxy among the Brahma Kumaris.

Warnings

When seen in close juxtaposition, the Radhasoami and Brahma Kumari movements present a picture of radical contrast. Two contrastive features stand out with particular clarity, and each of these raises important questions to be pursued in the following two chapters. First, there is the matter of women. Radhasoami teachings are simply not of the sort that raise basic questions about the role of women in social life. In comparison, the Brahma Kumari sect is a genuinely feminist movement, although its feminism is expressed in a distinctively Hindu idiom. To put it mildly, whatever the Radhasoami tradition may be, it is by no stretch of the imagination feminist.

But there is another difference, which has to do with history and time. Radhasoami teachings are little concerned with the future. It must be noted in qualification that the Soami Bagh community does await Soamiji Maharaj's ultimate return as a svatah sant, but this is a minor theme, essentially submerged in the more fundamental emphasis on finding and interacting with a sant satguru of one's own era. Dada Lekhraj, on the other hand, was obsessed with warnings and promises of 'things to come.' He tried to force the world into an orientation toward a significant future that held both appalling and hopeful prospects. This orientation seemed to give life in the present—for those who could hear and understand his message—a special rationale.

Lekhraj's concern with the future raises fundamental problems. On the face of things there is nothing very surprising about such prophecies. Dire predictions about the end of the world, and hopeful promises about the world thereafter, have been heard many times before and since, and they express themes that are well known to students of religion as 'millenarian.' In Indic studies, however, this entire matter has a special import, for it has been suggested that South Asian religious culture is essentially inhospitable to the spirit of millenarian prophecy. E. J. Hobsbawm, for example, says that millenarian expectations are 'alien to such religions as Hinduism and Buddhism' (1959, 58). Yonina Talmon asserts that 'religions in which history has no meaning whatsoever and religions which have a cyclical repetitive conception of time are not conducive to millenarism.' 'Otherworldly religions,' she goes on to suggest, 'do not give rise to the vision of the kingdom of god on earth,' which explains why 'there is apparently no apocalyptic tradition in Hinduism and why it has not occupied an important place in Buddhism' (1965, 531). Obviously if Hobsbawm and Talmon are right, then Lekhraj's warning presents us with a puzzle.

At stake is an issue of broad significance. 'Is it true,' Norman Cohn asks, 'that those world-views (such as the Christian, the Jewish and

the Moslem) which include the idea of divine will working through history provide a better climate for millenarism than world-views which know nothing of divine purpose and see history as an unending series of cycles?' (1962, 43). The answer would seem to be yes. Whatever else millenarianism might be, it is a way of taking history seriously. Where history is depreciated, devalued, or ignored, millenarian ideas would not seem to stand a chance of finding much intellectual or psychological foothold. The Indic world has often seemed to be a world in which history is in some sense devalued. For example, the point of Heinrich Zimmer's justly celebrated retelling of the story of the 'parade of ants' is that the Hindu theory of cyclical history empties historical occurrences of value; even Indra's apparently momentous conquest of Vritra is meaningless when it is revealed that infinite Indras have so triumphed infinite times before (Zimmer 1962, 3–11).

And yet Lekhraj's eschatology turns out to be far from novel in the Hindu world. The myth of Kalkin, the tenth *avatār* of Vishnu who will come to restore *dharma* at the end of the present age of evil (a theme echoed in the Soami Bagh idea of the master's return), clearly reflects millenarian ideas, and Steven Fuchs (1965) has found enough examples of messianism in India to fill a medium-sized book. It may be that Kalkin's image has been largely peripheral to the true core of popular Hinduism, and perhaps the movements described by Fuchs are mostly at the fringes of the Hindu world among tribals and the recently detribalized. Nevertheless, these instances at least indicate that, despite Hobsbawm and Talmon's conclusions, millenarian expectations can indeed arise in a Hindu environment.

The cloudiness surrounding this issue may result from overly narrow understandings of what Hindu views of time and history really are. For example, Wilfred Cantwell Smith (writing as an Islamicist) states that in the Hindu world-view 'history is not significant' (1977, 21). This opinion is not outrageously wrong, since in context it illuminates an important contrast between the Islamic and Hindu traditions, but it doesn't encourage alertness to subtleties. The real issue is not whether history 'is significant,' but rather *how* history matters. There is no reason to believe that history always matters the same way in the Hindu tradition. Consider the Western world, which has produced Hegel, Marx, and Toynbee, and accepts such disparate accounts of the world's origin as those of Genesis and the big-bang cosmology. This is a cultural universe that has no single theory of

history. Why must we assume, then, that there is a single, basic Hindu account of how time passes or what history means? If there is evidence for distinctive *tendencies* in Hindu historical cosmology (and I hope to show there is), this does not mean there is consensus on everything. One of the most notable features of Hinduism has always been the adaptability of some of its most basic concepts and symbols. The same is true of Hindu historical cosmology. It is not a single view, but a range of possible views, in which different ideas can be handled differently for different purposes.

Lekhraj's warning is an excellent example of the malleability of the Hindu tradition. The great emphasis he gave to the imminence of universal doom is certainly unusual in this tradition, but it is far closer to other Hindu systems, including the Radhasoami system, than it might at first seem to be. We have seen that Lekhraj gave unusual attention to the future. To this, however, it is now necessary to add a crucial, and hitherto unmentioned, fact: when Lekhraj predicted the future, he also recovered a past. He believed that the coming destruction of the world had already occurred countless times before. From this standpoint Lekhraj's warning was not really 'prophetic' in the narrow sense, nor was it truly novel. The idea that the world ends in periodic calamities is common coin in the Hindu world (and is part of the Radhasoami belief-system). In this respect Lekhraj's warning was simply a retelling of a well-known tale.

But the matter does not end there. If the idea that the world ends in periodic catastrophes was not new, what Lekhraj did with it was quite innovative. He had found a way to invest the end of the world with a new and urgent meaning. This meaning could, among other things, bring a certain kind of social discontent, that of women with traditionally sanctioned feminine roles, into the sphere of Hindu soteriology. He achieved this remarkable result, in part, by adopting a deceptively simple expedient: he drastically speeded up the traditional historical cycle.

5. History as Movie

Souls

At the heart of Dada Lekhraj's teachings was the familiar problem of identity. Who are you? was the question he always asked his followers, and this continues to be the first question put to potential members of the Brahma Kumari movement today. The answer to this question was both simple and, considering Lekhraj's lack of theological sophistication, impressively complex. You are, Lekhraj said, not the body you seem to be but an immortal soul. You are a soul with a complex history. The principal message of Brahma Kumari teachings lies in what he meant by this.

According to the fully matured Brahma Kumari doctrinal system, the universe consists of two utterly dissimilar elements: material nature (*prakriti*) and a vast number of nonmaterial selves or 'souls' (ātmās).[1] Material nature constantly shifts and flows; it is incessantly in motion. 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, we are actually souls. Unlike material things, souls are indestructable (*avināshī*). Each soul is a massless point of brightness and power, invisible to the physical eyes, that has been drawn into engagement with matter. Its location in the body is at the middle of the forehead. The soul's mistaken identity with the material body that it happens to inhabit is the root of the human predicament.

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* (the supreme abode) or *brahmlok* (the world of Brahm). As imaged by Brahma Kumari teachings, the universe has the shape of an egg (see Figure 4).

[1] My basic sources for the doctrinal details to follow are the 'classes' I attended (during which I took extensive notes) and informal conversations with movement teachers and lay members. This was supplemented by extensive reading in the movement's literature. Especially helpful was the movement's catechism entitled *One Week Course*.

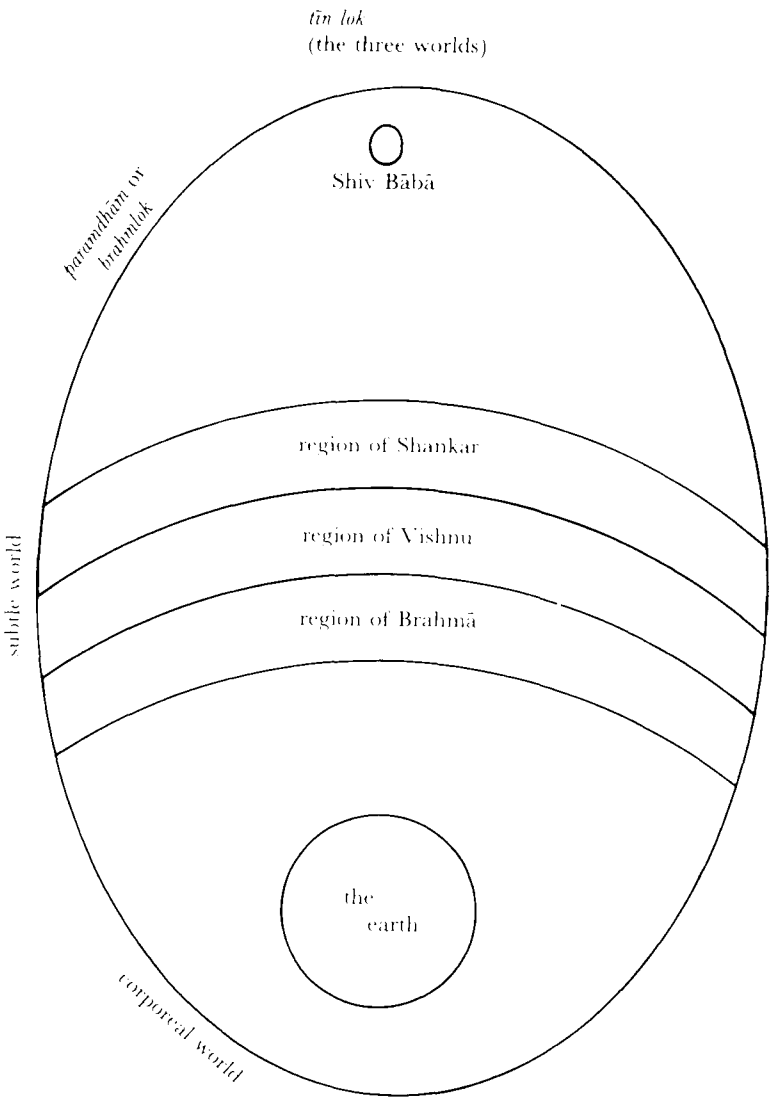

Figure 4. The Brahma Kumari Universe (simplified from standard pictures)

At its apex is the Supreme Soul known as Shiv Bābā (the Hindu deity Shiva), and paramdhām is the region around him. This zone is silent, void of movement, and is suffused by a reddish glow. Beneath paramdhām is the 'subtle world' (*suksham lok*), which is the region of the 'subtle deities' (*suksham devatās*)—Brahmā, Vishnu, and Shankar,[2] who are responsible, respectively, for the creation, preservation, and destruction of the physical world below. In this subtle world there is movement but no sound. At the bottom of the universe is the material world of sound and motion. This is where history happens, and this is where we find ourselves. While inhabiting paramdhām, souls are in a state of dormancy, and although 'liberated' from the world, they are incapable of experiencing pleasure or pain. To experience anything at all, souls must engage with matter, and this is something all souls do sooner or later. When they do so, they descend from paramdhām to the material world to become encased in human (never animal) bodies and enter the process of history.

According to the Brahma Kumaris, history occurs in endlessly repeating cycles of world creation, degeneration, and destruction. Certain highly deserving souls enter the cycle at the beginning when the world is perfect, and they experience complete 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 experience some happiness, it is less than the happiness of 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 situation. We are souls that have descended from paramdhām into this historical process. In so doing, we have forgotten our true home (paramdhām) and our real nature as souls; falsely identified with bodies, we find ourselves wandering through the ceaseless flow of historical existence.

Presiding over this entire process is Shiva, or Shiv Bābā. He is also called the Supreme Soul (*paramātmā*) or the Supreme Father (*parampitā*). Like all other souls, his form is that of a point of light (*jyoti bindu*) and

[2] In complete disagreement with the conventional Hindu view, the Brahma Kumaris regard Shiva (Shiv Bābā) and Shankar as totally distinct beings. Shiva is the Supreme Soul; Shankar is a 'subtle deity' responsible for the destruction of the world.

power, of which the *linga*[3] is said to be a gross representation. He is omniscient and all-powerful, but not omnipresent, since he is entirely separate from material nature and the historical process peculiar to material nature. Yet he is concerned with the welfare of souls, his 'children.' Because of his love, 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. He does so by speaking to the world through the mouth of Dada Lekhraj, the founder of the Brahma Kumari movement. The Brahma Kumaris are simply those who receive this knowledge and act on it. In so doing they 'remember' who they are, and those who remember will inherit the heavenly kingdom to come.[4]

History

In radical contrast with the millions of years posited by more conventional Hindu theory, Dada Lekhraj taught that world-time lasts a mere five thousand years, with a maximum of eighty-four births possible for souls that descend to the world at the beginning of the cycle. This is standard Hindu historical cosmology, but run at high RPM. In most other respects his model closely approximated the Hindu yuga scheme from which it derived. Every historical cycle is an exact replica of all the rest, consisting of four ages or *yugs* (yugas), each lasting 1250 years. At first the earth is a paradise; then a decline ensues. Vice becomes more prevalent, the population of the world increases, strife becomes more general, and the human life span decreases. By the time of the kaliyug, our age, the world has become a sea of vices and a sink of misery.

The first era of the cycle is the satyug, an age of perfection and total happiness. Nature is benign, pain and disease are unknown, and food

[3] The phallic emblem in which form Shiva is usually worshipped. For reasons that will be clear later, the Brahma Kumaris strongly deny that the *linga* has any phallic significance.

[4] For the sake of clarity it should be noted that two quite distinct ideas of 'salvation' coexist in the Brahma Kumari belief-system. Every soul will achieve 'liberation' (*mukti*) in *paramdhām*. Only a relatively few souls, however, will receive 'liberation-in-life' (*jīvan mukti*) by means of rebirth at the start of history. *Mukti* is the final goal of most other Hindu systems; here it has become a kind of way station to the true final goal.

and wealth are available to all without limit. Death is painless; souls simply leave old bodies for new ones, and have visions of their future bodies before they die. There is no competition or conflict, and days pass in happy play and idleness. As one informant put it, conversations between the denizens of the satyug consist of utterances like, 'Do you like the way I've arranged my crown?' or 'See how many jewels there are in my shoes.' Each soul that descends at the beginning of the satyug will experience eight births during this era. Therefore, the average span of life will be about one hundred fifty years.

The souls that inhabit the satyug are entirely worthy of this paradisiacal world. They are absolutely pure, and because of their purity, they are *devātmās* 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, because they are deities themselves. 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 worshipped by Hindus as deities today. And, of course, these deities still exist in the world; they are to be found among the membership of the Brahma Kumari movement.

At the onset of the satyug the population of the world is about nine hundred thousand, although this number will grow as new souls, less virtuous than the first-comers, descend from paramdhām. These fortunate individuals live in what is now India in the vicinity of Delhi. Their social order is highly stratified but completely harmonious. There are no religious divisions, since religion, as we now know it, does not exist. There is no political discord, because there is only one pair of sovereigns in existence at a time. The ruling dynasty is the *sūryavansh*, the 'sun line.' It consists of eight successive pairs of Lakshmī and Nārāyaṇ who rule the satyug jointly. Dada Lekhraj is himself the first Nārāyaṇ, and his foremost disciple, Om Radhe, the first Lakshmī. They will be succeeded in these statuses by other souls of very high rank.

In general, souls of the highest virtue will have the highest status and will belong to a 'royal family.' These are the princes and princesses that Lekhraj saw in his visions. Lekhraj's contact with royalty during his business career left vivid traces in this image of the paradise to come. The hierarchy of this age 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 crowns and halos, just as we see in pictures of deities today, symbolic of the complete coextension of sovereignty and virtue. This is a social order, in other words, in which inner nature and outer action are at one. There can thus 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 has to do with gender. Women and men are sexually distinct, as goddesses and gods are, but they are also entirely equal. Above all, there is no sexual intercourse, for this would be inconsonant (in the Brahma Kumari view) with the absolute purity of deities. Children are conceived within marriage, but by means of yogic power retained by their parents from spiritual practices undertaken at the end of the previous historical cycle. This is a matter to which we shall return.

Finally, those who enter the satyug do so in a state of innocence. By this I mean that they have no gyān, no 'knowledge' of their actual historical situation. Such knowledge is not necessary, since this is a time of reward, a time for the claiming of a rightful inheritance and a putting aside of 'efforts.' Those who live in the satyug have no memory whatsoever 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 souls, and is only ended, for a very few, when the Supreme Soul speaks through Lekhraj'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 the *tretāyug*. During the satyug souls of slightly less virtue than those who came at first continue to descend from paramdhām,[5] and the first-comers too lose some of their purity over time, apparently an inevitable consequence of life in the material world. As a result, by the end of 1250 years, the general level of purity has declined from sixteen degrees (perfect) to fourteen degrees (very pure, but less than perfect). At this point 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* (the *varṇa* of goddesses and gods) 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

[5] This is a somewhat cloudy point. In the literature I saw it never was quite clear whether the expansion of population begins at once or later in the cycle. I was told orally that it begins at once.

want. There are a total of twelve births in this age, yielding an average life span of about one hundred years. Women and men remain equal, and sexual intercourse is still unknown. The ruling dynasty of the tretāyug is the *chandravansh*, the 'moon line.' Twelve successive pairs of Sītā and Rāma rule jointly, with elite souls rotating through these statuses.

The next age is the *dvāparyug* in which twenty-one births take place. During the tretāyug souls continue to descend from paramdhām so that by the end of this period the population of the earth has risen to 330,000,000. The Brahma Kumaris say that this is why there are 330,000,000 deities in the Hindu pantheon. By now the general level of purity has declined to eight degrees, half that of the beginning of the satyug. At this juncture the dvāparyug starts.

In the dvāparyug the quality of *rajoguṇ* (passion) prevails rather than the *satoguṇ* (purity) of previous ages, and this is symptomatic of the transition that has occurred. 'Double-crowned' sovereignty is finished; mere power supplants true authority. There are now many separate political communities. Competition for wealth commences and becomes increasingly severe as the population, fed by new and increasingly vice-prone souls from paramdhām, continues to swell. This is the age when devotional religion (*bhakti*) originates. The deities who once lived in India now become 'Hindus.' No longer pūjya (worthy of worship), the inhabitants of the dvāparyug are merely pujārī (ones who worship). Other religions arise too: Buddhism, Islam, Christianity, and so on. Those who live in this age are no longer Kshatriya, but belong to the Vaishya varṇa, a low estate in the Brahma Kumari view, consistent with their fallen nature.

But the most important fact of all about the dvāparyug is that this is the age in which what the Brahma Kumaris call *deh abhimān*—'body pride' or 'body consciousness'—comes into existence. This development is a matter of historical necessity, because at the conclusion of the tretāyug, the yogic power hitherto used for human reproduction becomes exhausted. Coitus is now necessary; lust and other vices associated with it cause souls to sink into ever-stronger identification with the bodies they inhabit. As women become mere objects of lust, marriage becomes debased. With this development the subjugation of women begins. This is the fall of the world. With the advent of sexual intercourse the world changes from 'heaven' (*svarg*) to 'hell' (*narak*). All forms of violence, avariciousness, and exploitation arise from body consciousness. Thus with the onset of sexual reproduction the world begins an ineluctable slide into depravity and misery.

The trends emergent in the dvāparyug are simply continued and augmented in the present age, the kaliyug, comprising forty-two (generally short) births. This is an age in which all perfections are lost; it is a *vikār sāgar*, an 'ocean of vices,' and 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 predominant quality of the dvāparyug, now gives way to torpor and ignorance (*tamoguṇ*). All people of the world belong to the lowest estate, the Shūdra varṇa. In an inversion of Hobbes, life at the end of history is nasty, brutish, and 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 the dormant souls of paramdhām will have come to earth, and those who came at first will have completed eighty-four lifetimes of earthly existence. At this point the world will be destroyed. When the destruction will begin cannot be known exactly, but it will be soon.[6] This, of course, is the destruction that Lekhraj saw in his visions. When it happens, most souls will return to paramdhām, to await the renewal of the cycle.

Just prior to the end of the kaliyug, however, Shiv Bābā (Shiva) favors humanity with a remarkable act of grace. At this point, when human beings languish in the deepest alienation from their true nature as souls, Shiv Bābā speaks to the world through the mouth of Dada Lekhraj. For those who listen and heed what he says, the kaliyug becomes what is called the *sangamyug*, the 'confluence age,' so named because it is the age of transition from the kaliyug to the renewed world to come. Those who enter this fifth era are members of the Brahma Kumari movement, and their expectation is that they can become fit to be reborn in the paradisiacal phase of the next world cycle. By preparing his followers Lekhraj is, in effect, creating that new world, and thereby fulfilling the instructions he was given in his visions by Shiv Bābā. Because he creates the world in this sense, and because he dispenses gyān (knowledge), he is identified with the deity Brahmā and is called Brahmā Bābā within the movement.

[6] When I tried to pinpoint the date with a movement teacher, I was strongly discouraged. I was told that it might be around the turn of the century or sooner, but that, in any case, it would be long and drawn-out with no clear beginning. The movement has an obvious interest in quashing year-specific expectations, which I strongly suspect arise from time to time. I was told that at one time 1976 was rumored to be the year. It is quite likely, of course, that the world's continuing survival has required the movement to mitigate the concreteness of its expectations over time.

Remembrance

Shiv Bābā gives the Brahma Kumaris knowledge of who, where, and when they are. Therefore, at one level the Brahma Kumari movement is a kind of educational enterprise, and its self-portrayal as a 'divine university' is in no way disingenuous. One 'joins' the movement simply by beginning to attend 'classes' at one of the movement's centers. These classes consist partly of lessons on the nature of the historical cycle: what goes on in the four ages, how one should behave 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 center (less commonly a 'brother'). In the main these consist of Dada Lekhraj's discourses as they were recorded during his lifetime, supplemented by discourses delivered in seances by the medium who has acted as Lekhraj's surrogate since his death.

But lessons in themselves are not enough. Although knowing things about the history of the world and the nature of the soul certainly sheds light on the context and meaning of the human predicament, such knowledge cannot by itself ameliorate this predicament. At root our problem is 'ignorance,' but this ignorance, for which Lekhraj's 'knowledge' is the corrective, is not passive. It is an active, willed ignorance that arises from desire. It is ignorance of 'who we are.' We have forgotten that we are souls. In fact, attracted by material nature and its blandishments, we *want* to forget, and this forgetfulness has become an ingrained habit of mind.

At this level the Brahma Kumari vision of the human task converges with that of the Radhasoami tradition: mere understanding is not enough. What is required of us is not simply assent to the historical theory of the Brahma Kumaris, or to the proposition that we are souls, not bodies. We must undergo an actual change of self-awareness. In order truly to 'know,' we must eradicate 'body-consciousness' (*deh abhimān*) and cultivate 'soul-consciousness' (*dehi abhimān*) instead. We must see ourselves, and our relationship with our bodies and the world in general, in a completely altered way.

In part the requirement is a matter of changing what we do, and in particular of avoiding behavior that is an especially dangerous source of further entanglements with the body and material nature. One should take only *sāttvik* (pure) things into the body; meat, alcohol, tobacco, and excessively spicy and passion-inducing foods (such as onions and garlic) must be avoided. One should eat only food prepared by someone who is 'soul-conscious,' since the physiomoral quality of food is influenced by the state of mind of the preparer. The proper way of beginning the day is arising between three and four o'clock in the morning for daily meditation. One's companions should be 'good company' (*satsang*)—that is, the company of the soul-aware (*yogīs* as opposed to *bhogīs*, those given over to worldy pleasures). And above all, sexual intercourse is forbidden. Lust (*kām vikār*) is the master vice. More than anything else, lust draws the soul into engagement with the body, thus entrenching the soul in further ignorance. Absolute celibacy is therefore the *sine qua non* of the virtuous life as understood by the Brahma Kumaris.

But even proper conduct is not sufficient to remove ignorance, although it is a precondition for doing so. True self-knowledge, rather, is achieved through a type of meditation the Brahma Kumaris call *rāja yoga* (*rāj yog*). If part of the curriculum of the Brahma Kumari 'university' is revealed knowledge, the other part is the teaching of this technique. Rāja yoga is said to 'burn away' the karmic effects of past misdeeds, to produce 'bliss,' and to result in a redeeming communion with Shiv Bābā in which the practitioner comes to remember his or her true identity as a soul. Put slightly differently, the object of rāja yoga is to achieve the swanlike discrimination we have already seen idealized in the Radhasoami tradition; the practitioner learns to distinguish the soul from the material nature with which it is normally confused.

The teaching of rāja yoga is standardized, and is easy to describe, at least superficially. It is an intensely visual experience, and vividly recalls themes that we have already encountered in our discussion of visual interaction between guru and follower in the Radhasoami tradition. It is usually taught to small groups or individuals. The student or students sit in a semidarkened room facing the teacher (usually a 'sister'). Just above and behind the teacher's head is a red plastic ovoid that glows from a lightbulb within; at its center is a tiny hole, which appears as a point of intense white light against the red glow. This device represents the Supreme Soul, Shiv Bābā. With devotional songs playing softly in the background, student and teacher gaze intently at each other, either in the eyes or at the forehead. While doing this, the student is supposed to think of himself or herself as a soul, as a bodiless (*asharīrī*) 'point of light and power,' as the 'child' of Shiv Bābā, as rising upward out of the body into paramdhām, as

seeing the red glow that suffuses that region, as seeing Shiv Bābā as a point of light, as being bathed in his love, and so on. This may continue for fifteen or twenty minutes or more.

The central feature of this procedure appears to be a visual transaction between student and teacher in which there is a kind of mingling of frames of reference. While sitting and gazing into the eyes of an adept, the student is instructed to think 'I am a soul; you are a soul.' As one who is already highly soul-conscious, the adept has the power to see the student for the soul he or she really is. The teacher has 'spiritual sight' (*ātmik* or *rūhānī drishṭi*), a power of seeing that enables souls to be seen. The object is for the student to come to share this point of view by opening his or her own soul-seeing third eye. That is, to know oneself as a soul, one must see as the teacher can see—seeing souls where others see only bodies. The student thus absorbs the teacher's soul-awareness. As in the Radhasoami tradition, you become what you see.

This mingling of frames of reference sometimes has a very vivid experiential basis. While staring at the teacher, many students experience visual hallucinations involving lights. Frequently a glow appears on or around the teacher's face and body. In my own case a reddish halo would appear around her face, sometimes followed by an undulating red brightness spreading over her features. Others whom I consulted reported similar experiences, although there appear to be many individual variations. For some the teacher's visage is replaced entirely by light. Some see white light, and for some the entire room lights up. Others experience themselves as the source of the light.

These startling effects probably result from the action of the glowing red emblem on the retina in semidarkness, but this is really a side issue. What is important is that members of the movement have such experiences, and that such experiences are within the realm of plausible expectation. This expectation, in turn, seems to rest on the assumption that a certain kind of reciprocal 'looking' conveys a soul-power that is manifested as light, and also as the ability to *see* that light. As in the Radhasoami tradition, this concept seems to involve a combination of 'being seen' and 'coming to see.' In the process the devotee is changed—that is, one perceives oneself more powerfully—by participating in a more powerful other's point of view.

The learning of rāja yoga may be seen, in part, as a process in which the making (or remaking) of self is simplified and formalized. One is supposed to renounce the old self by 'dying' to the world; that is, one

becomes disengaged from interactions in which one was 'seen' in the old way. In what is, at least in theory, a vacuum of competing 'points of view,' one engages in the purest and simplest form of interaction—seeing and being seen—with a significant other. But as in the case of the Radhasoami guru, it is important that this 'other' be viewed in quite a special way. The procedure is most efficacious when the student can actually 'see' the teacher as a bright and powerful soul. If one's orientation toward the teacher is correct—'I am a soul; you are a soul'—then the arising of one's true self in the teacher's awareness becomes an aspect of one's own awareness as well. As one 'takes in' a superior power-of-seeing, one is 'drawn up' into a superior point of view. And for many devotees this superior power of sight, and through it self-identity as a soul, is actually validated by visions of light.

What I have discussed thus far is the teaching of rāja yoga as I experienced it in a movement center. But when one reaches a certain stage, the prop of visual interaction with a human other is said to be unnecessary (although congregational yogic sessions are usually led by an adept). The teacher is finally only a substitute for Shiv Bābā, the Supreme Soul. What is then left is pure interaction, through inner sight, with Shiv Bābā, whose form is a pure point of light-power. He is the ultimate 'other' to whom all rāja yoga is directed in the end.

In this relationship there are strong echoes of other themes we have previously encountered in the Radhasoami tradition. In one of the wall illustrations in the center I visited, a meditating devotee is portrayed as a swan into whose upturned beak rays are descending from red, egg-shaped Shiv Bābā directly overhead. In the movement's iconography Shiv Bābā's light-power is often represented as streaming downward (sometimes fountain-style, in the manner of the Ganges from Shiva's hair in a well-known pictorial representation) to earthly meditators below. They, in turn, drink this light-power through their now awakened inner vision. It is a subtle flow, pure divine power, to be visually imbibed by surrendered devotees, who have a metaphoric counterpart in the moonlight-drinking chakor bird of Radhasoami poetry. Moreover, it is said that the members of the movement are themselves Shiv Bābā's āratī, because, as practitioners of rāja yoga, they know themselves as souls. They see themselves as 'lights' in the eyes of each other, but finally and most importantly, in the perspective of Shiv Bābā. They see themselves and each other as the Lord sees them.

According to the Brahma Kumaris, having adopted this new outlook

on oneself, one 'sees' everything differently. Living in the afterglow of periodic yogic experiences, one no longer feels bound to old friends and relations. One's attachments are entirely transferred to Shiv Bābā. With new powers of discrimination, one now sees all others, including members of the opposite sex, as souls, which means that lust disappears. In this state of awareness one is unaffected by the tribulations of life in this world. One knows in the most fundamental way that he or she is really a soul. On the basis of this insight one can achieve the detachment of a mere 'witness' (*sākshī*) to the activities of the body and the material world. Such a person possesses self-awareness as an 'actor,' playing a part in a 'vast drama' (*virāṭ nāṭak*); even while acting, he or she will be disengaged from actions, not merely believing, but *knowing* that actions are things of the body alone.

An obvious theme in all this is spiritual mimicry. Yogic practitioners become like Dada Lekhraj, reenacting his own self-discovery. As he once did, his followers discover Shiv Bābā. And just as he came to see himself and others as souls, so do they. For Lekhraj these insights opened a floodgate of revelation. He came to see the true nature of history and his role in it—that is, he was in his eighty-fourth birth, he was Shiv Bābā's medium, he would be reborn in the satyug to become its first king, and so on. In knowing themselves as souls, his followers achieve a similar self-revelation. Even if they do not know exactly what their world-careers are or have been, yogic practitioners are urged to cultivate the feeling that they are souls who were once in paramdhām, who lived in the satyug and tretāyug, who fell when the world fell, and who are now in their eighty-fourth birth. That is, they are encouraged to imagine their own world-lines as parallel to Lekhraj's. To the degree that this is really felt—which is to say, to the degree that one's conviction of its truth can be energized by the extraordinary experiences cultivated in meditation—one can live in expectation of rebirth in the paradise to come.

Among other things, therefore, rāja yoga is an experiential domain in which Dada Lekhraj's historical theory can be transmuted into a devotee's personal biography. One of the goals of yogic practice is to foster the inner conviction that the four ages of history are one's *own* ages. As in the case of Radhasoami doctrine, therefore, the elaborate Brahma Kumari theory of history is less a purely intellectual construct than an ideological medium for spiritually crucial experiences. The purpose of the historical imagery is not so much a portrayal of a world

that makes theoretic sense as it is a portrayal of a world in which certain kinds of inner experiences can be understood as redemptively meaningful. This redemptive validity also extends to matters of gender role, but this is a matter to be taken up in the next chapter.

A practitioner of rāja yoga is characterized as one who 'remembers.' The Brahma Kumaris constantly employ the idiom of remembrance in discussing these matters. Rāja yoga is 'remembering father.' The soul has 'forgotten' its real nature and has identified with bodies. In yogic practice one should turn this upside down by 'forgetting the body' (*sharīr ko bhul jānā*) and 'remembering Shiv Bābā' (*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 and forgetful of the body and the world. This remembrance is of a quite extraordinary kind. It is extrahistorical or transhistorical, a way of seeing the world and the self not from within history (where there is always amnesia), but from outside history, as Shiv Bābā does. Because he is never in history—that is, because he is never embodied—he never forgets. By achieving such a state of remembrance, one finds happiness (*sukh*), peace (*shānti*), and confidence in one's own destiny. Moreover, one who is body-forgetful will feel the pain of the coming destruction very little, being in the enviable position of a disinterested spectator.

Fate

Brahma Kumari life is pervaded by a sense of urgency. When the end comes, the destruction will extend over a period of many years. But nobody knows for sure when the destruction will start, and when it does, it will be too late to prepare. There is little time left; most people are now in their last birth. 'In the sangamyug,' I once heard in a sermon, 'every second has value.' The Brahma Kumaris sometimes say that one should not be in the position of a student who has to prepare for a final exam in the last hours. This perception of the imminence of final calamity is the principal source of the movement's energy, and is clearly the real point of the drastically shortened cosmic cycle.

In contrast, therefore, to what some theorists apparently believe, anxiety about 'last things' can indeed exist in the Hindu world, but the Brahma Kumari evidence suggests that such anxiety may flourish best in a Hindu world that is much speeded up. Strictly speaking, the

precise numbers involved (Lekhraj's 5000-year cycles with yugas of 1250 years) are probably not that important. Although there is a numerical logic behind more conventional Hindu historical cosmologies (see Church 1971), these schemes seem to be at least as evocative as they are literally metrical. Very large numbers of years express a general disposition toward the world, devaluing history by miniaturizing events in relation to almost unimaginably spacious vistas of time. What matters most about these numbers is just that they are very large.

Lekhraj's figures are best understood in this frame of reference. At one level they reflect an idiosyncratic twist on traditional numerical premises. The traditional date of the *Mahābhārata* war and the beginning of the kaliyug is 3102 B.C.—that is, about 5000 years ago. Lekhraj obviously accepted that date, and simply moved all of history into the time that has elapsed between then and now. But what is important is what he meant to say by doing so. What '5000 years' actually signifies is that the time ahead is much shorter than you think.

Exactly how or why Lekhraj formed this idea is difficult to say.[7] The role of women in the movement, however, almost certainly bears on this issue. As we have seen, most of Lekhraj's earliest followers were women, and although men belong to the sect today, in significant ways it remains a women's movement. Entering a movement of celibates is obviously a fairly drastic initiative for most people, and in India this is especially true for women. What Lekhraj and his followers most needed was a projected world in which behavior that was regarded as deeply unreasonable in Hindu society (indeed, acts of desperation for many of the women involved) would seem, after all, reasonable. A world on the brink of doom would be such a world, and a world in which there is little time left is most easily imagined, given Hindu historical-cosmological premises, as one of very short duration. If most of history has happened, and if history lasts but 5000 years, then there *cannot* be much time remaining.

Some other rationale for drastic initiatives could have been discovered within the Hindu tradition. As we have already noted, the Radhasoami faith has found support for a certain kind of soteriological

[7] It is, of course, quite possible that Lekhraj's vision of impending doom was inspired, at some level, by non-Indic examples. Given the thinness of the existing evidence, and the dispersal of the Sindhi society of those days, it is unlikely that this could ever be proven or disproven. In the present context it hardly matters anyway, for everything about Brahma Kumari historical cosmology, including the notion of historical urgency itself, is completely embedded in Hindu ideas.

urgency in the very long cycle of more traditional Hindu historical cosmology, but the Radhasoami path is basically for householders and does not require a truly fundamental break with the institutions of society. Lekhraj asked more, especially at first. Nowadays the Brahma Kumari movement declares its way of life compatable with family life, though as we shall see, this is at best a precarious accommodation. But in the early days Lekhraj asked his women followers to reject the world in a way that put them in direct and often painful confrontations with the most important social others in their lives. For many women, entering the movement involved all-or-nothing, bridge-burning conversions. This circumstance no doubt reinforced the need for a world outlook portraying the human situation in something close to desperate terms.

Whatever his reasons, when Lekhraj speeded up the cycle, he committed himself and his movement to a vision of cosmic history that differed from other Hindu versions not just in this particular, but in more comprehensive ways. For the Brahma Kumaris, history seems to 'matter' in a way that it apparently does not in the Hindu tradition more generally. As Zimmer (1962, 18–19) has pointed out, in the enormity of a timescape in which eons are but blinks of the creator's eye, it is difficult for events, as such, to carry ultimate values, no matter how momentous they may seem from a limited human perspective. But this is apparently not so when there is little time ahead. The point of the speedup is to invest the impending calamity with new and urgent meaning. This, in turn, seems to distribute new kinds of values, positive and negative, on other occurrences as well. They acquire significance as signs, anticipations, and finally, justifications of the horrors soon to come. History is not exactly an epiphany for the Brahma Kumaris (cf. Eliade 1971, 104). The 'facts' of history have their ultimate significance as features of personal biography, not as manifestations of God or his will. But history nevertheless defines the situation of humankind in relation to the things that matter most.

As a result, an almost obsessive historical-mindedness has become a deeply entrenched feature of the religious subculture of the Brahma Kumaris. It goes beyond the mere fact that much of what they teach is what they consider to be history. From the very start, Lekhraj's teachings and revelations incorporated a highly distinctive historiography that radically reinterpreted Hindu scriptures, thus 'setting the record straight.' For example, he said that the great war of the *Mahābhārata* is actually a hazy recollection of the destruction of the

world at the end of the last cycle (complete, it was said later, with nuclear weapons). The deity Krishna is actually Dada Lekhraj before he became Nārāyaṇ upon his coronation as king of the satyug and marriage to Lakshmī. This kind of reinterpretation of traditional history is a pervasive tendency in the movement's intellectual life. The contemporary world is also intensely scrutinized for occurrences that seem to vindicate the Brahma Kumari scheme. At the time of the disastrous Delhi flooding in the autumn of 1978, this event was cited to me as yet another indication of the imminence of universal doom.

An interesting and unforeseen consequence of Lekhraj's stress on historical imagery has been that the Brahma Kumari vision of the world seems to be on a collision course with the formulations of historians, archaeologists, and geologists in a way that may be quite unusual in the Indic world. This is partly a matter of the simple temporal proximity of the events of short-cycle history, but I suspect that more is involved than this. Given the historical emphasis of Lekhraj's theology, details of dating and historical sequence acquire a very special significance. For the Brahma Kumaris it matters vitally that the world was born just five thousand years ago, that sexual intercourse is only twenty-five hundred years old, and so on. It is not that other Hindu versions of history are any more consistent with the findings of modern science or historical scholarship, but such findings seem to be a far more direct challenge to what matters most about the world to the Brahma Kumaris.

As far as I am aware, for example, the radiocarbon technique of dating is of no interest or consequence to the Radhasoami tradition, but one of the theoreticians of the Brahma Kumari movement considers the matter important enough to have given me a lengthy and erudite lecture on the technical inadequacies of both this and the potassium argon method. The question of why no archaeological remains have been found from the satyug is also a matter of genuine concern to the Brahma Kumaris; defensive elaborations have, therefore, been added to their historical theory in order to forestall disconfirmation. It is said, for example, that because houses and buildings were plated with gold and studded with jewels during the first half of the cycle, no trace of them could remain today, all having long since been looted and converted into ornaments. How successful these defenses will prove to be in the long run is hard to say.

One of the most interesting consequences of Lekhraj's speedup of the historical cycle is what seems to be a heightening of a sense of

historical-cyclical determinism. Such determinism is, of course, implicit in any historical cosmology based on the idea of recurrent cycles. If the cycles repeat themselves exactly, then anything that happens *must* happen as it has already happened before. Even so, in the wider Hindu tradition the possibility of the reiteration of individual world-careers does not seem to be much dwelt upon. Allusions to specific repetitions are apparently rather infrequent in Puranic texts (Zimmer 1962, 18), and as far as I am aware this is not an issue at all in the Radhasoami tradition. Here the question of why we have the experiences we do seems to be mainly the domain of karmic reasoning (with its implicit premise of free will) in the context of an encompassing conception of the Lord's will-as-pleasure (mauj). Things do not happen the way they do simply because they did so in previous historical cycles. It is as if cyclic determinism exists mainly as a latent possibility, an ideological empty space.

Among the Brahma Kumaris, however, with the shortening of the cosmic cycle, what is elsewhere a rather vague idea of determinism seems to have stiffened into what is felt to be literal fact. One of my informants reported asking Lekhraj whether a chip taken out of a stone would still be missing when he repeats the action the next time around. Lekhraj's answer—that his visions simply did not deal with such questions—is largely beside the point; what is important is that the question was asked at all. In the world as the Brahma Kumaris conceive it, the determinism implicit in the idea of repetition has become an insistent actuality that has to be faced.

The Brahma Kumaris in no way attempt to evade this implication. History, they flatly say, is like a 'movie'; the same film is screened again and again. Each person's 'part' is graven on his or her soul in the form of ineradicable *sanskārs* (inclinations). Those who enjoyed the earth as a paradise once will have the same experience in every cycle, and those who fail will always fail. Lekhraj has delivered the same warnings of the end to come countless times before, as he will for *infinite* times again.

One might suppose that such a strong determinism would lead to a fatalism that would be antithetical to the sense of spiritual-historical crisis so basic to the Brahma Kumari outlook. But this is no more true for the Brahma Kumaris than it was for the predestinarian Calvinists. Determinism, though absolute, settles nothing. It is permissible to take retrospective comfort in the inevitability of things as a way of putting past misfortunes into proper (and diminishing) perspective,

but *purushārth*, or 'effort,' is necessary. Rewards await only those who strive, and if anything, the principle of repetition simply raises the stakes; those who gain the satyug will always do so, and those who fail will fail forever.

The apparent contradiction is resolved by a truly fundamental principle—historical amnesia. Brahma Kumari teachings provide highly detailed accounts of the passage of world-time and what happens in history, but the world-careers of individuals are another matter. Historical beings 'forget,' and although devotees are encouraged to think of themselves as ones whose world-lines approximate that of Lekhraj, the actual specifics of any individual's destiny (and/or history) cannot be known—or so movement teachers told me—with certainty.[8] Or rather, there are only two personal destinies that are known and fixed: Lekhraj is to be the first Nārāyaṇ, and Om Radhe the first Lakshmī. Others must await the end to know for sure. There will be a 'final exam,' which souls will pass 'numberwise' (these terms are often given in English), according to their efforts. There will be a settling then of the *hisāb kitāb*, the account book. For now, however, we are in an odd sort of predicament; everything may be fixed, but from the standpoint of the individual nothing is settled.

Only a tiny minority of the earth's present population will inherit the satyug; most will receive *mukti* (liberation in paramdhām), but not jīvan mukti (liberation-in-life in the satyug and tretāyug). But the real issue is what one's status will be in the coming paradise. Will one be among the elite of the elite, a select 108 who are 'totally victorious'? Those of highest status will not only be the rulers of heaven, but will be close to Lekhraj throughout their world-careers. Or will one only be among the 16,000—those in the 'high royal families' of the heavenly world, but not at the top?[9] Will one rule, or will one serve?

[8] I was told quite definitely that one's future cannot be known for sure, but this is obviously a matter with many complexities. There was probably greater certainty about individual destiny during earlier eras of the movement's history when visions were more emphasized. Many apparently saw their future selves in such visions, and being able to do so was one of the attractions of the movement. No doubt this continues to be the case for some. I also suspect—though I have no evidence in support of this conjecture—that greater certainty exists in inner and higher circles of the movement. The doctrine of uncertainty is obviously consistent with the movement's hopes of attracting large numbers of converts. Why join up if the high places in heaven are already spoken for? It is likely that the estimate of the population of the satyug has expanded over time for the same reason.

[9] There is apparently some concession to 'worldly' family ties here. I was told that family members (and friends) who had been in at least some contact with the *gyān* might be numbered among the 16,000.

Only at the very end of the cycle will everyone see visions in which their personal destinies will be fully disclosed. In the meantime, as a movement teacher put it to me, you can only know your destiny by knowing yourself. What this means is knowing yourself *as* someone whose characteristics match those of the denizens of the satyug. This is a matter of your own self-control; those who rule themselves will rule the kingdom to come. In this sense, effort 'counts,' even though effort in itself cannot alter one's destiny. Given the urgency of the present historical moment, the energy-potential of this idea is quite high.

But what kinds of effort count? Apparently not efforts to reform the kaliyug in accord with Shiv Bābā's will. The kaliyug is quite beyond redemption, and true reform is inevitable anyway, and soon to come. There is nothing *we* can do to change history, since the cycle is fixed. Moreover, it is far from clear that Shiv Bābā has a 'will' in the Judeo-Christian sense. He is a source not so much of 'commandments' as of 'disclosures,' for which Dada Lekhraj is the human medium. He is not a changer of history, because history cannot be changed; he is a revealer of history. Because he is never embodied (as we are), Shiv Bābā never forgets, and therefore at this critical juncture in history he can impart the knowledge that will enable those who receive it to redeem themselves, as they have already done time and again before.

What 'effort' really means is exemplifying Brahma Kumari values in one's way of life. This, in turn, has two aspects. The first consists of serving the movement and obeying its rules. Service (sevā) requires active support of the movement, especially by participating in its many proselytizing activities. Great emphasis is placed on the value of bringing converts into the movement, particularly converts who stick—since many do not. Following the movement's rules means striving for purity of life, through celibacy and control of diet. Purity is also a matter of thought. One's innermost attitudes and desires must pass muster in accord with the movement's almost inhumanly high standards. The individual alone is the best judge of how successful he or she has been in this.

The second aspect of effort, and the true fulfillment of Brahma Kumari life, is yogic introspection. Group sessions of rāja yoga are part of every movement gathering, and daily individual meditation is strongly enjoined on every member. This is the movement's most significant 'effort.' Ideally it leads to a transhistorical experience of communion with Shiv Bābā, which should instill confidence in one's

salvationary destiny. One leaves the world of history in order to believe in one's reentry on favorable terms. Obviously there is a strongly millenarian theme in Dada Lekhraj's teachings. But if the Brahma Kumari sect is a millenarian movement, then it probably defines a distinctive species of the type. Lekhraj delivered a startling message of momentous things to come. However, his warning led not to confrontation with history, but flight from it.

Separation

There are basically two levels of membership in the Brahma Kumari movement. At its core are fully 'surrendered' women and men who have either left or never entered family life and reside in the movement's many centers.[10] A knowledgeable informant told me that there are currently some seven hundred surrendered sisters in the movement and a smaller number of men. At the center with which I became familiar there were usually six resident sisters and three resident men, but these numbers fluctuated over time. Most people with this level of commitment to the movement come from families with past movement connections. The depth of such prior connectedness varies, but in some cases among my surrendered acquaintances the links were with Lekhraj's original followers in 1937. On the basis of my own somewhat limited contact with this inner circle of the sect's membership, I have the impression that it is common for clusters of kin to be, as the Brahma Kumaris put it, 'in the gyān,' with some fully surrendered and others not.

Fully surrendered members are much needed. A knowledgeable insider told me that currently money is not really a problem for the movement, but there is an acute lack of qualified sisters to undertake the teaching and other spiritual tasks that are the heart of the movement's life. Full surrender is obviously a big step for anyone, especially a woman, and the matter is approached with great caution. The movement insists that recruits at this level must have a mature understanding of what they are doing and the permission of their families. A typical recruit will have been exposed to the highly distinctive atmosphere of the movement from childhood. She will be

[10] I am painfully aware of how little I know of the inner social life of the movement. My contact with the fully surrendered was at the relatively superficial level of teaching and being taught. A true ethnography of the movement would have to be written from inside.

required to undertake a trial period of residence for six months to a year at a local center. The trial period is to determine whether she really wants the life, and whether she has the intelligence and discipline necessary to lead it successfully. There was one such trial sister in residence at the center I attended. She was in her late teens and the daughter of a couple who had been lay members of the movement for many years; her elder sister had already surrendered to the movement in 1972. Some who surrender to the movement bring the equivalent of dowries with them. I do not know how great the sums involved are, or how common this practice is.

Surrendered women are the core personnel at all local centers. They do the teaching, conduct group sessions of yogic practice, and also do the cooking and housekeeping. Most of the resident men, apparently almost always a minority, maintain outside employment and function as indispensable mediators between the secluded sisters and the outside world. In the center I attended one of the resident men was a government bureaucrat, and another was an electrical engineer. A third, who was not always present, devoted his full time to the movement.

Surrounding this core is a much larger lay membership with varying degrees of commitment. Most of the daily attendees at the center I attended were men, but I was told that this is exceptional. Because of its location near middle and upper-middle class residential colonies of New Delhi, this center tended to attract members of government service families, but its constituency also included students, military personnel, and businessmen. The atmosphere of the center was strongly middle class. Attendees came from a variety of caste and regional backgrounds, but with North Indians greatly predominating.

Among the lay members at this center the distribution of time in the movement was strikingly bimodal. A minority of attendees had been members for many years, but at any given time most attendees had been in the movement for relatively short periods of weeks or months. This was so because turnover was very rapid. Many recruits do not really appreciate the personal implications of what the movement asks of its membership at first; with growing realization, enthusiasm cools. The movement is eager to hold on to recruits and to reclaim those who have fallen away. I once accompanied one of the resident brothers of the center on a surprise visit to a couple who had dropped out. The purpose of the visit was to rekindle their interest in the movement, but the overflowing ashtrays visible the minute we entered

the sitting room suggested that this would be a fruitless effort, as it turned out to be.

Lay membership is not regarded as spiritually disadvantageous.[11] Lay members are those who live with their 'worldly' (laukik) families. While the movement expresses no positive enthusiasm for family life, it recognizes the family as an institutional reality, and sees in family life a domain in which virtues can be perfected. Families often participate in the movement as units, and although commitment to the movement by individuals has sometimes proven to be quite disruptive to families, the Brahma Kumaris claim that the quality of family life can be radically improved if members adhere to Brahma Kumari teachings.

Brahma Kumari families should be 'lotus like'; that is, they should be unsullied by the mire in which they grow (this is a common Hindu image). Every home should become an āshram, a hermitage. What this mainly means is that these should be homes in which celibacy is practiced. For this reason most of the converts in the center I attended seemed to be persons for whom sexuality was no longer an issue: widows, widowers, and—in the case of married couples—those in their middle years and beyond who had already had children. Simple loneliness was probably a motivating factor in many conversions. The Brahma Kumaris are *always* happy to see you, and for an aging widow or widower this can be an important attraction. The boredom of retirement was also a factor for some. 'It gives me something to do,' said an elderly retired diplomat.

Fully surrendered members of the movement belong to a community that is densely interconnected and highly solidary despite its spatial dispersal. Lay members, especially those whose membership is relatively recent, have a more atomic involvement in the movement. At the center I knew, most members in this category did not interact with each other very much. What little contact they had was in the context of the center itself. For them affiliation with the movement was essentially a matter of attending the center's various activities.

Within the center a very distinctive style of life is cultivated. One of its most striking features is the absence of overt signs of hierarchy. In day-to-day interactions there is little of the foot touching and other

[11] The private opinions of the fully surrendered may be something else again. Public doctrine, however, avers that merely living in a center does not, in itself, guarantee that a person is more self-controlled and soul-conscious than those who live with 'worldly' families.

symbolic apparatus of status distinction in evidence. Members greet each other with the words '*om shānti*' (*om* peace). Resident sisters wear distinctive white saris, while lay members usually wear ordinary clothing. Diminutive signs with elevating slogans are ubiquitous: 'Are you remembering Shiv Bābā?' and 'He who is pure is like a diamond.' Such signs are printed against a *bel*-leaf background (the *bel*, or wood-apple, being sacred to Shiva).

Resident members arise at around three or four in the morning for their own meditations. Then follow congregational meditation and classes attended by lay members. As already noted, the central feature of the classes is the reading of the discourses that emanate from movement headquarters. At the conclusion of class, lay members are frequently asked to stand up before the assembled group to testify to their own spiritual progress or lack of it. Throughout the day there are further, more specialized classes, other spiritual activities, and housekeeping. The museum is open in the morning and evening after four o'clock. At four points during the day activities are interrupted by a few moments of recorded music, which is an opportunity for a quick session of individual yogic meditation.

At the center I attended there was an inconspicuous donation box located on the second floor of the building, a place where only regular attendees were likely to come. The movement is strongly committed to the idea that monetary donations should come only from members. Donations are voluntary and anonymous. Very occasionally members would be reminded of the high cost of the rent of the building (Rs 3000 per month), but such solicitation was low key. Members were not badgered for money in this center as far as I was aware.

In general Brahma Kumari life is not rich in ceremony. Their emphasis is on yogic practice and gyān, 'knowledge,' and on the words, writings, and didactic artwork through which knowledge is conveyed. An observer is therefore struck by the poverty of their ceremonial life when compared with popular Hinduism more generally. However, a Brahma Kumari ceremonial life exists.

Thursday is a special day in all Brahma Kumari centers, for this is the one day of the week on which bhog (food offering) is made regularly to Shiv Bābā. The ceremony occurs in the morning during congregational meditation. One of the sisters ascends a platform at the front of the room and sits in a yogic posture. She gazes around the room, making momentary eye-contact with all the other meditators in the room. After a few minutes of this, she closes her eyes and her body

makes a slight jerk. She then sits with her eyes closed for ten or fifteen minutes. While her eyes are closed, the sister is visiting Brahmā Bābā (that is, Lekhraj in his 'subtle body') in the 'subtle world' above. She sees him there, floating and surrounded by white light. A food offering, usually fruits or sweets of some kind, has been stationed at the front of the room. The sister offers Lekhraj the food in 'subtle form,' and then engages him in conversation. Of course in doing so she is actually conversing with Shiv Bābā, whose medium Brahmā Bābā is. Because this is a world of total silence, they must communicate by means of gestures. Finally she leaves the trance, opens her eyes, and begins to tell the assembled group what he said. This usually takes the form of an admonitory sermon. He 'sees' the class, and notices that the 'children' in it have varying degrees of purity and commitment. He distinguishes between different types of children, and urges the dilatory to increase their efforts. After this, the food offering is distributed to all attendees as prasād.

Visions of this sort were apparently far more central to the life of the movement in the past than they are now. Currently only certain sisters have them, and then only under narrowly defined circumstances. The ability to have such visions is regarded as a *vardān*, a pure 'boon,' with no particular implications about the soteriological destiny of one so gifted. From informants I heard of occasions when such women have contacted the souls of recently deceased movement members who declared themselves 'with Bābā' and happy. I have never witnessed this. Nowadays the movement downplays trance activity for fear that it would be, as one informant put it, 'misunderstood by the public.'

As far as I was able to tell, the usual life-cycle rites are of little concern to the Brahma Kumaris. I was told by an informant that a marriage was once solemnized by Dada Lekhraj (obviously a celibate marriage), but I never witnessed anything resembling this. I was also told that when a member dies the usual rites will be performed by his or her 'worldly' family, but that the Brahma Kumaris will hold a commemorative food offering within twelve days of the death. Individuals sometimes sponsor food offerings (bhog or *brahma bhojan*) in celebration of some special event in their own lives. For example, at the center I attended an elderly gentleman sponsored such an occasion in celebration of his sixteenth 'birthday,' which was the sixteenth anniversary of his 'rebirth' when he entered the movement.

The Brahma Kumaris warily regard their members' participation

in the ceremonial life of the surrounding society. To some degree their stance is confrontational. They have produced their own competing versions of certain major Hindu festivals, which members are expected to substitute for the rites of their own families and communities.

One of the biggest occasions of the Brahma Kumari year is *mahāshivrātri*, the 'great night of Shiva.'[12] The rest of the world, they say, is engaged in an essentially false *shivrātri*. The real 'night of Shiva' is the dark night that has now descended on the world on the eve of its total destruction, during which Shiv Bābā comes down to disseminate redeeming knowledge. At the center I attended mahāshivrātri was celebrated by a morning food offering (with trance), followed by a special sermon on the real meaning of the occasion and the hoisting of a flag bearing Shiv Bābā's egg-shaped emblem in the front yard. Similar Brahma Kumari celebrations of *holī*, *bhaiyā dūj*, *rakshābandhan*, *dashehrā*, *divālī*, and other Hindu festivals are held at the appropriate points in the calendar. These festivals are invariably ideologized in the Brahma Kumari fashion. Bhaiyā dūj (brother-second), for example, was enacted in a way that dramatized the siblinghood (as daughters and sons of Brahmā) of the members of the movement. The 'real meaning' of holī, I was told, is that 'we are spraying the nectar of knowledge [*gyān amrit*] on others.' Just as the rest of the world does on holī, my informant continued, 'we spray it on them whether they want to get wet or not.' There is also a special observance on the occasion of Dada Lekhraj's death anniversary in January.

As noted in chapter 4, major Hindu festivals are also occasions for the sponsorship of Brahma Kumari 'exhibitions.' During the year of my contact with the movement, one such exhibition was held near a major bus junction at Nehru Place on the eve of mahāshivrātri. Several hundred spectators were lured into a large tent by colorful advertising outside. They were then treated to a sound and light display illustrating major points of Brahma Kumari doctrine. Foreign devotees sang Brahma Kumari devotional songs, and various members gave speeches testifying to the value of rāja yoga and the importance of the movement in their own spiritual lives.

Special events of a nonceremonial kind were also frequently held at the center premises. A good example of this was a symposium entitled

[12] *Mahāshivrātri*, supposedly the darkest night of the year, is celebrated in the Hindu month of *phālgun* (February–March) and commemorates the marriage of Shiva and Pārvatī.

'Can Spiritual Education Help in Development of Self-Discipline?' The Brahma Kumaris invited a number of distinguished educators, most of whom, I think, had little idea of the real nature of the occasion. The visiting educators were first shown the museum and then seated amidst an audience consisting mostly of regular attendees of the center. They were then given a series of lectures on Brahma Kumari doctrine thinly overlaid with an 'educational' rationale. At one point the speakers (resident sisters and a couple of longtime lay members) began silently staring at the audience in the usual rāja-yogic manner. Most of the visitors seemed quite puzzled by this, but continued to pay polite attention.

In general the Brahma Kumaris' approach to popular Hinduism has been an attempt to reject what they regard as the dross and to assimilate the rest on their own terms. As we have seen, standard Hindu festivals are reworked to fit into Brahma Kumari formats. What cannot be absorbed is condemned and discarded. Thus, the usual holī revelry is rejected as a coarse accretion that has nothing to do with the real meaning of the occasion. And as we have also seen, there has been a massive effort to incorporate various aspects of Hindu lore and doctrine into the Brahma Kumari world-view. An example is a large image of the Hindu goddess Durgā stationed just outside the front door of one of the New Delhi centers. Over her head is a red egg, symbolizing the 'real' source of her power; under her feet are male figures, representing the 'five-vices,' whom she is slaying with her trident. Durgā has become a Brahma Kumari.

As already noted, the deity Krishna is regarded as Dada Lekhraj, imperfectly recollected from the beginning of history. Krishna's alleged 16,108 wives were actually his most favored followers, the elite of the satyug. The Hindu *mālā* (rosary) has 108 beads because this represents the 108 followers who were totally stainless. The Pāṇḍavas (in the *Mahābhārata*) are the Brahma Kumaris themselves; the Kauravas are the rest of the Indian population,[13] and the self-destructive Yādavas, with their fearsome weapons, are the Westerners and Western scientists who will destroy each other with nuclear bombs. The *shālagrāms*—the smooth, water-polished stones in which form Vishnu is often worshipped—are actually representations of the souls of those who became 'worthy of worship' (pūjya) by being 'washed in the stream of knowledge.' They are, in other words, the Brahma Kumaris.

[13] Who are said to use women 'for pleasure.' This is linked to Duhshasana's attempted rape of Draupadi as recounted in the *Mahābhārata*.

These rerenderings of Hindu tradition represent a vast and growing intellectual system on which I have merely touched. Its basis is the presumption that Hindu scripture, with the partial exception of the *Bhagavad Gītā*, is never really reliable. Existing Hindu texts, the Brahma Kumaris say, came to us by means of visions that occurred after the end of the tretāyug. In these visions things got blurred. Thus, Krishna was thought to be the source of divine knowledge in the *Gītā*, when in fact the real source was Shiv Bābā. Further distortions accumulated as scriptures were copied and recopied down through the ensuing generations. Divine revelation is now piecing the truth back together.

If there is a single theme that organizes Brahma Kumari religious life and characterizes their conception of who they are in the world, it is separation. Members are supposed to consider themselves 'dead' to the world. Having entered the sangamyug, one is *nyārā*, 'separate' and distinct from the rest of society. The condition the Brahma Kumaris seek to attain is, in fact, that interstructural, transitional, threshold state that van Gennep called 'liminal' in his celebrated analysis of rites of passage (1961). They say that they are neither of this world nor of the next, but *bīch mẽ*, 'in between.' Their sense of separation from the kaliyug is a powerful undercurrent in their outlook and behavior. They are encouraged not to form strong attachments outside the movement (even with nonmovement members of their own families), their white dress is distinctive, they refuse to take food prepared by outsiders (though fruit may be taken), and so on. They conceive themselves as having been reborn into a new kind of existence in which the most basic attachments of the old world count for little. And to this we must add that the behavior of the outer world toward them has sometimes massively vindicated their view.

The Brahma Kumaris say they have been reborn as 'Brāhmaṇs.' Each age has its own varṇa, and those who belong to the sangamyug are the 'true Brāhmaṇs.' The aperture of their birth is a mouth, the mouth of Dada Lekhraj, through which issues the knowledge that causes their rebirth. They are thus 'mouth-born Brāhmaṇs,' and Lekhraj can therefore be identified with the creative deity Brahmā (also classically a source of knowledge), since it is because of his utterances, inspired by Shiv Bābā, that the process leading to the rebirth of the world is begun. Having been reborn through his mouth, his children are therefore the daughters and sons of Brahmā.

There are elements of ritual logic in the Brahma Kumaris' stance

toward the world. They see themselves as the agencies through which the world to come is coming into being; without their self-denial this world could never be born. Their object is nothing less than to stop and restart time, to recover the childhood of the world by becoming Brahmā's children. 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 Brahma Kumaris attack the problem of human 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 Brahma Kumaris must die to the world and enter the liminal, or threshold sangamyug. In doing so they become ahistorical even as they continue—in some cases only marginally, and in others nearly fully—to live and act (while disengaged from action) in the historical world. For a time they are out of time, betwixt and between, but ultimately they will rejoin history at the rebirth of the world. Among the Brahma Kumaris the ritual sources of this reasoning have become sublimated and disguised. But when Lekhraj characterized the movement as a gigantic sacrifice, he knew very well what he was saying. The Brahma Kumaris are engaged in an extended and vastly magnified rite of renewal for themselves and for the world at large.

6. Otherworldly Feminism

Sexuality and Subjugation

Whether the Brahma Kumari movement is genuinely feminist is a very debatable question. That it was founded by a man is largely irrelevant. Lekhraj was in intimate and daily contact with his mostly female followers, and the content of his teachings certainly suggests the influence of a feminine perspective. But the mere presence of women, or even a woman's point of view, does not in itself establish the Brahma Kumaris' feminist credentials. What has to be shown is that the movement has produced a genuine critique of the social institutions that affect women's lives, and that it has generated at least some concept (its practicality is not at issue) of how the situation of women can be changed for the better.

I believe that it has. One of the goals of the movement, though certainly not the only goal, is the liberation of women from what is viewed as an oppressive social regime. This, however, is not an easy point to establish. The problem is that Brahma Kumari views on the situation of women are embedded in Hindu symbols, and are difficult to render into terms intelligible to Western feminism. They seek the liberation of women, but the *kind* of liberty they seek cannot really be understood except in the context of Hindu religious culture. Even their complaints about the institutions they consider oppressive are deeply colored by the outlook of the Hindu tradition.

This chapter shows how the Brahma Kumaris have expressed a will to be free as women by using Hindu religious concepts. For those who believe that a true feminism must seek radical change of existing social institutions, the Brahma Kumaris' beliefs will almost certainly seem misguided or futile. But, on the other hand, we might see feminism as the product of a transcultural motive that can be expressed in varied ways in different cultural settings. With this latter perspective the Hindu tradition itself appears as far more rich in possibilities than is sometimes supposed.

The place to begin is with Brahma Kumari views of history. These views are not only linked with an assessment of the present human situation in general, but also have directly to do with the position of women. The connection is the Brahma Kumari conception of the relationship between sexuality and the fall of the world. Readers will recall that the great transition between earthly 'heaven' and 'hell' occurs when sexual intercourse becomes part of the human scene for the first time. With intercourse arises 'body-consciousness,' the root of all other human evils and the primary cause of present miseries. At one level this is a general affliction affecting men and women alike; all have become bound to the body and to the misfortunes and pain of life in a world ruled by desire and passion. But it is also something that affects women specifically, because with the rise of body-consciousness women lose the equality they enjoyed during the satyug and tretāyug. Having become mere 'sex dolls,' they have fallen under the domination of men. The position of women thus emerges as a sharpened metaphor for the present human predicament. Women, more than anyone, are the principal victims of the human fall.

These ideas were not created ex nihilo. The notion that reproduction occurred without sex in the early phases of the cosmic cycle is an old one in the Hindu tradition (see O'Flaherty 1976, 27–29). Moreover, in the Indic world there is nothing remarkable about the doctrine that worldly passions and attachments are the principal causes of human bondage. Nor is there anything truly striking about the use of woman as a metaphor for the human situation, a concept with deep roots in the bhakti (Hindu devotional) tradition.

What is unusual in the case of the Brahma Kumaris is the incorporation of a critical point of view into this metaphor. Pervading the Brahma Kumaris' concept of the world and its history is an idea of human alienation that draws its strength from the image of women as victims of corrupt institutions. I certainly do not mean to imply that the Brahma Kumari movement can be reduced to a feminist critique of society, since this would violate the complexity of an intricate and multifaceted theological system. But a feminist motive is a discernable element in Brahma Kumari theology.

Though it is not to be found in any single place, a Brahma Kumari account of the situation of women in Indian society exists. Elements of it are scattered throughout Lekhraj's discourses (the muralīs) and the literature of the movement. When the pieces are put together, what

emerges is a coherent and intelligible assessment of where women stand. Its focus is on the role of women in marriage.

As we have already seen, one of the principal Brahma Kumari complaints about the family and marriage, a complaint dating from the earliest days of the movement, is that women are subordinated to husbands who are unworthy of veneration. The question of the differential religious value accorded to the sexes is fundamental to this accusation. Men (it is said) are full of vices. Yet women are required to treat their husbands as deities, while they themselves are regarded as no more than the 'heel of the left foot' of man. And if this were not enough, to the degree that man has fallen, woman is regarded as the temptress who pulls him down. According to an adage attributed to the sannyāsīs (world-renouncers), woman is the 'door to hell' (*narak kā dvār*). The implication is that women are not so much the victims of world-binding sexual lust as they are its source. Put otherwise (although the Brahma Kumaris never formulate it quite this way), women are viewed not as true moral subjects, but rather as provocations for moral choices made by men.

All this, however, is but a surface manifestation of what these materials point to as the fundamental injustice—namely, that women are not conceived as soteriological agents. If man has fallen, he at least has the option of renouncing the world; he can become an ascetic in a culturally sanctioned (and highly esteemed) role, and seek what he believes to be his salvation. But sannyāsīs are men, not women. In the world as presently constituted, woman is not the renouncer, but (at least one element of) that which is renounced, the 'door to hell.' Bondage is entanglement with the world; liberation is release from this. The implicit grievance in the Brahma Kumari assessment of women's condition is that women are not just bound to the world; they are also imprisoned in a particular concept of womanhood, one that envisions women as the bait in the trap of worldly life. And, in fact, at a more general level of Hindu symbolism the feminine is identified with māyā, the illusion that is the created world, and that draws the self into fatal bondage.[1]

[1] These attitudes reflect an interpretation of Hindu institutions and life that might or might not accord with the facts as others see them. There is good reason to believe, for example, that female sexuality is far more highly valued in Hindu culture than one might gather from the Brahma Kumaris, or for that matter, from many Western descriptions of Hindu life. For an excellent account of the positive valuations of the feminine, the reader is urged to see Marglin's *Wives of the God-King* (forthcoming).

Because the subordination of women began when sexual intercourse became a factor in human existence, sexual intercourse is at the root of women's inequality. In the world as it exists now, women must enter into sexual relations with men and live as sexual beings if they are to be married. This situation offers no real choice, since to be unmarried as a woman is to have no real status in society at all. Without the option of sannyās (world renunciation), women are trapped in 'worldly marriage.' Thus women are not merely house-bound; they are bound absolutely to the world. But so are men: they are as bound by their passions as women are by evil conventions. And in the present age of degradation even the freedom of the sannyāsī, in the Brahma Kumari view, is finally a false liberty. The sannyāsī, indeed, is an abettor of present miseries, making orphans of his children and a widow of his wife. The Brahma Kumaris say that the sannyāsīs flee women precisely because of their own weakness; it is because they themselves are 'body-conscious' that women seem to them to be a threat. This is the great mistake; it is not woman, but lust itself, which is the 'door to hell.'

Marriage, or at least a certain kind of marriage, therefore becomes a paradigm for the human condition, with the sexual role of women its focus. And because reproduction requires sex (and reproduction is necessary until the sangamyug), ultimately the reproductive role of woman underlies her predicament. The Brahma Kumari version of this predicament, however, differs somewhat from the one portrayed by Western feminism. Consistent with the more general Hindu mistrust of passion, the Brahma Kumaris have concentrated on sexuality itself rather than the exigencies of childrearing and house-keeping as the significant factor maintaining women's subordination. More important, they have not viewed the present reproductive role of women as a biological given. Intercourse is necessary for procreation, but only in the 'hell' of our present world. Women *can* be free, and some women inevitably will be (though only a tiny minority among the world's women). Since the bondage of woman is the bondage of all, the world can be made free (albeit a much smaller world than the one we now know) through her liberation. But a free world will have to be a world without sex.

Sexuality and Power

Celibacy is the strongest and most inclusive value of the Brahma Kumaris. Their heaven is heavenly because of the absence of sex, and

our present hell is mostly the product of sexual desire and the evils that flow therefrom. This does not mean that sexuality has an unambiguously negative role in the moral economy of the historical world. Intercourse is not only inevitable, but functionally necessary during the second half of the world-cycle. A movement teacher assured me that Dada Lekhraj himself, in the form of King Vikramaditya, aids and abets the spread of sexuality by causing erotic temple sculptures to be carved when the dvāparyug begins. Therefore, during the appropriate periods of the world's history, sexual life is at least tolerable, since even those who were the goddesses and gods of heaven must lead this life after the world's fall. But now is *not* the right time for such a life. This is a time of 'emergency'; the end of history is almost here, and it is time for radical purification in preparation for the heavenly world to come. If an individual has produced children, then of course he or she must support them and see to their future. But sex must stop.

Hatred of sexuality is a pervasive theme in both the writings and the daily discourse of the movement. Sex, it is said, weakens the body and leaves it easy prey to disease. It produces children who are attachments in themselves, and whose existence leads to further attachments because of the necessity to earn money for their support. Sex is responsible for the overpopulation of the planet (a constant Brahma Kumari preoccupation) that has made a 'slum' of the world. Lust is a 'poison,' and indulging in it is like carrying a 'basket of rubbish' on one's head. Intercourse is compared to wallowing in a 'sewer.'

As the Brahma Kumaris conceive it, sexual intercourse has nothing whatsoever to do with 'love.' To love another person is to love what the other person really is—namely, a soul. But we are normally deceived by our undiscriminating physical eyes, and instead of souls we see male and female bodily forms when we look at other persons. Only those whose 'eye of knowledge' (the third, soul-seeing eye in the forehead) is fully opened are totally safe from this deception. Therefore, the only persons in the movement who were ever allowed to embrace members of the opposite sex were Dada Lekhraj himself and his main disciple, Om Radhe. From false vision arises lust, which, far from being love, is the source of interpersonal violence. In the daily discourses frequent reference is made to women being 'tortured' by demands for sex, and in one of the movement's booklets it is asserted that people who sex on each other with lust 'do not make love, but actually commit criminal assault on each other' (*Purity and Brahmacharya* 1976, 14).

There is a crucial connection between the question of sexuality and matters of power. To be unfree is to be powerless; thus, the secret of freedom is power. The problem for women is that they are powerless in the present era. In part this is a matter of powerlessness within unjust social institutions—'worldly' families in which they are but the 'heel of the left foot' of man. But this in turn merely reflects a more basic kind of powerlessness. Sexuality, most of all, binds women, as well as men, to the world; precisely because we lack the power to conceive children without coitus, we are sexual beings. Moreover, our very sexuality augments our powerlessness, for sexual intercourse involves the expenditure and waste of vital power.

This point must be appreciated against the background of certain more general Hindu ideas about sexuality. In the Hindu milieu there is a close connection between sexuality and power. Intercourse is regarded as debilitating, because it rapidly drains vital energies that are slow to accumulate in the body (see esp. Carstairs 1961, 83–88). Conversely, sexual restraint is a method of concentrating and storing power. The deity Shiva is the preeminent symbol of this principle. Shiva is the ascetic of the gods, dwelling apart from society and, during one phase of his existence, gathering fiery energy within himself by means of chastity.[2] When the other gods once wished to rouse him from his trance of withdrawal to prevent him from absorbing all of the energy of the universe, they sent the unfortunate Kāmdev, the god of lust. Shiva, the 'enemy of lust,' then burnt Kāmdev to ashes with fire from his third eye.

The Brahma Kumaris seek the power to make themselves free in a world that they themselves, by means of their power, will make. Given Hindu ideas about the relationship between power and sexuality, this means that they must renounce sexual intercourse. Since Shiva is the divine archetype of the sexual renouncer, it is not surprising that he is the presiding deity of the universe as they conceive it. Like Shiva himself, the Brahma Kumaris 'destroy lust' by opening their own third eyes, the locus of their soul-seeing 'divine vision.' And like him they accumulate power, a power that is at once tapped, enhanced, and validated by the successful practice of rāja yoga.

Shiva was a very important deity among the Hindus of Sind (Thakur 1959, esp. 108–15), which no doubt provided the cultural infrastructure for the Brahma Kumaris' elaboration of his image in their own peculiar direction. However, the Brahma Kumaris' Shiva is

[2] Shiva's personality and attributes are analyzed in O'Flaherty's outstanding book, *Asceticism and Eroticism in the Mythology of Śiva* (1973).

a somewhat reduced or truncated version of the Puranic original. As portrayed in Puranic mythology, his character swings wildly (though regularly) between extremes of eroticism and asceticism (see O'Flaherty 1973). But there is nothing erotic about Shiva as the Brahma Kumaris picture him; he is a purely ascetic deity whose character fulfills the values of the movement. Nothing whatsoever (as far as I know) is said of his celebrated amours with his consort Pārvatī. Most Hindus worship Shiva in the form of the phallic linga. The Brahma Kumaris acknowledge the linga as a coarse representation of Shiva but adamantly deny that it is phallic in any sense. They themselves prefer to represent him not by the more conventional *yoni*-mounted linga, but—as we have seen—by a red, egg-shaped emblem. This is said to be a likeness of the halo of reddish light surrounding his real presence in the supreme abode. At the center is a tiny white dot (or hole, if the device is of the hollow sort with a lamp inside) representing the point of light (jyoti bindu) that is the locus of his immense power, forever retained by absolute chastity.

This emphasis on the connection between power and sexuality underlies what to Western feminists might seem a rather odd feature of the Brahma Kumaris' position with regard to existing institutions. Although they consider marriage, and thus the family, to be oppressive in the present age, and although commitment to the movement by individuals has sometimes proven to be quite destructive to marriages and families, they do not advocate the dissolution of either. Neither the family nor marriage vexes them as such. There will be marriage in the new world to come, and married couples (I was told by a movement teacher) will take care of their children much as they do here and now. As we have seen, moreover, many members are married and live in families. In itself, this arrangement is not regarded as an obstacle to achieving salvation. Rather, it is *worldly* marriage, marriage with intercourse, to which the Brahma Kumaris most object. Instead of directing the energies of the movement toward achieving the kind of institutional reforms sought by Western feminists, what they seek is purity (*pavitratā*) within the family. By purity they particularly mean chastity, which in their view is the virtue from which all other virtues arise.

Childhood

As a theme celibacy is probably susceptible to as many variations as sexuality itself. One may speak, for example, of postsexual celibacy,

the renunciation of an already fulfilled sexuality. This is, in fact, the celibacy of many of the Brahma Kumaris' middle-aged and elderly converts (and, I should add, is not necessarily a virtue made of necessity). Celibacy might also be hypersexual, as in the tantric image of restraint within a context of erotic stimulation. But among the Brahma Kumaris, celibacy as a value seems to be conceived primarily as presexual, drawing for its imagery on what the West has learned to call the latency period of childhood. That this is so is consistent with the movement's concern with women.

In Hindu India, renunciation is one of the most important means for achieving liberation as religiously conceived. Unfortunately, in this tradition renunciation is not a value that applies very easily to women. While there is nothing in the idea of liberation through renunciation that necessarily excludes women, and while there are and have been female ascetics in the Hindu world, the fact remains that sannyās (world renunciation), conceived as a stage of life, is not for women, but for men. In the classical four-āshrama scheme (the four stages of life), a man's wife is permitted to accompany him to the forest in the penultimate stage of *vānaprasth*, but he becomes a sannyāsī, or full renouncer, alone. In this portrayal of world renunciation, the wife just seems to dwindle away.

But if the culturally dominant model of renunciation appears to exclude women, the Brahma Kumaris have exploited another possibility inherent in that construct as a way of developing a culturally legitimate conception of world renunciation for women. It involves an inversion of the dominant model: if men can become free through renunciation at the end of their lives, women can achieve a similar condition by recovering life's beginning. To some degree this idea is latently present in the concept of sannyās already. The full renouncer is, in fact, childlike in his asexuality and dependency on those around him. But the Brahma Kumaris have carried this idea much further.

The concept of childhood is a powerful theme in Brahma Kumari teachings. The satyug is not only the childhood of the world, but also an age of children. This is an era of endless springtime. There are no worries, there is no work, and above all there is no sex. It is a world of total innocence and perpetual play.

Likewise, there has been a rather distinct flavor of juvenility in the movement's subculture in the present world. Because of his advanced age at the time the movement began, and also in consonance with the general Hindu image of the deity Brahmā as a grandfather, Lekhraj's

persona was in some respects rather grandfatherly. He was also then, and remains today, the movement's father. During his lifetime his followers were not merely his nominal 'daughters' and 'sons,' but were really treated that way. He was the paterfamilias of what was, in effect, an adopted family for committed members of the movement. He 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,[3] and took his children-followers on seaside walks, picnics, and other excursions. One male informant very emotionally recalled to me being taken, as an adult, on Lekhraj's lap.

There were—and are today—other role-establishing symbolisms too. Lekhraj is not only imaged as parental-grandparental Brahmā, but also as playful Krishna, whose form he is believed to take as his first birth in the satyug. Here is a flute-playing Lekhraj. His discourses are called muralīs, which is the same word used for Krishna's flute. Thus, he attracts his followers as Krishna did the gopīs of Braj. Moreover, Lekhraj's identity also incorporates something of Kalkin's, who likewise comes at the end of history and who, like Lekhraj, is a teacher of women (O'Flaherty 1976, 30).

But the dominant image is parental. Whatever else members of the movement might be, they are Brahmā Bābā's reborn ('lost but now found again') daughters and sons, and this relationship continues through mediumistic seances today. When you 'die alive,' the Brahma Kumaris say, you become 'Bābā's child.' Nor is the image of movement members as children always strictly familial. Although the movement has chosen the institutional facade of a 'university,' in many ways the prevailing atmosphere is more that of a primary schoolroom with its emphasis on classroom decorum and mild scoldings for the disobedient.

But why should the Brahma Kumaris wish to be children? The answer seems to lie in their use of women's situation as a metaphor for the human condition. Brahma Kumari historical cosmology portrays the world as a paradise in its childhood; only when the world grows up (to its sexual awakening) does the trouble begin. The point is, a

[3] In the Hindu tradition generally the theme of child-parent love may be stronger in prasād-taking than is generally recognized. Parents are, of course, feeders. The 'special-treat' character of prasād, especially when it takes the form of sweets, may well evoke recollections of childhood feelings toward parents. A perceptive informant (not a Brahma Kumari) once said to me that in her view the real function of prasād was to stimulate 'positive feelings' (her words) toward the deity in children.

similar 'fall' is characteristic of changes a woman experiences over the course of her life cycle. Or this, at least, is the Brahma Kumari view.

The change in religious as well as social status that women in northern India undergo at the time of marriage is a matter of great symbolic importance to the Brahma Kumaris, and a subject frequently touched upon in Lekhraj's sermons. A *kanyā*, or unmarried girl, is considered a kind of goddess.[4] In northern India one of the main occasions for the worship of the goddess (in the generic sense) is a ceremonial period known as *navrātra* (nine nights). The Brahma Kumaris put great emphasis on the fact that one of the ways the goddess is worshipped during this festival involves the worship (pūjā) of unmarried girls, which is offered just as it would be to an icon of the goddess on an altar. But a woman is not worshipped in this way after marriage; then the husband, not the wife, is regarded as pūjya, 'worthy of worship.' A wife, by contrast, is merely pujārī, 'one who worships.' It is true that the Hindu world considers the new bride who enters the house to be an earthly Lakshmī, the goddess of prosperity. But according to the Brahma Kumaris, a woman cannot really be Lakshmī unless she lives in celibacy, and this is not possible in 'worldly' marriage. She cannot be Lakshmī, in other words, unless she is married to Nārāyaṇ.

The analogy is obvious: just as the world falls with the advent of sexuality, so too the divinity (or at least the potential divinity) of women is lost when they marry. To regain divinity, or to ensure its perpetuation, the Brahma Kumaris must therefore become children; that is, they must be reborn as virgin daughters in the house of a new father.

Fatherhood may seem an odd idea for a group with an apparently feminist orientation to stress, but there is hardly a more pervasive concept in Brahma Kumari teachings. Dada Lekhraj was, of course, a father to the movement, a role he continues to play from beyond death's door. But even more important, the Supreme Soul—Shiv Bābā—is imaged as masculine and paternal; he is the Supreme

[4] This conception is very important in Sindhi culture. Thakur reports that 'a virgin or unmarried daughter is addressed as goddess ("Niani" or "Devi") and is considered equal to one hundred Brahmans . . . [who are] substituted in several rites by virgins. She is identified with sacred energy (shakti) as she symbolizes chastity which is potent with enormous powers . . . . She is frequently fed by the neighbors on various festivals including the Shradh festivities . . . . No fruit or vegetable of the season is eaten unless first offered to a virgin, whose feet are washed and homage paid whenever she is fed' (1959, 78). In this connection, it should be noted that Lekhraj also compares the worth of a pure woman to 'one hundred Brāhmaṇs.'

Father (parampitā) who loves his children (the souls of human beings) with fatherly watchfulness and devotion. As we have already noted, the Brahma Kumaris characterize rāja yoga as 'remembering father,' by which they mean remembrance of our true father whose identity we forgot when we forgot our own.

The contrast between the idea of one's supreme and 'true' father (Shiv Bābā) and one's earthly or worldly (laukik) father is strong in these materials. The contrast is also explicitly linked with the issue of the structural exclusion of women from their natal families. This conjunction is deeply resonant with the life experiences of North Indian women. At the time of marriage a woman leaves her worldly father's home for an altogether new kind of existence. The Brahma Kumaris characterize this transition as a kind of rebirth. As a woman is reborn into a new family and a wholly new kind of life, her dominant identity changes from that of daughter to daughter-in-law. This change provides one of the staples of Indian folklore and literature, both traditional and modern, because of the potential for anguished separation and tragedy it carries. A married woman no longer enjoys the relative freedom that was hers as daughter and sister in her father's house. Her station as a daughter-in-law is low, at least initially. Also, according to the Brahma Kumaris, her role is largely one of onerous servitude. However, one need not ever be truly exiled from the Supreme Father's house, since he will always welcome his daughters back if they can but remember.

The life experiences peculiar to women are associated with what the Brahma Kumaris regard as distinctively feminine spiritual virtues. Lekhraj used to say (*Pitā shrī* n.d., 20–21) that it is precisely because women must leave their father's house at marriage to be reborn into a new life that they are uniquely amenable to the 'rebirth' that the spiritual life entails. Women are sannyās-minded, he said, because they are used to the idea of giving things up. He also said that the hardships that women endure tend to foster the humility and willingness to serve others that is fundamental to religious devotion. A good and pure woman is better than 'one hundred Brāhmaṇs,' and such a woman can become a 'Ganges of knowledge.'[5]

[5] He also used to say that woman is not the 'field' (*kshetra*), but the 'field-knower' (*kshetragya*) (*Pitā shrī*, n.d., 24). In context this was a powerful assertion. In traditional theories of conception the woman is regarded as the mere 'field' (kshetra) into which man plants the vital seed (*bīj*). Lekhraj's statement is a double reference—to the famous field/field-knower (i.e., material nature/soul) distinction of the *Bhagavad Gītā*, and also to the aforementioned view of the feminine role in the economy of life.

In relation to the structural exclusion of women, another major issue for the Brahma Kumaris is inheritance. As Ursula Sharma has pointed out (1980, esp. 203–4), the inheritance system of northwest India is strongly masculine, and there is reason to believe that the hidden agenda of rules of exogamy in this region is to ensure the exclusion of women from the inheritance of land by exporting them as far from their natal families as possible. Sharma's analysis is probably valid for most areas of northern India, and is certainly consonant with what the Brahma Kumaris say. In the present world a daughter has 'no right' to her father's wealth (*Pitā shrī*, n.d., 21). The satyug, however, is an inheritance from the Supreme Father, belonging by right to the Brahma Kumaris as daughters who have proven themselves worthy of their claim.

But in a sense we, men and women alike, are *all* daughters who have become daughters-in-law. Subordination means living apart from one's father in worldly marriage; liberation, therefore, is to dwell with one's father as daughter of the house. The earthly hell into which we have fallen is simply worldly marriage, writ large. We have lost touch with our true father and have become 'lost children.' We must remember him and become his virgin daughters again, because only in his house can we find real freedom.

The idea of attaining autonomy and freedom by reclaiming premarital virginity has a special context in the symbolism of the Hindu pantheon. The image of the goddess in Hinduism is extremely complex, and since it has been explored in detail elsewhere,[6] I shall merely note a few relevant points here. Amidst the immense variety of forms the goddess takes, it is possible to discern two contrasting images. One portrays the goddess as the spouse of the gods. In these forms (as Lakshmī, Sītā, Pārvatī, and others) she is associated with such positive qualities as prosperity, nurturance, and fidelity. She is not a truly autonomous figure, since her identity is closely linked to that of her divine husbands. But when the goddess's marital connection is not stressed, another of her selves comes to the fore. Then she appears as a supremely powerful weapon-carrying killer of demons. In at least some of these forms, such as Kālī, she is portrayed as fearsome and even potentially dangerous, but these same powers can also be highly auspicious.

The autonomous goddess is an obvious symbol for a concept of woman as powerful and free. Her inherent power is unmodulated by

[6] See, for example, O'Flaherty (1980) and the essays in Hawley and Wulff (1982).

the restraints of marriage; she is a self-sufficient and self-directing force in the universe. Moreover, her status is not derived. Devotees worship her on her own account, since they believe that all other deities are subsumed in her. This independent goddess is the one virgin girls primarily represent in the rites of navrātra. This is also the goddess the Brahma Kumaris wish to emulate—autonomous, free, possessing inner powers protected by chastity, and worthy of worship like the virgins of the festival.

To recover childhood—and with it the virtues of premarital virginity—the Brahma Kumaris must die to old social roles (though they may continue to act them out) so that they may return to their true father's house. In their view earthly families are only temporary concatenations of material persons that have nothing to do with the souls that we essentially are. Thus, one must be reborn as a special kind of child in order to recover one's true identity in the eternal father's abode. Within this divine family (īshvarīya kuṭumb) the Brahma Kumaris believe they can achieve liberation from the injustices of this world and the promise of a liberated life, jīvan mukti, in the world to come.

Gender and Recognition

On the surface the Radhasoami and Brahma Kumari movements have little in common; millenarian and feminist tendencies seem to situate the Brahma Kumaris in an almost wholly different universe of religious thought and experience. But the differences seem less striking on closer inspection. What we learn from the juxtaposition of these two traditions is not simply how various the Hindu tradition is, but also how adaptable some of its most basic symbolisms and concepts can be.

Obviously the Radhasoami and Brahma Kumari traditions construe history quite differently. The Radhasoami image of the cosmos emphasizes temporal vastness, and finds in this idea support for a particular vision of the self's alienation from the world and salvationary opportunity. However, the celebrated cyclic déjà vù of Indic religions seems to play little role, if any, in this tradition. The Brahma Kumaris' scheme, on the other hand, emphasizes temporal finitude (in the context of infinite repetition). For them this focus provides a basis for a sense of crisis that has given them the courage to challenge the institutions of what they regard as an evil world. It is not, though, a motive to try to reshape the world directly. Differences

of this magnitude between the two movements can be accommodated within the fold of the Hindu tradition, though not (in either case) under its name.

However, there are also similarities between these two constructions of time's passage. The most obvious likeness is that both schemes include a conception of history as cyclical. The materials we have seen suggest that in the Indic world this is a pattern that can be much modified, and even, as in the Radhasoami tradition, relegated to the status of a footnote, but it cannot be easily rejected. A focus on 'last things' may seem to be such a rejection, but in the Brahma Kumari case an emphasis on the imminence of the end of the world seems—paradoxically—to have accentuated a sense of historical reiteration: history becomes a movie, shown again and again. The end of the world can be made into a desperate fact by bringing it close, but it cannot be made unique. Moreover, any attempt to shift salvationary goals from the total otherness of transhistory must apparently be trapped by the cycle in the end. The Brahma Kumaris expect a heaven on earth, but the price they pay for this expectation is commitment to a paradise that cannot be forever.

In relation to interpretations of the human situation in history, another common theme is amnesia. The importance of this principle is far greater than its lack of visibility in many writings on Indic religion might suggest. Amnesia is central to the logic of karma as a response to the theodicy problem. If our experiences are the effects of the moral qualities of deeds done in past lives, then, given the capriciousness of fortune, faith in the justice of one's present experience makes sense only in a world in which the past can never be certainly known. This is undoubtedly one reason why the Brahma Kumaris, for all of their emphasis on their own peculiar brand of historiography, expect full memory (taking the form of full foresight) only when the books are closed at world's end when history stops. Full self-awareness has to be atemporal awareness.

By accelerating the cycle, Lekhraj made history matter in a very special way. But in the end this vision collapsed back into the black hole of transhistory. Lekhraj's warning was also a recollection, and all of his prophetic visions had this double aspect. The result was a pervading sense of present tense. What will be, was; all of history, in the final analysis, is. To the degree that history is known for what it truly is, it is known from a standpoint outside of history.

Nor is there any possibility of ameliorating history from within. Because Lekhraj's thinking was based on the Hindu idea of cycles, and because the cycles are inevitable and fixed, it would have been nonsensical for him to have advocated trying to rescue *this* world by reforming its institutions. In this kind of world you cannot deal with things *in* history—you have to deal with history itself. And this means, at some level, escape from history. Therefore, although Lekhraj encouraged in his followers an urgent awareness of their position in history, the final result, at the level of praxis, was a renunciation of history by means of withdrawal into the liminal sangamyug and the contemplative disengagement of rāja yoga. Among other things, this meant that women—women greatly concerned about their position in a highly patriarchal society—ended up by meditating in semidarkened rooms.

On the matter of feminism, it must be stressed again that this is by no means the only concern of the Brahma Kumari movement. Although women's interests are a conspicuous element in their conception of the world and the human situation within it, they regard the tragedy of our present existence as a human problem, not specifically as a women's problem. Men have been involved in the movement from the beginning, and were in fact a majority among the daily attendees at the center in Delhi where most of my inquiries were conducted. Moreover, gender and sexual issues are muted in the movement's current persona, which has been deliberately focused on the culturally less provocative theme of world peace. All this said, however, at the very core of the Brahma Kumari view of the world there is an outlook that is feminist in the sense that it is based on a critical analysis of the position of women in Hindu society whose liberation it seeks, albeit in accord with what Western feminists might regard as a very queer idea of freedom.

It is possible, of course, that the Brahma Kumaris are in error about the relevance of their message to the women of India, or for that matter to anyone. Certainly their message seems to have very little general appeal. The sect has prospered greatly, but it still remains quite small in comparison with the size of the society in which it is situated. On the other hand, this may be an indication that its message is all too relevant. From its inception there has been nothing more striking about the Brahma Kumari movement than the uneasiness and distrust it has provoked in Indian society. This discomfort may reflect what men and women alike perceive as a powerful symbolic challenge to heterosexual relations in a highly patriarchal

society—relations that may be more sensitive and fragile than is commonly supposed.

In this respect the Brahma Kumari movement is an excellent illustration not only of the richness of the Hindu tradition, but also of the ways in which elements of religious culture can be reordered to serve goals ostensibly quite remote from tradition. The indigenous roots of the Brahma Kumaris' teaching about women are plain at many levels. Their notions of the wrongs done to women, their concept of the power that liberates, their idea of how such power can be acquired, and their image of liberation itself are all in one way or another derived from the Hindu tradition. The result is a notable achievement: a Hindu feminism, radical in its implications, yet true to its own past.

But there is also an even deeper level of congruence between Brahma Kumari feminism and other Indic visions of the world. Here the striking contrast between Brahma Kumari concern with women and Radhasoami indifference to the same issue is a happy circumstance, since it points the way to true fundamentals. If the Radhasoami and Brahma Kumari traditions are visualized as the two arms of a 'V', widely separated at the top, then at their intersection we find that most basic of all religious problematics: identity. In both traditions the truly crucial question is that of who the devotee really is. The devotee is portrayed as lost, alienated from his or her 'true home' and real nature. Self-discovery is thus the devotee's task and challenge.

In both traditions, too, the resolution of the identity problem seems to involve very special kinds of interactions with identity-transformative 'others.' One transforms oneself by in some sense 'taking in' the superior nature of an exalted being. There are obvious differences of emphasis. Far more than the Brahma Kumaris, Radhasoami devotees are eaters and drinkers of the Lord's effluvia. Among the Brahma Kumaris the aperture through which divine-human interaction takes place is very narrow. By comparison with Radhasoami practice, there is relatively little prasād-taking; instead devotees ingest mainly knowledge in the form of the divinely inspired words for which Lekhraj was the human medium. Like prasād, these words were and are mouth-borne, but they are a somewhat more subtle medium for deity-devotee transactions than food and saliva. In addition, the visual medium, also crucial in the Radhasoami tradition, has become central to Brahma Kumari practice; in rāja yoga the Brahma Kumaris are visual drinkers of divine soul-light through awakened faculties of inner awareness.

But it is not enough merely to be a drinker, hearer, or seer. All depends on who the 'other' is. What is crucial seems to be the trick of recognition that supplies energy to the devotee's sense that his or her interactions with another really are self-transformative. This trick of recognition requires seeing the other in a way that transcends mere appearances.

For the Brahma Kumaris, as a devotional congregation, what was first necessary was the recognition of Lekhraj himself as a special being, 'appearances to the contrary notwithstanding.' The Brahma Kumaris stress that outwardly he never seemed to be anything more than a perfectly ordinary 'old man.' Recognition dawned for his first followers when their 'divine eyes' were opened and they saw light and power in his visage. This formative recognition continues to be enacted on a weekly basis when sisters enter trances to visit him in his subtle form. These visual visitations are exactly analogous to the ideal Radhasoami devotee's vision of more refulgent forms of the sant satguru in his or her ascent to regions above. It is also enacted, on a different level, in rāja yoga. When a student learns the technique from a human teacher, he or she is learning, in effect, to know himself or herself as soul by coming to see another as soul—that is, by coming to see the other in a way that departs completely from appearances. Having learned this, the student can then enter unaided relationships with the totally nonphysical Supreme Soul. In all of these cases the other is essentially an identity-transforming mirror, an external point of reference through which the self comes to know itself differently.

Brahma Kumari feminism, concerned as it is with a reassessment of female identity, works in partnership with this principle; at this level an 'otherworldly feminism' blends into forms of religious experience that are probably of very general importance in the Hindu world. From this standpoint the peculiarities of Brahma Kumari cosmology and historical theory diminish in importance. One must distinguish between the specific promise of such a tradition and its psychic rewards. The Brahma Kumaris promise a heaven to come, a paradise of (though it is not *just* this) perfect sexual equality. What the movement actually offers is a new way of experiencing the self, here and now, in which (among other things) gender differences are irrelevant. Such experiences are offered by other Hindu subtraditions too. For those who are fully committed to the movement, it also offers a manner of life, one of liminal siblinghood, in which an altered sense of self can be socially expressed in a communitarianism of extraordinary inwardness and intensity.