

Gender Role Experimentation in New Religious Movements: Clarification of the Brahma Kumari Case

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In a recent challenge to the view that New Religious Movements (NRMs) are uniformly patriarchal, Palmer (1993, 1994) has brought forward the Brahma Kumaris (BKs) as an extreme countercase. Research presented here confirms her characterization of the BK gender ideology as one of "reverse sex polarity" (casting females as spiritually superior to males) and thereby partially validates her "unsuspected gender role variety" thesis, but shows that this is not associated in Western contexts with an "overwhelmingly female" leadership, as she claimed. Further, Palmer's thesis that groups with "reverse sex polarity" models will necessarily have predominantly female memberships is invalidated by findings on Western BKs. Nonetheless, data on attrition rates of Australian BKs in this study show that Palmer need not have taken the Brahma Kumaris as exceptions to her characterization of Western NRMs as settings for gender role experimentation.

In attempting to advance "gendered" approaches to the understanding of conversion to New Religious Movements, Palmer (1993, 1994) has recently challenged the characterization of them as uniformly patriarchal and therefore as manifestations of "backlash" against the feminist movement. In her analysis of gender roles in North American NRMs, she calls upon the Brahma Kumaris case together with the Rajneeshees to illustrate the opposite extreme of patriarchy: religions that actually vaunt the spiritual superiority of women and promote female leadership. The Brahma Kumaris are an especially significant case for her argument (even though Palmer did not make them one of the eight groups she studied intensively for that analysis) because they are cited as having an "overwhelmingly female" leadership (1993: 345), translating their more favorable evaluation of women's spirituality into action.

While the Brahma Kumaris appeared to give important support to Palmer's "unsuspected gender role variety" thesis, she was obliged on the evidence available to treat them as exceptions to her larger point: that this variety is utilized by NRM participants as a field of temporary experimentation in highly structured environments insulated from the wider society. Acting out NRM gender roles is thus taken to be analogous to movement through a rite of passage that facilitates a subsequent role choice. This interpretation rests on findings that in North Atlantic countries the average length of membership in NRMs is very short, indeed less than two years, and attrition rates high, with "between 80 and 90% of members participat[ing] . . . for one, two or even three years" (Palmer 1983: 349).

Unfortunately, Palmer's reliance on sources of information on the Brahma Kumaris that describe either the organization as it operated in India (Babb 1986) or in British branches dominated by Indian migrant enclaves (Barker 1991) is not appropriate for an analysis of social dynamics of North American NRMs whose members are culturally Western and not come predominantly from a single Asian migrant community. Data presented here will show that in the Western environment, the Brahma Kumaris are

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actually less exceptional than they have been portrayed as being: while they clearly do promote female leadership, and so are a valid example of an emphatically nonpatriarchal movement, they have nonetheless frequently given leadership roles to men; and while Western BK attrition rates are lower than rates for other NRMs cited in the literature, they are higher than those for core members of the Indian branches and consistent with the thesis that NRMs provide sheltered settings for relatively short periods of gender role experimentation.

Further, my data on the Brahma Kumaris in Western settings enable me to address another of Palmer's theses, namely that religions with "reverse sex polarity" ideologies (a view that women are different from men in ways that make them spiritually superior) and a preference for female leadership will necessarily have memberships numerically dominated by women (1993: 348; 1994: 239–40). Again relying on the Indian material, she sees the Brahma Kumaris as suggestive of this relationship. I show that, to the contrary, there has been much variation in gender ratios over time and space across the history of the BKs. Although women have continuously and vastly outnumbered men in the Indian branches, during the early spread of the movement overseas in at least one country (Australia), males have actually outnumbered females. Only recently have women come to equal and then surpass by a small margin the number of men in that Western setting.

I argue that differences in gender relations within the movement must be understood in the context of differing patterns of gender relations in the wider societies of the countries in which the movement operates, and of differences in the proportion of Indian members to the total membership in branches outside India. Likewise, different rates of defection can be explained in terms of differences in options open to defectors in the Western as opposed to the Indian context.

The Australian data marshalled here come from Australian BK internal membership censuses for 1987, 1990, and 1992, a questionnaire distributed by the author to all fully committed Australian Brahma Kumaris (or *brahmins*) in 1992, and participant observation and in-depth interviews with both leaders and ordinary members over the period 1991–1997. Primary data on the BKs in India and elsewhere in the world were gathered in that same period through interviews and participant observation at the world headquarters in Mt. Abu, India, and in the United Kingdom. These data are supplemented by reports on membership and leadership in Western countries supplied by the Brahma Kumaris' London headquarters in 1995.

BK Gender Ratios among Leaders and Members

Leadership. It is unquestionably the case that from the very beginning of the life of the organization its male founder, Dada Lekhraj, gave special encouragement to women to develop their spiritual lives and take leadership positions. Not only did he devolve his fortune and the responsibilities of administering it upon a trust of nine women as the very act of foundation of the Brahma Kumaris, but when, some few years after his life-transforming visions, he came to believe that celibacy was necessary to achieve salvation, he rejected the Hindu practice of restricting the elevated status of celibate seeker to men. Indeed much was made in the early life of the organization of the failure of so many Hindu men to live up to their traditional roles as "gurus" to their wives; correspondingly women enjoyed much appreciation as the ones who so often demonstrated their capacity for virtue as required by traditional family life (Chander 1981: 23). Anyone, regardless of sex, who was prepared to adopt chastity and follow purity rules concerning diet and alcohol was eligible to join Lekhraj and be a full member (a *brahmin*) of the organization. As it happened, a high proportion of early members were women and their children.

In the 1950s when Dada Lekhraj (or "Brahma Baba") judged the time right to send people out from the home community (by then in Mt. Abu, India) to open teaching centers elsewhere in India, it was young women he chose to spread the Brahma Kumaris teachings (cf. Chander 1981: 156). Today the leadership of the BK movement in India remains heavily female. "Sisters" or "kumaris" (daughters) are still "put in front," that is, favored for the position of "center-in-charge" (head of a local center). This preference is reflected in actual gender ratios: as of December 1995 all Indian centers were run by "sisters." However, "brothers" also reside in many of the centers run by "sisters." Brothers are expected to work to earn an outside income, which provides a substantial share of the support of the centers, and do the domestic work other than cooking. This frees the sisters to engage full time in service to the organization as teachers, leaders of meditation sessions and spiritual directors.

In contrast to the movement in India, the movement overseas has brought forward both male and female leaders. When the first Brahma Kumari center was established outside India (in London in 1971) it was again Indian women who were required to establish it. However, once that beachhead had been established in the West, much of the initial work of further extension beyond India fell to young Western *men*. The first cohort of pioneers were a small group of brothers (as it happened, mostly Australians) who first encountered "the knowledge" in London. These brothers then started centers in Australia, Europe and Latin America. Further proselytization was undertaken by young European men who entered the organization in Australia and then went to places such as Chile and Bolivia, as well as by sisters from the first generation of Australian BKs who opened centers in Indonesia, Israel and Japan. An English sister and an Indian sister pioneered the movement in Canada and later the United States.

By the end of the 1970s non-Indians, both male and female, from many countries had begun accepting pioneering tasks in other parts of their own countries and abroad. In the mid-90s the number of countries with BK centers has reached 62, requiring the clustering of centers by nation and groups of nations into "zones." Indian sisters resident in London, New York and Sydney coordinate, respectively, the European, North American and Southeast Asian zones (the latter including Australia, New Zealand the Pacific Islands), but the Latin American zone is still coordinated by an Australian brother. Men also hold high administrative positions (if not the formal headship) of national operations in some countries such as England and Australia.

The willingness of the Indian sisters in London in the 1970s to allow brothers to undertake much of the responsibility for spreading Brahma Kumaris teachings to new lands presaged a shift in gender practices amongst BKs outside India. Not only were sisters in countries other than India required to provide themselves with incomes, just like brothers, but correlatively, they have shared with brothers the responsibilities for the important spiritual tasks of teaching, directing meditation, organizing outreach activities and cooking. In contrast to India, where sisters and brothers with differentiated roles live together in centers, outside India the centers are commonly staffed either by males *or* females.¹ Brahmins living outside a center share in its support together with the brahmins actually living there. Brahmins living in the (public) centers can be said to have leadership roles in the organization.

In Australia the convergence of male and female roles has been associated with high rates of male participation in the leadership of centers. Thus in the author's 1992 survey of all Australian brahmins, the ratio of men to women among those who had ever lived in a center (and so taken some leadership role) was exactly 1:1.² It was not until 1994 that most centers were actually staffed by women. By 1996 this had risen to a strong majority, with sisters in charge of 14 of the 21 centers (or two thirds). (New Zealand still has two of its five centers run by brothers.)

Membership. The prominence of Australian brothers in leadership roles can in turn be related to the demographic history of the organization. Brothers (mostly in their 20s) predominated amongst the small group of Westerners who became part of the organization in London in the 1970s. The Australian brothers from this cohort who first brought "the knowledge" back to their home country recall that Westerners attracted to the Australian branches in the 1970s were also predominantly young males.

The change of the Australian organization from a predominantly male operation occurred only gradually along with changes in the age and occupational structure as the total numbers in the organization grew. By 1992 females slightly outnumbered males. Thus, 54.2% of brahmins recorded in the 1992 BK internal census were female, up from 54% in the 1990 census and 51.6% in the 1987 census.³

Although demographic data on members in other parts of the world are not available,⁴ discussions with senior brahmins in the United Kingdom suggest that the Australian demographic and leadership profile is similar to that of other regions outside India where Indian migrants have formed a small minority of the membership.⁵ This is the case in much of Europe, North and South America, and New Zealand. Notable exceptions are areas with large, active Indian memberships such as the regions focusing on London, Lancaster and New York, where sisters make up a larger proportion of the membership and are more evident in leadership roles. Thus, as of June 1995, Indian migrants made up half the number of brahmins in the United Kingdom and brothers headed only one-third of the 42 centers there. Even in areas with large numbers of Indian migrant members, however, the Indian practice of allowing junior sisters to become "surrendered" and draw their living from the organization is not allowed.

Reexamining BK Attrition Rates

For Palmer the sociological significance of joining a religious movement that promotes unusual gender roles lies not simply in the actual content of those roles (which the BK case helps to establish is much more various than previous research had shown) but in the way their adoption fits into the participants' life trajectories. The adoption under the sanction of an NRM of gender codes considered aberrant by mainstream society is read as experimentation, and the whole period of experimentation is seen as an interlude analogous to a rite of transition. Crucial to Palmer's interpretation is the frequently reported finding that new religionists studied in Western countries seldom stay with their adopted spiritual families for more than a few years. But Palmer concedes (presumably in light of Babb's Indian material) that the Brahma Kumaris are exceptional in making and keeping a long-term commitment (1983: 349). This view also needs to be modified. A careful sifting of information on the Brahma Kumaris shows that strong institutional factors operating in Indian society are what create pressures for many, but not all, brahmins to follow through on a life commitment. In Western countries, however, where such pressures do not operate, my data show that periods of involvement of Westerners are understandably shorter.

In India the strength of the family as a social institution and the corresponding rarity of single people living on their own have meant that brahmins who do not live in centers (where the public services of the movement are conducted or organized) live dispersed in the community with their natural families. Babb reports that these Brahmins are poorly integrated into the organization and have relatively short periods of association with it (1986: 132). In contrast, those who live in centers are heavily committed to it. The concept of "surrendered sisters" signals a privilege to draw a living in return for both long-term commitment and service; the term "surrendered brother" correspondingly connotes one who has accepted a primary responsibility for the security of the sisters and the organization as a whole. Clearly, brahmins cannot be allowed to undertake these responsibilities lightly.

This contrast between center-dwellers and other brahmins helps us to understand Babb's finding of a "bimodal distribution" in membership length among his Indian sample (1986: 131).

The likelihood that surrendered sisters in India will remain brahmins throughout their lives is increased by the practice of parents giving dowries to the Brahma Kumaris for daughters they concede will not marry. This practice apparently goes back to the early days of the organization, but it is not clear how common it was. Whaling (1995: 9) and Babb (1986: 131) report it as an occasional practice. Recently the pattern has been formalized, with retreats at Mt. Abu being offered for girls in their midteens who may wish to undertake a fuller commitment to the organization. The girls are offered a short period of taking classes and living near the senior sisters, at the end of which they may nominate to undertake a three year trial as surrendered sisters. A payment equivalent to a dowry is required from the girls' natural families to cover their living expenses over the trial period. This payment is also meant to prevent families "dumping" daughters on the Brahma Kumaris to avoid the dowries and other costs of ordinary marriages. Return to the world for women who have had such a dowry paid for them is difficult, as they could not look to their natural families to assist them in securing a husband and prospects for most single women are unattractive. Nor is it easy for men to find a new life after having been surrendered brothers: the patrilineally based families will have given up on them as lines of continuity into the future and as financial contributors. Some such brothers have remarked that they indeed have no options outside the organization.

In Western countries there is obviously no institution of dowry to solidify commitment; nor are marriage and occupational prospects so fatally damaged by a period of past membership in the Brahma Kumaris. Divorce and remarriage are common and no stigma is attached to single people living independently. Family support is of relatively little importance in finding a marriage partner and for gaining access to education and employment. Nor is delay or interruption of careers due to competing spiritual demands any longer an issue for BKs. According to long-term Australian brahmins, in their country in the 1970s and early 1980s there was some encouragement for brahmins to engage in occupations that did not compete with their spiritual lives. Thus in some cases early members spurned the acquisition of professional qualifications and a start on a career in favor of casual, unskilled jobs, although often their experiences in developing the organization itself provided a basis for subsequent careers. In any case, by the mid-1980s the average age of brahmins had increased and substantial numbers of professional and technically qualified people were starting to join (Howell and Nelson, *in press*). These brahmins won acceptance for the continuation of careers while participating fully in the organization.

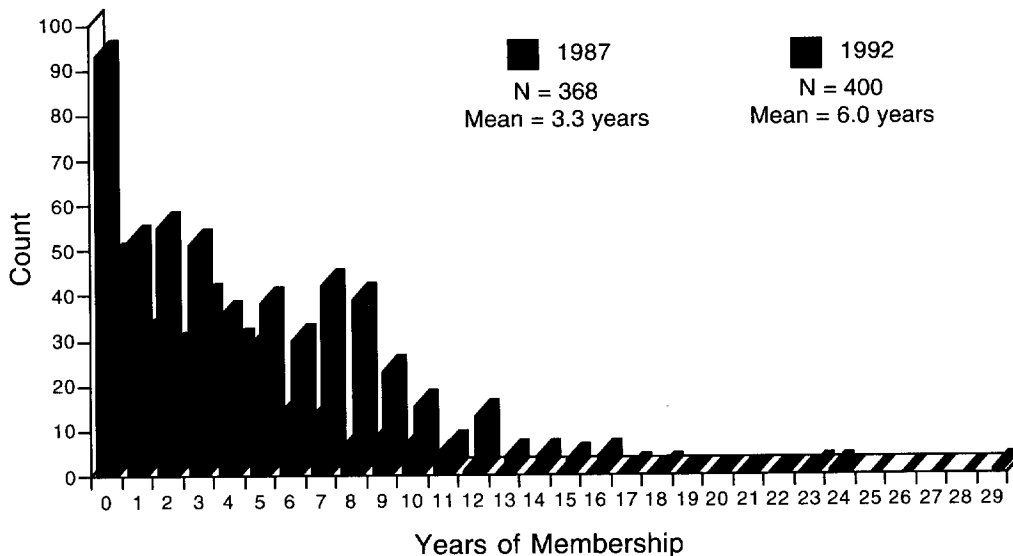
These factors combine to make the costs of leaving a spiritual community like the Brahma Kumaris much lower in the West than in India. This is reflected in actual attrition rates of Australian brahmins. Thus 77.2% of Australian brahmins recorded in the 1987 internal census were listed in the 1990 census and 60.9% were still on the 1992 census. The average length of membership reported for BKs in the censuses varied from about three and a third years for those in the 1987 census to almost six years for those in the 1992 census.

These BK attrition rates certainly appear to compare favorably with those for other NRMs in Western settings. Thus, for example, Beckford (1981 in Wright 1987: 2) reported that the British Unification Church lost "over a two year period approximately 75 percent of recruits" and Bird and Reimer's study of nine NRMs in Montreal showed that "75 percent of those who had ever participated" dropped out (1982: 5).⁶ However the length of membership data do not replicate the "bimodal distribution" that Babb found in the Indian BK movement (1986:131). Few Western BKs appear to be holding to a life-long commitment; on the other hand, the Western organization seems to be less vulnerable to high dropout rates

of new recruits. This could well be because Western branches integrate non-center-dwellers into the "brahmin family" better than the Indian branches do: they encourage singles into share-houses ("bavans") with other BKs where they receive more social support for their distinctive life style than they would living dispersed in the wider community, and status differences between center-dwellers and other Brahmins are not so sharply drawn in the West (Howell and Nelson 1997).

FIGURE 1

YEARS OF MEMBERSHIP AS SHOWN ON THE 1987 AND 1992 CENSUSES



DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The relatively high attrition rates of Western BKs in comparison to those of the Indian "surrendered" sisters and brothers give unexpected support to Palmer's characterization of NRMs as fields of temporary gender role experimentation. On the other hand, the greater prominence of men in the Western BK movement than in India requires an acknowledgment of the difference between ideals (in the case of the BKs, leadership by females) and practice, but does not detract from Palmer's basic point that patriarchy is but one of several themes in NRM gender role experimentation. Overall, then, the gender role experimentation thesis survives this reappraisal of the BK evidence.

Palmer's suggestion that religious groups with "reverse sex polarity" ideologies and a preference for female leadership will necessarily have memberships numerically dominated by women stands up less well under closer examination of the BK case. The slight and only recently achieved majority of women BKs in the Western branches is inadequate to support this view. The proposition can only be saved on this evidence by arguing (weakly) that the (Western) BK case represents a *trend* toward the expected congruence of gender ratios and sex role ideology. Supposing this to be so, it would still be necessary to examine the underlying assumption that this is because men are less attracted to organizations promoting female spiritual superiority and leadership than women are to organizations that promote male superiority and leadership. After all, women (not men) predominate among

active members of many religions dominated by men (like the majority of the mainstream Christian denominations in Western countries). The assumption might be justified by hypothesizing that the greater reluctance of males to accept female spiritual leaders can be accounted for by the disjunction between the norms of the religious group and those of the wider society. This supposition would find support in the fact that *Western* men have been nearly as eager as Western women to join the BKs in recent years, whereas in India, where patriarchal values are far stronger, they show considerably more reluctance.

There is the additional problem, however, that neither of Palmer's examples of "reverse sex polarity" movements (the Brahma Kumaris and the Rajneeshes) are actually "mirror images" of "sex polarity" movements (i.e., those which assert fundamental spiritual differences of the sexes with male rather than female superiority). Both "reverse sex polarity" movements were founded by men with whom followers, both women and men, have formed their most significant spiritual relationships. This is particularly marked in the case of the Brahma Kumaris, who regard their founder as God manifest and meet him in their meditations as well as "in person" through the body of a trance medium. The Marian cults within Christianity would be closest to mirror images of this (female deity with male spiritual leaders) but Mary's proper place as "saint" rather than divinity and so secondary in theology if not in devotion, detracts from the neatness of the contrast. It is also noteworthy that Palmer's case of an NRM with a female founder (Elizabeth Clare Prophet's Church Universal and Triumphant) does not propound the spiritual superiority of women, leaving us to look further for "pure" counterexamples to "sex polarity" movements favoring male leadership.

The actual preponderance of males early in the Australian movement also requires further interpretation, particularly given that country's notorious reputation for misogyny. In this regard it is significant that the early Australian membership as a whole was recruited from alternative and "hippy" circles and was part of a more broadly based reaction against mainstream values. My interviews suggest that some men have even regarded the movement as a haven for styles of masculinity poorly accepted in the wider society. In other words, the BKs' positive evaluation of "female" qualities and female senior leadership can even be seen as *attractors to men*. Further, the early membership, all of whom were active in recruitment, could see themselves as a small elite, as spiritual leaders more analogous to the then exclusively male Christian ministry than to the predominantly female Christian congregations.

Palmer's model of gender in NRMs successfully moves us beyond simplistic characterizations of them as either redoubts of patriarchy or instruments of female empowerment, calling attention to the actual complexity of gender attitudes in New Religious Movements. At the same time her model identifies useful types of movements, based on characteristic arrays of attitudes in the movements towards gender difference and the "function" or spiritual significance of gender. Indeed the typology motivated reference to the Brahma Kumaris as an example of a significant, if unusual, variant in spiritual understandings of gender, even though the BKs were not one of her case studies for the works referenced (1993, 1994). Further, her understanding of *why* there should be such diversity in gender attitudes in Western NRMs in the post-World War II period (as temporary havens from "gender confusion" (1994: xvii) and role choice overload in the wider society — the "gender role experimentation" thesis) remains plausible, even on closer inspection of what was thought to be the aberrant BK case.

However, this analysis of the Brahma Kumaris in the West shows that a great deal more needs to be done to understand relationships amongst Palmer's movement types (defined in terms of gender attitudes) and actual participation rates of women and men, as members and leaders, in NRMs. In trying to interpret the discrepancies raised by the BK case from what Palmer expected (numerical dominance of men in "sex polarity" groups

rating men as spiritually superior to women and *visa versa* in "reverse sex polarity" groups rating women as spiritually superior), we confront another order of complexity. Women may be seen to be spiritually superior to men in groups that were founded by men and make "male" beings central objects of religious devotions. In what way do these ideational elements (spiritual value of the genders, gender of founder, gender of focal spiritual beings — perhaps each with rather different gender messages) interact to motivate participation and ascent to leadership?

Turning to the issue of the organizational contexts in which these ideational factors play out, do stated preferences for female (or male) leaders have different impacts on gender participation in NRMs than they do on participation in mainline forms of Christianity in Western society? If the impacts are different, is that because of social dynamics associated with sectarianism or have we simply been too hasty in generalizing from the mainline groups? Shifting our focus to the societal context, what difference does it make that there are substantial differences in gender attitudes in the wider societies in which NRMs operate? Do differences in the strength of patriarchal values from one society to another colour people's gender attitudes even *within* groups that set out to be different? This becomes a particularly important issue as increasing numbers of both Western-originated and Eastern-originated NRMs intensify their global outreach.

That these questions are not easily answered on the available evidence suggests that there is considerable scope for extending the comparative analysis of gender ideologies and gender practice, both in NRMs and mainline forms of religion and in a variety of Western and non-Western settings.

NOTES

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¹ The exceptions are centers in major cities such as Sydney where a very large property has been purchased. There brothers and sisters may live in the same residence.

² Sixty-six ever lived in centers. The survey was conducted with Peter L. Nelson. See Howell and Nelson (1997).

³ Cf. Skultans' report that there are "slightly more men than women" among the Western BKs (1993: 54) but her data on the BKs in the West are generally unreliable. On internal evidence it appears that most of her assertions about the Western movement are unverified extrapolations from the Indian scene; her undated figures on the proportion of men to women in the whole movement are at least 10 years out of date as of the time of publication of her article.

⁴ The BK leadership in New York and London did not wish to have the questionnaire administered by the author in Australia used in the United States or England and the existence of membership records for the North Atlantic countries was not brought forward during our discussions with the leadership there.

⁵ Eight percent of the brahmins in Australia in 1992 were of Indian descent.

⁶ These data are not precisely comparable to the BK census data because the way the data were collected and the time periods over which rates were calculated sometimes differ. Further, the differing organizational structures, some of which have clear-cut boundaries and while others do not, some of which (like the BKs) have very narrow definitions of membership and others broad ones, make decisions about what is taken to take as the point of "entry" and "exit" difficult.

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