Indigenous Feminism in a Modern Hindu Sect

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Is a feminism with origins outside the Western tradition possible? I pose this question not as a hypothetical problem but as a puzzle arising from the beliefs and practices of a modern Hindu sect, the Brahmā Kumārī (Daughters of Brahmā) movement.[1] This sect seems to be feminist in at least some ways. But the idiom of its feminism, if feminism it is, is very different indeed from anything with which the Western women's movement is familiar. Let me be more specific. One of the goals of the sect, though certainly not its only goal, is the liberation of women, but the kind of liberty sought by the Brahmā Kumārīs cannot really be understood except in the context of Hindu religious culture. Even their complaints about the institutions they consider oppressive are deeply colored by the world outlook of the Hindu tradition.

My object here is to describe Brahmā Kumārī feminism in its cultural context. To me it is intrinsically interesting that the will to be free can be nourished in different ways by different cultures. I shall leave the question of whether the Brahmā Kumārīs possess a "genuine" feminism finally to my readers. For those who believe that a true feminism must seek radical change of existing social institutions, the Brahmā Kumārīs' beliefs will probably seem misguided or beside the point. I hope to

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1. "Daughters of Brahmā" is the English rendering preferred by the sect. A female member is a Brahmā Kumārī, a male member a Brahmā Kumār.

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suggest the possibility of another view, one that encourages us to see feminism as the product of a transcultural motive that can be expressed in richly varied ways in different cultural settings.

Origins of the Movement

The Brahmā Kumārī movement was founded in the late 1930s in the region of Sind (now part of Pakistan). Its original social setting was the "Sind Worki" (*sindhvarkī*) merchant community of Hyderabad. Belonging to the Lohana trading caste, the Sind Workis emerged as an elite class of merchants during the second half of the nineteenth century. They began as hawkers of Sindhi handicrafts in European settlements, prospered greatly, and by the time the sect started to form they had been taken by their businesses to other parts of India and overseas, where many had made quite sizable fortunes.[2] Informants characterize the Sind Worki men of those days as being rather conservative culturally, but because of business opportunities outside Sind, many were also quite cosmopolitan.

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

There is some evidence suggesting that the women's world of household and family was a troubled one at the time the movement began. The commercial life of Sind Worki men exacerbated this discontent. Business activities abroad often kept these men away from home for years at a time, leaving many families headed by absentee fathers and husbands. The statistical incidence of this pattern cannot be determined from existing evidence since the society in question was dispersed by the migration to India at the time of the partition between India and Pakistan. However, the accounts of older Sindhi informants and the Brahmā Kumārīs' own portrayal of the period suggest that the pattern was pronounced enough to have disrupted some families and also to have generated strong negative stereotypes of the lifestyles of Sind Worki men and of family life in the Sind Worki community more generally.

For example, at the time the movement began to form, popular belief held that absentee husbands formed extramarital unions while

2. U. T. Thakur, *Sindhi Culture* (Bombay: University of Bombay, 1959), pp. 37–38.

abroad.[3] Although a double standard of sexual morality was certainly nothing new in India, and although we have no way of knowing to what degree such allegations were true, it is reasonable to conjecture that these images of the lives of absent husbands could have been quite damaging to the morale of their wives and daughters and also to the esteem in which women held the patriarchal family. This would certainly be consistent with the importance the idea of the libertine husband was to assume in the Brahmā Kumārī critique of the family.

Informants report another stereotype of the time, that of the sex-starved wife languishing at home while her husband has his good times abroad. This also may or may not have been the case, but from autobiographical accounts of the period it seems evident that some women in this community were quite dissatisfied with their lives in traditional families.[4] Women were expected to fulfill the usual obligations of wives and mothers in traditional seclusion. However, the families within which they were expected to do so were sometimes truncated because of the absence of key male figures. Probably more important, rumor and local stereotype proclaimed that the men in these families were leading lives of sin when away and out of sight. Indeed, according to the Brahmā Kumārīs these men were habitually given to vices of all kinds even at home.

The matter of male corruption seems to have been much on the minds of the women who composed the early core of the Brahmā Kumārī movement. What they stress in their depiction of the period when the movement emerged is the moral hypocrisy inherent in the marriage relationship.[5] Husbands, they say, were supposed to be "deities" to their wives (this is, in fact, a standard Hindu usage), but because men's actual behavior was often brutish and ungodlike, such husbands were certainly unworthy of worship by their partners. The extent to which men ever really adhered to the rules of virtuous family life is another matter, but it is apparent that by the 1930s they were perceived by some women not to be playing by the rules, which called into question (for some) the legitimacy of the game itself.

The Brahmā Kumārī movement was founded not by a woman but by a prosperous Sindhi businessman named Lekhrāj. His later notoriety does not seem to have been foreshadowed by his life prior to the formation of the sect; neither obscure nor well-known, he is said by older informants to have been just another rich Sindhi merchant. It is probably

3. Informants presented such allegations to me as facts.

4. These accounts are preserved in the official biography of the founder of the movement (Jagdish, *Ek Adbhut Jīvan-Kahānī* [Mt. Abu: Prajāpitā Brahmākumārī Īshvarīya Vishva-Vidyālaya, n.d.]). My discussion of the history of the movement is based mainly on details given in this book, supplemented by conversations with informants inside and outside the movement.

5. See esp. ibid., p. 11.

significant, however, that his trade was jewelry. A jeweler is a specialist in women's ornaments, and we may surmise that Lekhrāj therefore came into more intimate contact with women who were nonkin than would have been normal for a man of his class and time. It is conceivable that this contact could have fostered a more than ordinary insight into women's situation.

Lekhrāj became a prophet late in life. Although the hagiography of the movement represents him as a lifelong vegetarian and teetotaler and a man of strong if conventional piety, it was only when he was about sixty years old that he began to acquire prophetic insight, which became manifest for the first time in a series of startling visions (*sākshātkārs*). In many of the visions he saw deities from the Hindu pantheon, but the most significant was one in which he witnessed the destruction of the world; he reported seeing monstrous weapons used in a cataclysmic war and millions of the souls of the dead flying upward "as moths flutter in the direction of a light." Jolted by these experiences, he began to wind up his business affairs. Meanwhile there were more visions. He saw a strange light emanating from a vast and benevolent power and a new world where stars descended to become princesses and princes. A mighty being, he said, was instructing him to "make such a world as this."[6]

Lekhrāj's visions attracted the attention of others, and the nucleus of a following came into existence. His first disciples, drawn primarily from his own family, were soon joined by outsiders. These followers were mostly female, which is not surprising since women, particularly older women, often provide the principal constituencies of lesser saints and gurus.[7] From this standpoint Lekhrāj was initially little more than just another minor religious visionary with a certain local renown. Soon his disciples began to have similar visions, and his apparent ability to induce such experiences in others became one of the main bases of his growing reputation. His followers called him "Om Bābā," and the group around him began to be known as the *om maṇḍlī* (*om,* a sacred syllable representing the absolute; *maṇḍlī,* "circle" or "association"). This was the core of what was to become the Brahmā Kumārī movement. In 1937 Lekhrāj established a managing committee of several women followers, and in early 1938 he turned his entire fortune over to this group.

From the very start the sect met with savage hostility from the surrounding society. Irate relatives of movement members formed an "anti–*om maṇḍlī*" association, and the local press undertook a campaign against the sect. Families of members were threatened with caste excommunication, and many of Lekhrāj's women followers were physically abused

6. Ibid., pp. 22, 26; my translations.

7. For a good discussion of this pattern in another region of India, see Manisha Roy, *Bengali Women* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975).

by their families. Street rowdies insulted and intimidated members, and in 1938 an angry mob set a movement building afire.

The ostensible reason for all the uproar focused on one of Lekhrāj's most important teachings, celibacy. Husbands returned from long stays abroad only to discover that their wives had made vows of chastity and wished to transform their homes into "temples." Husband and wife, these men were told, should live as "Lakshmī" (the goddess of prosperity) and "Nārāyan" (her husband, Vishnu, a major Hindu deity) and should love each other with pure spiritual love (*ātmik sneh*)—that is, with asexual love. Husbands and their families frequently responded with beatings, wife expulsions, and lawsuits for the reinstatement of conjugal rights. They regarded Lekhrāj himself with deep suspicion. Some accused him of sorcery, and many believed that he was a man of inexhaustible sexual appetite whose real motive was the seduction of his female followers. Similar suspicions linger around the movement today.[8]

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

Because the Brahmā Kumārī movement began in tumult, its initial consolidation occurred in a seclusion necessitated by the hostility of the surrounding society. Driven from Hyderabad, the sect members sequestered themselves in Karachi, where Lekhrāj and his principal disciple, a remarkable woman known within the movement as Saraswatī, presided as surrogate father and mother over a predominantly female following numbering about three hundred. After the partition of India and Pakistan, they moved in 1950 to India and their present headquarters in Rajasthan at Mount Abu.

Following the move, the Brahmā Kumārīs at first resumed their former seclusion. Gradually, however, a change occurred in the general

8. It is also frequently alleged that the Brahmā Kumārīs engage in secret tantric rites. In response it should be noted that relations between male gurus and female followers are sexually suspect in many areas of India. Moreover, in the past members of the movement engaged in ecstatic dances associated with their visions, something that could easily be misunderstood by already suspicious outsiders. This aspect of movement life has been curtailed in more recent times. In the course of my contact with the movement I encountered no evidence that would support allegations of sexual misconduct. In any case, I do not believe it either slanderous or evasive to note that tantric sexuality is the very opposite of libertine sexuality and therefore would be, at a certain level, consistent with the stated ideals of the movement.

outlook of the sect. Lekhrāj had previously characterized the movement as a fiery sacrifice (*yagy*) in which members would, in radical separation from the world, purify themselves through austerities while assimilating the knowledge (*gyān*) revealed by his visions. But now the founder began to emphasize active proselytization. It is likely that this resulted from the concern that he and his followers must have felt about the future membership of a movement of celibates. In part, too, he was probably encouraged by the fact that the movement no longer had to confront the entrenched prejudices of Sindhi society. In any case, he began to speak of the seclusion as a period of necessary preparation for the real mission of the movement, which involved awakening the *bhaktas* (devotees—here, nonmembers of the movement) from their ignorance and spiritual slumber.

To some degree Lekhrāj had already gone public. He had published pamphlets almost from the start, and he was an inveterate writer of letters to important public figures (Gandhi, the king of England, and many others) in which he interpreted the meaning of contemporary events in the light of his revealed knowledge. He began to intensify all of these activities, and some of the most gifted movement members began to visit major Indian cities for the purpose of spreading the word. Permanent centers were ultimately established in Delhi and other urban areas, and by the time Lekhrāj died in 1969 the outer persona of the movement had changed fundamentally. What was previously a highly reclusive sect had become an aggressively proselytizing movement.

These efforts have been very successful. The Brahmā Kumārīs claim a membership of one hundred thousand, although the number of truly committed adherents is certainly much smaller than this. They are highly conspicuous and an established presence. The movement presents itself as a "divine university" (*īshvarīya vishva-vidyālaya*) and offers classes in doctrine and meditation at hundreds of local centers. Most of these centers are in northern Indian cities, but they also exist in other areas of India, and there are a few overseas. The movement is now engaged in an energetic campaign to internationalize.

My own perspective on the movement was local. For several months I received instruction and participated in a variety of activities at a movement center in New Delhi. The constituency of this center was drawn mainly from middle- and upper-middle-class government-service families. Of the hundred or so women and men who seemed to be in the orbit of the center at any given time, there was a core of perhaps two dozen who attended center activities regularly. An extremely high rate of turnover characterized the outer fringes of this membership. It is very common for individuals attracted to the movement to lose interest on more intimate acquaintance. Most outsiders with whom I discussed the sect seemed to regard it with a mixture of contempt and mistrust.

Brahmā Kumārī views concerning the condition of women are embedded in a complex theological system. To a considerable degree this theology draws on ideas of wide currency in the Hindu world, but in some respects it is highly innovative. It was originally formulated in the discourses Lekhrāj gave to his followers during his lifetime, many of which were recorded and continue to be read at Brahmā Kumārī gatherings today. The words of course are Lekhrāj's own, but the views they express were probably influenced by others. He was in intimate and daily contact with a mostly female group of followers, and the content of his teachings certainly suggests the influence of a feminine perspective.

In consonance with other South Asian religions, the Brahmā Kumārīs teach that the single most important feature of the human situation is confusion about personal identity. "Who are you?" Lekhrāj always asked his followers; this continues to be the first question posed to potential converts today. Most people, the Brahmā Kumārīs say, have no idea at all of who they really are. The purpose of Brahmā Kumārī teachings is to enable those who are lost, those who have forgotten who they are, to recover their true identities.

Who, then, are we? According to the Brahmā Kumārīs we are souls (*ātmās*), and our confusion takes the form of false identification with the bodies we happen to inhabit. The world consists of two utterly dissimilar constituents, souls and material nature (*prakriti*). The world of our bodies and senses is the material world. Souls are immaterial, massless points of pure brightness and power that have a true home at the top of the universe in a place called the supreme abode (*paramdhām*). While there, souls exist in the company of the supreme soul (*paramātmā*), who is the source of the light Lekhrāj saw in his visions and who is identified by the Brahmā Kumārīs with the deity Shiva. All souls, however, periodically leave this place and descend into the material world to inhabit human (never animal) bodies. When they do so, they forget their true nature and origin and transmigrate from body to body, wandering through the world in total ignorance of who they really are. This is our predicament; we are lost souls, lost children of the supreme soul, and we must recover our true identity.

When souls descend into the material world, as all souls must, they become entrapped in a rigidly determined historical cycle. According to the Brahmā Kumārīs, the history of the world occurs in five-thousand-year cycles of moral and physical decline, each divided into four ages (*yugas*) of 1,250 years. Every cycle is believed to be an exact duplicate of the others, like a movie that is screened again and again. The world is perfect in the beginning and totally degraded by the end, at which point the cycle begins anew. Souls may enter a cycle at any point, but obviously it is most desirable to do so at or near its beginning when the world is

closer to perfection. The Brahmā Kumārīs believe that by means of self-purification and the realization of their true identities as souls they will enter the next cycle (and thus all cycles) at or near the beginning when the earth is a paradise.

At the start of the cycle, when the world is totally pure, there is no pain or hardship of any kind, and the deserving few who exist in the world at this time are deities.[9] Indeed, they are the very gods and goddesses of the Hindu pantheon imperfectly remembered through texts today—the stars that Lekhrāj saw in his visions who descend to rule a perfect new world. As time passes, however, the virtue of these beings gradually degrades; meanwhile, new souls—slightly less worthy than those who came before—continue to arrive from above. After 2,500 years of relative plenty and happiness, the decline of the world becomes serious and brings about a momentous transition at the halfway point in the cycle.

The great transition has to do with sex and procreation. One of the most fundamental elements in the Brahmā Kumārī conception of the human predicament, and one that is basic to their highly distinctive understanding of women's situation, is their belief (itself not novel in the Hindu tradition) that sexual intercourse is entirely unknown in the first and blessed half of the cycle of universal history. In the Brahmā Kumārī view, sexual intercourse is inconsistent with the purity of the deities who inhabit the world in that era. Sexual intercourse is unnecessary for reproduction because the souls that enter the world during the first half of the cycle are in possession of a special yogic power (*yog bal*) by which they conceive children. As the general level of purity and virtue declines, however, this power wanes, and at the midpoint of the cycle it disappears altogether.

With the advent of sexual intercourse the world changes from heaven (*svarg*) to hell (*narak*), and misery becomes the lot of humankind. Sexual lust (*kām vikār*), according to the Brahmā Kumārīs, is the parent of all other vices and the prime cause of the present unhappy state of humanity. Sexual passion, more than anything else, entrenches and confirms us in our false identifications with the body. All forms of violence, avariciousness, and exploitation arise from this. With the onset of sexual reproduction, the world begins an ineluctable slide into depravity and ever-deepening slavery to the body and its urges.

The fall of the world is also the fall of womankind. During the first half of the world cycle men and women are entirely equal, but with the beginning of what the Brahmā Kumārīs call "body consciousness" (*deh abhimān*) women become mere objects of lust and fall under the domi-

9. A more complete discussion of this theory can be found in Lawrence A. Babb, "Amnesia and Remembrance in a Hindu Theory of History," *Asian Folklore Studies* 41, no. 1 (1982): 49–66.

nation of men. This, however, is but a symptom of a more general affliction because, with the subjugation of women, men and women alike become bound to the body and to the misfortunes and pain of life in a world ruled by passion and desire. Thus the bondage of women is the bondage of all.

We are now at the very end of the *kaliyug,* the final era of universal depravity, and the world is soon to be destroyed. This of course is the destruction Lekhrāj foresaw in his visions; when it happens all souls will return to the supreme abode to await the renewal of the cycle. Just prior to the close of the *kaliyug,* however, the supreme soul favors humanity with a remarkable act of grace. At this point, when human beings languish in the deepest alienation from their true nature as souls, the supreme soul makes available special knowledge (*gyān*) of the true human situation to those few of special worthiness who are prepared to listen. He does so by speaking through the mouth of a human medium, who is, of course, Dādā Lekhrāj, the founder of the Brahmā Kumārī movement. To those who receive and accept such knowledge, the *kaliyug,* the present age of evil, becomes *sangamyug,* the "confluence age," so named because it represents a time of transition to the renewed world to come. Members of the Brahmā Kumārī movement enter this fifth era with the expectation that they will become fit to be reborn in the paradisiacal phase of the next world cycle. By preparing his followers Lekhrāj in effect creates that new world, thereby fulfilling the instructions he received from the supreme soul in his visions.

Subjugation

But what does all this have to do with feminism? A great deal, and the key lies in the way the Brahmā Kumārī portrayal of the human predicament invokes a particular image of women's condition. In the Hindu world there is nothing remarkable about the doctrine that worldly passions and attachments are the principal causes of bondage, nor is there anything truly striking about the use of woman as a metaphor for the human situation, a concept with deep roots in the *bhakti* (Hindu devotional) tradition. What is unusual in the case of the Brahmā Kumārīs is the incorporation of a critical point of view into this metaphor. Pervading the Brahmā Kumārīs' concept of the world is an idea of human alienation that draws its strength from the image of women as victims of corrupt institutions. I certainly do not mean to imply that the Brahmā Kumārī movement can be described as a feminist critique of society, for this would violate the complexity of an intricate and multifaceted theological system, but I do want to suggest that a feminist motive is at the very least a discernible element in Brahmā Kumārī theology.

Though it is not to be found in any single place, a Brahmā Kumārī account of the situation of women in Indian society exists. Elements of it are scattered throughout Lekhrāj's discourses and the literature of the movement, but when the pieces are put together, what emerges is a coherent assessment of where women stand, focusing on the role of women in marriage.

As I have already noted, one of the principal Brahmā Kumārī complaints about the family and marriage is that women are subordinated to husbands who are unworthy of veneration. The question of the different religious value accorded to each sex is fundamental to this accusation. Men are full of vices, yet women are required to treat their husbands as gurus and deities while they themselves are regarded as no more than the "heel of the left foot" of man. As if this were not enough, to the degree that man has fallen, woman is regarded as the temptress who pulls him down. According to a common observation, woman is the "door to hell" (*narak kā dvār*), the implication being that women are not so much the victims of world-binding sexual lust as they are its source. Put otherwise (although the Brahmā Kumārīs never formulate it quite this way), women are truly viewed not as moral subjects but rather as provocations for moral choices made by men.

All this, however, is but a surface manifestation of what these materials point to as the fundamental injustice, namely, that women are not conceived as soteriological agents. If man has fallen, he at least has the option of renouncing the world; he can become a *sannyāsī* (ascetic) and seek what he believes to be his salvation. But *sannyāsī*s are men, not women. In the world as presently constituted, woman is not the renouncer but that which is renounced—the "door to hell." Bondage is worldly entanglement; liberation is release from this. The implicit gravamen in the Brahmā Kumārī assessment of women's condition is that women are not just bound to the world but also imprisoned in a concept—the concept of women serving as bait for the trap. And in fact at a more general level of Hindu symbolism, woman is *māyā*, the illusion that is the created world and that draws the self into fatal bondage.

Because the subordination of women began when sexual intercourse became a factor in human existence, sexual intercourse is at the root of women's inequality. In the world as it exists now, women must enter into sexual relations with men and live as sexual beings if they are to be married. This offers no real choice, since to be an unmarried woman is to have no real status in society at all. Without the option of *sannyās* (world renunciation) women are trapped in "worldly marriage." This means that women are not merely housebound; they are also bound absolutely to the world. But so are men; they are as bound by their passions as women are by evil conventions. And in the present age of degradation even the freedom of the *sannyāsī*, in the Brahmā Kumārī

view, is finally a false liberty. The *sannyāsī,* indeed, is an abettor of present miseries, making orphans of his children and a widow of his wife.

Marriage, or at least a certain kind of marriage, thus becomes a paradigm for the human condition, with the sexual role of women its focus. And because reproduction requires sex in the present era, it is ultimately the reproductive role of woman that underlies her predicament. The Brahmā Kumārī version of this predicament, however, differs somewhat from the one portrayed by Western feminism. Consistent with the more general Hindu mistrust of passion, the Brahmā Kumārīs have concentrated on sexuality itself, rather than on the exigencies of child rearing and housekeeping, as the significant factor in women's subordination. More important, they have not viewed the reproductive role of women as a biological given. Intercourse is necessary for procreation, but only at the present time. Women can be free, and some women inevitably will be. And since the bondage of woman is the bondage of all, the world can be made free through her liberation. But a free world will have to be a world without sex.

Liberation and Power

In the Hindu milieu there is a close connection between sexuality and power. Intercourse is regarded as debilitating; it rapidly drains energies that are slow to accumulate in the body. Conversely, sexual restraint is a method of concentrating and storing power. The powerlessness that women, especially, experience in the present era can be partially attributed to women's inefficacy within unjust social institutions, but this powerlessness has a more basic root in the sexuality that binds both women and men to the world. Through sexual renunciation the Brahmā Kumārīs seek the power to make themselves free in a world that they themselves, by means of their power, will make.

Given Hindu ideas about the relationship between power and sexuality, it is not surprising that Shiva is the presiding deity of the universe as the Brahmā Kumārīs conceive it, for he is the divine archetype of the sexual renouncer. Shiva is the ascetic of the gods, dwelling apart from society and, during one phase of his existence, gathering fiery energy within himself by means of chastity.[10] When the other gods wish to rouse him from his trance of withdrawal to prevent him from absorbing all the energy of the universe, it is Kāmdev, the god of lust, whom they send. Although Shiva was also an extremely important deity among the Hindus of Sind,[11] the Brahmā Kumārīs' version is somewhat reduced

10. Shiva's personality and attributes are analyzed in detail in Wendy O'Flaherty's outstanding book, *Asceticism and Eroticism in the Mythology of Śiva* (London: Oxford University Press, 1973).

11. Thakur, esp. pp. 108–15.

from the Puranic original. As portrayed in Puranic mythology, Shiva's character swings wildly between extremes of eroticism and asceticism.[12] But there is nothing erotic about Shiva as the Brahmā Kumārīs picture him; he is a purely ascetic deity whose character fulfills the values of the movement. Known to the Brahmā Kumārīs as "Shiv Bābā," he is visually represented not by the more overtly phallic conventional linga but by a red, egg-shaped emblem said to be the likeness of the halo of reddish light surrounding his real presence in the supreme abode. At the center is a tiny white dot representing the point of light (*jyoti bindu*) that is the locus of his immense power, forever retained by absolute chastity.

This emphasis on the connection between power and sexuality underlies what to Western feminists might seem a rather odd feature of the Brahmā Kumārīs' position with regard to existing institutions. Although they consider marriage, and thus the family, to be oppressive in the present age, they do not advocate the dissolution of either. Neither institution as such vexes them—indeed, they believe there will be marriage in the world to come. Rather, it is worldly marriage, marriage with intercourse, to which they most object. Instead of directing the energies of the movement toward achieving the kind of institutional reforms sought by Western feminists, they seek purity (*pavitratā*) within the family. By purity they particularly mean chastity, which in their view is the virtue from which all other virtues arise.

There are basically two levels of membership in the movement. At its core are fully "surrendered" women and men who have either left or never entered family life and reside in the movement's many centers. Currently most of them seem to be recruited from families with strong and lasting movement connections. Women occupy the leadership roles and are the teachers who promulgate the movement's doctrines to the general membership and potential converts. Most of the resident men, a minority in the centers with which I am familiar, maintain outside employment and function as indispensible mediators between the secluded sisters and the outside world. Surrounding this core is a much larger lay membership with varying degrees of commitment to the movement. Lay members may live with their worldly families; if the movement expresses no positive enthusiasm for family life, it recognizes the family and marriage as institutional realities and sees in them a field in which virtues can be perfected. Families often participate in the movement as units, and although commitment to the sect by individuals has sometimes proven to be quite disruptive to households, the movement claims that the quality of family life can be radically improved if members adhere to Brahmā Kumārī teachings.

Brahmā Kumārī families must be "lotuslike"; that is, they must be unsullied by the mire in which they grow. Every home, the Brahmā

12. O'Flaherty.

Kumārīs say, should become an *āshram,* a hermitage. Even for the laity the rules governing day-to-day behavior are strict. Diet, for example, is a major concern: meat, alcohol, and all other impure, passion-inducing foods and substances must be avoided. The most important norm of all, however, is celibacy, the sine qua non of the virtuous life as the Brahmā Kumārīs understand it. It is for this reason that most of the converts in the center I knew best seemed to be persons for whom sexuality was no longer an issue: widows, widowers, and, in the case of married couples, those in their middle years and beyond who had already had children. In chastity husband and wife can live as god and goddess, a relationship that anticipates the divine partnerships that will exist in the new world to come. And by means of chastity they can accumulate the power that makes true liberation possible.

This liberating power is closely associated with a form of spiritual exercise the Brahmā Kumārīs call *rāja yoga. Rāja yoga* is a technique of meditation designed to cultivate "soul consciousness" (*dehī abhimān*). Its object is the direct experience of the self as a soul rather than as a body, that is, the direct experience of one's true identity. There is no need to describe the actual technique here; the important point is that many practitioners have experiences that they regard as valid indices of spiritual progress.[13] For them, *rāja yoga* represents both a confirmation and a guarantee: it confirms their attainment of power-producing purity, since only the truly pure can engage in the technique with full success, as it guarantees their soteriological destiny, since the pure can be confident of a place in the *satyug,* the first age of the universal cycle, to come. In short, this technique enables its practitioners to answer Lekhrāj's question—"Who are you?"—for themselves. It is a way of knowing that you are not who you seem to be: you are not a physical and social being, bound to the world and the institutions of the world, but a soul. Knowing this, one becomes a witness (*sākshī*) to the material self, released from the bondage of this world and fit to live in a world of the free.

The Concept of Childhood

In Hindu India, renunciation is the key to liberation, but the problem for women is that renunciation is not a value that applies very easily to them. While there is nothing in the idea of liberation through renunciation that necessarily excludes women, and while there are and have been female ascetics in the Hindu world, the fact remains that *sannyās,* conceived as a stage of life, is not for women but for men. In

13. For additional details see Lawrence A. Babb, "Glancing: Visual Interaction in Hinduism," *Journal of Anthropological Research* 37, no. 4 (Winter 1981): 387–401, and "Otherworldly Feminism" (paper delivered at the Luce Symposium on Max Weber and India, Amherst College, November 1979).

the classical four-*āshrama* scheme (the four stages of life), a man's wife is permitted to accompany him to the forest in the penultimate stage of *vānaprasth,* but he becomes a *sannyāsī,* a full renouncer, alone. In this image of world renunciation, the wife just seems to dwindle away.

But if the culturally dominant model of renunciation appears to bar women, the Brahmā Kumārīs have exploited another possibility inherent in that construct as a way of developing a culturally legitimate conception of world renunciation for women. Their beliefs incorporate an inversion of the dominant model: if men can become free through renunciation at the end of their lives, women can achieve a similar condition by recovering life's beginning.

The concept of childhood is a powerful theme in Brahmā Kumārī teachings. Not only do they consider the heaven for which they strive the childhood of the world, but it is also clear that the manner of life they seek in this world-dawn is in many ways a childlike existence. There will be no hardship, no worry, and above all no sex. Equally important, however, is the fact that the Brahmā Kumārī movement as it exists in this world consists of women and men who, in an important symbolic sense, have become children, the daughters and sons of Brahmā. Brahmā is the Hindu deity responsible for the creation of the world. Dādā Lekhrāj is known as "Brahmā Bābā" within the movement because by promulgating his doctrines he creates the new world to come. Members of the movement consider themselves to be Brahmā's (that is, Lekhrāj's) daughters and sons because they are reborn through the knowledge he enunciates, which in some sense separates them from the world and from their families. Though in the world, they say they are dead to it; their existence is a "death in life" (*marjīva janam*). In the *sangamyug,* an intermediate age, they are *bīch men,* "in between," neither of this world nor yet of the next. As such they are children in Dādā Lekhrāj's family.

But why should the Brahmā Kumārīs wish to be children? The answer seems to lie in their use of women's situation as a metaphor for the human condition. Brahmā Kumārī cosmology portrays the world as a paradise in its childhood; only when the world grows up does trouble begin. The point is, a similar "fall" describes the changes a woman experiences over the course of her life.

That women in northern India undergo a change of religious as well as social status at the time of marriage is a matter of great symbolic importance to the Brahmā Kumārīs. A *kanyā,* or unmarried girl, is considered a kind of goddess.[14] In northern India one of the main occasions for the worship of the goddess (in the generic sense) is a ceremonial

14. It should be noted that this conception is very important in Sindhi culture. Thakur reports that "a virgin or unmarried daughter is addressed as goddess ('Niani' or 'Devi') and is considered equal to one hundred Brahmins . . . [who are] substituted in several rites by virgins. She is identified with sacred energy (shakti) as she symbolizes chastity which is potent with enormous powers. . . . She is frequently fed by the neighbors on

period known as *navrātra* (nine nights). The Brahmā Kumārīs put great emphasis on the fact that one of the ways the goddess is worshiped during this festival is by homage (*pūjā*) to unmarried girls, which is offered just as it would be to an icon of the goddess on an altar. But a woman cannot be worshiped in this way after marriage; then the husband, not the wife, is regarded as *pūjya,* "worthy of worship." A wife, by contrast, is merely *pujārī,* "one who worships."

The analogy is obvious: just as the world falls with the advent of worldly marriage, so too the divinity of women is lost when they marry. To regain divinity, the Brahmā Kumārīs must become children; that is, they must be reborn as virgin daughters in the house of a new father.

It may seem an odd thing for a group with an apparently feminist orientation, but there is hardly a more pervasive concept in Brahmā Kumārī teachings than that of fatherhood. The supreme soul is imaged as masculine and paternal; he is the supreme father (*parampitā*) who loves his children (the souls of human beings) with fatherly devotion. The Brahmā Kumārīs characterize *rāja yoga* as "remembering father," and they say that the world to come is an inheritance from him, theirs by right as children who have proved themselves worthy of their claim. And of course Lekhrāj, too, is a father: he was the agency of the supreme father in his role as divine medium and also the father of the movement itself, a role he continues to fill from his present location in the supreme abode.

This emphasis on fatherhood is deeply rooted in the life experiences of northern Indian women. At the time of marriage a woman leaves her father's home for an altogether new kind of existence. The Brahmā Kumārīs characterize this transition as a kind of rebirth. As a woman is reborn into a new family and a wholly new life, her dominant identity changes from that of daughter to daughter-in-law. This change provides one of the staples of Indian folklore and literature, both traditional and modern, because of the potential for anguished separation and tragedy it carries. A woman no longer enjoys the relative freedom that was hers as daughter and sister in her father's house. Her station as a daughter-in-law is low, at least initially, and according to the Brahmā Kumārīs, her role is largely one of onerous servitude.

In a sense we are all daughters-in-law, men and women alike. Subordination means living apart from one's father in worldly marriage; liberation therefore is to dwell with one's father as daughter of the house. Thus we must all seek our true father, for it is only in his house that we can find real freedom. It is also only from him that we can expect an inheritance. As Ursula Sharma has recently pointed out, the inheritance

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various festivals including the Shradh festivities. . . . No fruit or vegetable of the season is eaten unless first offered to a virgin, whose feet are washed and homage paid whenever she is fed" (p. 78).

system of northwest India is strongly masculine; one effect of rules of exogamy in this region is to ensure the exclusion of women from the inheritance of land by exporting them as far from their natal families as possible.[15] Against the background of Sharma's analysis, which is probably valid for most areas of northern India, the Brahmā Kumārīs' emphasis on claiming an inheritance through the recovery of childhood is as poignant as it is intelligible.

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

The autonomous goddess is an obvious symbol for a concept of woman as powerful and free. Her inherent power is unmodulated by the restraints of marriage; she is a self-sufficient and self-directing force in the universe. Moreover, her status is not derived. Devotees worship her on her own account since they believe all other deities are subsumed in her. This independent goddess is the one virgin girls primarily represent in the rites of *navrātra.* This is also the goddess the Brahmā Kumārīs wish to emulate—autonomous, free, with inner powers protected by chastity, and worthy of worship like the virgins of the festival.

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

15. Ursula Sharma, *Women, Work, and Property in North-West India* (London and New York: Tavistock, 1980), esp. pp. 203–4.

Conclusion

I must stress that feminism is not the only concern of the Brahmā Kumārī movement. Although women's interests are a conspicuous element in their conception of the world and the human situation within it, they regard the tragedy of our present existence as a human problem, not specifically as a women's problem. Moreover, men have been involved in the movement from the beginning, and were in fact a majority among the daily attendees at the movement center in Delhi where most of my investigation took place (I was told this was an exceptional situation). All this said, however, it remains the case that at the very core of the Brahmā Kumārī view of the world is an outlook that is feminist in the sense that it is based on a critical analysis of the position of women in Hindu society and seeks their liberation in accord with the Brahmā Kumārīs' idea of freedom.

It is possible, of course, that the Brahmā Kumārīs are in error about the relevance of their message to the women of India or, for that matter, to anyone. Certainly the message seems to have very little general appeal. The sect has prospered, but despite vigorous proselytizing it remains quite small in comparison with the size of the society within which it is situated. On the other hand, this may be an indication that its message is all too relevant. From the very beginning there has been nothing more striking about the career of the Brahmā Kumārī movement than the immense uneasiness and distrust it has provoked in Indian society. It is conceivable that this discomfort reflects what men and women alike perceive as a powerful symbolic challenge to heterosexual relations in a highly patriarchal society, relations that may be more sensitive and fragile than is commonly supposed. Suspicion of sexual misconduct is generally the expressed justification for hostility toward the movement, but I suspect a more fundamental cause involves the unwelcome and threatening spectacle of women running their own affairs.

Leaving aside, however, the question of whether the Brahmā Kumārīs' assessment of women's situation is in any sense valid, and leaving aside also the question of whether the movement offers anything resembling a genuine solution to women's problems, I believe that this rather unusual sect deserves our serious attention. If nothing else, it offers a striking illustration of the richness of the Hindu tradition and also of the ways in which elements of a religious culture can be reordered to serve goals ostensibly quite remote from tradition.

It is difficult to determine the degree to which non-Indian influences might have played a role in the development of the Brahmā Kumārī movement. As noted earlier, cosmopolitan patterns of commerce led to disturbances in the lives of some Sind Worki families, which may have provided some impetus to the formation of the sect. There may have

been more specific influences as well, but the passage of time and the dispersion of the Sindhi society of those days make them difficult to pinpoint. However, even if it could be shown that the Brahmā Kumārīs' faith in the possibility of freedom for women was in some way exogenously inspired, the fact would remain that their feminism is essentially indigenous—indigenous in the sense that their notion of the wrongs done to women, their concept of the power that liberates, and their image of liberation itself are all in one way or another derived from the Hindu tradition. That the Brahmā Kumārīs have reacted critically to the situation of women in Hindu society is perhaps not in itself surprising; what is notable is that they have formulated a coherent analysis of this situation utilizing elements from within their own tradition. The result is a feminism that is both radical in its implications and true to its own past.

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