Cross-Cultural Adaptation: The Brahma Kumaris in the Western World

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INTRODUCTION

Despite the acknowledged prominence of religious currents of Asian origin amongst New Religious Movements (NRMs), relatively little attention has been given to the way the differing socio-cultural environments of the Asian countries and the Western countries have shaped the development of these movements. This is to be expected to some extent because so many Asian-derived NRMs have emerged as named organizations only after the founding teachers arrived in the West. One thinks, for example, of Vivekenanda's Vedanta Society, Yogananda's Self-Realization Fellowship, the organization centred around Isherwood's guru in Hollywood, and Transcendental Meditation, to name a few. But numerous others underwent periods of growth in the Asian environment first - even if influenced more or less strongly there by the West via colonial and post-colonial development, interchanges of religious and philosophical thought (both pre- and post-Theosophical, high- and low-brow), and through the presence of Western seekers in Hindu and Buddhist religious institutions. Cases like the various schools of Tibetan and Zen Buddhism and Shivananda's Divine Light Mission come to mind as well known examples. Brooks (1989) provides us with a revealing study of an NRM, ISKON, functioning in both Asian and Western cultural environments, and reflects back from his ethnographic material on ISKON Westerners in India and Indian Krishna devotees to enlighten our understanding of the evolution of the organization. Yet little has been done to examine the significance of transportation of NRMs from their Asian homelands (when they have them) to specific Western environments.

The focus of the core sociological literature on NRMs has been upon patterns of institutional change *within* Western society. Issues examined include sect formation (Stark 1985, Stark and Bainbridge 1986; Campbell 1972,1977), adaptation to mundane society or world rejection (Wallis 1984:9-39), institutionalization of charisma vs. defence of its free-form utilization by leaders (Johnson 1988; Robbins 110-121; Stark 1987; Wallis 1982, 1984:110-113; Weber 1948; Wilson 1987), and internal factors, such as commercialization, professionalization and transcendentalization, influencing organizational growth or decline (Robbins 1988:123-127; Wallis 1984:100-101; Wallis and Bruce 1986). Where explicit attention has been given to the socio-cultural context of the NRMs it is to explain the sudden prominence of these movements in the late 1960s and early 1970s in North

America, Europe and the UK (Anthony and Robbins 1982; Barker 1983; Bellah 1976; Robertson,1985; Wuthnow 1985). The significance of the Western socio-cultural environment is read, then, for the emergence of a class of religious activity, rather than for the patterns of institutional change within organizations. Coming somewhat closer to our concerns, Stark (1987:19) has identified a "favourable ecology" as a factor in NRM survival and bureacratization, but, like Richardson (1985) and Robbins (1985) is concerned primarily with taxation and other aspects of the legal environment.

In this paper it is argued that at least in the cases on NRMs formed first in an Asian country and then transported to the West (or visa versa) there is a clear need to problematize the significance of the contrasting socio-cultural environments, looking beyond the legal environment to broader patterns of social life and values in specific countries or communities, for a more complete understanding of processes of institutional change. Differences in structure and outlook of the Brahma Kumaris Raja Yoga organization in India and Australia are examined in order to develop the case. Given the internationalization of so many NRMs, one might well wish to extend this type of comparison to those organizations originating in Western countries but faced with both adaptations to particular new cultural settings and to the exigencies of transnational management.

The Western case materials utilized in this analysis derive from a study conducted by the authors on the Brahma Kumaris (BKs) between 1991-1993. The study was centred in Australia, one of the most active Western sites of BK activity outside India and a country whose citizens have made significant contributions to the development of the BK movement in the UK and many other parts of the world. The Australian organization graciously facilitated the administration of a questionnaire to its membership on their social backgrounds, types and frequency of involvement with the organization and attitudes to spiritual and social issues. The authors concentrated most of their participant observation and in-depth interviewing in Australia, but also visited BK centres and personnel in the UK, Europe and the USA as well as in New Delhi and Mt. Abu, the spiritual centre of the organization in India. Lawrence Babb's (1986) insightful ethnography of the BKs in India serves as an authoritative source of comparative materials, supplementing the more casual observations by the authors themselves on the Indian scene.

OUT OF INDIA: THE BRAHMA KUMARIS MOVE TO THE WEST

Although insiders recall that the founder of the Brahma Kumaris, Sindhi businessman Dada Lekhraj, obscurely anticipated the spread of his movement outside of India, when he died in 1969 no one guessed that this would actually happen. The eventual establishment of the BKs outside of India occurred not by plan to, as it were, move into

the Western "market," but rather in response to calls from Indian expatriots in London. Soon after Dada Lekhraj "left the body," as BKs prefer to understand his passing, Indian families in London who had been associated with the movement in India expressed a need to have an exponent of the organization sent to them for their spiritual guidance. In response, the organization sent them a series of senior "sisters" experienced in the foundation and guidance of centres in India but with no experience overseas. The first of these was a qualified medical doctor, Dr. Nirmala, followed by Dadi ("elder" or "senior sister") Ratan Mohini and then in 1974 by Dadi Jenki, who has remained the principle figure in London. She now oversees from that vantage the BK's Western-world operations in sixty two countries.[1] Initially concerned with the spiritual needs of only a handful of Indian families overseas, she is now responsible for an international, multi-ethnic community only a small minority of which consists of Indian expatriots. In Australia, for example, we found that only 8.3% of committed members, or "brahmins" are of Indian parentage.[2]

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

By 1976 there were still only about a dozen Westerners who had made it through this cultural barrier.[3] Some of them were drawn across that barrier by dramatic spiritual experiences that formed the basis of immediate and intense bonds with the teacher. But all had something in common sociologically: they were relatively well educated, creative and adventurous. A few of these Westerners, though by no means all, were what might loosely be described as "hippies": young people, among them travellers from Europe and Australia, looking to experience life, with little concern for moralistic and social

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[1]Source: personal interviews, Mt. Abu, February 1992 and London, March 1993.

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

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

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

conventions.[4] The rest could be characterized as entertaining interests in "alternative" ideas and life styles.[5] Given their social flexibility, combined with a capacity for discipline, they were ready to accept both the demanding regime of BKs (including dietary and sexual abstinence, radically different hours of sleep, and regular meditation practice) and its embeddedness in a foreign culture.

Two of this early cohort were in their forties; the rest were under thirty with the majority being male.[6] Their social profile (including their educational and attitudinal characteristics) thus contrasted with that of the Indian BKs in London, many of whom participated as families and who were struggling to establish themselves in the ethnically mixed and predominantly lower-middle class sections of north-west London.

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

The foundation of BK centres in North America, under the initial guidance of sisters from the UK and India, proceeded with more difficulty, with the first US centre being founded in Texas in 1978. Ironically the USA, renown for the intensity and catholicity of its religious interests, has proven a less fertile ground for BK work than the UK and Australia.[7]

As BK Raja Yoga has grown and spread overseas, the delegation of committed and capable members to new centres away from their home countries, as well as geographical mobility for personal professional reasons, have greatly internationalized the middle-level

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

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

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

[7]The spread of Raja Yoga to other countries: Actually Westerners had met Dada Lekhraj Raj in Mt. Abu, but none had taken up his teachings during his life time. The first Westerner to "take the knowledge" was a German who came to Mt. Abu and accepted the teachings there in 1974. After returning to Germany, he founded a centre there in 1975. In the same year that a centre was established in London, that is, 1971, centres were also established in Hong Kong and Zambia. It was the UK and Australian centres, however, that produced most of the BKs who became pioneers in countries outside India, and the London centre, now housed in a large, purpose-built structure called "Global Cooperation House," has been the administrative centre for Western operations since its founding. Interestingly Japan received a visit from the "daughters of Brahma" as early as 1954, when a small delegation was sent to attend a yoga conference. Later, in 1971, a brother was sent, but no centre eventuated until much later. Sister Maureen Goodman of Global Cooperation House, has called Japan "the driest ground" for the BKs.

leadership of the organization outside India. Thus, for example, Australian BKs reside, pursue their professions and serve the organization in established centres in the UK, Brazil, Greece and Germany and the USA, as well as in the newer non-Western centres they helped to found. The major regions of operation are still overseen by Indian sisters associated with the organization since the time of Dada Lekhraj, but Westerners and other non-Indians now staff many of the national-level coordination posts as well as local centres.[8]

STRUCTURE, ENVIRONMENT AND ADAPTATION

Clearly, when Asian teachers and disciples create an organization for the first time in a Western country issues of both cultural and structural adaptation will be prominent, even unavoidable, as they emerge in the interactions of expatriot founder and "native" followers. An Indian organization transplanted from its home environment initially into an expatriot Indian community in the West might, on the other hand, be expected simply to expand overseas an existing set of organizational structures, patterns of interaction and attitudes. Is this what has happened with the Brahma Kumaris? Is a description of the organization as it functions in India equally applicable to BK Western (and other non-Indian) operations? The above description of the early London BK centre suggests that this is so, but did the structure remain a close copy of the Indian one as numbers grew and the organization came to include more and more Westerners? And what was the situation in the majority of Western countries, such as Australia, where the Indian migrant community was much smaller than in the UK? To answer this question the authors reflect upon their recent participant observation in BK life in Australia and to a lesser extent in the UK and Europe as well as upon survey data from Australia. We will show that in Australia some significant differences in operation and outlook have emerged, albeit within the framework of a standardized international pattern. However, we will also argue that these differences are not simply regional adaptations that can be expected to remain fixed in their local contexts. The contrasted Australian and Indian patterns are contemporary phases in an on-going process of change. Moreover both contemporary patterns form part of a single international organization, and differences in membership, leadership and attitudes in the various regional segments of the organization are part of a mix which will help determine the future shape of the organization as a whole. In particular, we suggest that the greater worldly involvement of Westerners through their jobs, the changing mix of membership (which now includes more mature people in the

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

professions, business and the arts) and the increased prominence of liaison activities with the outside world, may well impact on such crucial matters of organizational life as leadership patterns and the significance of the millennium for action in the world today.

CONTRASTING CONTEMPORARY PATTERNS: THE BRAHMA KUMARIS IN INDIA AND AUSTRALIA

Indian Templates

As Babb observed (1986:100ff), the BK organization of the 1980s in India was one that had undergone considerable change. In its earliest phase it was merely an informal *satsang* (i.e., devotional) group emotionally and spiritually electrified by the extraordinary experiences of their host. The effect of these experiences - in which the Lord Shiva spoke through Dada Lekhraj and the teacher saw the coming cataclysmic destruction of the world - was to create out of the satsang group the core institutions of the new BK organization. The teacher as respected commentator and source of personal advice became a *sant satguru*, a living conduit of the divine. Homey businessmen's wives and children who had come to the *satsangs* for Gita readings and a socially respectable break from the confines of their homes, started being transfixed in their teacher's presence, experiencing visions of Krishna such as prove elusive to dedicated *bhaktas* and *sannyasis*.[9] These dramatic changes in the tone of the gatherings transformed the somewhat prosaic Gita group and greatly enhanced the popularity of the teacher.

Spiritual appetites whetted, the followers sought more intense involvement in religious pursuits. This was met by the commencement of communal living and the formation of a school for the children. In 1937 Dada Lekhraj formalized the administration of the community by establishing the Managing Committee (staffed by female devotees) and devolved upon it his personal fortune. Thus emerged a small, intensely inward-looking group of individuals (primarily, but not exclusively female), intimately connected with their teacher through communal living, yoga and study.

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[9] Source: personal interviews with Dada Lekhraj's contemporaries, Mt. Abu 1992. See also Babb 1986:10-101.
Bhaktas are "devotees;" generally the term points towards people practicing an emotive form of worship emanating from the Hindu "bhakti" tradition. This can be practiced at various levels of intensity by householders, but it has also been refined into a demanding path requiring the severance of worldly bonds, particularly when combined with with elements of the yoga tradition. BKs used the term "bhakti" in a special sense to refer to any religious activity consisting of "mere" worship of deities or gods. *Sannyasis* are people, prototypically and almost exclusively males, who have renounced the world to devote themselves to spiritual learning, austerities and meditation.

After Partition and the move in 1950 from Pakistan to Mt. Abu, India, the small "family"[10] came to see itself as having sufficient maturity to minister to people living outside the quiet and remote mountain resort that was their home. Many of the little girls, carefully nurtured and schooled by "Brahma Baba" (as Dada Lekhraj is now known) and the Brahmin family, had grown up. Occasional visitors to the mountain home of the community called attention to the spiritual needs of others, and so Baba sent his "daughters," the Daughters of Brahma (which is the meaning of *Brahma Kumaris*) to cities elsewhere in India to establish residences (or "centres") as homes for people who wished to take up the life and as places of yoga and teaching for the public. Though now no longer as inward looking as when the family was almost entirely resident in one establishment, the dispersed organization as it has survived and grown in many Indian cities and towns still has, in Babb's words, "a communitarianism of extraordinary inwardness and intensity" (1986:155).

The intense "communitarianism" of the Brahma Kumaris in India has been maintained by keeping the life of the centre-dwelling "children of Brahma," but, more particularly, the life of the "daughters of Brahma," as the ideal of spiritual life in this age.[11] For, like Buddhism so many centuries ago and more recently the Protestant reformation, the teachings of Dada Lekhraj opened up 'virtuoso' spirituality to the ordinary person, challenging everyone to try for perfection of the soul. Though it is acknowledged that only some are fated to so choose, everyone is invited to learn the saving knowledge, to practice yoga and to adopt austerities thought by many Indians to be properly the path of older, high caste males. And in the BK's Raja Yoga, not only are women included amongst the spiritual 'virtuosi', but they are identified as the pre-eminent vessels of salvation. This radical democratization of Hindu traditions has been both a cause of vilification of the movement in the subcontinent (through it has now largely subsided) and a valuable mark of progressivism in Westernized Indian and Western eyes.

Membership roles and organization boundaries

All democratized paths to salvation are forced to cope with not only criticisms from traditionalists but differences in levels of motivation and commitment. Even when priests are dispensed with and monks become less exclusive, some differentiation in roles amongst those subscribing to a common path according to these levels of commitment

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[10]The BKs have from the beginning of the life of the community characterized themselves as a "family." The term is in constant use in Australia, as elsewhere, carrying a strong and positive emotional charge associated with the solidarity and supportiveness of the organization. The term "family" is, of course, prominent in the self-reference of many NRMs, such as __(Jonestown?)_____ . For the distinctive symbolic significance of the concept of family for the Brahma Kumaris, see Babb 1986:147.

[11]Note that in other "ages" celibacy and the moral leadership of women were not necessary. These are requirements of a period of emergency at the end of the world that will ensure a minority of people are reborn as the blessed inhabitants of the Golden Age when the cycle of ages begins again, cf. Babb 1986:113-117;142-145.

inevitably occur. Moreover, as networks focused on certain inspiring individuals coalesce into institutions and organizations, the issues of what constitutes a common path, what one has to do to be seen to be following it and whether association with other paths and teachers moves one from insider to outsider status, begin to emerge. In the case of the BKs, the bases were laid for defining the membership statuses and the insider-outside boundary through two early developments: the formation of the residential community for the highly committed and the understanding Dada Lekhraj developed a year or so after his first, transforming ecstasies that not only vegetarianism but chastity was required for proper communion with God and rebirth in the Golden Age.[12] Thus adherence to five fundamental purity rules came to define who was and who was not one of Baba's children, a daughter or son of Brahma; and although people who could not reside with their fellow BKs were not seen to be necessarily of lesser spiritual stature, those who live in BK centres have become the models of what is most desirable and the backbone of the organization.

As the organization grew in India, especially once the sisters were sent outside Mt. Abu, the differentiation in membership roles became a more salient feature of the organization. Babb describes these as he observed them in the 1980s in New Delhi. There the highly committed, those who live in the BK centres, are known as "surrendered" sisters and brothers (1986:95;130-131). They are readily distinguishable from the laity who happen to be visiting the centres by the fact that they wear white clothing (saris for sisters). Brothers are expected to earn an income outside the centre, but sisters, who generally outnumber men in the centres, devote their energies entirely to the organization (Babb 1986:130-131). This is not only to shelter the women from the necessity of interacting so much with the outside world, but to give them, with the superior virtues that their girl- and womanhood confer upon them, the opportunity to do most of the key spiritual tasks: teaching, leading yoga and counselling. They also do the housekeeping for the centre, including cooking, which is seen as a spiritually significant task.[13]

Although the laity (those not resident in centres) are considered to be just as capable of spiritual perfection as the surrendered sisters and brothers in the centres, Babb diagnoses them as "anomic," being rather poorly integrated into the life of the organization (1986:132). Babb also suspects that many new members do not fully

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[12]Source: personal interviews, Mt. Abu, February 1992.

[13]As in many Hindu traditions, cooking is regarded as imparting the spiritual qualities or vibrations of the cook into the food. BKs wish to protect themselves from intimate contact with those who have not adopted their purity rules by not eating food cooked by them. They also appreciate food cooked by fellow BKs who are regarded as leading an exemplary life of purity, as their cooking is thought to convey benefit to those who eat it. Thus some of the most respected BKs work in the kitchens at Mt. Abu and the main London centre, Global Cooperation House. Further, food cooked by BKs is often offered at BK functions and is a gift of spiritual benefits as well as a tasty snack or meal.

understand the nature or weight of the commitments they are expected to take on, as he found a sharply bimodal distribution in the length of time people were associated with the BKs: quite new members and people long "in the knowledge" predominated, with few people in the middle range (1986:131). Apparently many Indian new members do not survive the realization of the costs of their new way of life.[14]

Nonetheless it is from lay families, some of them associated with the organization since the time of Dada Lekhraj, that many of the young women and men come into the centres as surrendered sisters and brothers (Ibid.:130). Having long been familiar with BK teachings, such women are likely to be more sure of the choices they are making when they don the white sari. Nonetheless, all newly surrendered sisters and brothers are considered to be on trial in the centres for the first six months of their residence there (Ibid.:131). The fact that the first period of residence in a centre is considered a trial period, combined with the very special privilege and obligation of a surrendered sister to live from the support of the community, suggests that in India movement into a centre is regarded as a choice for life, rather than as something to experiment with for as long as it suits.[15]

Attitudes to the wider community

Whether resident in a centre or in a *laukik* (worldly) family, Indian BKs, according to Babb, focus inward towards their spiritual family (1986:137;147). Whilst sharing in a general way the Hindu culture of the surrounding community, they are nonetheless set at odds with it by encouraging everyone who would have the greatest spiritual rewards to practice not only vegetarianism (which is in any case widely practiced and prestigious) but non-commensality with non-Brahmins and, particularly contentious for women, permanent chastity. Also, BKs do celebrate the major Hindu festivals, but in Babb's opinion (1986:135) the way in which they reinterpret them to serve as vehicles for their teachings is seen as confrontational. Further, not only do their rules and rituals create obstacles to easy interchange with non-members, but the daughters and sons of Brahma are explicitly discouraged from cultivating ties with them (Ibid.:137). Even service to the wider community (which has become increasingly important in the organization since the 1980s) is not meant to confer value upon work in the world. One does not earn salvation through "good works;" one offers them simply as gifts of compassion from the riches one

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

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

has already gained from purity and from the special access this gives to the divine. Nor do BKs expect, according to Babb, that through their service the world can be saved (1986:151). The world will end in cataclysm, and soon. What the BKs offer is the chance for those whose fate it is to restore themselves to purity and godly knowledge and hence assure themselves a place in the Golden Age that will follow the impending cataclysm. Others, not so fated, are merely offered a balm for the time of their suffering.

Survey Findings - Australian Patterns.

Australians who have been part of the BK movement from its earliest days describe its beginnings in a small organization consisting, predominantly (and remarkably in this society renown for its sexism) of young males.[16] Amongst them were not only Australians but British subjects and Europeans who had traversed the globe on the young adventurers' trails from Australia via Southeast Asia and the subcontinent to Europe. Open to experimentation and cultures different from their own, they were prepared to try even the repudiation of the libertinism that had become a central feature of Western youth culture and acceptance of the authoritative guidance of a mature Indian woman. At least communal living, which they were encouraged to adopt, had a certain cache in counter-cultural circles.

As will be demonstrated below, the membership underwent substantial demographic change in the 1980s and early 1990s, becoming not only much larger (it is estimated that there are now about 240 Australian residents practicing the purity rules and associating regularly with the organization) but experiencing changes in its sex, age and occupational profiles. Nevertheless, the distinctive adjustments to the Indian template made early on in the organization's life have persisted up to the present day and may well carry the seeds of further structural and ideational change.

Early organizational adjustments

One of these adjustments was to draw a substantial proportion of the Australian BK family into communal living *outside* "centres," in *bhavans*. Although only 34% of Australian BKs surveyed in 1992 had ever lived in a centre, 54.6% had lived in a *bhavan*.[17] Perhaps in part because so many more Australians than Indian young people live away from home and because there were no Australian families with BK affiliations, those wanting to

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[16]It is, of course, not remarkable that a religious movement of Indian origin should attract mainly youths at that time in this Western country, as the NRMs of the later twentieth century in Western countries have typically begun by recruiting mostly young people (Baker 1992:11; Wilson 1981:v). What is remarkable is the gender ratio.

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

practice the BKs' yoga (meditation) and prepared to adopt the purity rules readily sought to live with others so minded. Living in a "centre," however, is highly demanding since it is the place at which the administration, teaching and meditation functions for a whole area are carried out. The organization must see to it that its standards are met by having suitably capable people living in the centres; and individuals living in centres must be prepared to meet the constant demands on their time that are a part of the semi-public life of such places.

The *bhavan* is simply a place of BK co-residence other than a "centre." In Australia the company of fellow seekers these institutions provide has played an important part in helping people adopt habits quite alien to their natal cultural environment without exposing them prematurely to public responsibilities. In the land of sheep and cattle stations vegetarianism has only recently become moderately fashionable.[18] Celibacy in the 1970s was understood as appropriate for Catholic priests, nuns and unmarried women, but all these were already loosing the respect they once enjoyed (and all have all since become less common). Another radical departure from the Australian norm was waking in time for private meditation at 4 a.m. and attendance at the local centre at 5:30 a.m. for *murali* readings.[19] All these things were made easier in the *bhavans* where others had adopted the same rules and shared the beliefs which made them meaningful.

Another adjustment to the Indian organizational arrangements introduced early on in Australia was the requirement that all BKs (other than the Indian sister provided to oversee the new branch) should earn an income through outside jobs. Clearly, in the earliest days this was a sheer financial necessity. However, this requirement is still in place not only in Australia but in other Western countries, for all but the most senior administrators at the national level.[20] And even for these few the term "surrendered sister" (or "surrendered brother") is not commonly used, as if to discourage the idea that full-time service is a superior status to which all might aspire. This pattern may relate to the greater acceptability for Australian women of employment outside the home, however, it is usually explained in terms of the lesser maturity (in certain respects) of Westerners.

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[18] Australia is a highly urbanized country but has been described as having a "rural ethos" (Western 19 :)

[19] A *murali* (literally, "flute" in Hindi - a reference to one of the ways Lord Krishna charms his devotees) is in this context an inspired message offering guidance on spiritual development. After Dada Lekhraj's transformative visions, he wrote the first of these pieces, called *sakar murali*, in which both he and Shiva addressed the students or "children." After his passing the trance medium Dadi Gulzar began delivering similar messages from the beloved founder and Shiva. These are the *avayakt murali*.

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

Centre-dwellers and *bhavan*-dwellers alike, then, live with their fellow BKs, and everyone who does not have independent means or some form of pension holds an outside job. The combined effect of these arrangements is that the importance of the distinction between centre-dwellers and others is greatly diminished in Australia. This finds symbolic expression in the wearing of white by everyone who comes to a centre, except for those who have not finished the classes through which new-comers are introduced to BK teachings and except for those who wish to signal that they have not fully accepted the BK way of life. It finds practical expression in the participation of non-centre dwellers in important administrative and teaching tasks of the centres and in their leading of the meditations.

Flowing on from this, Australian non-centre dwellers (what in India Babb could readily distinguish as "the laity") are relatively well integrated into the life of the BK family, with only minor variations from city to city relating to size of city and consequent ease or difficulty of transport access to the centres. This is demonstrated in rates of participation of the family as a whole that are exceptionally high, both in the main weekend "services"and at weekday activities.[21]

When interviewed 88% of repondents (N = 194) stated that they had attended Sunday morning Murali session in the last week but only 53% had attended Saturday evening meditation the night before which is a similar attendance rate for the Sunday evening meditation of the same weekend (55%). However, 57% attended some additional meditation during the same week. It would seem that attendance at Sunday morning sessions is of greater importance. On the other hand, 80% of respondents claimed that they had attended morning meditation at least once in the past week with 53% affirming that they had attended six times or more during this period (median attendance rate = 6). In contrast to morning participation, only 16% showed for evening meditation 6 or more times (median attendance rate = 4).

These figures accord well with observations made by the authors on a number of occasions. Although the evening meditations sessions are less frequented, still, more than half of the regular Brahmins participated in the week examined. In fact, the BK ethos stresses the greater importance of the morning practice which no doubt accounts for the observed difference. A test for statistical significance between the mean rates of participation reveals that morning meditations were attended significantly more frequently than evening sessions ($p < 0.01$) for the week in question.

An examination of the attendance of Brahmins at other classes or WorkBees offered through the various centres reveals that less than half of the respondents (47%) attended these sorts of activities in the week reviewed with an average 3.7 classes per week per

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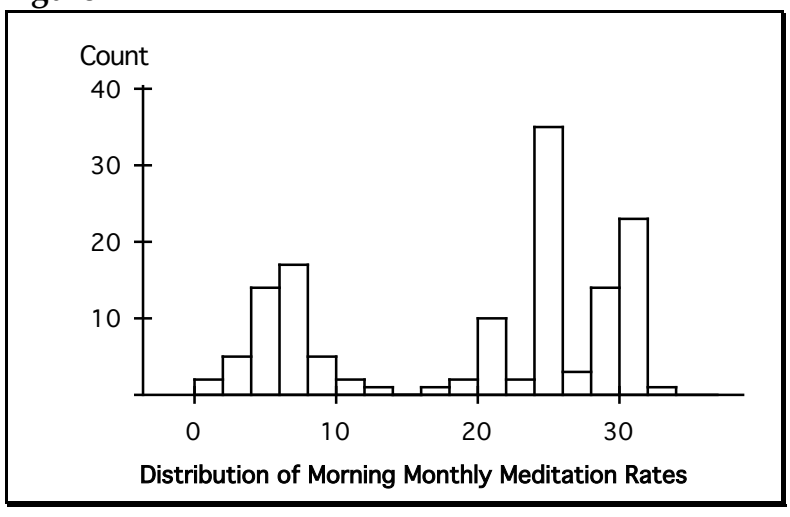
[21]Weekend 'services' refers to the long (two hour) meditations held on Saturday and Sunday evenings and the Sunday morning murali reading and meditation after which notices are read and visitors are introduced.

person. This relatively high frequency of participation for a minority suggests that there may be a core of the membership who are more committed to the organization. This possible variance in committment is not reflected, however, in any significant difference between the 'yes' and 'no' groups regarding mean number of months in Gyan or mean age. On the other hand, a cross-tabulation between the variables indicating class participation (or not) and whether one has lived in a centre (or not) reveals a significant dependent relationship (Chi-square = 18.11, 1 df, $p \leq 0.0001$) in which those who have lived in a centre are over-represented in class participation (68%) and those who have never lived in a centre are over-represented in the group who did not participate in classes during the surveyed week (64%).

When the all important morning meditation attendance rates for all reponding *brahmins* are plotted as a histogram (Figure 1), there appears to be a bi-modal distribution consisting of one group (n = 46) who attends on average less then a third of the time (attendance mean = 5.7, s.d. = 2.4, median = 6) and another group (n = 91) with average attendance of more than two thirds of the month (attendance mean = 25.8, s.d. = 3.7, median = 24). Further examination of the data reveals that the *low rate morning meditation attendees* are more likely to be female (attendance mean = 17.4, s.d. = 9.7) than male (attendance mean = 20.8, s.d. = 10.2) (statistically significant on a two-tailed t-test, $p < 0.05$) and more likely to be brahmins with a greater mean time in gyan (low rate attendees: mean time in gyan = 78.9 months, s.d. = 59.0; high rate attendees: mean time in gyan = 66.2 months, s.d. = 42.9 with no statistically significant difference found). A possible explanation for this latter finding may be that 'newer' brahmins are attempting to prove their worthiness through greater zealousness.

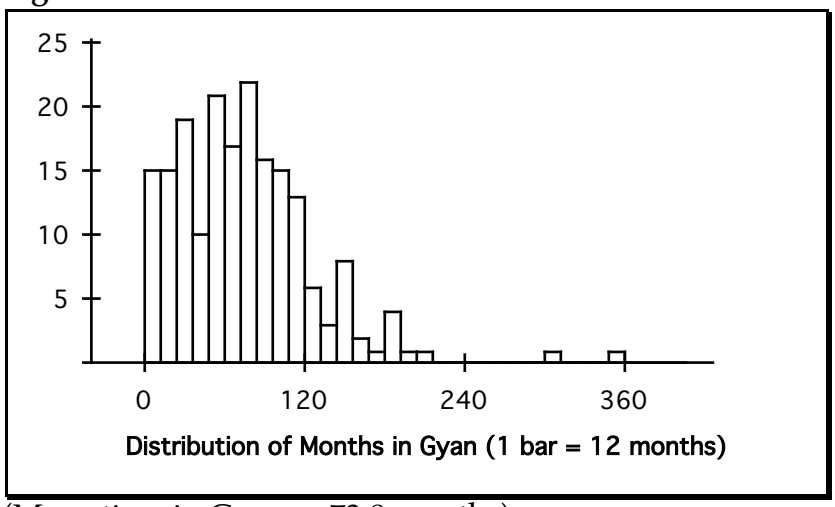
Figure 1



Although the results appear to indicate some greater committment or involvement by centre dwellers or previous centre dwellers to the BK organization, further evidence that non-centre dwellers are relatively well integrated into the life of the BK family is revealed in Figure 2. The bimodal distribution of "members'" length of association with

the organization that Babb found in India does not appear in Australia. The proportion of people who have been BKs for over one half to one year (4.7%) is only slightly less than that of people who have been BKs for a half a year or less (5.2%), and the percentage of those who have been BKs for between one to two years (9.4%) is about twice that in the half year or less category. Apparently sufficient support is available to new BKs to carry them past their period of early enthusiasm into long term participation and committment.

Figure 2



(Mean time in Gyan = 73.8 months)

Whilst the contrasts between role and status of centre-dwellers and other BKs is not so great in Australia as it appears to be in India, it must be acknowledged that a particular category of those who live in centres, that is the administrative heads (or "centre-in-charge"), are regarded as "seniors" with respect to those in the geographical area their centre serves. This is so not only because the centres-in-charge are primarily responsible for decision-making concerning the organization's activities in the area, but because their placement in the role indicates the confidence the senior sisters (the dadis), via their regional deputies, have placed in the qualifications and experience of the centre-in-charge to offer spiritual guidance. However, because of the nested hierarchy of administration, the status of "senior" is a relative one. Nor is imputed spiritual "weightiness" entirely co-terminous with administrative position.

The Indian sisters who knew Dada Lekhraj in his earthly life time naturally are regarded with a special respect, reminiscent of that accorded in Islam to the "companions of the Prophet." For the most part these venerable figures are only present for Australians when the dadis undertake visits outside India, or when Australians visit the Indian headquarters of the Brahma Kumaris at Mt. Abu. Some Australians who have been able to have extended contact with and direction from the dadis overseas may also earn special respect through this and be sought for informal advice rather more than others in a similar position in the formal administration.

Because of the minimal contrast in roles of centre-dwelling and other BKs and because of effective integration of non-centre dwellers in the activities of the organization, the most salient membership categories for the Australian BKs are "brahmins" (or "BKs") vs. "laukiks" (people "of the world"). *Brahmins* are those who have undertaken to follow all the purity rules in contrast to *laukiks* who have not. *Laukiks* may well join in BK activities, practicing meditation as taught by them and perhaps attending *murali* readings. They may also wear white when attending BK activities, the white then being a sign of respect and a means of marking off everyday activities from those in the centre, rather than being a sign of membership status.[22]

Demographic change

Although the distinctive features of the Australian BK organization emerged early in its history, subsequent growth has changed the social profile of its adherents. This in turn has created social dynamics that may have implications for the persistence of the structures we have described so far, both at the national and international levels. For example, with the growth in total numbers in the organization in Australia (that is, numbers of *brahmins*) has come an improvement in the sex ratio to the point that in 1992 females actually outnumbered males (59.8% of *brahmins* responding to the questionnaire were female).[23] This growth, however, has apparently not been sufficient to allow women to take the predominant roles in the running of the centres, which is the BK ideal. However, of the 66 respondents who reported in 1992 having ever lived in a centre, the ratio of men to women is exactly 1.0.[24]

Just as sex ratios have become less imbalanced as the organization has grown over the years, so has the age profile of *brahmins* come to more closely resemble that of the population at large. Long-term *brahmins* have reported that as the very young adults, who predominated in the first cohort of Australian BKs, came into their thirties (that is, in

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[22]There is, however, less emphasis on wearing white in Australian centres now than ten years ago, and in other Western countries a still more casual attitude is taken toward the colour code for dressing in centres.

[23]This resembles patterns of affiliation in some, but not all, Australian Christian denominations, such as Church of England, Roman Catholic, Lutherans and Orthodox Catholic, where males have been more numerous than females until the 1980s, when women took the lead (Mol 1985:69). It may be significant that many of these are heavily immigrant churches and males often immigrated alone, only bringing their families over after becoming established. Even before the 1980s, however, women have been more active participants in Australian church congregations than men(as women have been in churches elsewhere in the world) (Mol 1985:68 and Bouma 1992:117-118). Sex ratios in the Christian sects in Australia (Jehovah's Witnesses, Seventh Day Adventists, Church of Christ and the Salvation Army) have had low sex ratios (Mol 1985:71). Note also that there has been a decrease in the sex ratio of the Australian population at large from 102.2 males per 100 females in 1961 (ABS in Mol 1985:70 to 99.7 in 1986 (ABS: 1987).

[24]Note that the 50:50 figure represents the cumulative history of residence for respondents, not the proportion of women in the category of those currently living in centres.

the 1980s) a wider range of age groups started to become involved.[25] This is reflected in the present age profile which is a fairly normal distribution ranging from 10 to 84 years with a median age of 35 and a mean of 36.5 (s.d. = 13.2).[26]

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

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[25]Source: personal interviews with long-term participants in Syndey, June, 1992.

[26]Note that the Australian population in 1986 had a median age of 31.9 as reported by the Australian Bureau of Statistics. The BK figures are not far off for an organization in which children younger than preteens are not asked to participate in other than social activities.
Even though BK brahmins are celibate, many of their recruits already have children. The BKs in Australia actually resemble Australian Christian sectarian groups in terms of age distribution (cf. Mol 1985:75-76; Bouma 1992:126-127) rather than the established Christian denominations in which the twenty to forty year old age group are typically underrepresented.
Note also that the Indian notion of virtuoso religiousity appropriately being pursued in youth and after the age of childbearing is not evident here in this organization that generalizes the role of virtuoso to people of all ages and both sexes. The BK idea of family appears here in a distribution which includes all age ranges of a natural family except that from 0 - 10.

Table 1

Frequency breakdown of **Employment**

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

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

The levels of education reported reflect the predominance among BKs of people in jobs requiring high levels of skill and education. More than half report some tertiary education in a country where as late as 1981 only 3% of adults had a university degree (ABS in Mol 1985:88). However, the middle class educational and occupational profile of the BKs in Australia does resemble that of NRMs in other Western countries (Wilson 1981:v), but note that the contrast to mainline religious groups as regards education is not so stark in Australia as in Europe. In Australia, unlike Europe, the higher the level of education, the more likely a person is to be involved in some religious practice (Mol 1985:91).

Attitudes to the wider community

With the changed social profile of the organization has come a more open attitude to the wider community. Long-term BKs acknowledge the important role in this change of a membership more balanced in age and gender, and more firmly linked to the wider society through their occupational commitments. They also point to the changed orientation of the international organization from the 1980s towards more service and a changed attitude toward service. From that time Australian BKs say the *muralis* began to stress that all humankind are Baba's children, even if some are special in the degree of commitment they offer him.

Promoting conditions that will bring peace of mind to all people of the world then came to be a focus of a series of highly demanding international projects, such as "Million Minutes of Peace" (that operated in eighty countries) and "Global Cooperation for a Better

World" (run in 122 countries). The BKs have also pursued this concern for the wider community through the United Nations, winning affiliation with the United Nations' Department of Public Information, listing on the roster of the United Nations' Economic and Social Council and consultative status with UNICEF.

The head of BK Western operations, Dadi Jenki was also an invited participant in the Earth Summit in Rio. These developments, together with features of the Australian (and other Western) organizations that had been present from the beginning - namely, the linkages of all *brahmins* with the wider community through their jobs and the minimal differentiation of membership statuses, have lent momentum to the trend in Australia towards a more outward orientation. This is evident in a range of areas, from greater acceptance of brahmins' involvement in and borrowing from other spiritual domains to further erosion of the insider-outsider "boundary," to new understandings of the significance of work in the world for the coming millennium.

Looking first at insider-outsider boundaries, long-term *brahmins* in Australia have reflected on the lessening intensity of expectation in the last five to six years for people exposed to the BK teachings to either take the whole brahmin "package" or acknowledge that they are not meant to be one of the family and go elsewhere. Evidence for the greater acceptance of people maintaining connections with the BKs without adopting the full set of purity rules and attending early morning meditation regularly comes not only from the reports of "older" *brahmins* but from the recent introduction by BKs in Western countries of programmes to teach cognitive skills such as meditation and creative visualization removed from the doctrinal context of the basic BK "course." In Australia these skills courses have been adapted and taken to special needs groups as diverse as stressed professionals and business managers, the unemployed, physical abuse victims and substance abusers.

Similarly, Barker reports that in the UK the Brahma Kumaris have offered their positive thinking and meditational skills programmes to police cadets and Members of Parliament as well as in schools and prisons (1992:169) where there is little or no expectation, at least in the short term, that people might make a total commitment to "the knowledge" and become heavily involved in the organization. Whilst there remains the idea that these courses in general can be a means to draw to BK teachings people who would have been put off by a first encounter with its more foreign elements, the teaching is combined with a concern to help people in the variety of ways they might want to be helped, rather than strictly in the terms that BKs feel would be the best.

Changed attitudes to the wider community can also be seen in a new readiness on the part of *brahmins* to make use of programmes and activities other than their own for physical and personal betterment. Until recently the Brahma Kumari teachings and way of life were considered wholly sufficient. Continued affiliation with the many other religious or spiritual groups in which BKs had participated before becoming *brahmins* was frowned upon. Exploration in these areas, or in alternative fitness regimes and healing

programmes, such as hatha yoga, Tai Chi or therapeutic massage, was seen as an unnecessary and probably deleterious competing interest.

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

Australian *brahmins* have also stopped wearing their white clothes in the work place and outside the centres generally. Even at BK sponsored programmes, *brahmins* may not wear white, depending on whether the activity is more for community service or more expressly a witnessing or recruitment activity. In this way BKs allow more of their image to be shaped by the wider community and lay more emphasis on conveying a particular spiritual quality in their interactions with the public than upon signalling a particular affiliation.

The presence in centres of numbers of people who have not decided to take up the full *brahmin* regime and may not even know what that regime is because they have come in via some set of activities other than the core doctrinal "course," makes boundaries between insiders and outsiders particularly difficult to distinguish in this organization that has no procedure for enroling members and has an actual prohibition against asking for money from people.[27] Rather than a single transition point between member and non-member status, what one experiences instead is a series of transitions from no involvement or commitment to greater and greater involvement and commitment. Looking in, the organization appears quite open; looking out, the more one becomes involved the more sensitive one becomes to the solidarity of those following all the purity rules and of the privileges reserved for them. Thus, amongst the fully committed there are still strong "we" group feelings, but there are also voices that do not acknowledge that being a *brahmin* and not-being a *brahmin* is an important division amongst people.

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[27]BKs do not solicit money from the public. The meditation courses and other public programmes are free. When BKs go on residential retreats participants are asked only to cover the actual cost of food and rental accommodation. There are donation boxes in the centres, in Australia, as in India, but these are usually located somewhere in the back of the building or upstairs where they are not readily noticeable. Only after becoming a regular participant at activities at a centre does one learn by observation that there is such box and that a certain reciprocity for benefits received is considered the right thing to do. Contributions are anonymous and individuals members have obviously different standards of living outside the centres reflecting differences in personal incomes and wealth.

Along with this blurring of lines between insiders and outsiders has come a growing range of interpretations concerning the significance of service to the world for salvation, that is for the coming of the Golden Age and rebirth in it. Alongside the classical position, described by Babb, that world history takes its course regardless of the efforts of individuals and renders futile attempts to "reshape the world directly" (1986: 151), we hear on the contemporary Australian scene people describing the need to *create* the new world, even as the old world crumbles around us. In such views, it is significant that although total catastrophe may fall suddenly upon us, there will still be a period of building - perhaps fifty years or so - when the skills and talents of individuals will be needed to remake the society that will be the home for the reborn daughters and sons of Brahma in the Golden Age. This now makes "work in the world" *in order to make the world a better place* significant. In this emergent view spiritual meaning is attached not just to acts of kindness towards Baba's lesser children (whose pain can be eased as they face the destruction of the world through learning to calm their minds), but also to acts of reforming and restructuring institutions by infusing them with new attitudes and values.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

In the foregoing sections we have seen how the transplantation of an Indian spiritual society into a Western environment necessitated adjustments to the Indian organizational template. Initially lacking resources in the new Australian environment and drawing upon a culturally alien tradition, the Brahma Kumaris could not expect to find support for "surrendered sisters," that is, for a financially dependent contemplative elite. Also, the greater social acceptability of wage work for women in the Australian setting helped to make feasible the continuation of the requirement for all BKs to work. This has afforded some protection for the organization against what its Indian leaders have considered the immaturity of new Western recruits and has, as well, minimized the financial costs of leadership in this self-funding organization as it has grown in size.

Another organizational adjustment, the prevalence of *bhavan* residence, has helped Australian BKs adopt a spiritual regime that is demanding even in the context of its home culture, but is particularly challenging in a society that does not value the kind of efforts called for (vegetarianism, the creation of social distance through non-commensality, chastity and long hours devoted to "other worldly" activities). The *bhavans* also have a special importance for young people in Australia, most of whom expect to live away from home as soon as they can be financially independent and who, in any case, are far less likely than Indian young people to have BK parents who would provide them a spiritually congenial home environment.

These organizational adjustments, initiated early in the life of the Brahma Kumaris in Australia but continuing to the present (the necessity for Australian *brahmins* to work and

the common practice of non-centre-dwellers living with other *brahmins* in *bhavans*), have worked together with policy initiatives from the central administration and local demographic factors to change ways the BKs relate to the wider community. The policy changes included a greater stress on liaison activities with power holders and opinion makers, as well as on ministering to the spiritual needs of those not destined to become BKs. The demographic factors identified were the growth in membership not only in size but across age, occupational and educational categories. Particularly significant has been the greatly increased numbers of older, highly qualified people in business, the professions and the arts since the 1980s. These individuals have often not accepted the relegation of their work to the status of a mere financial support and have sought to integrate their spiritual and working lives, bringing into the organization their secular skills and facilitating the adaptation and extension of the organization's teachings to outside community groups.

In its Indian expression an intensely inward-focused organization, the Brahma Kumaris have become in Australia (and elsewhere in the West) far more involved with the wider community and less clearly demarcated from it. Centres are now frequented not just by regular *brahmins* and people being introduced to the basic teachings preparatory to becoming a *brahmin*, but by people taking skills courses who not only do not wish to make a full commitment to *brahmin* life, but who do not even know the basic doctrines of Raja Yoga. Special meditations, such as for world peace, create regular, if infrequent, occasions for these more casual participants to keep in touch. Skills courses emptied of most of their doctrinal components are also taken outside centres to public venues where particular interest groups can be served. The newer *brahmins* with backgrounds in business, the professions and the arts have been particularly important in this area, identifying new areas of community need, creating the appropriate adaptations and mobilizing contacts and audiences.

Just as *brahmins* have become more active in offering their teachings in modified form to the public, so have they become more open to making use of other teachings and practices themselves. Once meant to be wholly reliant upon their own (Indian) traditions, BKs are now widely accepting of the need to reduce sugar intake and increase exercise, and may even seek out the likes of Japanese or Swedish massage therapy, hatha yoga or Tai Chi. Nor is clothing any longer used to make sharp status distinctions. Australian *brahmins* no longer wear white to their outside jobs, and the wearing of white by all participants in centre activities who are so inclined (not only centre dwellers but *bhavan* residents and *brahmin* and non-*brahmins* resident in ordinary households) both blurs status distinctions within the *brahmin* family and between *brahmins* and the wider community.

Policy changes, demographic changes and organizational changes that have moved through the Australian BK community have in turn stimulated theological reflections. Some of these now show a changed attitude towards the significance of work in the world. Alongside the canonical view that the course of history cannot be modified by our

efforts, have appeared views to the effect that we must begin now to create new ways of being in the world that will be the moral and institutional seeds from which the Golden Age will grow in the ashes of our present world.

The significance of the changes wrought in the Australian Brahma Kumaris organization needs to be read in the light of both the similarity of the Australian organization to other Western branches of the international organization (insofar as broadly similar cultural and demographic factors have been at work) and to the fact that as an international organizational promoting considerable geographic mobility, attitudes and values generated in the Western peripheri spread rapidly to the Western (London) and Indian headquarters and so influence the whole organization. Senior figures in the administration are very much aware of this and the effects of greater involvement with the wider community have been seriously evaluated by them. The designation of 1991 as the "Year of Tapasya," that is, of renewed effort in the area of meditation and reflection, is widely understood as an acknowledgment that a proper balance is needed to be reestablished between inner work and outward service, between the BK family with its own particular understandings and aspirations and the wider community.

That period of turning inward, was, however, not a period of turning back, and brought hardly even a pause in the proliferation of community involvements. In the environment of greater openness that has both fostered and been feulled by it, there are signs that further changes within the organization are being tested and debated. As the Western membership grows both in numbers and experience and as the senior Indian sisters meet the challenges of physical age, familiar ways of negotiating authority relationships shaped in the Indian context, are being reassessed. The value of chastity and sexuality, so differently constructed in India and the West, may well be another item on the agenda in the near future.

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