

Information on the Brahma Kumaris

What is the movement called?

Generally known as the Brahma Kumaris (BKs) the movement's official title is The Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University (BKWSU). The BKs often advertise themselves under their main practical teaching, Raja Yoga. Kumari is usually translated as 'daughter' reflecting the emphasis placed on the leadership of women in the organisation.

Where did the movement come from?

The movement was founded in 1932 in Hyderabad, Sindh, which was then part of India. According to the BKs, Lekhraj Kirpalani (1876-1969), a gem trader and devout Vaishnavite (a specific Hindu tradition), received a series of visions as he was approaching the age of 60. The visions revealed the world experiencing great suffering from man-made devastation and an image of future paradise. Kirpalani and his followers came to believe that Shiva was speaking through his body. In recognition of his special status as Shiva's medium, Kirpalani became known as Brahma Baba and the group around him was initially known as Om Mandali.

Brahma Baba handed over his wealth to a trust consisting of a small group of his female followers. He encouraged women to take leadership roles, and asked all his students to work for their personal spiritual development and to practise celibacy. These were radical challenges to the traditional positions of women in Indian culture. The group soon moved to Karachi and grew to between 300-500 members living in a relatively insular community. In 1950, a few years after partition, Brahma Baba moved the community around him from Pakistan to its current world headquarters in Mount Abu in the Aravali Mountains of Rajasthan in India. From there, he began to send out women teachers to establish centres in other parts of India.

In 1971 the BKs began establishing missions outside India. Women continue to hold most of the senior leadership and administrative positions. However the BKs stress that men are welcomed and can be found in most administrative and organisational roles.

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Registered Office
INFORM
Houghton St
London WC2A 2AE

Telephone
020 7955 7654
Facsimile
020 7955 7979

inform@lse.ac.uk
www.inform.ac

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What do Brahma Kumaris practise?

The movement's central practice is called Raja Yoga and is based on the concept of 'Soul-consciousness' or 'God-consciousness.' Raja Yoga does not involve mantras or breathing techniques or special postures, but merely calming one's mind by 'contacting the supreme soul' (represented as a point of light). Practitioners are encouraged to sit quietly for 10-20 minutes, with eyes open, gazing gently outward. The practitioner is then directed towards withdrawing attention from the senses and observing the passage of thoughts. Then, a positive thought is introduced, e.g. 'I am a peaceful soul,' and attention is brought back to this thought while neutrally observing other passing thoughts. The meditation is ended with a few moments of mental 'silence' with the eyes closed. The objective of all BK meditation is to recognise the self not as a body but as a soul. The BKs teach that anyone, whatever their religion, can follow this practise.

How do Brahma Kumaris live?

Members are strongly encouraged to practise meditation and spiritual study for an hour or two daily and to attend events at their local centre on a regular basis. The BKs also describe the practice of Raja Yoga as 'a way of life' and encourage members to integrate their meditation into their daily life. Officially, there is no 'dress code' but modest dress is strongly encouraged and most senior staff and committed members wear all white 'as it reflects the inner aspirations towards living a life of simplicity, purity, cleanliness and truth'.

Members are strongly encouraged to adopt an Indian 'sattvic' vegetarian diet which allows no meat, fish, eggs, as well as no onions or garlic. The use of alcohol, tobacco and non-prescription drugs are strongly discouraged. All members are encouraged to be celibate as it prioritises the giving and receiving of 'spiritual' rather than 'material' love. Committed members often keep a diary of their spiritual progress.

Ideally, a BK would rise at 4.00am for the first meditation practice of the day, attend the 6.00am group meditation at a BK centre and also practise meditation at various points throughout the day (called 'Traffic Control'). Followers often use 'Om Shanti' as a greeting, which they translate as 'I am an eternal and peaceful soul.' In India BK membership can offer an alternative, respectable lifestyle, particularly in the early days to women who do not accept an arranged marriage or are widowed, though today the membership is frequently comprised of families.

What do Brahma Kumaris believe?

Much of the BKs' teaching is common to other forms of mainstream Indian religion. The basis of the movement's beliefs is that the practice of Raja Yoga will bring a mental union of the individual soul (Atman) with God or the Supreme Soul (Shiva) and create natural peace and happiness. The Brahma Kumaris teach that there is only one God and God's fundamental form is a point of light; this single God is most purely manifested through Brahma Baba and now BK Gulzar. The Indian philosophical concepts of karma and reincarnation also have an important place in the BKs' belief system.

According to the BKs' teachings, the root of all human tragedy and suffering is believed to be due to 'body consciousness'. The BKs attribute the vices of lust, anger, greed, attachment and ego to the individual having 'body-consciousness' rather than being established in 'soul-

consciousness.' When one is in a state of 'soul-consciousness' it has qualities of love, peace, happiness, truth, bliss, and purity.

According to the BKs' teachings, time is eternal but progresses through cycles (Yuga) related to spiritual purity. There are four such periods, the Gold, Silver, Copper, and Iron ages. The BKs teach that we are now at the cusp between the most spiritually degenerate time, the Iron Age (or Kali Yuga) and that of a new Golden Age. They call this phase the Confluence Age and believe it is a time in which God will descend to earth and become manifest in the form of Brahma Baba. The BKs teach that the entire cycle is completed every 5,000 years and that each soul is destined to replay exactly the same actions in their reincarnations during the next 5,000 year cycle. On several occasions, the BKs have prophesied exact dates for these transitions. While their current teachings are more generalized, millenarian beliefs continue to be an important part of the BKs worldview.

Further Teachings

While many people simply practise Raja Yoga, those who are interested in further involvement are encouraged to take a series of courses that explain Brahma Baba's revelations and the BKs' beliefs in more depth. Seven key concepts are detailed in a 'Seven Day Course' of one-hour lectures on each topic. After these concepts are accepted and understood, members are allowed to hear and read what are believed to be direct revelations of God *via* Brahma Baba. These revelations are primarily found in transcriptions of Brahma Baba's lectures, called Sakar Murlis. The last five years of the Sakar Murlis are read aloud at BK centres every morning except Sundays. Since Brahma Baba's death, the BKs believe that he, together with the Supreme Soul, has continued to communicate through the medium of member Dadi Gulzar (b. 1929), who has been a member since 1937. Only a few of these messages, called Avyakt Murlis, are issued each year. These are read and re-read by members at BK centres on Sundays. While the murlis provide the foundation of the BK worldview, they only become accessible to members after considerable commitment to the organisation has been made.

Other Activities

The BKs actively promote peace, human rights and spiritual values. In relation to these activities the BKWSU has been given general consultative status with the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations and consultative status with UNICEF. In India, the BKs have innovated and encouraged the use of sustainable energy and established a hospital serving the poor population of western Rajasthan. Internationally, linked organisations include the Association for Living Values Education International (ALIVE) and the Janki Foundation for Global Healthcare.

Where are the Brahma Kumaris?

The majority of BK members originate from and live on the Indian subcontinent, but the BKWSU is a global organisation with a significant presence in the UK, Kenya, South Africa, Australia, Russia, and north and south America. The movement claims to have over 800,000 students at over 7,000 centres in 110 countries. Many 'centres' are in the residences of committed followers.

The Brahma Kumaris in Britain

The BKs came to Britain in 1971 under the name of their main practice, Raja Yoga. The International Coordinating Office is located in London. Currently, there are BK centres in over forty locations in Britain, including retreat centres near Oxford and in Worthing.

In Britain, the BKs offer a variety of courses in meditation, positive thinking, leadership development, stress management and self-esteem. These courses generally appeal to middle-class professionals though people from other backgrounds also attend. Most people first come into contact with the BKs through one of these courses. Many do not have any other involvement with the movement, while others become dedicated to the Brahma Kumari teachings and lifestyle.

There are different layers of membership, members being referred to as students at all levels. In 2004, the BKs reported approximately 1,500 active members and 100 teachers in Britain. In the 2001 UK National Census, 331 individuals gave their religion as 'Brahma Kumari'.

How is the movement financed?

BKWSU classes are free, although participants are told that donations are acceptable. Increasing interest and commitment leads to encouragement to donate to the movement. Around thirty people work full-time for the movement but the majority are employed in 'normal jobs' while keeping daily contact with the centre.

Problems, controversies

Millenarian beliefs have caused concern to non-member friends and family when BK members have wanted to base important life-decisions on these beliefs. Some former-members have found the teachings of BKs' spiritual superiority and the coming 'end times' difficult to forget as they try to integrate with the wider society after leaving the movement. The emphasis on celibacy has caused marital stress for some members. Non-member spouses can find this teaching very difficult to accept.

BKs sometimes change their wills, leaving property to the movement upon their death. This has resulted in a few family members, who might otherwise have inherited the property, accusing the movement of exerting undue influence on vulnerable members.

Some of those raised within the movement have complained about the authority given to leaders as God's representatives and the guilt associated with experiencing negative feelings such as anger and sexual desire. There are no allegations of widespread or systemic child abuse and the BKs report that rigorous child protection policies have been in place since 2001. Some former members have complained that the BKs were slow in implementing formal child-protection policies.

In India, the BKs have also been controversial. BK beliefs incorporate many traditional Indian ideas and consider Hinduism as a corrupted version of Shiva's revealed truth. This position has angered some Hindu groups in India, particularly the nationalistic Arya Samaj. Some claim that the measures used for crowd control at BK celebrations are heavy-handed. The BKs' encouragement of women to shun marriage and become celibate is unpopular with many parents and relatives of members in India. For those who have given their dowry to the

BKs, any possibility of a future marriage becomes difficult if not impossible; an Indian woman in this situation leaving the BKs would find it difficult to be respectable woman in ordinary Indian society. This is a situation that critics argue puts unacceptable pressure on women to remain BKs. The BKs have also been criticised by some former members for having differential treatment towards Western members and higher caste Indian members than low caste Indian members. In India, BKs sometimes visit the homes of those recently bereaved. While the BKs maintain their visits are only to offer comfort, some have believed that the purpose is to persuade surviving family members to join.

There are several groups that have split from the Brahma Kumaris but maintain aspects of their beliefs. The most significant of these is the Prajapita Brahma Kumaris (PBKs) who are also known as the Advance Party. The PBKs hold similar beliefs as their parent organization. However, the PBKs believe that a man named Veerendra Dev Dixit is the reincarnation of Lekhraj Kripalani's deceased business partner and since 1976 has been the human vehicle for Shiva. The PBKs allege that some of their members have been physically assaulted by members of the BKs. The PBKs also have inspired a splinter group known as the Inadvance Party, the Vishnu Party or the PPBKs.

Further Information

From the Brahma Kumaris:

Official websites: <http://www.bkwsu.org>,
<http://www.brahmakumaris.com>, and <http://www.bkwsu.org.uk>

The Brahma Kumaris (2002) *The Gift of Peace*, London: BK Press.

Janki, Dadi (1996) *Companion of God: The Wisdom and Words of Dadi Janki*, London: BKWSU.

For a Sympathetic Approach:

Hodgkinson, Liz (1999) *Peace and Purity: The Story of the Brahma Kumaris: A Spiritual Revolution*, London: Rider.

For An Academic Approach:

Babb, Lawrence (1986) *Redemptive Encounters: Three Modern Styles in the Hindu Tradition*. Berkeley, University of California Press.

Howell, Julia Day (1997) 'ASC Induction Techniques, Spiritual Experiences, and Commitment to New Religious Movements' *Sociology of Religion* 58(2): 141-163.

Skultans, Vieda (1993) 'The Brahma Kumaris and the Role of Women' *Women as Teachers and Disciples in Traditional and New Religions*, E. Puttick and P. B. Clarke. Lewiston, Edwin Mellen Press: 47-62.

Walliss, John (2002) *The Brahma Kumaris as a 'Reflexive Tradition'*, Aldershot: Ashgate.

Whaling, Frank (2008) *Understanding the Brahma Kumaris*, Dunedin: Academic Press.

For a Critical Approach:

Former members have organised an anonymously-run website at www.brahmakumaris.info detailing their concerns about the movement.

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- By putting you in touch with a nation-wide network of experts with specialist knowledge concerning NRMs
- By putting you in touch with people who can give counselling, legal advice - or just lend a sympathetic ear.
- By putting you in touch with former-members or families who have personal experience with a particular group.

New Religious Movements: A Practical Introduction (London: HMSO, revised 1995) has been written by Professor Eileen Barker to provide practical suggestions as well as general background information.