DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGE AND SECULARIZATION IN AN ASIAN NEW RELIGIOUS MOVEMENT

THE BRAHMA KUMARIS IN THE WESTERN WORLD, PART II

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the interaction between demographic change, social structural change, and ideological change in a New Religious Movement, the Brahma Kumaris, which in the last three decades has spread from its home in India to the West and other parts of the world. Focusing on the Australian branches that have supplied much of the impetus for the spread of the movement beyond India, the paper documents the gradual normalization of the age profile from a prototypically youthful base and the increasing incorporation of career people into its membership. Mobilization of Western members' professional skills to design culturally-appropriate outreach activities has lessened the tendency of certain institutional adaptations to isolate the organization from potential new recruits. The growing proportion of

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mature and professionally engaged members has also facilitated a softening of the organization's "world rejecting" (Wallis 1979; 1984) stance in Western branches. A sliding of the movement toward secularization is arrested, however, by differentiation of the core spiritual activities of fully committed members from their activities concerned with service to the wider society.

INTRODUCTION

The Brahma Kumaris (BKs), founded in 1937 in what is now Pakistan, have become an international movement. They now claim 450,000 "students" (full members and others) in 3200 centers spread across 70 countries and territories (www.bkwsu.com). Until recently, however, understanding of the movement's organizational structure and membership profile has been based substantially on studies of the organization in India (e.g., Babb 1986; cf. Howell 1998; Whaling 1995). Our previous report in this serial (Howell and Nelson, 1997), contributed to understanding of the BKs' internationalization by detailing structural adaptations made by Western branches in response to local social conditions and analyzing how those adaptations reflect on Stark's (1987) model of New Religious Movement (NRM) survival. Here we extend our analysis of BK accommodation to new environments by examining the way internal demographic changes have affected the Western branches' relationships with the wider society.

Our analysis is based primarily on interviews, participant observation, and survey material gathered in Australia. Australian BKs have played an especially prominent role in founding "overseas" branches, not just in Australia but in other Western as well as Asian countries. Our supplementary interviews and observations in the principal BK centers in London, England, and Mt. Abu, India, as well as those done in regional centers in New Delhi, India, Nuneham, Courtney and Oxford England, and in New York and Los Angeles in the United States, suggest that the Australian BK experience is broadly similar to that of other Western branches. (The partial exceptions are branches in England made up predominantly of Indian migrants and their children. Whereas in other Western countries people of Indian descent make up a small percentage of the membership, for example just 8 percent in Australia, about two thirds of BKs in the United Kingdom have an Indian background [Howell and Nelson 1997, p. 9]).

As described in our 1997 article (pp. 6–7), the core beliefs of the Brahma Kumaris (colloquially known as "Raja Yoga" for its meditation technique) are a millenarian variant of Hindu traditions. Their theology is monotheistic, and the goal of enlightenment is replaced by one of rebirth in a heavenly Golden Age. They believe that the cataclysmic destruction of the world is rapidly approaching and is but another closing of the endlessly repeating Hindu cycle of four ages; its Golden Age is followed by progressively deteriorating Silver, Bronze and Iron Ages. Now the world is in the final days of decay and ruin, what the BKs call the

"Confluence Age." It is a dire moment just at the close of the Iron Age, but nonetheless a time of special opportunity. Those who modify their lifestyle to purify body and mind and use BK meditation practices can look forward to new life in the Golden Age after the rapidly impending destruction of the present world. All others must wait to be reborn in one of the later and inferior ages suitable to their lesser spiritual capacities.

These beliefs have been understood to imply that "work in the world" is useless, whether it consists of efforts to achieve salvation through acts of charity or contributions to positive social change. Accordingly, conventional BK outreach activities have been limited to the objective of making Brahma Baba's "Godly knowledge" available to those souls fated to accept it so that they may begin the purification that will qualify them for their destined place in the Golden Age. Other souls, in the conventional BK view, can only be taught to calm their minds in order to alleviate the distress of the troubles into which the world is descending. The movement thus has been strongly inward-looking, focused on drawing in "Baba's children," with each child who already is found working strenuously to qualify for the on-rushing Golden Age.

In our1997 article we analyzed the way in which certain residential and structural modifications that were necessitated by the extension of the movement to Western countries reinforced the inward-looking and world rejecting orientation of the BKs and created clear boundaries between insiders and outsiders. The sharpening of insider-outsider boundaries of the movement in the West helped the BKs there to sustain a culturally alien belief system and highly demanding spiritual regime, thereby mitigating one of the factors, cultural incongruity, that Stark (1987, pp. 13–23) identifies as detractors from the viability of NRMs. However sharpened movement boundaries also compounded the problem of recruitment already constricted by celibacy rules. We showed that in the West (unlike India) this potential cost of isolation was counterbalanced by the requirement for full members (*brahmins*) to maintain outside employment (Howell and Nelson 1997).

Here we examine the way changes in the demographic profile of the Australian membership and the increasing recruitment of people with highly developed career commitments have combined with the requirement that *brahmins* do outside paid work to minimize structural tendencies towards isolation. Further, we show that these centrifugal tendencies have been associated over time with a softening of the "world rejecting" stance of the movement. This ideational accommodation has benefits for movement "success" (Stark 1987), but it also carries potential costs in that it raises the possibility of a slide toward secularization and thereby loss of the movement's distinctive "spiritual" appeal. Nonetheless, the BKs in the West have been able to preserve their attractiveness to people seeking "other-worldly" salvation by retaining, out of public view, a core of restricted and highly charged spiritual activities for fully committed members.

DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGE

The involvement of nearly all Western BKs in outside work creates social contacts that have the potential to overcome the isolation that their purity rules and high levels of coresidence tend to create (Howell and Nelson 1997), but the significance of work contacts can vary with the level of people's commitments to that work. Also an individual's maturity, of which age is one indicator, is likely to moderate the extent to which competing commitments and views developed through them are likely to be asserted. These demographic factors have changed over the history of the organization in Australia, as revealed in our interviews with long-time members and in the survey we carried out in 1992.

Our questionnaire, including questions on social background, types and frequency of involvement with the organization, and attitudes to spiritual and social issues, was distributed in all of the Australian BK centers to people considered by the center officials to be following all the rules and practices incumbent upon fully committed members. Questionnaires were received from 194 of the estimated 250 full members. (As BK officials in the United States and the United Kingdom did not wish to have the questionnaire distributed there, the Australian survey is the sole source of the statistical material presented here.)

Changing Age Distributions

Long-term *brahmins* have reported that very young adults predominated in the first cohort of Australian BKs. But as this cohort came into their thirties during the 1980s a wider range of age groups started to join the movement, in a process of "like attracting like" that Wilson (1987, p. 39) has observed in other maturing NRMs. The aging of the membership is reflected in the age profile evidenced in the 1992 survey that was distributed to all *brahmins* considered old enough (preteen and above) to have made a personal commitment to the requisite practices. Thus, discounting young children who could not figure in the survey, there is a fairly normal age distribution among the 194 respondents, ranging from 10 to 84 years with a median age of 35 and a mean of 36.5. This compares to a median age of 31.9 for the whole Australian population at the time, according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (1998).

Occupational Backgrounds

Along with the influx of people across a wider range of ages has come a greater diversity of occupations among the membership. Many of the young adults who entered the movement in the 1970s had not yet committed themselves to a trade or profession and were encouraged to find work that would not redirect too much of their time and attention outside the organization. However long-time members who had been active in the mid-1980s reported that from that time new recruits

Table 1. Employment Categories: Australian Brahma Kumaris (ages 10-84) in 1992 and the Australian Population (aged 14+) in 1991

Group	*Count*	*BK Survey Percent*	*Population Percent*
Business	5	2.58	NI
Clerk	31	16.00	9
Entertainment	8	4.12	NI
Home duties	11	5.67	17
Management & administration	22	11.30	7
Machine & plant operators	1	0.52	NI
Pensioner	5	2.58	16
Professional	33	17.00	9
Sales & personal service	24	12.40	10
Self-employed	2	1.03	NI
Student	18	9.28	8
Trades	20	10.30	15
Unemployed	2	1.03	5
Unskilled	7	3.61	5
Not stated	5	2.58	NI

Notes: NI = category not included in the NCADA survey. "Pensioner" = all in receipt of monetary benefits from the state; "Student" includes secondary and tertiary.

Sources: 1992 survey of Australian BKs by the authors and Australian National Campaign Against Drug Abuse (NCADA) Social Issues Survey (Social Science Data Archives 1991).

included many who had already established themselves in an occupation and did not accept the necessity of leaving that type of work. We see from the 1992 survey that the *brahmins* by then numbered amongst themselves a high proportion of professional people (17 percent) and persons with other areas of high skill and training. Also, only a very small percentage of BKs were unskilled (3.6 percent) and unemployed (1.0 percent in a country where the national rate of unemployment was around 10.5 percent).[1] Table 1 provides the survey breakdown for employment together with national employment figures for persons aged fourteen and older from the National Campaign Against Drug Abuse Social Issues Survey (Social Science Data Archives, 1991).

Educational Backgrounds

The levels of education reported reflect the predominance among BKs of people in jobs requiring high levels of skill and education. More than half (53.6 percent) reported some tertiary education in a country where by 1993 only 19 percent of adults aged 15 to 64 had at least some tertiary study (Australian Bureau of Statistics 1998, p. 74). The middle class educational and occupational profile of the BKs in Australia thus resembles that of NRMs in other Western countries where such groups have higher than average educational and occupational backgrounds (Wilson 1981, p. v).

Gender Profile

The change in the age and occupational profiles of the BKs in Australia has been associated with marked changes in another demographic feature: gender. Despite the fact that the BKs in India are a heavily female organization, both in membership and leadership, and the top administrative and teaching posts in India and London have always been held by women, the movement was brought to Australia by European brothers and in the 1970s the Australian membership was predominantly male (Howell 1998, pp. 455–456). By 1992, however, females, making up just over 54 percent of the Australian membership, outnumber males, but not by a wide margin (p. 456). The proportion of females in the BKs had just exceeded that in the population at large, where in 1991 50.16 percent were female (Australian Bureau of Statistics 1998, p. 2).

ATTITUDES TOWARD THE WIDER COMMUNITY

With the changed social profile of the organization has come a more open attitude to the wider community. This is evident in a range of areas, from greater acceptance of *brahmins'* involvement in and borrowing from other spiritual and cultural domains to further erosion of the insider–outsider "boundary" of the organization. The impact of the changed social profile of Australian *brahmins* has been substantial because the older, professionally skilled, work force-involved *brahmins* are not confined to lower membership statuses in the organization; they include sisters as well as brothers, center-dwellers as well as those living in *bhavans* (BK share houses), and private homes.

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

Gradually, Australian *brahmins* have gained acceptance for some modifications to their BK regimes (like cutting down on sugar, a much beloved and symbolically significant treat 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 percent of all respondents) in other spiritual or personal betterment practices. However, people who have at some time resided in centers (that is, *brahmins* who have been role models and leaders in the family) reported less than half that level of involvement (16.7 percent). Also, in spite of some participation in

other spiritual and personal growth practices outside of the BK methodology, there remains little connection to other religions among *brahmins* in general (5.2 percent had such outside affiliations at the survey date) and no reported connections for those *brahmins* who have ever lived in centers.

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

Insider–outsider boundaries have also been softened in other ways. Long-term *brahmins* in Australia reflected on the lessening intensity of expectation during the 1990s for people exposed to the BK teachings to either take the whole *brahmin* "package" or to acknowledge that they are not meant to be one of the family and go elsewhere. Thus some centers today have occasional special activities of interest to people who have done "the course" (that is, the standard course where they would have learned the BK way of meditating and the basics of BK spiritual understandings) but who do not follow all of the purity rules nor come to a center regularly for morning meditations. These activities include meditations for world peace, as well as sessions where people learn skills for self-reflection, enhancing interpersonal communication, and the like. They provide a means to keep in touch with sympathetic but not fully committed people in the wider community and to promote a positive image of the organization. How far this spirit of openness has developed was demonstrated in 1998 when the Sydney BK leadership actually hosted a "reunion" for former *brahmins* (whose rejection of the full purity regime had resulted in their estrangement from the organization). They were even encouraged to bring along their partners and children to re-enliven their spiritual connection with the BK family.

Australian and other Western centers have also developed a wide range of programs other than their standard course for people who have never taken that course and may never do so. Like the activities for non-*brahmins* who have done the course (and to an extent overlapping with them), these programs teach cognitive skills, such as meditation and creative visualization, removed from the doctrinal context of the standard BK course. In Australia these skills courses have been adapted and taken to special needs groups as diverse as stressed professionals and business managers, the unemployed, physical abuse victims, and substance abusers. Similarly, Barker (1992, p. 169) reports that in the UK the Brahma Kumaris have offered their positive thinking and meditation skills programs to police cadets and Members of Parliament as well as to schools and

prisons where there is little or no expectation, at least in the short term, that people might make a total commitment to "the Knowledge" and become *brahmins*. While there remains the idea that these courses in general can be a means to draw to BK teachings people who would have been put off by a first encounter with its more foreign elements, the teaching is combined with a concern to help people in the variety of ways they might want to be helped, rather than strictly in the terms that BKs feel would be best.

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

Although there has been an element of resistance to detheologized and Westernized programs produced outside India, an impetus to reach out to the non-*brahmin* world also came from the highest levels of the international organization itself. Thus the international leadership at Mt. Abu cultivated an association with the United Nations, and eventually won affiliation with its Department of Public Information, consultative status with UNICEF and general consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC).

Links with the United Nations developed in part through a series of highly demanding international projects proposed by Westerners but carried out with the full support of the Mt. Abu leadership. These began in 1985 and were aimed at promoting conditions that would bring peace of mind and better quality of life to all people of the world. The first of these was the "Million Minutes of Peace" project that operated in eighty countries in conjunction with the United Nations 1986 International Year of Peace. It was followed by the "Global Cooperation for a Better World" project run in 122 countries by the Brahma Kumaris in association with the United Nations as one of the UN's designated "Peace Messenger" organizations. These cooperative efforts laid the basis for the upgrading of ties between the Brahma Kumaris and UN bodies in the 1990s and culminated in the participation of a top BK administrator in the Earth Summit in Rio in 1992, in the Barbados UN Conference on the Sustainable Development of Small Island and Developing States in 1994, and in the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995.

EXPANDING SCOPE OF THEOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION

Along with the BKs' greater willingness to make use of spiritual and cultural elements from the wider society and the blurring of lines between insiders and outsiders has come a growing range of interpretations concerning the significance of service for salvation. Alongside *brahmins* propounding the classical BK position that world history takes its course regardless of the efforts of individuals and renders futile all attempts to "reshape the world directly" (Babb 1986, p. 151), we hear BKs on the contemporary Australian scene describing the need to *create* the new world as the old world crumbles around us. There is even evidence now of a belief that non-*brahmins* have a significant role to play in this reconstruction and hence BKs should have a broader concern for them.

Long-term BKs sympathetic with these new interpretations thus note that inspiration for a change in attitude toward service to the world came from the highest possible source: the *murlis* (daily lessons) that bring divine guidance to the family through the voice of the organization's official medium. In the mid-1980s, they observe, the *murlis* began to stress that all humankind are Baba's children, even if some are special in the degree of commitment they offer him. As such they are deserving of "regard" and concern.

The literature that accompanied the United Nations' projects also showed an evolution in attitude toward service to Baba's "other children." The Million Minutes of Peace fostered the conventional goal of encouraging all people to practice some technique for calming the mind as an aid to facing the perils of the times and mobilized a high level of expertise to pursue this goal without coloring the project with BK theology. The Global Cooperation project then went further, asking people of all sorts to formulate their personal "vision for a better world." The summation of this project, a glossy illustrated book, describes itself as "a manual for personal involvement in building a better world" (Brahma Kumaris Spiritual University 1992, p. 8). It presents proposals concerned with such diverse areas as "living in balance with nature," "respect, understanding and tolerance," "science and quality of life," and "democratic government and people participation" from non-*brahmins*. The novel significance attributed to the efforts of non-*brahmins*, which *brahmins* can support and help refine, is highlighted in its preface in which one of the organization's two chief administrators, Dadi Prakashmani, says, "The testimony of people from around the world...makes clear that the process of transformation from evil to good is under way. It is our hope that this book will help intensify and broaden it" (p. xi).

This new kind of service effort and the new language accompanying it have encouraged Australian BKs' interest in a wider range of speculation concerning the millennium and the role their service to the world might have in it. Thus there is reflection on the suddenness of the total catastrophe: perhaps it will be somewhat drawn out? In any case, there will still be a period of building—perhaps even fifty years or so—when the skills and talents of individuals will be needed to

remake the society that will be the home for the reborn daughters and sons of Brahma in the Golden Age. This now makes "work in the world" *in order to make the world a better place* significant. It also allows the work of non-*brahmins*, as well as that of *brahmins*, to be deemed significant in the reconstruction. In this emergent view, spiritual meaning is attached not just to acts of kindness toward 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.

IMPEDIMENTS TO SECULARIZATION

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

There are, however, impediments in the way of an accelerating slide toward secularization. These consist in the differentiation of activities that are open to participants who have made different levels of commitment and the reservation of a core set of highly significant spiritual activities for only the most committed members. Thus the new service activities using partially secularized teaching materials are counter-balanced by other, more restricted activities. The door to these is the standard "course" that teaches BK meditation techniques, purity rules, and theology. The course is the entry point into the organization for those sufficiently interested, although to be sure many are not. For those who are, completion of the standard course opens the way for participation in the regular BK meditations, *murli* readings and talks at local and national centers and retreats. While these activities are more open to non-*brahmins* now than in the past, they are still primarily for the *brahmin* family. Particularly at the early morning sessions, there is a strong sense of intimacy and an explicit focus on elements of the tradition that are most challenging to non-*brahmins*. There the tradition is lived without apology, translation, or dilution; one is there not in the first instance to

relieve stress or to equip oneself to provide better business leadership but to be with God as taught and manifested through a particular Indian teacher.

Yet the most highly spiritually charged and most intimate of all BK activities is the pilgrimage to Mt. Abu and the actual meeting with Brahma Baba at the Madhuban retreat center through the agency of the senior sister Dadi Gulzar. A talented medium, Dadi Gulzar has served as a vehicle for Brahma Baba to speak to his *brahmin* family since the time of his physical passing. Although many others report meeting Baba in their meditations, only Dadi Gulzar is allowed to publicly manifest his presence through her physical body, speaking with his voice and gesturing to his children. These meetings are, moreover, multiply significant because the "child," standing before Dadi Gulzar when she is acting as a medium for Brahma Baba, also understands herself to be standing before and talking to God, for whom Brahma Baba himself acts as a medium.

Brahma Baba's appearances through the medium Dadi Gulzar occur only on certain scheduled occasions, and these cannot be attended by just anyone, not even any *brahmin*. It is true that the Madhuban facility has been opened to non-*brahmin* visitors in recent years as part of the effort to forge links with the wider society. Thus on what was once known as "VIP retreats," selected visitors are given the opportunity once a year to participate in a special program on spiritual themes and learn something of the BK philosophy. But no visitors are allowed in Madhuban when Dadi Gulzar is scheduled to manifest the presence of Baba. Then only *brahmins* who have been following the purity rules for at least six months and have been vetted by their home centers are allowed to attend.

The pilgrimage then becomes an affirmation of a commitment not only made but maintained. In recognition of this sustained commitment, each *brahmin* pilgrim to Madhuban is given a silver ring inscribed with the BK symbol of "the Supreme Soul." The rings are normally worn all the time on the wedding ring finger. The pilgrimage is also an entrance into private mysteries: one can physically go, as it were, to the center of the universe (cf. Turner and Turner 1978, pp.30–34) to the very place where the soon to be destroyed world will be reborn in the Golden Age as a joyful kingdom of God, and there one can actually meet and talk to God. Even given some reinterpretation of how the millennium is to come and what its significance is for "work in the world," all this is very far from secularization.

SUMMARY

This paper has documented changes in the demographic profile of the Australian branches of the Brahma Kumaris and the increasing openness of the organization to the wider society. With growing numbers of older and more career-committed members in this Western branch, the organization has developed outreach programs to nonmembers and innovated ways of involving people who are not

prepared to commit themselves fully to BK practices. It has even made gestures of reconciliation with former brothers and sisters, encouraging their participation on the periphery of the organization. Moreover, fully practicing BKs themselves are now more willing to make use of outside programs for their own physical and even mental betterment. They also have found ways of interpreting their purity rules to make social interaction with business associates and colleagues easier.

Along with greater openness to the wider society has come a concern on the part of some members to reassess the salvific value of work in the world. Thus the view that it is futile to try to moderate the course of world destruction now is sometimes amended to suggest that the seeds of the new world must be planted in the old. Thus some hold that the shaping of more positive institutions in this time of impending destruction is actually needed to provide the basis for the happy society of the coming Golden Age.

CONCLUSION

The theological and structural adaptations made by the Brahma Kumaris in Australia and other Western countries, as described here and in Howell and Nelson (1997), are suggestive of what Richardson (1988, pp. 9–10) has identified as a possible movement of more totalistic or communal religious movement organizations toward more congregational forms in institutionally differentiated and culturally open societies. Barker's (1988, pp.178–179) observations on the softening of membership categories in the maturing Unification Church may also suggest a similar trend.

If such shifts from a totalistic movement organization and a strongly world rejecting stance toward greater accommodation are not uncommon, neither are they risk free. As Stark (1987, p. 23) observed, too much accommodation with the world can erode a religious movement's "market edge" over fully secular institutions. We have argued that the Brahma Kumaris have some protection against this. A serious threat to the viability of the Brahma Kumaris through secularization is not likely to develop because secularizing elements of Western culture are incorporated mainly through BK service programs intended for nonmembers. Members can use their professional skills in creating detheologized renderings of their spiritual path for outsiders, yet in different, more intimate settings they can continue to engage in an intensely religious practice.

It is nonetheless important to note that the BK practices that presently protect the organization from weakening through secularization are themselves not entirely secure. One issue here is the possible loss of unity and vitality the Brahma Kumaris might suffer in the absence of the medium, Dadi Gulzar, who brings the divine into the physical presence of committed members. Like the other senior sisters who were companions of the founder, Dadi Gulzar is now well on in years and has significant health problems. Her loss would be felt as the loss of a

uniquely vivid form of personal contact with God, and the movement would lose an extraordinarily intense ritual focus.

Should age or death deprive the organization of Dadi Gulzar's vital services, there would also be immediate implications for decision-making, since divine guidance for the organization has come through her. It is not that the divine would be silent: all *brahmins* seek to encounter God through their founder in meditation, and many feel they are successful in this. In the past the organization has actually had to deal with apparently authoritative pronouncements of Baba's wishes from too many sources and for that reason in recent years has prohibited anyone but the one medium from delivering messages from him. Her passing would thus raise again the question as to who, if anyone, could provide authoritative guidance from God. Too many sources of messages would threaten unity; yet no acceptable successor could lend momentum to secularization.

Another core religious practice under some pressure is sexual abstinence. Of all the purity rules this is arguably the one most closely bound up with the Brahma Kumaris' identity and the one that most strikingly sets the BKs apart from secular movements. Its adoption by the Indian women who pioneered the movement made the Brahma Kumaris radically different from other Hindu paths to God, and many of those women paid dearly to maintain their commitment to it. Yet in the West, as we have shown, a precedent for exercising personal judgment has been set in the case of the noncommensality rule, and *brahmins* are using more individual discretion in the areas of dress and use of non-BK aids to personal development.

In this environment it is inevitable that other purity rules will also come into question. Although BKs are strongly socialized not to challenge the views of seniors, either in private conversations or in group lessons, in Australia some genuine discussion groups are now emerging on an informal basis and are bringing into the open opinions on sexual relations that in the past could not have been explored publicly. Whether changed views on such a crucial value as chastity will be tolerated and, if so, whether they can be incorporated into BK practice without destroying the *brahmin* family remain to be seen.

The impetus to accommodation which has come into the Brahma Kumaris through the Western branches has been cautiously appreciated by the senior Indian leadership, who have utilized it in developing supportive relationships with government officials and international bodies like the United Nations. Outreach activities have been particularly important in raising the BKs' public profile, and care has been taken to make the most positive use of the desire of talented Western *brahmins* to contribute to the organization through their skills, knowledge, and connections. Yet even as the numbers of long term, experienced, and dedicated Western *brahmins* increase and they continue to play important roles in international service projects, Westerners still have not had their talents utilized at the most senior levels of the organization. The question of ethnic bias thus arises and adds to the potential for dissension as the senior Indian sisters advance in years and succession issues grow more acute.

In sum, the recent evolution of the BKs in the West illustrates that "world rejection" and "accommodation" are not necessarily "either/or" choices for religious organizations. While it is reasonable to conceive of these stances toward everyday life in society as representing poles on a continuum along which an organization may shift over time, we need not assume that the stances are adopted consistently or uniformly across a single organization at any one point in time. This is not to say simply that there will always be attitudinal differences among individuals, but rather that different arenas of activities and structures within an organization may be sites at which different stances may be simultaneously acted out. Interesting sociological questions then arise as to the value and viability of combining potentially contradictory attitudes in particular ways and in particular institutional locations within a single organization. The BKs' current strategy of insulating its core "world rejecting" activities from peripheral activities that make much greater accommodation to the wider society for now appears to be highly successful. The organization has survived into the late 1990s, not only in India, but in the West and elsewhere in the world, and its student body has continued to grow, although there are signs of tension. How long the BKs' binary strategy enables the organization to support seekers with such a wide variety of needs remains to be seen.

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NOTE

1. The higher proportion of professional and highly skilled people in the movement in the 1990s may also be due in part to the effect of Australian immigration policies. Since 1947 when the nation turned to immigration to boost its population, it has favored applicants (including prospective Indian migrants) with good job skills. While Australians of Indian descent were not in the first cohort of *brahmins* in the 1970s, by the 1990s they accounted for about 8 percent of the membership.

Note also, as regards percentage unemployed, that the NCADA figure in Table 1 is the percentage in the sample for that survey, not the percentage registered as unemployed of the job eligible population as reported by governments (and referred to in the text).

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