Custodians of Purity

An Ethnography of the Brahma Kumaris

by

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Dedication

My beginning
my end
my signal.
All things faced
all souls loved
the self fully known.
Home.

- Anthea Church

This thesis is dedicated to
Dadi Prakashmani
(1922-2007)

Statement of Authorship

General Declaration

Monash University

Monash Research Graduate School

Declaration for thesis based or partially based on conjointly published or unpublished work

In accordance with Monash University Doctorate Regulation 17/ Doctor of Philosophy and Master of Philosophy (MPhil) regulations the following declarations are made:

I hereby declare that this thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma at any university or equivalent institution and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, this thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text of the thesis.

This thesis includes one original paper published in a peer reviewed journal and no unpublished publications. The core theme of the thesis is the spiritual response to disaster. The ideas, development and writing up of all the papers in the thesis were the principal responsibility of myself, the candidate, working within the School of Psychology and Psychiatry under the supervision of Professor Lenore Manderson and Dr Wendy Smith.

The inclusion of co-authors reflects the fact that the work came from active collaboration between researchers and acknowledges input into team-based research.

In the case of Chapter Five my contribution to the work involved the following:

Thesis chapter	**Publication title**	**Publication status**	**Nature and extent of candidate's contribution**
Five	Changing a Mountain to a Mustard Seed	In Press	80%

I have renumbered sections of submitted or published papers in order to generate a consistent presentation within the thesis.

Signed:

Date:

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Glossary

Alokik: Not of this world.

Ashram: See 'centre.'

Avinashi Gyān Yagya: The earliest name of the Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University (BKWSU), adopted sometime in the 1940s.

Baba: An affectionate term meaning 'father.'

BapDada: The combined form of Shiv Baba and Brahma Baba.

Bhawna: Deep feelings of love, belonging and sentiment.

Bhog: Food that has been cooked and offered to God with ceremony on special occasions.

Brahmā bhojan: Food that has been cooked and offered to God.

BK: An acronym for someone who self-identifies as following the path of Brahma Kumaris Raja Yoga.

Brahma Baba: The founder of the Brahma Kumaris.

Brahmā Kumār/i: Spiritual son or daughter of Brahma Baba, respectively, male and female member of the Brahma Kumaris.

Brahmā Kumaris Ishwariya Vishwa Vidyalaya: Official native title of the organization, anglicized as Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University

Brāhman (caste): The highest priestly caste. Historically *brāhman*s adhered to a pure lifestyle and follow the highest lifestyle principles of non-violence.

Brahmin: An anglicized version of *brāhman*. Used among BKs to identify BKs. "Is she a Brahmin (Is she a BK)?"

Centre: A place where BK ascetics reside and the main teaching house of the Brahma Kumaris. Also referred to as 'ashram' in India.

Confluence Age: The metaphysical age that overlaps the end of Kaliyuga and the beginning of Satyuga.

Cooperative Soul: Someone who does not necessarily abide by BK philosophy and principles but supports and facilitates the work that the organization does.

Cycle: An eternal, predestined, cyclic and endless repeating period of 5,000 years.

Dada: Lit., Elder brother, father, grandfather. Fig. A senior male BK who has been in the organization since its inception. A form of respectful address to elder men.

Dadi: Lit., Grandmother. Fig. A senior female BK who has been in the organization since its inception.

Dedicated/ surrendered: A BK sister or brother who lives in a centre and has dedicated his or her life to teaching and living the principles of the BK path.

Didi: Lit., Elder sister. Fig., Senior sisters who joined the organization in the 1950s and 1960s. Didis are considered the middle management of the organization.

Double Videshī: Double Foreigners. BKs who are of a nationality other than Indian.

Drama: An eternally repeating play that takes place on the stage of the world. It is a closed system that contains three forms of energy: souls, matter and God.

Drishti: Lit., vision or insight. Fig., a significant, sacred and important BK practice where, with the eyes open, good energy is passed between souls.

Gyān: Spiritual knowledge or wisdom. 'Coming into gyan' and 'leaving gyan' are terms BKs use when somebody enters or leaves the path of BK Raja Yoga

Instrument: The consciousness with which BKs endeavor to do service. E.g. "Shiv Baba is getting it done through me. I am God's puppet. I am just His instrument."

Kālī: Dark fearsome mother goddess, worshipped especially in East India.

Kalīyuga: The age of death and darkness that exists presently.

Lokik: Of the world.

Madhuban: The Headquarters of the Brahma Kumaris, located in Rajasthan, applies to all campuses on Mt Abu. The spiritual 'home' of BKs.

Maryāda: Lifestyle principles adhered to by BKs, considered the highest form of living.

Moolvatan: The world of absolute essence. See Soul World.

Murlī: Spiritual teachings read and studied daily at BK centres. *Sakar*: Teachings given by Shiv Baba through Brahma Baba, between 1964 and 1969. *Avyakt*: Teachings spoken by Shiv Baba and Brahma Baba (BapDada) through Dadi Gulzar since 1969.

Nirvana: See soul world.

Om Mandli: Lit., A gathering of those who chant and sing. The first name of the Brahma Kumaris, given by the outside community.

Om Shānti: "I am peace". A common greeting among BKs.

Pukka: Strong, firm, accurate.

Sangamyuga: See Confluence Age.

Sanskāras: Peculiarities of character from which souls draw meaning and reason through life events. Forms the basis of one's perception.

Satyuga: The age of truth, beauty and harmony that is forthcoming.

Service: The daily activities of BKs, which may include cooking, cleaning, public talks and teaching meditation, among other forms of virtuous action.

Shiv Baba: The name for God.

Shrimat: All the teachings given by Shiv Baba through Brahma Baba.

Sookshmavatan: The world of subtlety. The refined world.

Soul: A sentient eternal point of indivisible and indestructible conscious light energy.

Soul World: The region of warm golden light that is the eternal home of souls and the Supreme Soul.

Stoolvatan: The physical world. The world of inertia.

Subtle Regions: The subtle world that exists between the physical world and the spiritual world. It is a world created and sustained by thought. Also called *Sookshmavatan*.

Supreme Soul: Identical to the soul but complete and perfect. Is beyond birth and rebirth.

Tilak: A small sacred symbol worn in the centre of the forehead. Women wear them decoratively, and they are also applied at temples and during religious ceremonies

Toli: A sweet or biscuit made by BKs that is cooked in remembrance, offered to God and shared as a form of spiritual service.

VIP: 'Very important person'. People of note such as government leaders, celebrities and ministers with whom BKs endeavour to make contact.

Yagya: (Sanskrit: *Yajña*) The sacrificial fire of the knowledge of the Brahma Kumaris. Used to denote the organization, as well as the spiritual heart of the Brahma Kumaris. *Bhakti Yagya*: A sacred fire created, monitored and guarded by a Brahman priest to ward off bad omens. Offerings may be made into the fire, and symbolically received from the fire.

Abstract

This thesis is an ethnographic study of the Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University (Brahma Kumaris). The Brahma Kumaris is a millenarian new religious movement (NRM) established in Northwest India in the 1930s and in 2009 is located in more than 120 countries. I define members (BKs) of the Brahma Kumaris as social ascetics. BKs live a life of rigorous purity, based around their central practice of meditation. The disciplines of these social ascetics are designed to free the mind, through mastery over the body, culminating in self-sovereignty. While some BKs live in ashrams in moderately cloistered communities, most live at home with their families and conduct normal lives according to their environment, culture and circumstances. For this reason, BKs endure and moderate unique tensions as they arbitrate leading a life that is spiritually meaningful while maintaining authentic relationships and fulfilling their worldly responsibilities.

Over a period of fifteen months, I conducted fieldwork in New York, USA and Orissa, India in an attempt to understand how BKs actualize their beliefs in traumatic circumstances through a variety of disasters including a flood, cyclone and act of terrorism, as well as personal battles and a case of spirit possession.

BK theology rests on the belief that each person is an immutable, conscious and inherently valuable eternal and immortal soul, an infinitesimal point of light that dwells in the forehead of the physical costume of the body. Originally pure and embodying peaceful and joyous states of awareness, all souls have gradually lost their original purity and associated happiness and peace through taking rebirth in the physical world. BKs believe the world we live in today is the result of that spiritual demise. The present time in which humanity is living is the time when the lowest and highest points of human and environmental history converge, and is known as the age of confluence or *Sangamyuga*. It culminates in liberation, peace and happiness for all souls, and restoration for the world.

The research shows that within Brahma Kumaris philosophy, acts of war and environmental demise, political unrest and financial collapse are expected and understood to be the natural order of things, as the impurity of the world comes to its zenith. BKs normalize what the world considers to be 'disasters' through their theology. This thesis explores the ways in which BKs respond to environmental disasters and acts of war, as well as threats to physical and spiritual purity. BKs say that it is purity that will restore balance, value and peace. I analyze how BKs' focus on purity influences the ways in which they manage traumatic circumstances, and the ways that they discuss those circumstances and engage in acts of care.

For BKs purity is the seed of peace, happiness and world restoration. Impurity is the cause of the world's decline and the associated horrors and sorrow. Therefore, for BKs, a threat to or violation of purity is the most significant disaster.

Ultimately the thesis argues that BKs live with daily tensions that may make them a potentially valuable and calming, non-proselytizing resource for the broader community during disasters. This can have further implications for the ways in which faith-based communities are utilized and may enable disaster managers to more courageously integrate the spiritual skills of faith-based non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and their members. It also exposes difficulties that spiritual practitioners must manage, in a world in which people may be oblivious to unusual forms of tension.

Chapter 1

Origins: The Indestructible Sacrificial Fire of Knowledge

Those days flew away
Sweet aching melancholy
And still we are here

Many things come in between an initial research idea and its outcome. And so it has been with my doctoral studies. After being introduced to the Brahma Kumaris in 1984 and being part of the community since then, I have been inquisitive about the effect of spiritual practice in life. On reflection it seems extraordinary that it could take twelve years for that idea to work itself into a research question; 'How does the spiritual praxis and philosophy of BKs shape their experience of disaster?' Even within this question there were others I had asked myself over the years that sustained my interest: What does it mean to live as a meditator? How should one 'be' in a world that is focussed so unreservedly on producing and accumulating? What are the deeper mechanisms upon which the world, and the people within it, runs?

During my career as a paramedic I began to look at new ways of being and doing as a spiritual person, which is how I see myself. From time to time, my work partner and I would come across someone in a state of chronic pain or suffering, when - flashy uniforms and fancy equipment notwithstanding - there was nothing we could do. Unable to rush in with syringes, tubes, drugs and monitors, I would experiment with different ways of contributing to care from a holistic perspective. I remember the man with chronic ostalgia (bone pain) who screamed at the slightest touch, the woman who felt the feet of her fetus as it spontaneously aborted in her toilet, the seven year old girl who had found her mother hanging from the fan in her living room, the father whose daughter had shot herself in the head with his gun, the young man who was diagnosed with liver cancer and had weeks to

live. It was the lives and experiences of these people that made me reflect and consider there may be different ways of being and doing as a spiritual practitioner, as a BK. What might they be? What could they mean?

In this thesis, I explore three areas based on the above - how BKs perceive events that the world considers 'disasters', how BKs' ideas of humanitarian service in the context of disaster is directed through their faith, and how BKs manage day-to-day tensions within their lives.

Thesis structure

The thesis follows a timeline, as each chapter progresses forward into my fieldwork. I begin each chapter with a haiku poem that encapsulates the chapter content. In our preparatory year, the doctoral students in our unit were given creative tasks by our professor to stimulate our writing skills. One task we were given was to write poems about our work, in the disciplined syllabic rhythm (5-7-5) typical to Japanese haiku style. Later, in the field, I found haiku a measured and disciplined way to debrief at times of confusion and stress. When I was writing up, I found compiling the rhythmic stanzas an excellent way to anchor my thinking and discovering deeper layers of meaning in the data.

The thesis proceeds as follows. In Chapter One, I begin by establishing my main theoretical framework of phenomenology (Hegel 1977; Moran 2000; Sokolowski 2000), positive psychology (Calhoun and Tedeschi 2006) and logotherapy (Frankl 1988, 1962). Within the broad discussion of New Religious Movements, I review the scholarly literature on the Brahma Kumaris. In light of original documents deposited in the British Library, I examine the understanding and perspective of the Brahma Kumaris' earliest days when the

community called itself the *Avinashi Gyān Yagya*[1] (the indestructible sacred fire of divine wisdom or knowledge) (Radhe 1942). I follow the organizations trajectory as it moves from one in which members had a compelling sense of spiritual urgency and imminent destruction in the 1930s and 1940s that has gradually given way to a much more integrated and socially considered organization, with implications for Brahma Kumaris' role in disaster response.

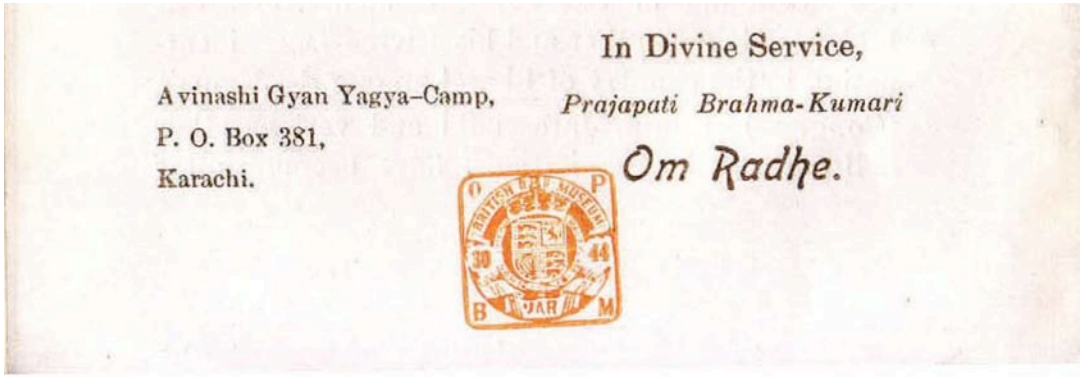


Figure 1. A letterhead from the early community
Source: Radhe 1942:no pages

In Chapter Two, I introduce my field locations of New York, USA and Orissa, India and discuss my position and stance in relation to my research community. In Chapter Three, I introduce the main tenets of Brahma Kumaris philosophy that contribute to the ways in which BKs make sense of catastrophic events. This exposition of the philosophy and life principles adhered to by BKs is central to understanding the rest of the thesis.

In Chapter Four, I explore the inner world of my research community and my place within it, as I document the death of Dadi[2] Prakashmani (jewel of light), the most significant event for the Brahma Kumaris since the death of the founder in 1969. It is the most auto-ethnographic of the chapters, and I position the auto-ethnography in a broader discussion

[1] *Yajña* is anglicized and pronounced as *yagya*.

[2] In Northern India Dadi is a term of respect used for elder sisters.

about the anthropology of sentiment and critical ethnography. In Chapter Five, I explore the narratives of New York BKs as research participants discuss their experiences of the World Trade Centre (WTC) collapse in 2001. In this chapter, a forthcoming publication, my co-authors and I consider BKs' spiritual management of the World Trade Centre collapse in 2001, in terms of personal conduct and social response. Because of its status as an independent article, Chapter Five contains an abridged version of the Brahma Kumaris history and philosophy. In Chapter Six, I continue to explore the BK community in New York, but from the perspective of the organization's role at the United Nations (UN). Brahma Kumaris' role at the UN is a notable one, and here I document BK participation in the Climate Change Conference of 2007, triangulating the data against personal reflections of BKs and their theology about the current state of the world. I situate the Brahma Kumaris within a broader discussion on faith-based response to disaster.

In Chapter Seven, I move to Orissa to look at the lives of East Indian BKs and the way in which they live with everyday vulnerability, drawing on accounts of their management of the Super Cyclone of 1999 and my observation of the eastern floods of 2008. The data underpinning this chapter reflect the more devotional context of Indian culture compared to the USA, although BK sense-making is similar in both locations. In Chapter Seven, I provide a case study of a BK sister (BK women are 'sisters' and men are 'brothers') in Orissa and her experience of spirit possession. Strong themes around purity, threats to purity and the spiritual management of those threats, professed in earlier chapters, are anchored and affirmed.

The final chapter is a discussion of the deeper thematic thread of fire that was a repeated metaphor during the research. Throughout the fieldwork in Indian and USA, BKs referred to both the Brahma Kumaris organization and by contrast, the spiritual heart of the Brahma Kumaris as a *yagya* (sacrificial fire). A *yagya* is also a sacred fire ritual in Hinduism. BK theology regularly employs the metaphor of fire, which offers an interesting

quality with which to generate an overarching theory about the ways in which BKs become guardians of purity, or *yagyarakshak*, those who protect the sacrificial fire. I use their metaphor to summarize my findings.

Theoretical perspectives

I look at my data from a perspective that is broad, interpretive, and open. This thesis is fluid and purposely draws in some of the mess that occurred in the field, outside my initial realm of inquiry, particularly in Chapters Four and Eight. The focus of this project is on personal and lived experience within the context of a broader spiritual life. Therefore I draw on theories of phenomenology, existentialism and positive psychology.

Phenomenologists do not agree on one theory or outlook: there are incredibly diverse interpretations of central issues of consciousness, knowledge and the world (Moran 2000). In essence, phenomenology is:

> A radical anti-traditional style of philosophizing which emphasizes and attempts to get to the truth of matters, to describe phenomena, in the broadest sense as whatever appears in the manner to which it appears, that is, as it manifests itself to consciousness to the experiencer. (Moran 2000:4)

Phenomenology rejects the categorization of experience by externally constructed criteria. This provides an appropriate philosophical support with which to view the experiences of BKs. The interest of phenomenology is in capturing life as it is lived. It pays close attention to the nature of consciousness as actually experienced, not as fettered by 'common sense' or by philosophical or scientific ambits. Phenomenology supports qualitative studies because it steps aside from the premise that there is truth and falsehood when it comes to peoples' experiences and the way in which they apply their consciousness to external events. Phenomenology draws a distinction between the physical world and the inner world, calling for something other than a simplistic response to a research question (Hegel 1977; Sokolowski 2000). Phenomenology permits the

research findings to be built up from the data, with participants' experience as the authority.

In ethnographic research, phenomenology provides a mirror that travels constantly with the researcher. The mirror may not reflect accurately at all times, because of the degree to which one's own perception, as well as social interactions, alter and shape the production of knowing and being, knowledge and experience. However, because phenomenology is anti-reductionist, it permits changes in perception and messy thinking - if clearly stated - as a valid part of the phenomenon under investigation. In reflexive anthropology, this includes the researcher. Phenomenology also offers a context of thinking, whereby a researcher is able to articulate her experience as a participant. After all, social research is co-created by building shared understanding of experiences, that are expressed through social situations, and meaningfully established through customs, rituals, history and shared behaviour.

Hermeneutics, or the language of analysis and interpretation, is a guiding principle of rigorous qualitative research and forms a dimension of my theory. The philosophy of hermeneutics is historically entwined with the interpretation of scripture. The first instance of hermeneutics dates back to the Jewish Oral Tradition (Wright 1999), but since the time of Aristotle (Risser 1997) it has been a method of engaging critically with scriptural text.

The Brahma Kumaris' scriptural texts, read and listened to daily, are known as *murlis* (sacred flute of knowledge). There are two types of *murlis,* discussed at length in Chapter Three. The *sakar murli,* spoken when the founder was alive and which still form the main body of teachings today, was a co-creation between two entities: Brahma Baba, a human being and the now-deceased founder of the Brahma Kumaris, and Shiv Baba, the Supreme Soul (God). The intent of *murli* text is that it be understood as a set of instructions on the subject of personal and world transformation, through stories, directions, and the

semiotics of religious parable and metaphor. The relationship between intention and practice is this: Up until 1969 the soul of Shiv Baba spoke directly through the body of Brahma Baba. During *sakar* days, when Brahma Baba was alive, spoken *murlis* were recorded on analogue tape and then transcribed. *Murlis* spoken between 1965 and 1969 (the '*sakar*' days) are revised every five years; for those who do not understand Hindi, they are edited according to the level of English sophistication of the bilingual translators. The *murlis* today are read aloud by a designated teacher to a classroom of students who listen, take notes, and refer to those notes during the day as the basis of their spiritual practice. Hermeneutics becomes important at this point. The interpretation of these *murli* texts occurs where the mind of the author and the life of the listener meet, through the assimilated and lived interpretation of the written text (Gadamer 1994). It therefore neither belongs to the author nor the listener, but is co-created and becomes truly a *murli* (divine song) when it concludes as a form of living practice. The benefit of hermeneutics is in understanding that the *murli*, of fundamental importance to BKs, is a co-created scripture that becomes meaningful when listened to, interpreted and acted upon in life. The *murli* becomes alive.

Hermeneutics also allows one to engage critically but interpretatively when coding interviews and fieldnotes. It allows the final language of the work to be assembled while the final written product maintains an ethical and rigorous form. Hermeneutics also sits alongside phenomenology well, adding to rigour by allowing the researcher to be present and accounted for, and acknowledging clearly the role of the researcher in the data, through the text. In a sense, hermeneutics provides a sidecar for the researcher, and does not pretend that the motorbike of the participants' experiences is travelling solo, without a witness and an interpreter (Morse 1994). The above notwithstanding, words in text, just as in spoken language, are markers that point to an experience, and not the experience itself. Scriptural interpretation is inherently limited, as it cannot absolutely grasp the experience and deeper meaning behind the language.

Logotherapy and other theories

In this research project, I contend that attitude plays an eminent role in the experience of wellbeing and resilience to the experience of suffering in the context of disaster. These ideas were first put forward by Frankl (1962) and have since been developed by Wong (1998a; 1998b), Calhoun (1998), Tedeschi (2004; 1998) and Janoff-Bulman (1992; 2006); I draw on the work of each of them.

Frankl is the founder of logotherapy,[3] often termed 'The Third Viennese School of Psychotherapy'. Logotherapy is the most influential school of psychotherapy after Freud's psychoanalysis that explains human psychology as centred around the drive for pleasure, and Adler's individual psychology that draws on Nietzsche's philosophy of power and freedom as prime motivating forces. Frankl's experiences in the German concentration camps of Theresienstadt, Auschwitz, Kaufering III, and Tuerkheim verified the initial theories he held as a young man, around meaning as the prime motivator in life. As with all forms of psychotherapy, certain assumptions are made that form the crux on which more complex understanding is built. Just as Freud's assumption was the will to pleasure, and Alder's was the will to power, so Frankl's primary assumption was the will to meaning. Logotherapy is built upon three fundamental philosophical and psychological precepts (Marshall 2009):

Life has meaning. Even in the most tragic of circumstances, meaning can be found. BKs understand that whatever is happening is meant to happen as part of the bigger picture designed by karma, rebirth and the Drama (discussed further in Chapter Three). To suffer can be meaningful and so it is never arbitrary. People are unique, individual and have a right and a will to exist in the world meaningfully. Each person has the freedom to choose

[3] Logotherapy comes from logos or 'meaning' and therapy 'to heal'.

how they approach and respond to life circumstances. Using meaning developed through their theology and meditation, BKs endeavour to transform attitudes that may be based on division and fear, to attitudes based on higher spiritual principles of inclusion and tolerance. Frankl's "tragic optimism" (1984:161-179) expresses the view that whatever happens in life, whatever is taken away or destroyed, whatever is experienced, the one aspect that remains autonomous and empowered, the ultimate freedom that every person retains, is to choose one's *attitude* to life's circumstances.

Human freedom is not freedom from conditions, Frankl argues (1988), but freedom to take a stand and to face whatever conditions might confront her, which is the second tenet of logotherapy and what BKs would call the 'the power to face.' People reach beyond themselves in the search for purposeful goals and values. Beyond the body and mind, there is a spirit that equips people with the will to explore, to decide, to choose and to change. BKs concur, understanding the soul as the master, and the ability of each person to be a true self-sovereign by understanding their original virtuous state and drawing on its capacities. The freedom to act in the belief of something that is greater than the self is what motivates people to search for meaning in extraordinarily tragic events. BKs' overarching understanding is that presently the world is in a time of transition between impurity and purity. This accords BKs a higher purpose and greater meaning when witnessing or experiencing tragedies such as personal, social or natural disaster.

Human behaviour is infinitely complex and multidimensional. People have an eclectic inner box from which to choose their response to any given situation, and BKs are no different in this. This inner framework may include genetic predispositions, and learned behaviours or values that one aspires to. However, BKs endeavour to strengthen the values that they aspire to, believing that those values are the original state of each soul. If people had not experienced that state in the past, BKs reason, there would be no reason to aspire to it in the present. People choose to behave a certain way based on a broad

understanding of the way things are. Someone then becomes the form of her or his choice by actualizing the possibility through action. All people choose to behave in a certain way, whether that choice is cognitive or not. BKs draw on their *murli* scriptures for guidance and advice, and aim to make its teachings part of their 'natural' response to life circumstances, whatever they may be.

Frankl did not include a religious perspective in his description of logotherapy as a philosophy or therapeutic tool; however he spoke secularly about the human spirit as a dynamic. Frankl's philosophy of spirit is akin with the Brahma Kumaris' understanding of soul, and so logotherapy becomes a philosophical framework that can contain Brahma Kumaris theology and also the experience of BKs. The spirit is energy, not substance. It cannot be destroyed, divided, reduced or duplicated. Spirit is the essence of a person, beyond biology and all forms of learned behaviour. A person *is* a spirit. A person *has* a body and a mind. The person (spirit) expresses itself through the body and mind, but it is distinct from them. The body and mind exist within the constraints of time and space, but the spirit is not confined to the physical dimensions of time and space. The spirit is, therefore, the ultimate form of freedom for each person in the way they live their lives, with meaning.

Frankl argues as his third tenet that meaning itself is a form of healing. He suggests that one can tolerate suffering and failure if there is meaning in either, but if one finds no meaning, one will be led to despair. Therefore in traumatic or difficult circumstances, searching for meaning offers a path through the situation so that one does not get stuck in momentary suffering. In some cases, as with Frankl himself, the losses are the very catalysts that reinvigorate the search for meaning. Being meaning-centred makes logotherapy characteristically different from other more reductionist forms of psychological understanding. Logotherapy is fundamentally holistic (Rice et al. 2009), and

therefore useful for ethnography. Logotherapy offers a solid theory for the development of the data in these chapters and a strong psychological structure for this study.

Paul Wong developed Frankl's ideas of recognizing that people are spiritual as well as psycho-social biological beings. From this, Wong developed Meaning Centred Counselling. This is relevant in its capacity to consider spiritual and existential issues as central to healing, wellbeing and growth, or positive change. Meaning Centred Counselling emphasizes the transformative power of meaning, especially in re-authoring narratives, recognizing that people are essentially meaning-seeking, meaning-making creatures.

Calhoun and Tedeschi (2006) build on some of Frankl's theories around meaning. Drawing on empirical research, they discuss the notion of post-traumatic growth, which suggests that the experience of trauma can be an instrument for positive change in one's life, leading to more fulfilling relationships and a richer spiritual and existential life. Post-traumatic growth allows the possibility for positive responses and is recognized as part of a life narrative and a continuum, not a final outcome. Calhoun's and Tedeschi's work is pertinent because it systematically recognizes the value of spirituality (discussed further on page 241) as a framework with which to experience and manifest positive change in the context of traumatic events. Janoff-Bulman (1992, 2006) has spent years revising the psychology of trauma based on the capacity of people in the face of disaster, to manage their ruminations and re-author new meaning.

Data from BKs in this thesis reveal the cognitive machinations that moderate experiences of suffering and enable them to maintain a positive and meaningful attitude. Calhoun's and Tedeschi's research and writings supplement and moderate theories of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), a generalized and sometimes inappropriately utilized form of psychological assessment (Perera 2002; Napoleon 1991; Asmundson, Stapleton, and Taylor 2004; Fontana and Rosenheck 2004). Reinforcing the findings of Calhoun and Tedeschi, Wong (1998a, 1998b) sees that every crisis is an opportunity and every

transition is a transformation. Janoff-Bulman (1992: 2006) provides a context of the transitions and mutations to one's 'assumptive world' that occurs in context of disaster.

Overall, these theories form a valuable foundation with which to view my data. The theories support this research by providing a breadth of responses that recognize spirituality and existential questions as a valuable and intrinsic part of meaning-making in the broad context of disaster.

New Religious Movements

Few topics grab media attention like the Charles Manson massacre, the Branch Davidians debacle at Waco, Texas, The Solar Temple mass suicide, the free love and polygamy of The Family of God, and the celebrity adherents and questionable finances of The Church of Scientology. In the academic arena too, particularly in the anthropology of religion, there is a steady interest in the development and modification of religious institutions and spiritual communities in different parts of the world (Clarke 2000, 2006b).

Diverse spiritual collectives are usually termed 'cults,' although this is a poor descriptor and a term of little utility. The term 'cult' came into common parlance when members of orthodox Christian church groups responded to religious and new age spiritual communities in the 1960s and 1970s. In the academic field the less inflammatory, although still inaccurate term (Robbins 2000) 'new religious movement' (NRM) is used to identify these spiritual communities that are distinct from more established religions. Terminology becomes even more problematic when what is a bona fide religion to one is a dangerous cult to another. It is worth recalling that, in its beginning, the now established Christian religion was considered a novel Jewish sect (Werblowsky and Wigoder 1997:158).

Currently, a NRM refers to a religious movement established after WWII that contrasts with the world's main historical traditions of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam and

Judaism, born from monotheistic Abrahamic traditions and polytheistic Hindu traditions. NRMs may identify as being related to one of the main faiths (the Branch Davidians with Christianity) or as being completely distinct (Brahma Kumaris from Hinduism).

After World War II when social traditions in industrialized countries started breaking down, travel increased and a new generation of young people presaged a social revolution that saw a striking influence of the 'East' upon the 'West'. This was reverse to the political colonial influence, much of which took a religious guise, a century earlier, of the 'West' upon the 'East'. In the 1960s and 1970s NRMs tended to be classified as Eastern Mystical/ Guru movements, Jesus movements or Religio-therapeutic New Age movements (Robbins 2000). During these two decades, NRMs expanded with the full and enthusiastic support of idealistic, primarily young middle-class adults, as old ways of being were questioned and people began to experiment with ideas of freedom, democracy, and independence, putting tradition and history aside for a time. In response to this wave of spiritual revolution came an associated cynicism, often from the friends and family of that generation's youth (McCloud 2007). This lead to organizations like Cult Watchers (Adler), the New Cult Awareness Network (2001) and the International Cultic Studies Association (ICSA 2009), that were often supported by more conservative branches of the Christian Church, such as the Reachout Trust (Harris 2009) and the Watchman Fellowship (Watchman Fellowship 2009).

Anti-cult groups claim that brain-washing, questionable behaviour, and suspicious and hidden methods of conversion are characteristic of NRMs (Dawson 2003a). Not all of these suspicions are unfounded. On 26 March 1997 Police found 39 bodies of Heavens Gate adherents in San Diego California, in an apparent collective suicide, where members left the 'vessel' of their bodies to advance to the next level, expecting to be carried away by UFOs. The 1978 tragedy in Jonestown was conveyed to a wide audience through the media. Boxes of syringes and lethal cans of soft drink were shown, along with repeated

and graphic aerial images of bodies strewn over the ground, and dead parents lying next to their dead children. These scenes suggested that perhaps all NRMs were perilous, requiring the public to be shielded from such organizations (Whittier 1979). However incidents like Jonestown and Heavens Gate are not characteristic of NRMs at large. The International Network Focus on Religious Movements (INFORM) (Arweck 2009) and Centre for Studies in New Religions (CESNUR, 2009) have been important scholarly and equitable bridges between anti-cult groups and NRMs since their inception more than twenty years ago. In the last twenty to thirty years scholars such as Peter Clarke (2006a; 1993; 2006b; and Sutherland 1991), Eileen Barker (1986, 1989, 2003), Geoffrey Nelson (1987), Elisabeth Arweck (2002a; and Clarke 1997) and James Beckford (and Walliss 2006), among others, have done considerable work to de-stigmatize NRMs, bringing the discussion of them into a common scholarly arena for fair and open debate.

During his short life, Roy Wallis (1945-1990) explored NRMs with the aim of understanding their place within and response to the world. In so doing, he developed three categories of NRM: world-rejecting, world-affirming and world-accommodating (Wallis 1984), while also accepting that some NRMs may be a combination of more than one type.

World-rejecting NRMs have a clear concept of God, and ask of their members that they reject the worlds' prevailing social order, and undertake a life of service on the basis of the previous two convictions. They are usually millenarian in nature, anticipating the destruction of the old world and a forthcoming new world (Beit-Hallahmi 2003; Jennaway 2008). Examples are the Children of God, the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), the Unification Church (better known as 'the Moonies'), and until relatively recently the Brahma Kumaris. In world-rejecting NRMs, a charismatic leader typically holds authority over members, however since the death of the Brahma Kumaris' founder in 1969 there has been no or sole charismatic leader or 'guru' (Mitchiner 1992).

Many world-affirming new religions contrast the above by their lack of collective ritual, underdeveloped - if any - theology, and a focus on improving ones' current life by harnessing success, and creating wealth, stronger relationships and an overall more fruitful existence. Examples are Transcendental Meditation (Knott 1986; Seeman, Dubin, and Seeman 2003), Soka Gakkai[4] (Dawson 2001), Landmark (2009), EST (Erdhard Seminars Training) (Bartley 1978) and Anthony Robbins (2009). The focus in world-affirming groups is on the individual. Individual change is the foundation of world change. Therefore each person improving her or his self will bring an overall improvement in the world, the benefits of which will be present and immediate, not in an imagined future. World-affirming groups are characterized in three ways (Wallis 2003a): They provide members with guidance to cope with demands of success and satisfaction in the modern world, and techniques to facilitate individual freedom from external and internal constraints. They also offer a method to alleviate loneliness by providing a ready-made social group of deliberately supportive relationships.

World-accommodating groups are distinctive from the first two types by providing an impetus to live in a more religiously inspired fashion. In an unstructured and not adversarial way, it is a new style of religious life. The Charismatic Renewal Movement, also known as the Neo-Pentecostal Movement, and Seicho-no-Ie (Clarke 1999), are examples of the less formally structured and more participatory type of Christian congregational NRM. The benefits focus on the individual, but the practice is characteristically communal. World-accommodating movements, while drawing their behaviour from traditional religion, are established in response to dissatisfaction with current religious orders. They seek to offer a modified version that, while clearly faith-based, is compatible with the

[4] Soka Gakkai is an exception to many world-affirming NRM with clear rituals and doctrine.

complexity versus the demands of modern life such as heightened productivity, and the general social expectations of having visible signs of success.

Observing the course of inquiry into NRMs over time, it is clear how the study of NRMs has changed and become post-modern in nature. The Church of Scientology says it is a religion (Urban 2006), yet others disagree (Freedman 2004). A fire station in Manhattan is not a religion, yet at least one study implies that post 9/11 it has developed the characteristics of a church with the meetings of survivors seeming congregational (Freedman 2004). General Shoup's classic article on the United States Marine Corps debates the "cult of the gun" (1969:3). If having a founder, a loyal following and a moral code are the criteria for a religion (for a typology of religion read Whaling 1995), then even Google may be a religious movement of a sort.

World-ambivalence to world-corresponding

John Walliss[5] (1999) supplemented these three terms of 'world-rejecting,' 'world-affirming' and 'world-accommodating' when he studied the Brahma Kumaris, and described the movement as 'world-ambivalent,' entailing "two distinct and unresolved orientations towards the world" (1999:380). This is a reasonable conclusion when one considers the early reclusiveness of BKs, its rudimentary theology, and the demand for absolute purity, as well as the social context of violence and vulnerable social geography that surrounded early members. When Walliss conducted his research in the 1990s, the Brahma Kumaris and its members were going through an important transition, hence his perspective of 'ambivalence.' After rapid expansion into the west during the 1970s and the two significant international initiatives of the 1980s (Million Minutes of Peace in 1986 and Global Cooperation for a Better World in 1989), there was a lull in Brahma Kumaris

[5] Both Roy Wallis and John Walliss are distinctive scholars who have both written on NRMs, creating some confusion.

'service' activities (spiritual outreach, teaching and programs for the public) as BKs, frankly, were recovering from the sudden international exposure and high work load. A large number of BKs subsequently left the organization in the early 1990s, and others who did not, reconnected with their families and slowly began to re-establish career paths. This pattern, in keeping with 'deradicalization' (Walsh 2005; Walsh, Ramsay, and Smith 2007; Ramsay and Smith 2008; Lucas and Robbins 2004:83), reflects the social and demographic change within many NRMs (Barker 1995).

The mid-1990s was a time when the form of service outreach was changing in the Brahma Kumaris. Retreat centres were purchased by voluntary donation in the USA, and Australia, then in Africa, Asia and Europe. This change in service altered the pace of Brahma Kumaris' spiritual work from one that oscillated regularly between times of high and low demand, to a pattern of work that was more predictable and steady. Rather than major international programs in which everyone was involved, regular courses and meditation programs, created especially for different groups of people (Smith and Ramsay 2009), were offered and conducted through the retreat centres, to a large degree. Rather than world-ambivalent, ten years further on the Brahma Kumaris seems to be 'world-corresponding,' matching its programs and social outreach to the needs of its local communities, while individual BKs maintain their core principles, theology and belief structure.

The Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University

The Brahma Kumaris began in the early 1930s (Ramsay and Smith 2008) as a small spiritual community in Hyderabad, Sindh, India (now part of Pakistan). Formalizing their congregation in August 1938 (Radhe 1943), the community called itself *Avinashi Gyān Yagya* but was referred to by others as *Om Mandli* (sacred circle). *Om Mandli* consisted primarily of young women from the Bhaiband community, a social caste of merchants and traders in Hyderabad Sindh. In the 1950s, the community was officially named *Brahmā*

Kumaris Ishwariya Vishwa Vidyalaya, which translates as the Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University.

There are few thorough cultural studies on the Brahma Kumaris (Nagel 1999; Walliss 2002), although the organization has attracted scholarly interest since the 1970s (Babb 1982). Collectively, previous studies offer an important overview of the organization's change over forty years, particularly Nagel's (1999), which explores BK theology in depth. Walliss's study follows others (Babb 1984; Skultans 1993; Howell and Nelson 1997; Puttick 1997; Howell 2005; Howell 2000) that track the organization's changing identity over time. Walliss noticed that the imminent destruction of the world, predicted on at least three occasions, had not yet taken place (Beit-Hallahmi 2003) and, in consequence, the organization and its members became increasingly involved in world affairs. The movement had gone from one where members isolated themselves from the world, through being solely a teaching organization in India with firm ideas on the date of world destruction, to a social movement.[6] Placed in a post-modern world, the Brahma Kumaris had adapted itself and started offering a variety of programs to suit the needs of different groups of people (Clarke 2006a).

Another particular notation in a number of scholarly texts (Babb 1984; Howell 1998; Puttick 1997; Puttick 1999; Skultans 1993; Sudesh 1993) is the remarkable status of women in the Brahma Kumaris and the role the organization has played in changing cultural opinions of women in India (Lalrinawma 2004) particularly within and on the margins of extended BK communities. Babb refers to Brahma Kumaris as "indigenous feminism in a modern Hindu sect" (1984:399), and noted that the "sensibilities of women have contributed in very important ways to the ideology of the movement" (1982:50).

[6] For more on the debate about whether or not NRMs can be defined as social movements see Smith 2009; Snow 2004; Snow, Soule, and Kriesi 2004.

Despite local perceptions of women as ritually impure during menstruation (Olson 2007b) and generally more impure than men (Madan 2003; Sinclair-Brull 1997), the founder still considered that women held innate purity and made superior spiritual teachers. At the time of its foundation, and still in many countries where BKs operate, young girls and women of the community would normally have been betrothed at a young age, committing them to a family, and by definition unchaste, life. In joining the *Yagya*, and giving their dowries to the movement, young girls and women were dismissing tradition and choosing to live spiritually autonomous and celibate lives (Khandelwal 1997). Women left their family homes, not always with family support; female children, mothers and elderly women were repeatedly kidnapped by their families and suffered beatings; caste vegetarians were forced to eat pig meat by angry relatives; and women were shackled or placed in locked rooms for months at a time (Radhe 1939). This violence and suffering may be part of what led to members' early seclusion and world rejection.

Today, the Brahma Kumaris organization is truly global (Smith 2008), with over 7000 centres in 128 countries, territories and islands. Many are located in places of unrest, including in the Middle East, Africa and communist Asia. In many of these places, the appointed BK representative must be extremely cautious, and present spiritual ideas in ways that are compatible with the ideas accepted within, and acceptable to, that culture. In at least one place, BKs teach people techniques to remain peaceful and to lead a happier life, but are unable to use the words 'meditation', 'yoga', 'soul', 'spirituality' or 'God' because of the country's political stance. While the BKs believe that the world will become an increasingly difficult place to inhabit, they consistently place themselves in some of its most challenging areas and work at creating authentic symbiotic relationships with people of repute to garner cooperation for their outreach work.

The Brahma Kumaris arose from a Hindu cultural base in Northwest India under strong Muslim influences. On one hand the Brahma Kumaris is classified as a Hindu sect (Babb

1984; Chowdhry 1996), or as Neo-Hinduistic (Clarke 2006b), yet many of the Brahma Kumaris tenets, such as monotheism, celibacy for women and no temple worship, sit clearly outside Hindu beliefs. Some BKs consider their path to be distinct from Hinduism, as do other Indian-founded NRMs, including the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), Ad-Dharm (Juergensmeyer 1988) and Radhasoami (Jestice 2004). Brahma Kumaris' daily theology draws on Hindu scripture as its reference point, but it also includes teachings from the Granth (Sikh scripture), the Bible (Christian scripture) and the Qura'n (Muslim scripture), as well as oral and text-based knowledge of Buddha, Jainism and the Arya Samaj (the Hindi reform movement established in 1875). By touching on all faiths in its discourses, Brahma Kumaris theology can be seen as ecumenical rather than for or against any established religious path. However, many people who lived in the same community as Om Mandli members believed that their philosophy threatened fundamental Hindu values (Chaudhuri 2003).

The Brahma Kumaris founder, Dada Lekhraj, was born as Lekhraj Khubchand Kirpalani to a schoolteacher. Some authors maintain that he was born in 1876-7 (Piven 2004b), and others 1870 (Mitchiner 1992). Documents from founding members (Radhe 1939) and memories of local politicians (Hardy 1984) of the 1930s declare that he was 54 years of age in 1938 making his birth year 1884. I suggest that, in the beginning, members of the BK community may have surmised Dada's age to be 60 because, according to dharma texts (Olson 2007b), this is the age at which a man initiates his spiritual life. Today, this age is colloquially referred to as *sathiyana* or 'gone sixtyish' in north Indian local vernacular (Cohen 1998) and serves as a useful cultural category and life marker that reflects age-specific attitudes, beliefs and behaviours.

In the dharma texts of Hinduism (Olson 2007a) dating back more than two thousand years, it is stated that any male born into one of the higher three *varnas* or castes (*brāhman, vaishya, kshatriya*) should live life according to the four stages of life or

ashramas (Rodrigues 2006). Structuring one's life according to these stages was thought to balance the cosmic forces that were present and uphold the righteous order of things. First a young man should be a chaste student (*brahmā charin*), then rear a family (*grihastha*) and perform devotional duties, then retire (*vanaprastha*) and devote himself to spiritual matters, and finally become an ascetic (*sannyasin*), leaving his home and family and educating others on the basis of his spiritual realizations.



Figure 2. Dada Lekhraj (c. 1920)
Source: Photography Department,
Pandav Bhawan, Mount Abu

With these *ashramas* in mind, and considering the restrictive society of the period when Om Mandli was founded, the fortuitous synchronicity of Dada 'being 60' may have been considerably more important than factual birth dates. In any case, names and dates of birth, the two forms of identity so important for many non-Indians, are historically fluid and changeable in India and subject to limited registration (Agrawal 1969). Nineteen and

early twentieth century dates of birth in India were vague and unreliable at best (Weiner 1973), and birth names were sometimes changed to suit stages of life or astrological reckonings. Some elder BKs, who were children in the 1930s, relied on the physical stature and the reported age of their peers to help them determine their own age. This is an issue of contention for some inquirers, particularly from the United Kingdom, which is the home of a website that promotes heated and mostly negative debates about the Brahma Kumaris (discussed further in 'Caution and criticisms', starting on page 94).

Dada Lekhraj (Figure 2) was part of the Bhaiband merchant community and a Hindu follower of the Vallabacharya sect (a Vaishnav sect started by Sri Vallabhacharya (1479-1531) who promulgated Vedanta non-dualistic philosophy. The Hindus in Sindh were divided into two classes, the Amils and the Bhaibands. The Amils were highly educated, with many occupying professional and government positions in Hyderabad and Karachi. They were cultured and polished, often holding high offices. Conversely, the Bhaibands were businessmen who traded in silk, curios and textiles. Most were not well educated, the majority not having completed their secondary schooling. However, the Bhaibands earned wealth and notability through their diaspora to Singapore, Hong Kong and Bangkok, while still maintaining their home offices in Hyderabad. The men typically lived abroad, enjoying their mistresses and returning home for a month or so every couple of years. Their wives and children remained in Hyderabad and lived chaste and moral lives, as was expected of them. Due to the lengthy history of Muslim rule, Islamic values compounded local Indian and Hindu attitudes towards women in Northwest India, with restrictions on sexuality and inflexible ideas of morality (Ikram 1989; Chand 2006). The veiling and seclusion of women became the norm in this patrilineal and patrilocal society.

Throughout his early life, Dada Lekhraj was a well-respected lay Hindu, had two gurus, and a facility for reciting sacred texts such as the central and revered Hindu scripture, *Shrimad Bhagavad Gītā* and the Sikh scripture, the *Gurū Granth Sāhib* indicating his

affinity with the culture and religions of Northwest India. Dada enjoyed entertaining holy men, sages and ascetics, and going on regular pilgrimages through northern India. While he was young, he saved up his earnings as a small merchant of wheat, typical of a Bhaiband, and entered the diamond trade to work in Kolkata. Dada quickly developed a good reputation in the jewellery business and, as time passed, he formed friendships with many of the rulers and with people from the wealthy classes of Northwest India, who became his regular clients.

Mystical experiences

Oral stories from the Dadis and others who knew him before Om Mandli say that in the early 1930s Dada's behaviour started to change (Chandrahas 2002; Nirmal-Shanta 2007), becoming uncharacteristically awkward, at times during important social occasions (Chander 1981). This indicated to those closest to him that he was going through some kind of peculiar transition. The precise period of this change is unclear, but over months, possibly even years, his closest relatives reported that Dada had a series of striking visions and ecstatic spiritual experiences. Some of these were blissful and others were disturbing. The paramount experience was that of an indescribable 'being' of power and light. This changed the way that Dada viewed the world, life and his devotional and scriptural beliefs. "Do you know what that was? It was a Light! It was a Power! And there was an altogether new world! The Light and Power said to me, 'You have to make such a world'" (Chander 2003:41). Dada was overcome with the unqualified feeling that his life purpose was to somehow help this (at the time) unidentified power and light to create a new world. Simultaneously Dada felt lost and without direction on how he was to manifest this world of peace, or the role he was to play. Despite his bewilderment, this primary visual and auditory mystical experience motivated Dada to change his life.

Dada had subsequent visionary experiences: one was of Vishnu, the Preserver of the Universe in Hindu cosmology, and the object of worship for the Vallabhacharyas. This

vision was accompanied by the feeling of being bodiless and bathed in an ocean of bliss and delight. An auditory apparition that accompanied the vision told him, "You are this." Another time, Dada had a vision of catastrophic world collapse, with chaos, wreckage and misery in its wake. The sorrow and suffering he witnessed was incommensurable.

Following his spiritual experiences, Dada rapidly lost interest in his jewellery work and began spending extended periods of time in contemplation in and around Kashmir, as he tried to make sense of his experiences. Kashmir is a place of great importance in Hindu mythology, a major centre for Sanskrit scholars, home to important temples, and was a favourite pilgrimage place for Dada.

Dada's overwhelming visionary experiences propelled him from *grahāstha* into a premature *vanaprastha*, his next stage of life. Soon after these experiences, Dada sold his half of the business to his partner for around 'a million rupees,' reportedly very little in view of its reputed assets and worth. Dada left Kolkata with his remaining assets and

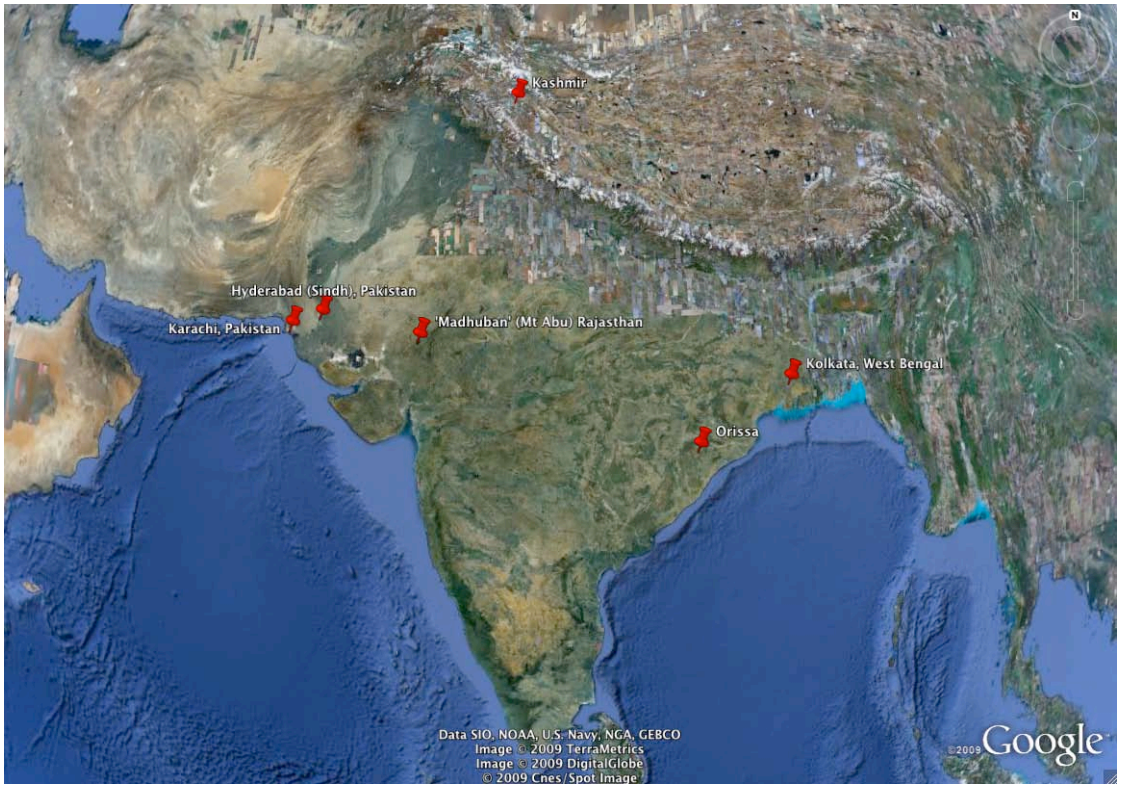


Figure 3. Locations within India and Pakistan of Dada Lekhraj, also indicating Orissa

returned to Hyderabad (Sindh). He began to give readings at his home from his favourite religious scripture, the Shrimad Bhagawad Gita, and many of the local Bhaiband community, many of who were members of Dada's extended family, attended the readings. Such gatherings were common at that time, but this particular gathering proved especially popular. Those who lived nearby began referring to the group as Om Mandli because they would hear members chanting *om* collectively for extended periods of time. The attendees, mostly women and children whose husbands were away on business, would regularly experience visions of Dada as Krishna, and of each other as princes and princesses, while they experienced the feeling of being transcendent. Chanting *om* and dancing the *ras lila*[7] together stimulated many, mostly female, members into trance states of meditation and visionary experiences. The attraction was such that many women left their homes, taking their children, and resided together with Dada Lekhraj, his wife, and their grown children. Because of the numbers of children and youth in the community, shortly after Om Mandli, a school called *Om Niwas*, that provided a standard education, was established to ensure their education.

Unusual for men at that time, Dada Dada Lekhraj is said to have displayed a particularly high regard for women (Chandrahas 2002). Prior to his spiritual revelations, Dada was a great devotee of Narayan, a major Hindu god. But upon seeing a picture of Narayan with his wife Lakshmi portrayed washing his feet, Dada demanded that it be repainted to show the divine couple on an equal footing. In August 1938, Dada Lekhraj, soon to be known as Brahma Baba, officially founded the *Avinashi Gyān Yagya* (imperishable sacrificial fire of wisdom or knowledge, hereafter called *Yagya*), although the *Yagya* continued to be called Om Mandli by those outside. Dada created a trust and placed his entire wealth into the hands of a small group of young women members of the *Yagya*, including Sister Rama

[7] The ras lila is part of the traditional story of Krishna desribed in the Indian scriptures. Literally, it means the dance of divine love.

(later known as Kumarka), who would become his heir. Dada also entrusted the organization's spiritual development to young women, elevating them to the status of teachers (Nirmal-Shanta 2007). Outside of their community he rarely, if ever, played the role of teacher.



Figure 4. Brahma Baba with sisters in the early yagya (c. 1940s)

For a year, everything was said to be peaceful for the small community, but in 1938 trouble arose. One of Dada Lekhraj's daughters had married into the family of Mukhi Mangharam, the eventual leader of a committee of family members against Om Mandli that came to be known among BKs as the "Anti-Party." Dada's daughter eventually left her husband's house to spend time with Dada and others in the *Yagya* chanting, dancing and listening to readings of the *Shrimad Bhagawad Gita*. Three other women from the community refused to have conjugal relations with their husbands, and this disobedience created serious dissent, giving the husbands and families of the women cause to file multiple cases of kidnapping and abduction against Dada Lekhraj. The court proceedings were managed not by Dada Lekhraj but by one of the young sisters, Om Radhe (Chander

1981). Although younger than many of them, the community began referring to Radhe as 'Mama' because of her refined understanding of spiritual knowledge, diligent ascetic practice, and natural leadership qualities.

Dada Lakhraj's decision to marry another of his daughters to a man outside the Bhaiband community added to Om Mandli's troubles. Although this young man, who remains unnamed in the stories, was of a different social class, Dada felt he had great virtue and was more worthy of his daughter than anyone from within his own community. When members of the Anti-Party approached Dada Lekhraj to reverse his decision, Dada refused and remained resolute. Supreme Court Justice Hardayal Hardy reports:

> The magistrates in Hyderabad issued summons against him. (They) asked me to go to Hyderabad, meet Dada Lekhraj and appear for him in the cases… I went and stayed with Dada Lekhraj. Om Radhe, a young unmarried woman, was in charge of the organization. She was a talented girl, and I have seldom seen so much wisdom and virtue as I found in her. My contacts with Dada Lekhraj were equally profitable. His face indicated his character - a man like him could not be lecherous. (Nevertheless) the Government of Sindh issued a directive under the Criminal Law Assessment Act, declaring Om Mandli to be an unlawful association. (Hardy 1984)

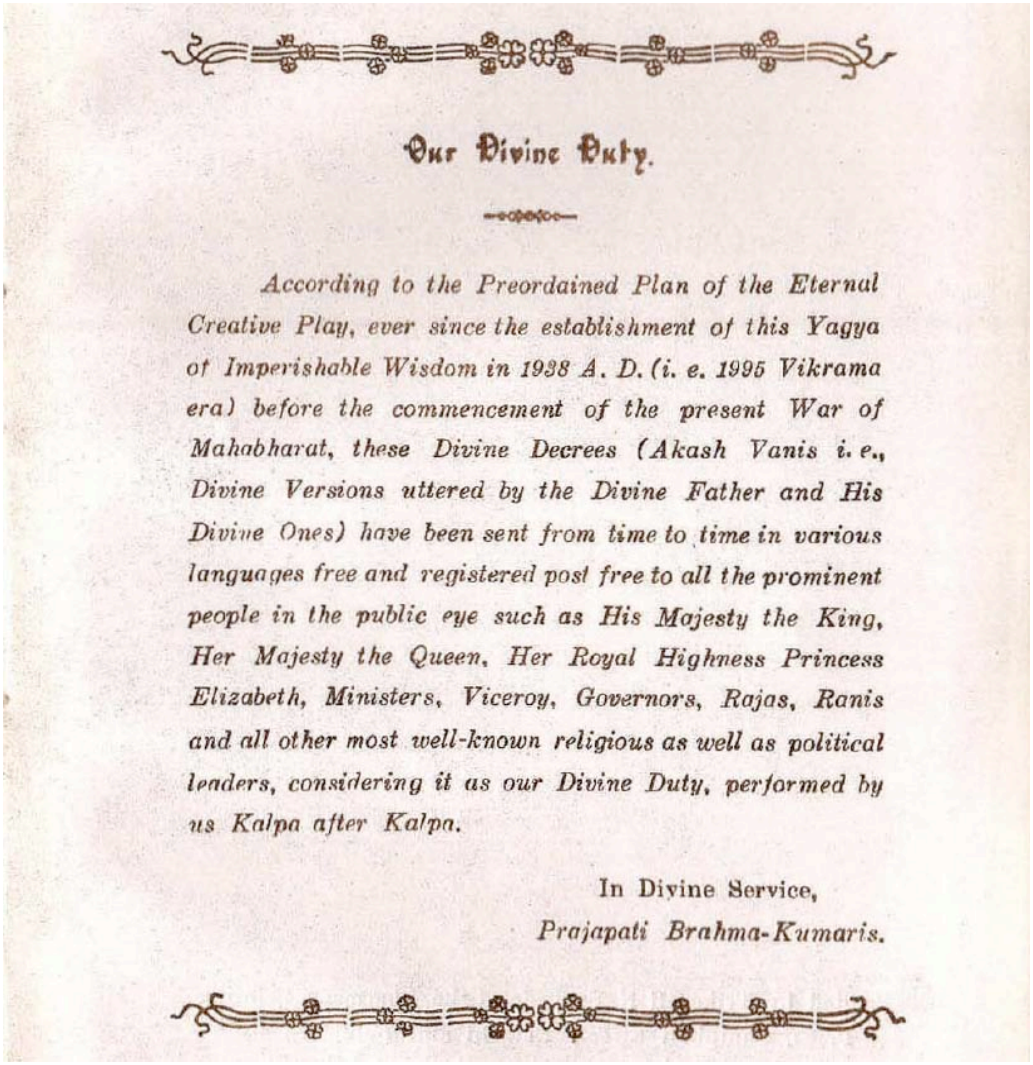
Mukhi Mangharam, the leader of the Anti-Party, gathered a number of disaffected male members of the Bhaiband community. This group formed a strong foundation for the Anti-Party, and together they began spreading propaganda among the more conservative population in their area. The first accusation made against Om Mandli was that the community intended to abolish the sacred system of marriage. The Committee harnessed help from the local newspapers, and spread word about the Om Mandli practice of celibacy and the ways in which this threatened to destroy the role of women and their dutiful position in the family.

> I appeared for him in one of the cases where the charge was of kidnapping and abduction. I requested the magistrate that he should visit the premises of Om Mandli, and if he did not agree with the way I had summed up the conduct of Dada Lekhraj, he could summon the accused and take steps against him. The magistrate agreed and was fully convinced. Dada Lekhraj (was told that if he) left Hyderabad no action would be taken against Om Mandli (or) Dada Lekhraj... Dada left Hyderabad and took up a house on rent at Clifton, where he carried on the activities of the institution. It was said that every night after twelve, (Dada and the residents of the

> house) performed 'Ras Lila' on the sea-beach. Dada Lekhraj did not appear in any case, and in course of time all the cases were dropped. (Hardy 1984:39)

The conflict eased during the 1940s after Om Mandli moved to Clifton, Karachi. However, with the social unrest preceding Partition, Om Mandli faced difficult times. The partition of India and Pakistan was the end result of violent social, religious and political battles (Das 2000) between the Muslims and Hindus within British India (Khan 2007). The small *Yagya* continued to live in Karachi in relative isolation from the rest of society for fourteen years until 1950 (Chandrahas 2002; Nirmal-Shanta 2007). When family money began to run low and resources became scarce, a period known now within the Brahma Kumaris as "the beggary period," some women returned to their families. Still, many remained as part of the self-sufficient community of around 300, and continued to devote their time to intense spiritual study, meditation and self-change. This quiet and reclusive life is what original members call "the fourteen-year *bhatti"* (lit: furnace or intense fire),[8] drawing parallels between the organization, Indian mythology, and scripture. Although the name of the organization today is the Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University, it was founded as the *Avinashi Gyān Yagya*, that sent metaphoric tendrils of fire to other countries: early members sent proclamatory letters (Figure 5 page 29) that often accompanied hand drawn pictures (Figure 24 page 113) based on visionary trance, to religious and political leaders within India and overseas to Great Britain.

[8] It is also used by BKs to identify special periods of purposeful meditation, usually for hours at a time. There are also 'all night *bhattis* and weeks of time during the Monsoon in India that are set aside for *bhattis*)



Our Divine Duty.

According to the Preordained Plan of the Eternal Creative Play, ever since the establishment of this Yagya of Imperishable Wisdom in 1938 A. D. (i. e. 1995 Vikrama era) before the commencement of the present War of Mahabharat, these Divine Decrees (Akash Vanis i. e., Divine Versions uttered by the Divine Father and His Divine Ones) have been sent from time to time in various languages free and registered post free to all the prominent people in the public eye such as His Majesty the King, Her Majesty the Queen, Her Royal Highness Princess Elizabeth, Ministers, Viceroy, Governors, Rajas, Ranis and all other most well-known religious as well as political leaders, considering it as our Divine Duty, performed by us Kalpa after Kalpa.

In Divine Service,
Prajapati Brahma-Kumaris.

Figure 5. Proclamatory letter
Source: Radhe 1943:43

A *Yagya* is literally is a fire, implying a moving energy of outreach, service and communication. Conversely, a *bhatti* is fire in the form of a furnace or a kiln, where something is shut away and kept until its form is changed. When a pot is put into a kiln, either it breaks or becomes strong. A *Yagya* was created to liberate the world, but the *bhatti* was required for members to become strong, firm, or *pukka*.

> This is a spiritual furnace (*bhatti*). The *bhatti* you had in Karachi was something else and this *bhatti* of yoga is something else. This is the *bhatti* of the power of yoga (meditation) in which all the rubbish within is removed. There, you were in your own furnace and you didn't meet anyone from outside. This is the *bhatti* of yoga. You have to do your own spiritual work for this. (BapDada 2002a)

> Some bricks are made very strong in a furnace, whereas others remain weak. (BapDada 2005a)

The fourteen year *bhatti* draws on origin myths connected with the *Shrimad Bhagawad Gita* (Gita), one of the two great Sanskrit epics. The other is the *Ramayana*, which documents India's great mythological history and the lives of two great heroes, Krishna and Rama. In the *Mahabharata*, the lauded eighteenth chapter of the Gita, one of the most famous episodes is when a group of brothers (the *Pandavas*) lose their entire kingdom to their male cousins (the *Kauravas*), as the result of a crooked and contrived game of dice. The *Kauravas* receive the kingdom and the Pandava brothers are exiled to the jungle for twelve years. They must remain in hiding until the thirteenth year, and come into public in the fourteenth year, for if they are found, they must repeat the twelve years of exile (Mittal 2006). BKs draw mythological connections between the two events: the exile of the *pandavas* and the Om Mandli's fourteen years of isolation.[9]

The fourteen-year *bhatti* is considered a powerful and fortuitous time during which the foundations of purity, power and love, on which the global organization is now built, were laid. In personal recollections of the *bhatti*, people speak nostalgically of playing games, going for walks and performing necessary physical and administrative chores. Along with a life of physical chores and games, elder sisters tell of times when many of them would regularly and collectively enter into trance states of meditation, sometimes for days at a time, and experience profound love, belonging and delight. Compared to Brahma Kumaris philosophy now, the detail of knowledge was relatively simple and fundamentally different in some ways. I discuss this further in Chapter Three.

In 1950, after Partition and the *bhatti,* many of the relatives of Om Mandli members were concerned about the welfare of a small community of mainly women, now living in Pakistan. So the community of around 400 loaded their belongings onto a boat and moved from Karachi in Pakistan to Mt Abu in Rajasthan. Mt Abu is an old British hill station, a

[9] (for more about forms of mythological reinterpretation read Barz 1988)

favourite place for weddings and honeymoons, and home to the famous Jain *Dilwāra* temple. *Madhuban* (forest of honey) on top of Mount Abu, in the Aravali Ranges of the Rajasthan desert (see Figure 3 page 24), became the new home of the Brahma Kumaris and remains so to this day. Sometimes distinguished by the name *Pandav Bhawan* (brother's house), it is a place of great meaning to BKs. The small campus can house a few hundred people in total, and is thought by BKs to have a particularly powerful vibration of peace, belonging and spiritual power.

Between 1950 and 1969, Baba and Mama sent small groups of young sisters from Madhuban to different parts of India to teach what they had been learning and discovering, and so the seven day foundation course in meditation came into existence (see Chapter Three). The 7-Day Course is the most common format for teaching the BK Raja Yoga form of meditation, as well as the rudiments of their philosophy. After completing the course, people may attend the centres for morning class and meditation, although evening meditation is always open to the public.

In 1952 the first official meditation centres outside of Madhuban were established, in Delhi and Mumbai. Sisters would often, upon invitation, travel to other major cities of India like Pune, Indore and Kolkata to give classes of spiritual knowledge and conduct lessons in open-eyed meditation. Two or more sisters would leave with two sets of clothes and a small amount of rupees, relying on their enthusiasm and God's power to bring service to fruition. All of the now elderly women say that it did.

On 24 June 1965, fourteen years after they first left Madhuban, the respected leader and mother of the *Yagya*, died. The loss was profound for the close community, but its members continued to travel, teach and meditate, spurred on by the memory of Mama's example and Baba's power, love and absolute faith in them. Then on 18 January 1969, at around 8 o'clock in the evening, Brahma Baba experienced chest pain. He called one of the original sisters, Dadi Kumarka who, then in her forties, had been a loyal and powerful

companion since her mid-teens. Dadi told a group of us when she visited Australia in 1999, that Baba's eyes had been sparkling with life. She held his hand gently as he willed the care of the Brahma Kumaris to her, along with her friend and companion Didi Manmohini, before his eyes grew distant and he passed away.

Dadi Kumarka and Didi Manmohini knew of Brahma Baba's dream of taking the knowledge to foreign lands, and together they set about bringing it to fruition. Two years later Dadi Janki, with the help of a young Sister Jayanti as her companion and translator, went to London and established the first official overseas centre. In 1974 the first foreigners 'came into *gyān*' (started the path of BK meditation) at the small centre in London, and devoted themselves to the spiritual work of the *Yagya*. Centres were soon established in Australia, Germany and the United States of America, with other countries following. From the mid-1970s to the present, Dadi Janki has administered all the countries outside India, with a particular focus on Europe and more recently the Middle East.

United Nations

In 1980, after the centre in New York had been in existence for around five years, the Brahma Kumaris became affiliated with the United Nations Department of Public Information (DPI) (see Chapter Six). In 1983 the Brahma Kumaris was granted consultative status on the roster of the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), and general consultative status in 1999 (BKWSU 2004a). Brahma Kumaris also holds consultative status with the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF).

By the time Brahma Kumaris received their position on the ECOSOC roster in 1983, their membership had expanded to around 40,000. 1983 was the beginning of rapid expansion that was consecrated with the building of *Om Shānti Bhawan* (Peace House), a new hall in Madhuban that would seat 3,000 people. After Didi Manmohini died in that same year, Dadi Kumarka, now known as Dadi Prakashmani, continued to administer the Brahma Kumaris with two other sisters and leaders, Dadi Janki and Dadi Gulzar (Figure 6 below). All three were from the original community (Radhe 1939) and came to Om Mandli with their families when they were as young as eight; they are all now in their 80s.



Figure 6. Dadi Janki, Dadi Prakashmani and Dadi Gulzar (left to right) in Shantivan (c. 2005)

Over the years, all the Dadis have worked closely with each other and it was unheard of for any one to make a significant decision without consulting the other two. Although they hold the title of 'administrators,' Dadis operate as traditional elders. They do little if any

administrative tasks in a written capacity; and most of their work involves guiding, encouraging and advising fellow BKs and making decisions in consultation with national, regional (overseas) and zonal (India) coordinators about the service and other activities of the organization.

By 1984 the Brahma Kumaris was established in approximately 30 countries. In 1986 the Brahma Kumaris conducted its first international program, the Million Minutes of Peace, for which it received seven UN Peace Messenger awards. For Million Minutes of Peace, people from 88 countries donated minutes of peace through time spent in prayer, meditation and peaceful thought, creating a 'bank' of peace. In four weeks (mid September to mid-October 1986) 1,231,975,713 minutes (equivalent to 2,344 years) were collected. In 1988, the Global Cooperation for a Better World was created as a follow-up to Million Minutes of Peace. People were asked to share their visions of what a better world might look like through dialogue, art, performance and workshops. The Living Values Education Program (Tillman 2007), as well as other values-based initiatives (Virola and Corpus 2008), began from these pioneering initiatives.

In 1990 The J Watumull Memorial Global Hospital and Research Centre was established within walking distance of Madhuban. The hospital utilizes allopathic, homeopathic, ayurvedic and other indigenous methods of healing, and is staffed by local and foreign, professional and voluntary nursing and medical staff. There are inpatient and outpatient services, active surgical theatres and a critical care unit. The local indigenous community is treated free of charge on site and through the Village Outreach Program. The hospital now has five additional branches specializing in eye care and trauma, facilitating the humanitarian work of the Brahma Kumaris, in the context of 'service' that, for BKs, means to bring spiritual nourishment and peace to people of the world.

As BK international membership has continued to expand, with 100,000 in 1988 and 850,000 in 2009, the organization has constructed two new campuses: *Gyān Sarovar*

(1995) that accommodates 1700 people and is halfway down the mountain, and *Shāntivan* (1998), in the plains of Rajasthan at the foot of Mt Abu. Shantivan, the former farm where BKs would stop for fresh sugar cane on the way up the mountain, has been completely redeveloped. Shantivan now resembles a village (see Chapter Four), capable of feeding and accommodating more than 11,000 people a day. These campuses accommodate pilgrims who come in tens of thousands from within India and overseas for regular meetings and spiritual retreats during the summer season between September and April, the cooler season. There are particular times reserved for Indians and foreigners, arranged to expedite comfortable accommodation for large (15,000) and small (3,000) numbers respectively. The division between 'Indian season' and 'foreign season' is somewhat flexible, with both Indians and foreigners invariably present at each occasion. Visitors from India usually stay for only a few days given their large numbers, whereas the recommended length of stay for foreigners is two weeks, particularly considering the distances some non-Indian BKs cover to get there.

In 2007, Dadi Prakashmani, the Chief Administrative Head of the Brahma Kumaris since 1969, passed away at the age of 85. A gifted and natural leader, she was based in Mount Abu and looked after the entire organization, but with a focus on India. Dadi Janki, the designated Additional Administrative Head and based in London while Dadi Prakashmani was alive, succeeded Dadi Prakashmani as the Chief Administrative Head. Dadi Janki is now based in India although she travels extensively, regularly returning to London. Dadi Gulzar is the Joint Administrative Head, and lives in Delhi. She divides her time between visiting Centres in India and conducting programs overseas. Since the recent change of leadership, Dadi Rattan Mohini based in Mount Abu has become the Additional Administrative Head again ensuring three original members continue to administer the Brahma Kumaris worldwide. As the Dadis are growing older, the next generation of sisters is now taking a more active leadership role.

The Organization

BKWSU is a millenarian movement now situated in a post-modern world (Jennaway 2008; Walliss 1999) . Yet in comparison with other NRMs, the degree of change and adaptation to local cultures has been minimal in the Brahma Kumaris due to the strict principles of daily life, which constitute a spiritual technology (Ramsay and Smith 2008) for establishing the relationship with the Supreme Soul. For the inner circle of members, there can be no modification of these principles (see Chapter Three and Appendix 10: *Maryādas* – Principles for Brahmins, page 365). However, in the way the organization relates to the wider society, there have been some important adaptations.

When the BKs were new to the west, the emphasis was on teaching the traditional '7 days course,' understanding *gyān*,[10] practicing meditation and living the disciplines of the path. Since the late 1980s, in addition to conducting courses, the movement has reconfigured its identity to interact more with the wider community and to be of service in response to social change.

Despite this expansion and new forms of outreach, BKs still focus on teaching meditation through an obligation-free and cost-free seven-day course comprising seven hour-long lessons. Each lesson consists of a short class and meditation practice, and centres on the following topics: the soul, the Supreme Soul, the three worlds, the Cycle of Time, the tree of religions, spiritual powers acquired through meditation, and BK principles. Although the foundation course is still the core teaching of the Brahma Kumaris, a number of innovative programs have developed over the last two decades including 'Positive Thinking,' (Nesbitt and Arweck 2003), 'Living Values' (Arweck and Nesbitt 2004; Arweck,

[10] Gyān (Hindi) is the correct modern pronunciation of the original Jñāna (Sanskrit) and means 'knowledge'. This term for knowledge always refers only to spiritual and philosophical forms of understanding both in Sanskrit and in Hindi (Nagel 1999)

Nesbitt, and Jackson 2005; Giorgio 2004) Images and Voices of Hope (Rodgers 2008), Call of the Time (BKWSU 2009b) and 'Self Managing Leadership' (Shiveshwarkar 2005), among others. The programs are still based on the spiritual principles of BK philosophy but are more relevant to most people's lives and are designed for those who are not necessarily looking to adopt an entirely new lifestyle and belief system, as is required if one becomes a BK.

BKs conduct their main teaching activities and programs in what are referred to in India and elsewhere as 'centres.' Smaller centres are usually residential and occupied by at least two BKs of the same gender. In each city where the Brahma Kumaris has a presence, there is a main centre where the BK community gathers for meditation and spiritual classes on the weekend. Larger centres may have sisters and brothers, but the bedrooms and bathrooms of each are carefully segregated. In every centre there is always someone designated as the person responsible. Centre Coordinators are appointed by Regional Coordinators, who determine their transfer postings within the organization. Coordinators are chosen for a number of reasons, often a combination of spiritual readiness and 'surrender' (discussed further below), along with particular life circumstances. Each centre is administered independently, yet there is regular communication amongst all levels of the organization.

In the case of non-Indians who wish to live in a centre, preference is given to people whose lifestyle lends itself to flexibility, either through employment that is moveable, such as teaching or working in a government position, or having financial independence. The position of coordinator does not necessarily correlate with length of membership in the organization, although individuals must have followed all lifestyle principles for 'at least a year or two'. Age is also unspecified, although few, if any, would be under eighteen. More importantly, the National and Regional Coordinators would regard them as having a mature disposition. In India younger sisters tend to inhabit centres, and in foreign

countries they tend to be older. This is in keeping with young (from late teens through to early thirties) unmarried sisters in India choosing a path of celibacy at the time they would otherwise choose marriage. For non-Indian BKs, centre residence often comes after having had a family or later in life when one is more financially secure.

Finances

All centre activities are supported through donation boxes known as 'Baba's Box,' that are visibly located in each centre. Visitors to the centre make anonymous financial contributions into Baba's Boxes, and this is central to the autonomous administration of each centre. Reportedly, it was low-income BKs from small villages in India who financed more than ninety percent of Shantivan's construction. The Dadis explain that in the early days when there was little money, Brahma Baba would consider the intention with which a donation was given. If he felt the donation had been given with wrong intention - desiring favouritism for example – he would keep the money or jewellery aside unused, and then return it when the donors requested it be returned, which invariably occurred. The Dadis follow that same principle today. Contributions 'in kind,' such as time or energy, are accepted and encouraged. For those who wish to contribute finances, property or jewellery, the Dadis and other senior[11] sisters will consider the intent with which the gift is being given. I have witnessed situations where donations have been kindly refused in keeping with this philosophy. Consistent with Brahma Baba's early instruction, all programs and classes conducted at centres are free of charge and no payment is requested. All BKs are volunteers and support the centre through whatever means they have, whether through cooking, teaching, administrating, cleaning or donating.

[11] Someone recognized as being a BK for a long time. Some spiritual prestige goes with this title.

Surrender

BKs are often referred to as 'surrendered' or 'dedicated,' although the latter term is used more in India than elsewhere. There are two forms of surrender for BKs. One is the internal surrender to God, which is an intimate form of faith bound by a promise of purity. The second form of surrender is organizational, and is identified by BKs' willingness to live and work according to the directions of the senior sisters. For example, if a BK is asked to move to Afghanistan to establish a centre there, their degree of surrender is indicated by their willingness to go. Both forms of surrender are considered important. To 'come to Baba' and 'surrender to Baba' in BK idiom means to surrender one's life to God. In the beginning of the *Yagya*, Brahma Baba also 'surrendered to Baba (Shiv Baba)'.

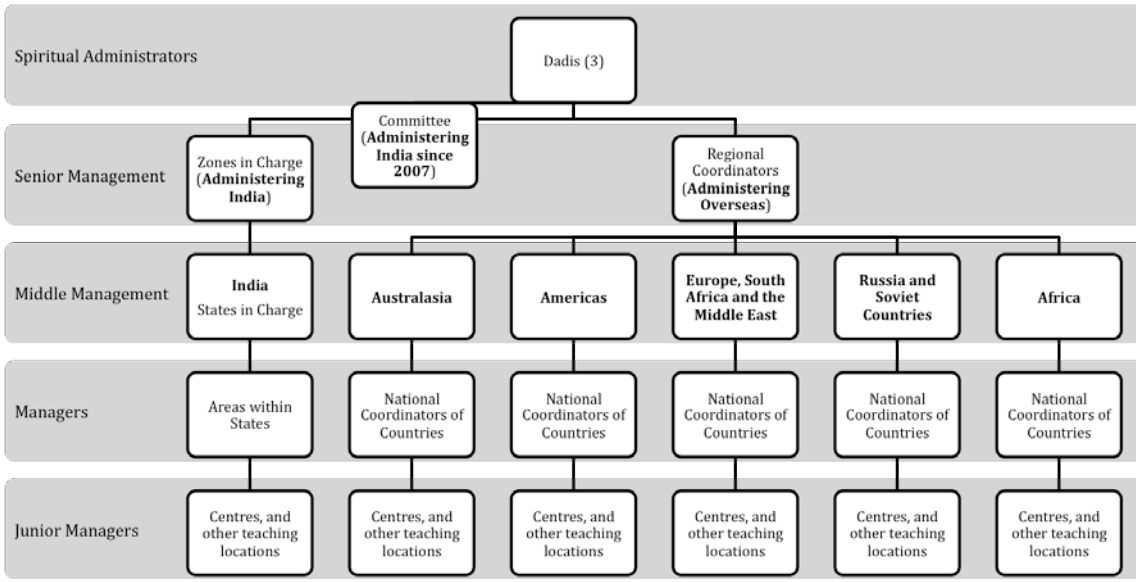


Figure 7. Organizational hierarchy of the Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University

While the above diagram is necessarily static, there is a fluid relationship through communication between all levels of management from the Dadis (elder sisters from the original Yagya) extending beyond managers to the general congregation. For example, someone who is a BK for a month can easily have a personal meeting and exchange with one of the Dadis. In the case of non-Indians, a third person may be present to translate. The management structure is typically looser in foreign countries than in India, and is

affected by the cultural attitudes of each place. In India, and in countries most heavily influenced by Indian culture, the management structure is more apparent. Through fieldwork it was obvious that the majority of BKs worldwide concur with this organizational structure.

A senior management committee of eight to twelve members has existed for many years, as an advisory group to the Chief Administrative Head of the Brahma Kumaris. It has a core membership that has advised the main Dadi since the early days of the diaspora, and most of the original membership remains unchanged. Since Dadi Prakashmani's death, the committee, which includes senior BK brothers and sisters who have been in the organization since its inception through the 1950s, has taken a more active role, aiming to ensure a seamless continuation of management, while BKs deal with the loss of their esteemed leader.

Rosary, bureaucracy and hierarchy

Dadi Prakashmani earned the loyalty, love and respect from all BKs over many years and left a powerful legacy. Since 2007, key BK members from India and foreign countries have been meeting regularly to find ways to continue her spiritual leadership. BKs uphold that the organization is God's responsibility, and not the ultimate task of any human being. However, in listening to conversations among many BKs, Dadi's death has left an organizational vacuum that BKs are now rushing to fill with various strategies. There is a genuine search to find a way of continuing the respect, love and unity that Dadi organically created and sustained over the years. As the Brahma Kumaris expands, a tension is being revealed among members as they struggle to maintain what they perceive to be the heart and essence of their spiritual life that is centred around silent meditation and a life of simplicity and good action, with an organization that must necessarily become more bureaucratic and administrative in order to satisfy the needs and requirements of

goodness according to the world. The charismatic necessarily becomes more bureaucratic as original members pass away.

Since 2008, there has been a detailed review of management through a process called 'Global Functioning'. Global Functioning, the brainchild of three BKs in the Americas and administered from the UN office in New York, was designed to review how well the Brahma Kumaris is operating during the present time of change and rapid expansion, and to increase organizational transparency and communication. This is a complex issue because Brahma Kumaris members identify their community as a family, an educational institution, and a formal organization, resulting in concurrent forms of identity, invariably causing miscommunication and tension at times. Global Functioning was also designed especially to enhance communication between management and grass roots BKs through having 'conversations' at all organizational levels, the results of which will be seen in the future.

All centres in all countries were invited to participate in the Global Functioning 'conversations' that dealt with particular areas of need that had been identified the year prior by a meeting of senior members. Conversations began with three areas of focus: 'upholding our spiritual principles', 'caring for the family', and 'mechanisms for reconciliation'. As a result of the data gathered through the 'conversations,' this expanded to what would ultimately be the basis for seven international committees (see below). This has added another layer within the management hierarchy, effectively increasing the administrative and increasingly bureaucratic nature of the organization. Each committee has a Regional Coordinator who oversees it, two co-chairs from National Coordinator level so as to adhere to the primary organizational structure, and a small group of BKs considered specialists in the respective areas. The seven committees now comprise:

1. Upholding Our Spiritual Principles
2. Care and Wellbeing
3. Managing Human, Financial and Other Resources

4. Providing Mechanisms for Reconciliation
5. Newness in Learning
6. Communication and Decision-Making
7. History and Information

Within this structure, the Brahma Kumaris still show all the characteristics of Servant Leadership as defined by Greenleaf (Greenleaf 2002): humility, leadership by example, nurturing, empowering and a refusal to be treated as gurus or objects of reverence although, in India especially, this is not always implemented successfully. Foreign members have had to reconcile their spiritual practice with life in Western settings as a key to the NRM's success (Howell and Nelson 1997, Walsh 2005). Therefore, it seems that Global Functioning is more specifically designed to assist non-Indian BKs in managing the tensions they experience, coming from vastly different countries, yet working and living within an organization that operationally is deeply influenced by Indian culture and traditions. Within different countries, the Brahma Kumaris create local initiatives to facilitate their work that are nationally specific and not part of the global administrative hierarchy.

Along with the tension of managing organizational expansion, leadership succession and holding on to the spiritual essence, there is the additional restlessness of spiritual and organizational positioning. Spiritual positioning within the Brahma Kumaris utilizes the metaphor of a 'rosary,' prevalent in all major faiths including Hinduism. The 'rosary' is a necklace of beads that is symbolically and inherently meaningful in both Eastern and Western devotional practices. The BKs believe that the original or true rosary is a rosary of souls who become God-like through their inculcation of virtues and attainment of perfection. BKs use the rosary metaphor to describe the position of BKs and their spiritual closeness to God. The circular rosary contains no hierarchy, however the position is 'numberwise'. The soul's inherent level of spiritual purity, whereby one can position oneself close to the metaphorical main bead of the rosary (the symbol for God),

determines this. In *murlis*, descriptions of the rosary are often comical, with anecdotes of beads falling off the string and rethreading themselves as BKs face challenges and tests of faith. The 'rosary' is a form of spiritual ordering, however, and has little to do with the patent seniority of one's position in the organizational structure. Here the tension between spiritual and organizational positioning arises.

Those who have a position in the organization are regarded as 'senior.' Particularly in India, this position comes with an implied associated holiness. Non-Indians BKs, many of whom come from cultures that are far less hierarchically entrenched than India, more often perceive the two forms of positioning as distinct and separate. BK theology also states that having a position within the organizational hierarchy does not equate with spiritual goodness. However, wearing the 'crown of responsibility' in terms of maintaining and living by the principles, and the spiritual teachings, does. This tension can cause internal anxiety as BKs wish to be close in the rosary, which can become confused with being high in the organizational hierarchy.

The fluid communication in the organization means that decisions are rarely made in isolation. Centre coordinators discuss local issues with BKs at their centre. Anything of national concern is brought to the attention of the National Coordinator. These are discussed among members of a national committee or 'board' comprised of centre Coordinators and other BKs who are known by the Centre Coordinators to have relevant expertise. Topics of international concern will be discussed with the Regional Coordinators and anything more important will be discussed with the Dadis. BKs also utilize the *lokik* (worldly) technology of Internet, email, Skype, VOIP and conference calls to maintain communication.

The seed of the current organizational structure comes from the earliest days of Om Mandli. As in the 1930s, the approach to managing people within the organization is monitored by elders and is governed more by relationships resembling a family of elders

and youngers than by more formal connections. Perhaps this is why the Dadis' choice of leaders and administrators is accepted without too much protest. There are instances of conflict, but the structure is such that it is maintained even when local BKs are in disagreement. The Om Mandli is held in nostalgic esteem, and so the structure is unlikely to change. However, through the BK diaspora as well as globalization and the expansion of technology (An-Na'im 2005; Lehmann 2002), new areas pertinent to an organization of the Brahma Kumaris' breadth and size require discussion, which is what Global Functioning aims to address.

The Expansion

Brahma Kumaris has been uniquely positioned as a worldwide organization administered by women since it began. Almost seventy-five years since its establishment, a new generation of leadership has ushered in a time of organizational reassessment and dialogue among all levels of the organization within foreign countries, with strong adherence to the organization's founding vision of peace and happiness for all souls.

Brahma Kumaris has followed a path typical of millenarian movements: from a place of world rejection where BKs lived an almost cloistered existence, BKs are now involved more in present-day social concerns such as education, disaster response and health outreach. BKs design programs intending to offer people tangible ways of improving their lives, characteristic of world-affirming movements (Wallis 2003a). The BKs certainly believe that world calamities, war and natural disasters will only increase, and cannot be prevented (Piven 2004a). Yet they also believe in the peace that manifests through self-awareness or spiritual knowledge, and the love and power received through the practice of meditation, as genuine methods for dealing with increasingly calamitous world events and disturbing life events. The Brahma Kumaris organization has moved from a world-rejecting community (Wallis 1984) that believed in imminent destruction in its beginning days (Beit-Hallahmi 2003), to being 'world corresponding'. BKs perceive the current time

as one of world transition, where their spiritual philosophy and practice is most beneficial when shaped to suit the needs and wants of society at large, facilitating personal, social and global change.

While the Brahma Kumaris' focus remains on teaching meditation, the organization is also progressively involved in grassroots community service and international humanitarian activities. The Brahma Kumaris have participated in policy debate at the United Nations on the subject of disaster and the environment for years (BKWSU 1991, 1992a, 1992b, 1994, 2002, 2007a, 2009c), however it is relatively recent that BKs have been called upon by their local communities to assist in disasters, including the 1995 Kobe earthquake in Japan, the 2001 Bhuj earthquake in India, the 2004 Tsunami in South East Asia (most significantly in Sri Lanka) and the 2007 floods in Malaysia, among others. This change in role reflects a change in their perception of disastrous events and their perceived helping role within these events, as I document in this thesis.

Chapter 2

The Me Nobody Knows: Methodological Reflections

Journey here and there
Round about and through the door
I am me no more.

I have heard stories about solitary doctoral students, lone scholars who walk the isolated path of research. Strangeness I have felt, confounded and turned around as well, but I never felt alone. Perhaps this is because I was studying my own community so that, while certainly a foreigner in some places, even my status as a 'foreigner' was meaningful. Beliefs, rituals, history and shared understanding connected me with my research community. I was also a sister and a senior in some places although not in others, and often, if not always, a friend. There was a strong sense of belonging, family and home through the entire process. Sometimes the belonging was challenged and sometimes I felt challenged by the community that is my spiritual family, but these particular difficulties are born from the very feeling of belonging. It is only when one belongs that one can feel comparatively shut out, dismissed or rejected. It is when one feels the ties of family that the stretching of those ties can cause one to feel uneasy or a misfit.

Home for me is Melbourne, Australia. I am a child of the seventies. The arts, ideas of free love, attitudes of openness, and the celebration of difference influenced my formative years. My childhood was creative and fairly undisciplined. I moved between the southeastern suburbs of Melbourne, Australia, and a simple wooden house that my parents built without bathroom, electricity, telephone, or town water. We lived on 315 acres of bush on a mountain outside of Bega in southeast New South Wales. I remember hand-spinning our washing, bathing in a hip bath in front of the fire at night, and turning our bright yellow kerosene fridge upside-down to make it work. We made our own bread

and grew our own vegetables. Dinner was either a 'cook-up' or a 'soupy-stew.' Our closest neighbour lived two kilometers away, but kookaburras, wallabies, bellbirds and the odd cow were welcomed and frequent guests.

After being educated in eight different schools, I had a short career in film and television, and a longer career as a paramedic. During this time I discovered a love of science while simultaneously I developed a heightened interest in matters of the spirit. This all affects the place from which I write, the way in which I write, and the methods by which this study has been co-created (Charmaz 2006; Liamputtong and Ezzy 2005; Morse 1994).

Reflexive positioning

In this methods chapter, I discuss my position and stance, given my long-term connection with the research community. I outline the research locations, and detail the methods and theory that underpin my study of BKs and disasters, and the analysis and ethics that shape it. At times my field methods did not go according to my initial plan, and I acquired a necessary flexibility so characteristic of the mess of social science research (Law 2004). I felt this was a methodological maturity that enabled me to maintain the rigour in my methods, while moderating them when required. I document some of the field realities that caused this need for flexibility and moderation.

My position as a long-term member of the Brahma Kumaris affected every component of this study. The research topic would not have arisen had I not considered the effect of my own spiritual practice on my professional role as a paramedic. It is unlikely that I would have gained permission from the research gatekeepers, had I not been building relationships of trust with senior members for more than twenty years. At a deeper level, I share inherent non-biological kinship with the participants, based on the shared moral code of the Brahma Kumaris community. I would not have been permitted to stay in BK

households and centres had I not been living by the ascetic principles that are the foundation of BK life.

My data in New York included information from long-term friends as well as acquaintances and strangers. In Orissa I was meeting everyone for the first time. However in the BK world, there is a strong understanding of spiritual family, so one is never a complete stranger; there are instinctive connections within the overarching spiritual kinship circle. As with other spiritual paths and social groups, collective experience, common history and a shared moral code offer a sense of elemental cohesion that would normally take time to build (Olaveson 2001; Glazier and Flowerday 2003).

My position within the community impacted on how I conducted my research (Cutcliffe 2003; Ellingson 1998; May and Williams 1998). Issues of power are inherent in the researcher-participant relationship, and primarily relate to the distinction between 'us' (the researcher) and 'them' (the researched). My insider role moderated this and made it more complex (Arweck and Stringer 2002). In the field, I was always clear about my role as a researcher, but I doubt whether the participants truly understood – I doubt whether I truly understood – how this would change my stance in relation to my own life as a BK and my perception of the Brahma Kumaris from a point of necessary analytical distance.

Participants

I conducted fifteen months of fieldwork, comprising seven months in New York, USA and eight months in Orissa, India, and this included periods of time spent at Madhuban.

New York and Orissa are culturally, linguistically and socially distinct from each other. Brahma Kumaris at the UN initiates projects that support the ideals of the UN, and its participants are often leaders, dignitaries and people of note in government, business or the humanitarian sector. In contrast, people in India as well as some scholars (Mohanty 1990; Samal 1998), refer to Orissa as a 'backward state.' Its population is primarily tribal,

according to Indian reckoning, and the people are devotional in nature. Few Indian BKs would intentionally visit Orissa. In Table 1 (below), the vertical axis indicates participants' place of birth; the horizontal axis indicates their current place of residence. The relative heterogeny and homogeny of participants from New York and Orissa respectively is notable.

Table 1. Birthplace and residence of all research participants

Birthplace	*Residence*				
	India (Orissa)	India	USA (New York)	USA	Other
Guyana	2				
India	2	3	3		
India (Orissa)	56	2	3		
Lebanon				1	
Lima-Peru			1		
Mexico			1		
Ukraine			1		
Venezuela				1	
United Kingdom			1		2
USA			3	1	
USA (New York)			3		

The Human Development Office of the United Nations (UNDP) has used the Human Development Index (HDI)[12] since 1990 to determine a broad measure of wellbeing and to allow for contrasts between nations. The HDI employs a composite measure of three dimensions of human development: living a long and healthy life (measured by life expectancy), being educated (measured by adult literacy and enrolment at the primary, secondary and tertiary levels of education) and having a decent standard of living (measured by purchasing power parity and income). Although Table 2 (below) does not address issues such as gender disparities, political freedom and human rights, I have used the HDI to demonstrate human progress in each of my field locations, and to highlight the

[12] For an extended discussion about methods of measuring wellbeing, read Nussbaum 2005

complex relationship between income and wellbeing. This is the context in which BKs live, and so offers a broad positional setting of the research participants.

Table 2. Human Development Indices highlighting USA and India

Abridged Human Development Index (HDI) 2006

HDI value	**Life expectancy at birth (yrs)**	**Adult literacy rate (% over 15)**	**Education: 1^0, 2^0, 3^0 enrolment (%)**	**GDP per capita (PPP US$)**
1. Iceland (0.968)	1. Japan (82.4)	1. Georgia (100.0)	1. Australia (114.2)	1. Luxembourg (77,089)
14.Austria (0.951)	30. Denmark (78.1)	Not stated	19. Slovenia (92.8)	7. Kuwait (46,638)
15. United States (0.950)	31. United States (78.0)	Not stated	20. United States (92.4)	8.United States (43,968)
16. Spain (0.949)	32. Cuba (77.9)	Not stated	21. Lithuania (92.3)	9. Ireland (40,823)
131. Bhutan (0.613)	126.Comoros (64.5)	117.Congo (67.2)	133. Trinidad and Tobago (61.1)	125. Guyana (2,782)
132. India (0.609)	127. India (64.1)	118. India (65.2)	134. India (61.0)	126. India (2,489)
133. Lao (0.608)	128. Lao (63.7)	119. Rwanda (64.9)	135. Nepal (60.8)	127. Nicaragua (2,441)
179. Sierra Leone (0.329)	179. Swaziland (40.2)	147. Mali (22.9)	179. Djibouti (25.5)	178.Congo (281)

The latest HDI (UNDP 2008) places Australia as fourth in the world, the United States of America at 15th and India 132nd out of the 179 countries. Figures in parentheses indicate HDI ranks in descending order. Selected countries are included for comparison. Within India, Orissa is number 11 out of 15 states between Kerala (1) and Bihar (15). Orissa has held the same approximate position for at least twenty years (UNDP 2004). Rajasthan, the Indian state in which Madhuban is located is 9th.

Social ordering

Communities within India in general and Orissa in particular (Bailey 1958, 1960; Gupta 1979; Patnaik 2005; Pujari and Behera 2003) have strong and complex kinship rules that dictate the proper behaviour of different members of the family (Das 1985; Freed and Freed 1964; Mahapatra 2005; Mallebrein 2002). These traditions are altered in the BK community, but they are honoured within the tradition of family relationships (Skultans 1993). This is less so in New York among whom the majority of resident BKs were Indian or of Indian descent. Indian influence is strong, even so; Western BKs are accepted, but may risk being positioned outside of this family system, unless they are seen to conform to Indian standards of 'goodness'.

Mundane situations provide the best examples of the experience of social ordering. In New York, on special occasions, BKs were allocated reserved seats according to perceived seniority. Particularly in New York, BKs are classified and referred to as 'seniors', 'instruments', 'teachers' and 'students', structuring relationships between different levels of BKs.[13] There are also ideas of 'closeness', and souls are termed close or distant according to their perceived connection with the heart of the Brahma Kumaris, or the '*Yagya*' (see Chapter 9). Another intermediary level is 'BK-lite'. A participant referred to herself as this because she does not abide strictly to all the fundamental disciplines. When I mentioned the term to other BKs, they liked it and have since started using it. Those 'outside' the BK community are termed 'VIPs' or 'cooperative souls', depending on their perceived social standing in the world. This multi-level ordering diminished feelings of belonging for at least ten non-Indian BKs with whom I spoke. In India, social ordering is deeply woven through the history, culture and geography of the land, with a diverse system of caste and class. It works within the structured disorder of Indian society.

[13] cf with John Walliss's four types of users in the Brahma Kumaris: instrumental users, eclectic users, interpretative drifters and spiritual searchers.

However, in New York I watched as attempts to segregate people according to perceived rank caused feelings of dismay, quiet sadness, and feelings of separation.

Although it is unstated, there appears to be an ideal BK to which everyone aspires. This ideal is a fair skinned Indian sister who is bilingual (English and Hindi) and speaks with an educated accent, has long hair, and dresses in a white sari. This image fashions the social class structure within the Brahma Kumaris. Some of the more feminine brothers express their sense of having been sisters in past lives, and the desire most certainly to be sisters in their future lives. Authority and seniority is strongly, although not exclusively, aligned with an image that concurs with the traditional dress and traditional roles of high caste Indians. BKs, who are of Indian heritage, and those who abide by Indian cultural ideals, tend to be in positions of leadership. There are comparatively few BKs of American origin who have a position of responsibility within the organization in New York.

There are rules around accuracy or being *pukka* in the Brahma Kumaris that are in addition to the cultural rules of India. These rules apply regardless of region, caste, or cultural group (Bagwe 1996; Parameswaran 2001; Ram 1992; Ram and Jolly 1998). A 'good' young woman in India (Seizer 2000) is traditionally expected to be demure and respectful, trained in cooking and caring for the family, quietly spoken and modest. However, in the Brahma Kumaris, along with these traditional qualities they are also expected to be good teachers and powerful yogis (meditators), which are in contrast to traditional constructions. BK sisters are also expected to be competent and authoritative. These perceptions were confirmed through regular and systematic participant observation.

In Orissa the social delineation of class based on status within the organization was clear, definitive and un-negotiated, and everyone seemed content with it. For example, road trips generally involved at least two cars. The senior sister would arrange the seating of passengers. Seating was according to perceived social status and spiritual caste (discussed

further in Chapter 3). For example, one car was for senior sisters and dedicated teachers, and so was driven by a senior brother. It was generally the larger vehicle and, as a ten seater, it could hold up to twenty sisters uncomfortably. Seated in the middle row, behind the driver's bench seat were the two senior sisters of Orissa, with me wedged in between them. This symbolized my general importance, but also my junior status relative to the senior sisters of Orissa, and their protective guard of me. Younger sisters sat squashed in the back, leaned over the seat and played with my fine brown hair with fascination. A less senior brother, or at times a male 'householder' or *grahāstwallah,*[14] drove the second car; in that car were BKs who lived at home with their families and who had *lokik* jobs. Importantly, we were all together. And separate.

Strange and stranger

Within the global BK movement, there are approximately 900,000 members, at least 98% of who are culturally Indian and resident in India. There is no official membership registration however; people self-identify – either tightly or loosely - as BKs, and the number is taken from annual service reports of activities conducted in each nation and region. This information is then sent back to the Headquarters in Madhuban and compiled annually.

A double foreigner or *double videshi* is a term of endearment for BKs who are foreign to India. This term comes from the *murlis* and was used first by Indian BKs as a term that is incorporating rather than alienating. The term 'double foreigner' incorporates foreigners by placing them squarely within Brahma Kumaris spiritual understanding that souls – all living beings – come from the soul world (see Figure 23 page 111) and so are 'foreign' to

[14] This is a term that identifies someone according to the circumstances in which they live. Someone who is married or living with members of her or his worldly or lokik family is called a *grahasthwallah*. At least some BKs from India are not happy being identified by this term because it implies a spiritually lesser stage of life and one of relative impurity, although BKs are taught this is not the case.

the physical world, in Brahma Kumaris cosmology. India is the original and ancient land of the physical world, so those born outside of India are also foreign in this way. That is, they are twice foreign or 'double foreign'. In India, double foreigners are often reserved special seats at the front of any important occasion. They are also given special food (primarily the same as others, but with less chilli) in smaller dining halls. In Orissa I regularly observed people look at me astounded, because I was dressed and lived as a BK ascetic. I was told that it is considered quite remarkable that a foreigner, from the 'impure West,' could recognize the value of Indian spiritual philosophy. To see a foreigner abide by disciplines similar to those of a *saddhu, rishi* or *muni* (the saints, holy men and philosophers of India) is considered no less than extraordinary in Orissa. In India my role as a *double videshi* made me feel simultaneously curious and common, and simultaneously aroused responses of curiosity and community in others.

Within the population of double foreigners (a good percentage of whom come from an Indian cultural background) very few have family members in *gyān*, with even fewer consisting of both parents and a child. The latter is the case with me. To add further to my distinctiveness, my parents and I are considered privileged, as other BKs tell me, because we are long term members, have undertaken unconventional forms of 'service' through the performing arts, and have close relationships with elders within the organization. The ambiguous feeling of belonging and being different arose, particularly in Orissa, because of this distinctiveness.

Double foreigners have been visiting Madhuban since the 1970s and are now considered unremarkable. However, from time to time, double foreigners are reminded of their strangeness when different groups of BKs from other parts of India come to visit the Headquarters during 'double foreign season,' between September and March. In one instance, a young Indian sister from South India walked up to Sister Anneke from the Netherlands, stood inches from her face, and touched the white skin on the back of her

hand. The Indian sister felt Anneke's soft blonde hair, rubbing it gently between her fingers, before muttering a shy *om shānti* and walking away, giggling with her friends.

I saw no foreigners during my time in Orissa, even in the main city of Bhubaneshwar. I found it peculiar that the more I blended in or attempted to blend in, the more distinctive I became, perhaps because of my foreign appearance. The way in which I adopted Indian hair, clothes, food, language and customs was so incredulous to my companions in the field and to the broader community in which I lived, that as a result of my determined endeavours not to appear so, I was consistently made to be distinctive (For more about social positioning in India read Sen 2005).

In New York I was free to dress as I wished. This is contrary to Orissa where, despite my attempts at conformity, in an effort to show their love for me (so it was explained), the sisters I lived with continued to refine my modifications. They changed my hair (from medium length harnessed in a clip and ponytail to being tugged into a longer and heavily oiled plait), my speech (with yelps of delight every time I spoke Oriya and head jiggles of approval when I spoke Hindi), my food (from eating a lot of raw foods with cutlery, I started eating three locally cooked meals a day with my hands), my language (smiling happily and giggling behind their hands as I read Hindi spiritual discourse to the public class), my spiritual expression (they put me in key and observable positions during any ceremony or occasion of note), my shoes (they did not like my 'man sandals,' so they took me to an Indian shoe store chain and insisted I buy new ones from the 'ladies' section), and my clothes (making it clear that the white *sari*[15] is the pinnacle, although the *salwar kameez*[16] is accepted, with a *chunni*[17] if in public, but that white clothes from foreign lands are accepted, but reluctantly).

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[15] Traditional Indian clothing for women, and the 'uniform' for teachers in the Brahma Kumaris.

[16] Traditional Indian pant suit for women

Arriving in Orissa

My first day in Orissa is indelibly printed in my mind. After a fourteen-hour train trip, and two flights, the last one in a small plane, I arrived at the local airport. I gathered up my multiple *sari* folds and, put my hand baggage over my shoulder, I grabbed the railing of the rickety stairs and descended the plane onto the tarmac. When I reached the bottom I looked up to see two sisters and a brother smiling broadly at me through the tinted glass of the arrivals hall. When I entered the terminal shortly afterwards, Sister Sundari (my future research assistant) gave me flowers that I promptly dropped, while Devika took my hand-baggage and picked up my bruised posy. My two suitcases stuffed with items I would not use once while I was in the field wobbled precariously through the black rubber vertical straps of the luggage carousel. On route to the centre, in a tiny white vehicle, I discovered to my delight as she asked me questions to test my understanding of BK knowledge that Sundari spoke quite good English. "How many rays are there in the picture of Shiv Baba?" "Do you attend *murli* every day?" Do you wear a *sari* in foreign?" "Who is Brahma Baba in relation to Shiv Baba?" She laughed when I said "the chariot." But apparently I answered all her questions correctly. Devika, the sister on the other side of me, spent most of the time looking out of the window. Every now and then I would see her look around my face with intrigue as small lengths of my fine un-oiled brown hair flew around in the wind, rebelling against the hair elastic that was doing a dismal job. As mentioned above, I was intensely aware of my strangeness as a foreigner and my familiarity as a BK and the peculiarity of position this created as I stepped on Oriya soil. I wondered what kind of 'me' I would be here.

[17] A light scarf that is worn across the chest or wrapped around the head and usually accompanies the salwar kameez.

We wound through the small streets of Jhanjiri Mangla. They called it a town. I called it a village. It was much bigger than the villages I would visit later, that had been destroyed and rebuilt by the Super Cyclone. After forty minutes or so, we arrived at the BK centre, or 'ashram' as it was commonly called. How could I miss it? There was a huge statue of a brightly painted goddess in a glass case on the top of the welcome booth that was inside the high gate, shielding the ashram from the street. A sign on top of the encased goddess invited the observer into the Jeevan Darshan Art Gallery (see Figure 8 on page 59). The bottom story contained a fabulously intricate coloured exhibition that gave the entire Brahma Kumaris philosophy 'in a nutshell', as I heard it said. One of the twenty young sisters who lived at the ashram would take small groups of people through the exhibitions regularly through the day, and in the evenings. Sometimes I would walk through and see one of the sisters seated with two or three others at a small table at the end of the exhibition hall, teaching in a more personal way.

On the same floor there was a Baba's room for silent meditation that had a five-foot by three-foot 'translight' of Baba. A trance light is a light box that has a translucent picture of Brahma Baba with Shiv Baba as a point of light in the front of the box. A light globe is affixed inside the box, and shines through from behind, illuminating the picture. The Art Department in Gyan Sarovar prints these popular Trance Lights regularly on request, at nominal cost.

As I walk past Baba's room, I see there is a lift at the end of the corridor, but I decide to take the stairs. As I walk up the grey marble steps to the next level, I notice the external walls of the centre. I can see the building next door, because the walls have big decorative holes in them, like large clumsy doilies that let in light and air.

On the next floor is where most of the activity happens. Sisters sit on the bench swing that hangs in the corridor or on the couch or one of the chairs. I will notice later that this is where most of the grain cleaning takes place. The sisters' bedrooms are also on this level.



Figure 8. Sisters and mothers standing outside Jhanjiri Mangla centre, Orissa

There are a total of ten beds and around twenty sisters. And there is always space for grass mats on the floor. As I arrived on this level, I was taken immediately to meet Karunamata, the senior sister. She laughed as I said her name and embraced me. She

cupped the fingers of her right hand together and nodded them towards her mouth. "*Kana* (lunch)?" "*Haji* (yes)," I reply. Within 24 hours Karunamata would tell me about the two sisters who would be my assistants, who would make me tea and keep my room clean. All my laundry and ironing would be done for me. Brothers would do the shopping and sisters would arrange anything else I needed. I could go for walks but it should be in a *sari*, or *salwar kameez* (soft pant suit) with a *chunni,* (a light scarf worn across the chest, see Figure 8) in the company of a sister, in the morning or evening. Food would be cooked for me according to my specifications. Clothes would be made for me and my head massaged nightly with oil. My feet would be massaged too, if I wished. Karunamata made it clear that it was their (they speak collectively) wish to look after me. Of course, I could do any of it myself. But they would like to do it. The next day, once I was settled and the practical side was sorted out, the first serious question Karunamata asked me was, "How are you with purity? Are you *pukka*?"

I see the dining room and kitchen as I continue walking up to the third floor. The third floor is the classroom. There is a stage with a bigger than life-size hand-painted Brahma Baba as the backdrop. The padded floor overlaid with soft cotton sheets takes up most of the room. A small group of sisters are sitting at the back of the room on the chairs, speaking softly. It is after 2pm, so some are already lying on the comfortable classroom floor, taking their afternoon nap. What strikes me is how close they lie alongside each other, taking up less than one tenth of the room. They could spread out, but they do not. At the back of the room are three rows of odd chairs and out of place couches, somewhat haphazardly arranged. My room, along with another guest room, is on this floor.

My room was the VIP room with only two beds and a window looking out onto some of the typically small and windy streets of Jhanjiri Mangla. The sisters left me there to "become fresh" or, in other words, make myself presentable before sitting down for lunch. For a compact room, it held a lot of furniture.



Figure 9. Classroom in Jhanjiri Mangla centre with sisters having an afternoon rest

There were two beds with firm mattresses and similarly firm pillows covered with a hand towel, to protect the pillowcase from hair oil. Each bed had a comfortable armchair alongside it upholstered in brown flowered velvet with pink lace coverlets on the arms and back. Protective again. The couch opposite the chairs was similarly covered and coverleted. A glass coffee table with a wooden shelf underneath was in the centre of the room. That would soon be filled with papers. There was a door out to a small balcony that was blocked with a narrow but tall table, the drawer of which would soon house every electronic item and cable that I had. The air conditioner was a welcome sight. I knew that I would need it in the coming months although that day, in early March, the heat was moderate. Between the two chairs was a small double doorway that led to a dressing area with open shelves that I would have to dust a lot while I was there, due to the window that I invariably kept open. The bathroom was typical, although it was a 'western-style' sitting toilet, and not squatting, for which I was grateful. Considering how ungainly I often felt in a sari, being able to sit down would help prevent nasty accidents. The built-in shelves supported a fresh bar of 'lux' soap, 'head and shoulders' shampoo which the sisters said

was good for combating dandruff, and a big bottle of green hair oil which would apparently make my hair thick and black if I used it often enough. Hot and cold running water, two plastic buckets and a plastic dipper completed the scene. I 'became fresh,' and went downstairs to the dining room. A sister seated me in the best seat, where I could look across the small dining room to see the red flag waving above the *Shiva* Temple through the protective bars of the centre. The *Shiva* temple was literally our backyard.

Suvali brought over a plate of especially cooked vegetable dishes and soft white rice. I would discover that special food would always be cooked for me, despite my regular requests to the contrary. After a few minutes of munching happily, I looked up to find sixteen faces standing around the table, smiling, watching me chew with absolute interest. Every now and then one sister would leave and another would come to take her place in the viewing circle. They gave me more room than I needed when I stood up to make my way upstairs for a rest. In the first few weeks, I would frequently catch the sisters I lived with staring at me, sometimes from behind doorways, other times openly. Visitors to the centre would come into my room and watch me while I worked. They would sometimes read aloud whatever they saw on the computer screen, but more often than not, they would remain silent, and just stand or sit, and stare as I read, combed my hair, drank tea, got dressed. For me, staring was intrusive and impolite. While Sundari told me it was out of love and respect, I kept feeling as if they felt I was broken and needed mending. But over the duration of my time there, from being an object that was watched, they gradually made me a subject that belonged (Buber 1970). I was a form of strange spiritual treasure that would be started at, taken care of, loved and displayed at important events.

New York

The small island city Manhattan, commonly referred to as New York City (NYC) is in fact only one of five boroughs, which comprise Manhattan, Queens, Staten Island, the Bronx and Brooklyn. Manhattan is the most densely populated area in the United States of

America (USA) with approximately 1,600,000 people living in an area 59km^2 at the time of the last census (NYC Department of City Planning 2008).



Figure 10. Map of Manhattan neighbourhoods
(Source: http://gonyc.about.com/cs/manhattan)

Loosely divided into 'neighbourhoods', areas of Manhattan are identified as being 'east' or 'west', with 5th Avenue as the dividing line between the two. Running north to south on Manhattan Island the areas are generally classified as 'uptown', 'midtown' and 'downtown.' The WTC collapse in 2001 occurred 'downtown' in the financial district. Manhattan is culturally and linguistically diverse and geographical areas are often culturally concentrated. Based on historic patterns of settlement, cultural concentrations and subsequent local promotion some of the main areas are: 'Little Italy' in a small area surrounding Mulberry Street downtown, 'Yorkville' (not shown) home to the Germans after WWII in the East 80s, and Chinatown near the financial district. Harlem (largely African American) is uptown above 125th Street on the West Side, and Spanish Harlem is a little lower down in the 100s and on the East Side. Almost four hundred years after Manhattan was 'purchased' from Native Americans by the Dutch, it has become one of the world's foremost commercial, financial, and cultural centres.

Environment

Geographically New York is vulnerable. The island is only accessible by boat, subway or over one of its nine bridges. Due to its high population and traffic density, if Manhattan's bridges were to become compromised, people could rapidly become isolated and resource scarce. Even so, as a symbol of the main political power of the West at the time, the attack and subsequent collapse of the WTC in Manhattan on September 11 2001 was particularly shocking. Graphic images were portrayed around the world representing America and its people in a new and vulnerable light.

Brahma Kumaris in New York

There are four BK centres in New York (see above): one on 5th Avenue near 34th Street in midtown Manhattan, the BK office at the UN, the third in Queens, and the main centre and Headquarters for the greater Americas in Long Island (see Figure 11 page 65).

I attended the Manhattan centre daily, and spent the month of September (2007) at the BK office at the UN. The BK UN office works to support the values of the UN and offer guidance in areas where the BKs are considered to possess special experience or technical knowledge of value to the UN, particularly the Economic and Social Council. The gatekeepers in this research (in relation to the UN, it was Dadi Janki) arranged for me to have a UN pass, permitting me to attend meetings, the NGO/DPI conference, High Level Dialogues of leaders in particular fields, and other convenings restricted to UN representatives of NGOs during my time there.



Figure 11. Map of NYC Burroughs, indicating centre locations, and my apartment

The culture of the Brahma Kumaris is only slightly moderated by its existence in New York. However, there are significant differences between India and Western countries like the USA, in terms of lifestyle. BKs report that when Indian sisters first ventured into 'foreign' lands, there was a fear of impurity, considered a genuine and grave threat. In the early days of the diaspora, double foreigners were encouraged to leave their families, separate if married, and live in collective BK households of sisters or brothers to help protect their purity. In the twenty-first century, this is no longer the case, although the legacy is visible as BKs in New York still tend to live alone, with one other person or – rarely – with their family. Conversely, in Orissa, BKs live collectively in the centre with – in my case – between sixteen and twenty sisters on any given day or alternatively they continue to live with their extended natal family, with the latter option accepted and encouraged.

Orissa

Positioned on the east coast of India between the Bay of Bengal and Andhra Pradesh, Orissa is systematically affected by coastal storms. An intricate network of fourteen rivers and adjoining major and minor waterways contributes towards its tendency to severe flash flooding and other disasters during the summer and ensuing monsoon season. Recently (2009), although there was no disaster of international note, Oriya people were badly affected by heat waves and floods, a regular occurrence. The cyclone warning

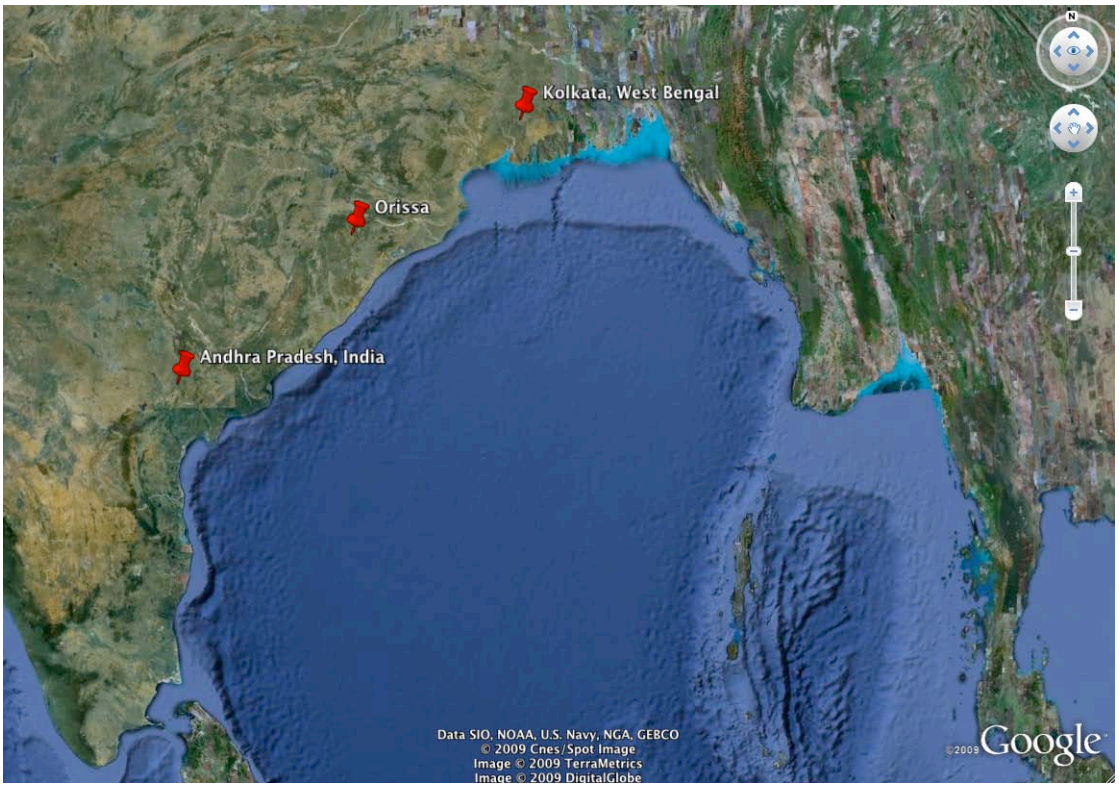


Figure 12. Orissa between West Bengal and Andhra Pradesh

thankfully was uneventful. In 1999 though, Orissa was struck by a severe cyclone popularly referred to as the 'Super Cyclone' that killed more than 10,000 people and rendered many more thousands injured and homeless, particularly in the districts of Kendrapara and Jagatsinghpur. These two districts were home to many BKs.



Figure 13. Administrative districts of Orissa, as at 2008
Source: Orissa State Disaster Management Authority

Politically, Orissa is divided into thirty administrative districts (see Figure 13) that are under autonomous governance of the District Collector, a member of the Indian Administrative Service, and the preeminent official of the district. His responsibility is to collect revenue in the district, and to maintain law and order. He is also the main point of contact during any significant district-wide event, such as a disaster. This is significant when it comes to disaster relief, as there is often conflict between different Collectors (Gupta 1995; Padhy 1987). The district is then further divided into *tehsils* or 'blocks', which contain generally between 200-600 villages. The Tehsildar, sometimes called the Subcollector, administers each block and is responsible for ensuring civil wellbeing and collecting revenue within his assigned area. Each block contains a block council, and on it is a representative of the *Panchayat*, the most local form of political governance. The

Panchayat is a self-governing and popularly selected village council. In this way, there is a hierarchy of administrative, financial and civil governance at all geographic levels in Orissa. Generally, all levels of administration are engaged in preparation for disaster and disaster relief, although there are examples of creative and highly localized solutions to disaster preparedness and response (Kaul 2007) independent of governments, which are supported by UNDP and the Government of India.

For example, since 2002 women from Jajpur district have been organizing themselves to collect dry food, pack the food into the inner tubes of truck tires, and float the tires to submerged villages during floods. They also used rafts made from the trunks of banana trees to transport kerosene and other supplies. As a unique and independent form of communication, women blow on conch shells, creating a loud distinctive sound that supersedes more advanced forms of technology that may fail during disaster. In fire prone areas during high-risk seasons, each household is required to keep a bucket of water at the door of their hut, and must pay a fine if the family does not comply.

Within India, the devastation caused by the Super Cyclone of 1999 was particularly remarkable (Kremmer 1999). However this does not detract from the silent disasters that continue. Ten years after the Super-Cyclone, some villagers still live under tarpaulins. Orissa has one of the largest tribal populations in the entire subcontinent (22.13 per cent of the state's population according to the 2001 census, numbering approximately 7 million) and many of these tribes are dependent on fishing or agriculture for their livelihood (UNDP 2004). They consequently live with a unique form of everyday vulnerability to disaster, due to regular storms and flooding.

Table 3. Patterns of employment among the general population in Orissa
(Source: UNDP, 2008)

Vocation	*Gender*	*Location*	*Percentage*
Agriculture and animal husbandry, forestry and logging, fishing and mining and quarrying (Primary sector)	Female	Urban	19.10
		Rural	80.30
	Male	Urban	11.20
		Rural	77.20
Manufacturing, construction, trade (Secondary sector)	Female	Urban	22.50
		Rural	12.30
	Male	Urban	17.20
		Rural	5.60
Railways, transport and communication. Banking, hospitality and public administration (Tertiary sector)	Female	Urban	44.00
		Rural	4.60
	Male	Urban	59.10
		Rural	12.50

Linguistically, Hindi is the national language and first language of 30% of people of India, however there are 14 other official languages of which Oriya (the language of Orissa) is one of the oldest in the country. About 84 per cent of Orissa's population speak Oriya but Hindi, Urdu, Bengali and Telugu are widely understood and sometimes spoken. English tends to be spoken in the state only by the educated few.

Agriculture is the main form of income production (see Table 3 above), and crops are continually at risk from poor irrigation, pestilence, floods, droughts, cyclonic storms and the resulting low yield per hectare. Persistent deforestation of Orissa's mangrove forests has destroyed the state's natural buffer to floods and storms. The regular mining of some of Orissa's most mineral-rich mountains, is displacing and destroying indigenous communities who have lived there for generations. Everyday disasters may not attract the

same attention as the 1999 Super-Cyclone did, but they are a living reality for people of Orissa.



Figure 14. Mounds of rich earth mined from mountains in Orissa, formerly home to Indigenous tribes

Royalty and religion in Orissa

India has a regal history (Babb 1975; Bailey 1960; Carpenter 1921; Heitzman and Worden 1995; Kenoyer 1998; Schnepel 2002; Sen 2005; Varma 2005), and prior to the 1950s, there were strong connections between royalty and devotion in Orissa. Forms of worship affirmed the status of the king and, by association, his people. Each king would add to the prestige of particular temples by conducting his worship there, often receiving high status within the temple. There was a particular and unique pride among the kings as they drew parallels between their own lives and that of the esteemed characters of the scriptures, many of whom had great adventures in the jungle or, in the case of the famous *Pandavas*, lived there in exile. This alliance with scriptural mythology in defining life narratives is

reflected in the lives and theology of BKs as they refer to heroic scriptural stories as metaphors for various struggles. BKs draw parallels between their lives and scriptural stories as methods of meaning-making, repositioning and divinizing their life narratives.

Since the 1950s there has been scarce evidence of Orissa's regal connection, other than televised images of the current king of Puri, Gajapati Maharaja Divyasingha Deva, sweeping the floor of Jagganath's chariot, the most esteemed Oriya god, during the great Oriya festival of Jagganath Puri. In areas of Orissa today, there are still local centres of worship (Guzy 2002) connected with local ruling elites, who may now be governors or politicians rather than from royal lineage. These dignitaries provide the means for ascetics to lead a devotional life. The present ruling class sponsors ascetics in rituals as well as providing places of worship, gaining religious merit, and having the moral reconfirmation of being a good local ruler.

The Brahma Kumaris was established in Orissa through an adjusted form of this historical moral contract. In 1973, sisters Karunamata and Savita left Madhuban on instructions from the Dadis. Karunamata explains that she and Savita were shy when they first arrived in Orissa, taking two or three months to begin introducing themselves around the local community. "Then Baba gave me wonderful power and I would experience blissful feeling and get a powerful enthusiasm." Filled with courage, Kaunamata went to the house of the local Muslim Governor and introduced herself and the Brahma Kumaris to the Governor's wife. A few days later it was apparently printed in the local paper that the Governor would be visiting the Brahma Kumaris ashram. Someone read this, and notified the sisters of the Governor's impending visit. The sisters enthusiastically awaited his arrival. Upon seeing the centre and meeting the sisters, Karunamata says the Governor became instantly supportive of their work saying, "what you are doing is so good, you are like a daughter to me." Soon afterwards the two sisters, with the help of students who were beginning to come, created an exhibition of pictures, one of the most traditional forms of 'doing service'

or 'teaching *gyān'* within the Brahma Kumaris, and important because it transcends literacy. Karunamata and Savita invited the editor of the *Samaj*, the most widely read local newspaper to the opening of the exhibition. He too was impressed with the sisters and their work, ultimately offering to financially support the sisters while they set up their meditation centre. The sisters accepted his offer for one year, and assured him they would be independent after the year, through the support of potential students who would come regularly to the centre. This proved to be the case. Thirty years later, the current editor of the *Samaj* still sends them a free daily newspaper.

Dignitaries often accept invitations to visit ashrams and inaugurate exhibitions because it attributes good karma to them (explained further in Chapter Three), and they are seen to be of good moral character. Connecting with respected leaders or 'VIPs' is a strategy that enables the Brahma Kumaris to gain credibility, as well as a form of sympathetic social alliance. Now the sisters in Orissa have established good relationships with many dignitaries, and frequently invite them to special events, treating them with great regard and offering them central position on the stage of any celebration or public ritual.

Collective culture

Tribal communities in India live according to heterogeneous traditions and principles. Tribes are distinct in clan organization and territorial exogamy, class and social structure, social segregation, rituals, mythical belief and folk art, music and dance (Bailey 1958; Elwin 1954; Mishra 1995; Padhy 1987; Schnepel 2002). There are more than 60 tribes in Orissa, which vary in their size, degree of acculturation and economic patterns. Languages vary widely and what is sacred to one tribe may be profane to the other. Even so, within the social space of Orissa, identity is collective and tribal, not autonomous and individual. Decisions, behaviours and activities are conducted according to what will maintain the honour and sanctity of the group (Elwin 1954; Padel 1995; Skoda 2004).

I experienced this sense of co-created tribal consciousness during a trip to Baleshwar immediately after the floods of 2008. Sundari (now my research assistant) and I were walking through the flood-affected areas and we stopped to chat with an elderly woman, Vasu, who had lost her home. Afterwards, I offered her some rupees to contribute towards rebuilding her house, hoping that someone would do that for me were the situation reversed. After Vasu fell at my feet weeping, and I eventually turned away embarrassed, Sundari and I walked back to the tiny local centre where we were staying. The next morning Sundari told me that four or five times over the next twelve hours, people had come to the centre asking for money, apparently inspired by the scene they had either witnessed or heard about. "Why didn't you tell me?" I asked, "It's my responsibility. I would have handled it." She looked at me as if I had said something most peculiar. "What do you mean, it's yours? It's our responsibility. We are together only…. You are not different from us. We are…." "But it's *my*…" I began. "But we are…" she replied. She looked at me confused. I looked at her, equally perplexed. Then we both laughed. Nothing else was said, but I understood from then on that I was part of a collective of sisters, and I watched as this collectivity played itself out over the ensuing months. I did not exist as a separate individual but was one part of a cohesive group. I felt I was part of a 'tribe', and a 'clan' (for more about objectivity, subjectivity and community read Buber 1970; Olaveson 2001). This collective consciousness is not unique to Orissa and is reflected in the lives of all BKs who must "uphold the honour of the 'old man's beard'," as one of the senior brothers Jagdish used to say, and to maintain the honour of the clan through adherence to spiritual disciplines and proper behaviour.

Orissa has approximately 130 BK centres and 1500 BKs, many of who live in small villages. There are seven centres in the capital city Bhubaneshwar on the coast, and five in Cuttack, which was the capital until 1947 and is slightly inland. Brahma Kumaris in Orissa



Figure 15. Cyclone and flood affected areas of Orissa where I collected data

I was based at the main centre in Cuttack called Sukh Shānti Bhawan, which is nestled between seven main Hindu temples: Lakshmi and Narayan, *Shiva*, Radhe Krishna, Rama, Jagannath, Hanuman and Jhanjiri Mangla (see Figure 16 page 75). I hear that a Ganesh temple has recently opened for business.

Ethnography

Ethnography uses multiple methods to explore and write about the lived reality of a culture. The unit of analysis being researched has by convention been small, and the method of research invariably deep. The purpose of ethnography is to look at a unit of analysis or a phenomenon from multiple angles, using multiple methods and thinking in multiple ways, inviting complexity and dismissing forms of reductionism. I utilized methods that were broad and open-ended, and allowed participants to guide proceedings as much as possible. The data were gathered through participant observation. Participants' responses during interviews directed subsequent data collection.



Figure 16. A local woman performing morning devotion at Jhanjiri Mangla temple

Coming from a clinical science background my greatest trepidation when I began my journey as a student of anthropology was how to write. Ethnography, I was told, included the 'thick description' of my participants, their world, the context that holds their world, my world, the world my participants and I make together, and me. It took me time to understand the value of bringing in descriptive complexity as a method of adding rigour to a study (Marcus 1998). As I began to cautiously write ethnography, I started to recognize and utilize its value as a form of analysis. Metaphor, analogy, opinion, perspective, and position, became like individual beads that, when viewed separately, caused me to doubt them as they seemed to have no meaning or place on their own. Then I began seeing the research question like a sewing needle, and ethnographic writing like the thread that pulls the beads of different methods, experiences and data together, creating a necklace of a kind that could be worn and appreciated, according to the fashion, design, and build of the wearer. This is the magic of ethnography for me. It is not information. It is an ornament that shows off the most intricate display of human existence. It is a picture that the reader

can step into. Writing ethnography became one of the most important abilities I learned as an anthropologist, and imperative in my capacity to build theory. So, in each data chapter I create an ethnographic context that the data sits within.

Reflexivity

I include reflexivity as a method (Freshwater and Rolfe 2001), rather than just part of the research process, because of its constant presence in the field as something that needed to be reckoned with. The degree to which I was part of the research community meant that consecutive scholarly analysis was not straightforward. Reflexivity offered an important analytical stance on which I was able to draw regularly in the field, defined by Finlay (Finlay 2002:532) as "thoughtful conscious self-awareness." Reflexivity is one of the richest and most contested topics in qualitative research, sitting somewhere between standing on the edge of cliffs and navel-gazing (Finlay 2002), before one even broaches the task of analysis. Reflexivity has developed as a critical component of social research, since Hegel (Hegel 1977) determined that being equipped with reason and rational thought was enough to begin theorizing about human conditions. He then refocused the inquirers' attention onto lived experience through his development of phenomenology, as the precursor to reflexive thinking in social research.

My perception as a researcher was one of "wholesale reflexivity" (Giddens 1992:39), where each component in the inquiry process reflects upon the self and the other in an exchange of unremitting calibration. I experienced this constantly mutating positioning, as I reflected on the way in which my presence altered participants heterogeneously created space, which in turn altered how I interacted in their space, again altering the 'field' we were co-creating.

Participant observation

The terms 'emic' and 'etic' come from linguistic anthropology and in social science, there is general disciplinary concurrence about their meaning. Emic constructs are accounts, analyzes, descriptions, and concepts that are meaningful to the people being studied. It is the perspective from the inner world of the people and phenomena being researched. Etic constructs are accounts, analyzes, descriptions, and concepts that are considered meaningful and important from a scientific viewpoint, developed separate to the field of study. It is the understanding derived from a perspective that is clearly external to the world of the participants. The method of participant (emic) observation (etic) brings these two constructs together.

Participant observation was a strange experience, because I often felt like the one being observed. I participated in the slippery task (Davies 1999) of watching myself observing others watching me, while we participated in each other's day-to-day lives (Davies et al. 2004), and performed mundane tasks. Long periods of time watching, participating and noticing patterns of behaviour within the community, helped me to generate an understanding of the ways in which BKs self-organize within their community, and how I slotted into and moderated the self-determining forms of social organization. I attended important events, places, and festivals in each field location, and noted what was important and meaningful to BKs during these times. I used these observations as a way to authenticate and strengthen the data I was gathering in the interviews, as well as building up an additional body of data.

Consent

When it came to the field and individual consent of participants, there was caution mostly from New York. One BK did not want to share certain experiences for fear of retribution by those in senior organizational positions, another was suspicious about disclosing any personal information other than her name, and one sister who had a position of authority

did not see the importance of signing a consent form and, while promising to do so repeatedly, ultimately did not. In Orissa the substantial majority required the help of the research assistant to complete the form, even though it was written in their native language of Oriya. It would sometimes take 15 minutes and substantial discussion between the participant and the assistant to answer what I perceived as simple questions (see Appendix 4 on page 351). I suggest that sometimes there is a gap between the research demands of Western institutions and ethics committees for specificity, and the sometimes vague and inexplicit roles and activities of the participants, resulting in a dissonance of communication and understanding.

Case studies

Cases are broad research situations that provide a good context for working through some of the research themes. I conducted two case studies. They were both in Orissa and neither had been planned. The first was a type of spirit possession, and was unique and revelatory (Bryman 2004:51) as spirit possession is not an every day occurrence for BKs. In fact, BKs are discouraged from even discussing it for fear of inadvertently inviting such phenomenona. Therefore this case gave me an opportunity to investigate the way in which BK spirituality is used when distressing and unique situations, that are not an every day occurrence, call for immediate spiritual intervention. I was ethically conflicted regarding informed consent and digital recording over these two days, so I played it safe and, recorded nothing. Instead I wrote furiously, documenting every detail in my notebook and in my mind. This case forms the basis of Chapter Six.

The second case is one that I conducted at the end of my fieldwork, and is the life story of a senior sister in Orissa. During almost eight hours of interviews, her narratives saliently reflected and affirmed many of the themes that arose during the research. She spoke of the ways in which she managed the tensions between familial roles and spiritual independence, and internal struggles and external disciplines she worked with in order to

protect and maintain her ideal of purity. The experiences from her life made important contributions to understanding what it means to live as a custodian of purity. Although I was unable to include her life story as part of this thesis, the case was significant in helping to solidify the themes and generate the theory resulting from this study.

Discourse analysis

Although the founder of the Brahma Kumaris originally spoke the *murli*s in the 1960s, because of their importance in BKs' lives, *murlis* continue to be read and re-read as core spiritual texts. The senior teachers read them aloud to the student body in a formal class setting and daily *murli* attendance is a central discipline for BKs. I listened to the teachings daily and watched the way in which BKs would draw meaning from what they had heard, 'churn' (think deeply) from time to time, and inculcate the ideas in various ways through the day. Data collection never ceases: As I was writing this, a class from Dadi Gulzar sent by email (Gulzar 2009) states:

> Nowadays *Maya* (illusion) will come in various forms to test you. That is why if you keep your mind engaged in churning and doing service through the mind whenever it is free, then Maya will not get a chance to come. Every day after *amrit vela* (early morning meditation at 4am), fix a timetable for your mind.

Because *murlis* contain the rudiments of BK philosophy and form the foundation of BKs spiritual endeavour through the day, I have considered them as constituting primary ethnographic material in this study. I use the texts at times to elucidate participants' responses, and as a form of data triangulation.

In-depth interviews

A number of my methodological experiences were different from what I had planned, with many of my early ideas seeming naive. In both field sites, interviews were conducted at BK centres, which are comfortable and familiar meeting place for most BKs.

A list of interview themes (see Appendix 4 page 351) was used to guide my questioning; however, I rarely consulted it during the course of interviews. In the field the interview themes seemed contrived and unnatural, so I tended to let participants direct the course of our interactions. I began each interview by inviting the participant: "Please tell me about the day of the disaster from when you woke up, in as much detail as you can remember." As she or he was speaking, I took notes of recurring themes or areas that required further clarification, or that dealt directly with the research question, 'How does the spiritual philosophy and praxis shape BKs experience of disaster?' All interviews were recorded with a digital audio recorder, with the participants' consent. After the participants had told me their stories, I would ask further questions in order to clarify or understand something in further depth. However, all follow-up questions were inspired by participants' initial responses. I did not introduce new or unrelated themes (Brekhus, Galliher, and Gubrium 2005; Charmaz 2004).

I had anticipated that participants would have rich details about their meditation and spiritual experiences. This was often not the case, particularly in Orissa. And so at times I had to build a picture from the more commonplace aspects of their stories and lives. For many in Orissa, me asking them to share details about their spiritual experiences was confusing. Despite their length of time practicing BK meditation (see below), they were often unsure how to respond. Most replied with 'I felt very happy', 'I felt no sorrow' or 'it was very good', even when asked to elaborate. Nevertheless, my aim was firm; I was to be lead completely by participants' stories, responses and lives.

Table 4. Indicating gender, physical and spiritual ages (in years) of all research participants

Gender		*Physical Age at interview*	*Total*	*Spiritual Age (years as BK) at interview*	*Total*
Female	37	10-19 years	1	1-9 years	22
Male	45	20-29 years	8	10-19 years	39
		30-39 years	16	20-29 years	8
		40-49 years	20	30-39 years	3
		50-59 years	24	40-49 years	2
		60-69 years	11	50-59 years	2
		70-79 years	0	60-69 years	
		80-89 years	1	70-79 years	1
		90-99 years	1		

I had intended to be in India for three months or so before conducting any interviews. However, sisters with whom I lived were enthusiastic, and I was whisked away to the first research location in Jagatsinghpur district, after being in Orissa for only three weeks. I was introduced to a brother who had been designated, unbeknownst to me, as 'interview coordinator'. As we approached the centre, I saw a line of interviewees dressed in their best *lunghis*, *dhotis* and *kurtas* (forms of traditional male dress). I wondered where all the sisters were. With a female assistant by my side, I interviewed the brothers. The interview coordinator brother had not purposely recruited only men, however because of the BK gender divide he had unthinkingly approached brothers and not sisters. I requested sisters to be included. The next day the line was of women dressed in their best *saris*. All participants fit the criteria for inclusion, so I allowed myself to be led by what was happening as I curiously observed the formality that had found its way into the interview process.

The formality with my interviews in Orissa came in part – I believe – from my exotic and authoritative stance as a 'senior foreign BK,' as a 'researcher' and 'on a scholarship from the Australian Government', despite the methods I took to reduce this distance. Any small gifts or acts of friendliness appeared to heighten my merit further and, at times, created a greater power differential. Interviews were therefore relatively staid, although informative. In New York I gave each participant a transcript of their interview to ensure it properly reflected their ideas. No changes were made. In Orissa, no-one wished to receive the transcript and they found the idea strange. I transcribed all interviews in full and coded the data with NVivo 8.0.

Discussion groups

I had intended to conduct two focus group discussions: one with BKs who work at the UN (UNBKs), and another with senior Disaster Managers of Orissa. My aim was to determine best practices around the spiritual and social requirements of local populations and to gather information about how the Brahma Kumaris, as a faith-based NGO, may be positioned as part of the local disaster response process.

The focus group in New York involved all UNBKs, with the Regional Coordinator (RC) of the Brahma Kumaris for the Americas and the Caribbean and longest standing UNBK attending later. This was intentional as, given the hierarchical nature of BK management, the RC's participation may have overshadowed the other participants as they looked to her for 'answers.' The focus group lasted for over two hours, with the subsequent participation of the RC extending this to almost 3 hours. The discussion was tape-recorded and transcribed in full. Copies were then sent to all participants inviting comment and changes to anything that did not properly reflect their perspective and ideas. No changes were made.

The focus group in NY was straightforward, although in retrospect I could have chosen a better location and made it slightly more conversational. I chose the centre location based on convenience to the most senior sister. However, all participants agreed afterwards that one of the other NY centres had a warmer atmosphere and we could have enjoyed *chai* (spiced Indian tea) and a more extended casual discussion. In any case, it was successful, which I determined by the way in which the UNBKs engaged with each other and the topic, along with my lack of input. The voices of UNBKs were broadly indicative of other BKs I spoke with during my field-work, which made an important contribution to the overall theoretical development of this thesis.

The number of UNBKs was small (n=6), so I used line-by-line coding to generate initial themes. Themes were categorized hierarchically into tree nodes. Concepts gathered were data driven, and have helped to generate early themes on the way in which the organization is perceived by members, what the *Yagya* is, and the way in which BKs act to protect the *Yagya* (Chapter Nine) as they manage the tension of living in the world as part of a global spiritual community, and as dedicated spiritual practitioners.

I intended to conduct a focus group discussion with senior managers of different organizations in Orissa. However, I clearly saw that a successful focus group discussion there would be impossible. When I first arrived in Cuttack I met individually with four Indian men who had some social or political position that involved disaster preparedness or relief. As a precursor to the possible focus group, I met them each on separate occasions. During our meetings, two of them offered to help me write my PhD, another one waved his forefinger at me repeatedly during our first meeting, changing hands from time to time, explaining why I was the foreign enemy and the reason for India's downfall. The final gentleman wrote me two love poems requesting that I publish a book of his poetry in Australia upon my return. On the few occasions that we saw each other, he would often lean his forehead against mine and smile broadly.

On one occasion, I did have a group discussion but it was too unstructured to be regarded as a focus group discussion. In 2008, Baleshwar district (see map on page 68) was badly affected by floodwaters. Two weeks after the floods, when the roads were open for travel, Sundari and I visited one of the centres and surrounding villages. There was nothing planned except a walk to the flood affected areas and some interviews later in the day, so Sundari had gone to help wash the floor sheets and curtains that had been damaged in the flood. After morning *murli* class, the brothers and sisters began deliberating about the best way to serve those who had lost their homes and family to the flood. "Give them pure food and good wishes" was the general comment. The young sisters and mothers[18] took no time to decide that they would cook and serve pure vegetarian food at the local village. One of the brothers, a medical doctor, arranged to conduct a 'health camp'. This involved setting up a makeshift clinic of a table and chair, medical monitoring equipment and fresh water, and reviewing the health status of each person in the village. The young sisters decided to conduct a 'yoga camp,' where they would teach the villagers how to meditate, and conduct guided meditation commentaries encouraging the villagers to develop a peaceful state of mind. The importance of food and meditation in the lives of BKs and as forms of service were reaffirmed as themes in this study.

Informal conversations occurred spontaneously, and I documented these with memos and follow-up field notes. The majority of these participants did not speak of a particular disaster, however each respondent offered important background and insight to the study: One had been a spiritual practitioner for many years and was the head of an international disaster relief organization, another knew a great deal about rituals that must be performed during an untimely death, another was a taxi driver in New York and spoke about his experience driving around after September 11, although he had not been in New York at the time. Two more were in positions of leadership in government or

[18] Any woman who has given birth is classified as a 'mother' regardless of age.

humanitarian NGOs in Orissa and played key roles in coordinating disaster preparedness and response in their areas.

Recruitment

Recruitment was a multi-faceted activity (see Figure 17 and Figure 18 below), which occurred haphazardly in New York and with remarkable precision in Orissa. I had heard that 'collecting data' could be messy, but I imagined that recruiting would be simple, clean and straightforward. In New York my carefully prepared flyers rapidly found their way to the bottom of a thickening pin-board, and my clear announcements about the research and invitation to be involved went unheeded. I had to approach people individually, who would then refer others. I ultimately employed purposeful, snowball and volunteer sampling methods. I did not conduct follow-up interviews, but found that participants would approach me later informally. Transcribing in New York was uneventful because all interviews were conducted in English, my first language.

In striking contrast to this was Orissa, where I quickly found myself on a bus going to Jagatsinghpur with Sundari who had, with the help of others, arranged absolutely everything for me. Interviews were lined up, consent forms, and explanatory statements (see Appendices) were transcribed into Oriya, and even my food preferences had been passed on to the centres that would be accommodating us. The interviews were distinctively formal in Orissa.

Participants

A total of eighty-one participants, from New York, USA and Orissa, India participated in interviews (67), a focus group (1), case studies (2) and informal discussions (7). There were slightly more male respondents, and most were in their 40s and 50s (see Figure 19 page below).

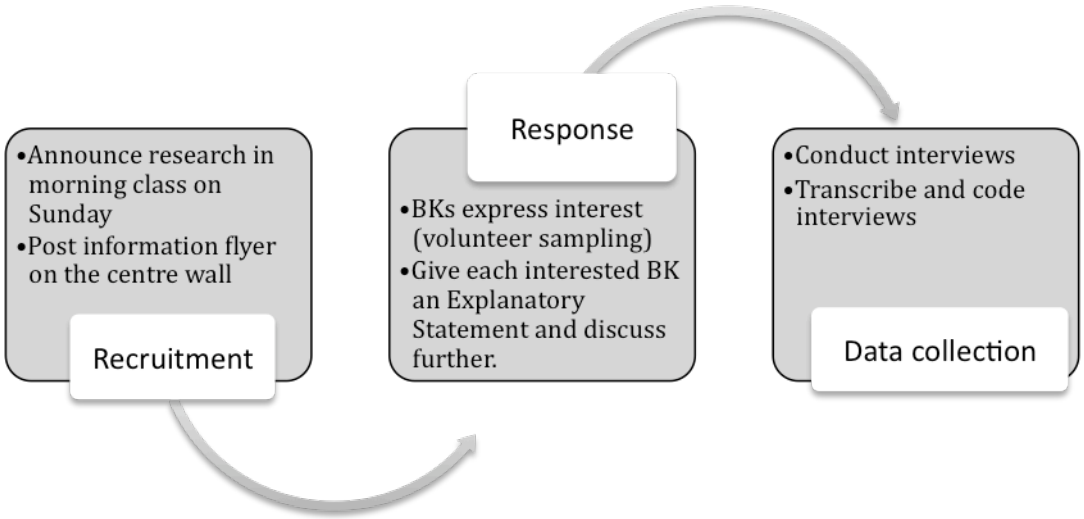


Figure 17. Notional recruitment methods

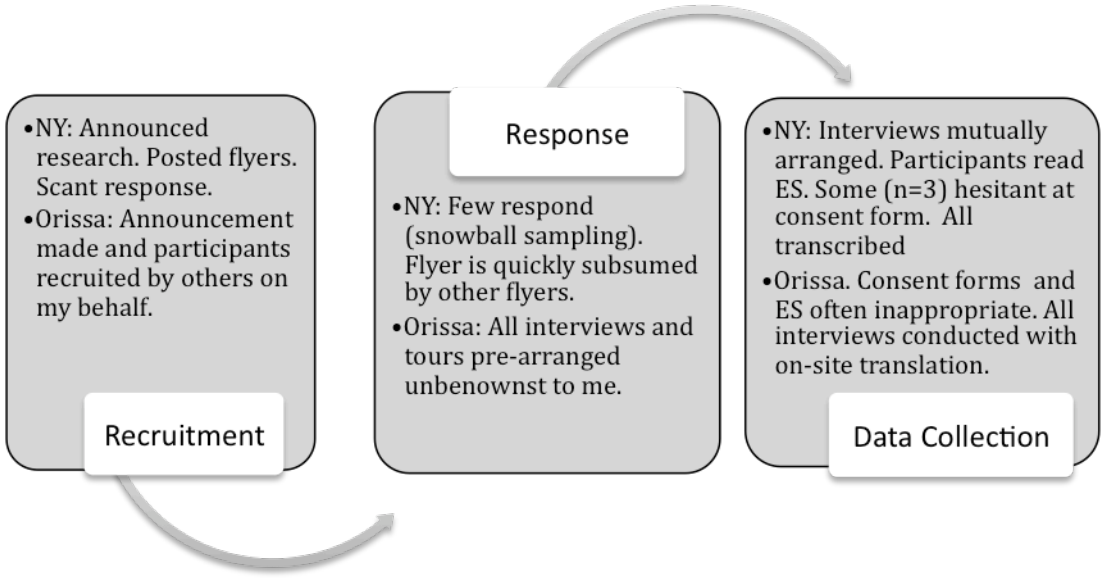


Figure 18. Actual recruitment methods

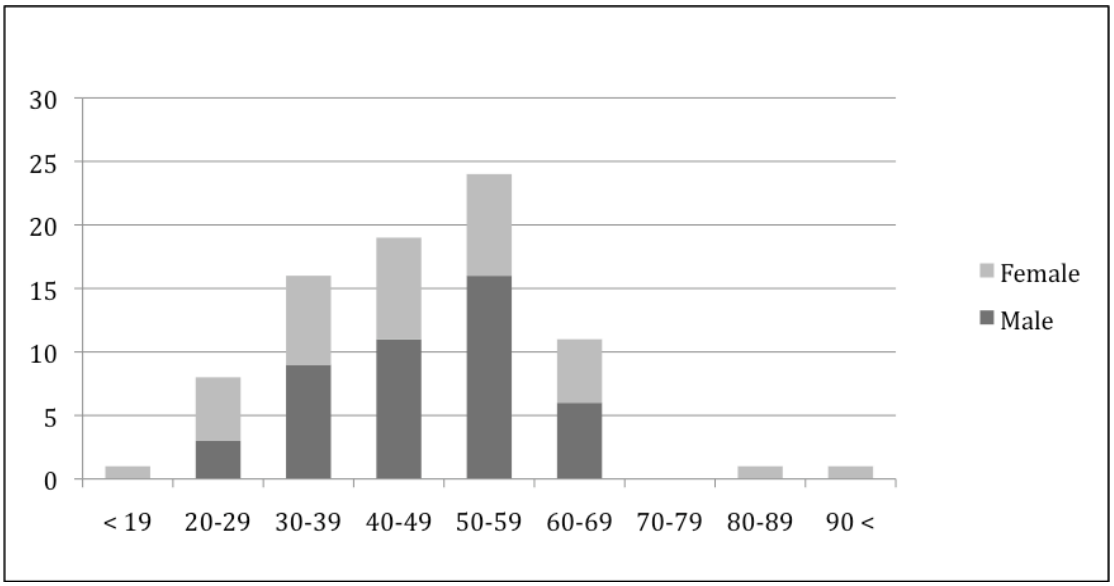


Figure 19. Age range and gender of all research participants

Participants came from a variety of vocational backgrounds (see Figure 20 below), however the majority self-identified as 'dedicated teacher' (primarily from Orissa), 'unassigned', 'business' (New York), and 'agriculture' (Orissa). Some participants identified by the industry that employed them, others by the task that they performed, or the job that they held. I maintain participant definitions in the categories.

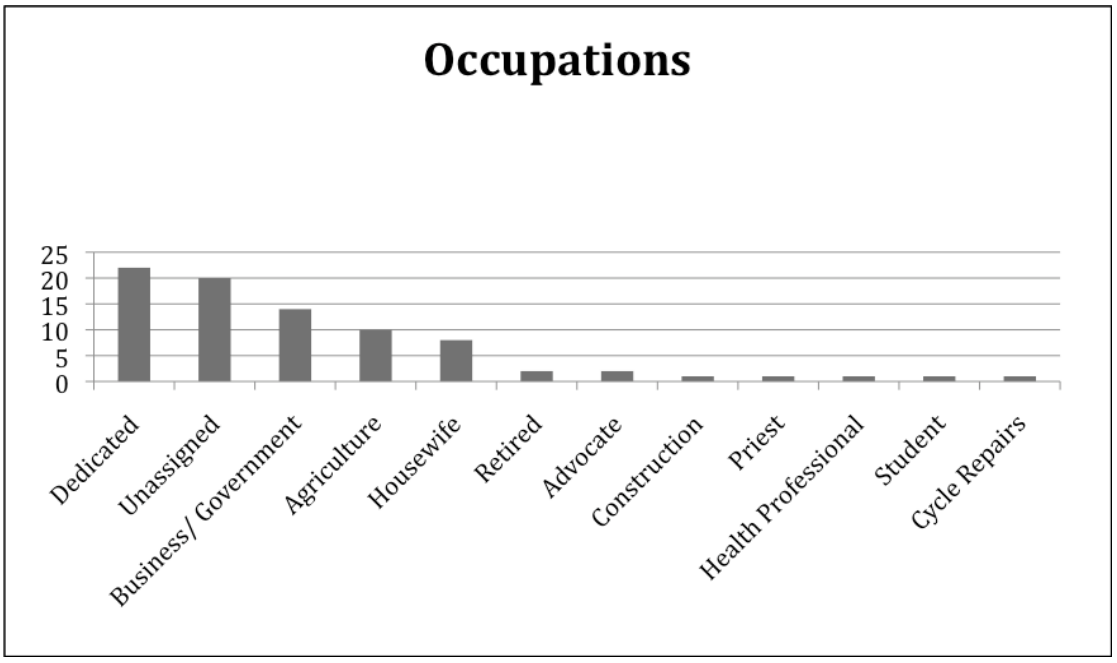


Figure 20. Self-determined occupation of all research participants

Many participants in Orissa did not readily identify a single vocation and so preferred to leave it unassigned.

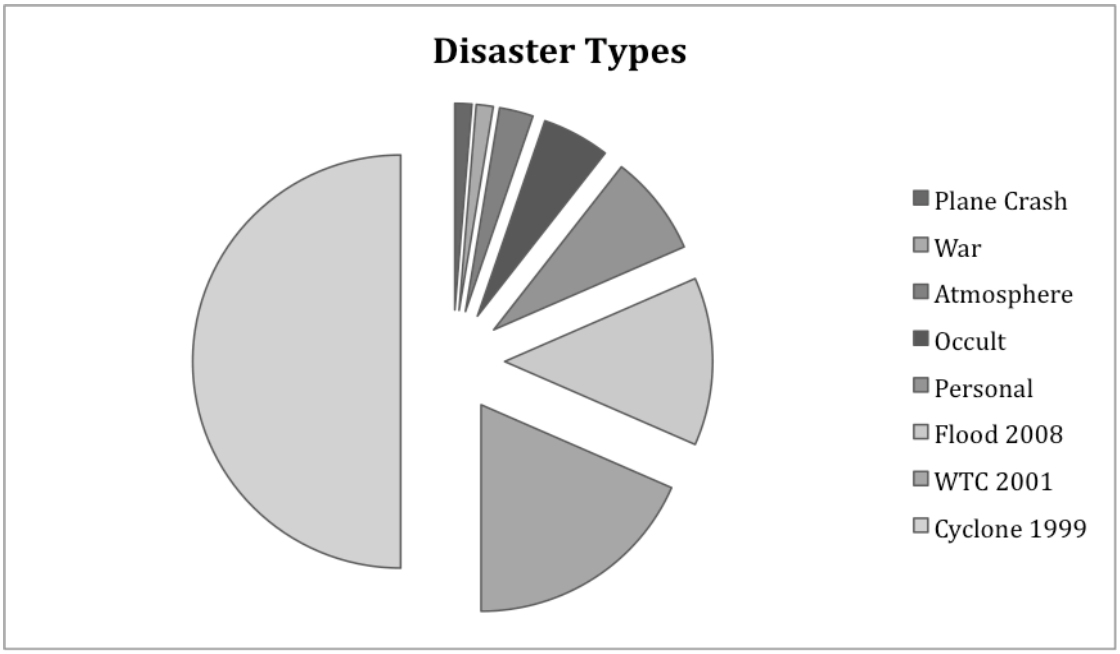


Figure 21. Types of disasters as defined by participants

In relation to types of disasters, although I pursued the two disasters of September 11 in New York and the Super Cyclone in Orissa as areas of focussed inquiry, I also left myself open to speaking with BKs who had other 'disaster' stories to tell. This helped me to determine what BKs consider to be a disaster, and this is now a key finding. Documented below are the types of disasters that BKs reported. Note the incidence of inconspicuous disasters, such as 'occult' and 'atmosphere (Figure 21 page 88).

Data management

Managing my data was challenging as, despite my diligence, my three backup disks all failed at various times in the field. My fieldnotes were systematic in New York, but in Orissa, although they were systematic and regular when I was at the Centre, during tours to remote coastal villages, pens would frequently stop working, power cuts meant I was unable to use the computer, and notebooks were left behind, lost or taken by curious

villagers. At times my fieldnotes offer highly detailed accounts of important events, coloured by my interpretation and inner musings, yet others are incomplete descriptions of community activities where, despite my good intentions to write more later and flesh them out, there were always more data to collect and more notes to write. I rarely revisited the previous days notations, despite a firm resolve to the contrary.

Keeping good records was more difficult on days that are particularly significant for BKs. *Rakshabandhan* (bondage of protection) is one of the most important festival days in India and I was a key part of BK ceremonial rituals from 8am until 10pm. In traditional India, *Rakshabandhan* is a festival where a sister ties a thread on the right wrist of her brother and in return he gives her a gift and promises to protect her. BKs have a unique understanding of the devotional festival. All the BKs in the local area visit the main centre where the senior sister ties a 'rakhi' on them, as a public and private recognition of the pledge of purity to God and the commitment from God to love and protect in return. This tying symbolizes the spiritual contract between the soul and God. The Brahma Kumaris is known through India for their impressive *rakshabandhan* celebrations. After festivities are held at the centre, senior BKs travel through their area tying rakhi on local dignitaries. By the time I returned from our travels through Orissa, and tying rakhi to ministers, politicians, lawyers, dignitaries and actors, I was absolutely exhausted and forced to write my notes the next day in the morning, when I was hot, tired and heavy-headed.

In the field

When I first arrived in Orissa, I visited the Shanta Memorial Rehabilitation Centre (SMRC),[19] in Bhubaneshwar, a forty-minute car drive from where I was living in Cuttack. SMRC is an advocacy and disaster support centre for people with disabilities founded by a

[19] http://www.smrcorissa.org/

humanitarian brother and sister team. Sadly the brother, Ashok Hans, passed away while I was in the field, but his legacy continues through the work of his sister, Asha. Asha was particularly cooperative and provided me with names and numbers of organizations and people who worked in the disaster field. Out of thirty-six contacts, I managed to call twenty-four successfully. Two eventually responded to my multiple requests: the Orissa State Disaster Management Organization and the Indian Red Cross. I was able to meet senior managers of both organization, and they contributed richly to the knowledge base of this study.

Local research assistants

In New York, interviews were linguistically straightforward as no translation was required. However, the primary spoken language in Orissa is Oriya, one that I was unable to receive tuition in before departing for the field. While I may have detected inconsistencies if the interviews had been in Hindi, the majority of the participants spoke comfortably only in Oriya, meaning that I was dependent on the integrity of the translation and the research assistants' understandings of their roles in the interview process.

In Orissa, I had two local trilingual (Oriya/Hindi/English) BK assistants who translated interviews on site (Sundari and Gunjan). They were both unpaid as they felt it was their contribution to 'Baba's service'. My direction to both Sundari and Gunjan was to translate exactly what I said and what the participants said, acting as a go-between. I stated clearly that the intention was to gather the participants' full and complex stories, in as much detail as possible. Apart from some confusing pronoun issues, Sundari did this well, filling me with confidence.

While I thought Gunjan understood this, her work proved more troublesome. I discovered that she had been inappropriately guiding participants' responses, redirecting them if they began to talk about something she did not think was relevant, and encouraging them to

finish their interviews quickly. At one point, I asked if she was enjoying the work and happy to continue. She assured me that she was. However, her demeanor was often one of boredom and impatience, which I believe affected participants' ease and comfort. Many issues come between a researcher and her data. I was feeling uncertain about the precision of Gunjan's translation, so I hired Hessa to re-translate the audio recordings of the interviews. This is when I learned of the inappropriate redirections and interjections of Gunjan, and decided to use this as a personal lesson on care in hiring local assistants. Then I faced a similar dilemma with Hessa as she started putting her interpretation into the transcription, editing and adding things she thought made the story 'better'. I subsequently hired Indulekha and Kinnari, both English teachers at a good local university who then re-translated the original audio file. Each had a masters degree and was contemplating higher study, so I felt assured of accurate translation. They both transcribed moderately well, but delays abounded, supported by numerous stories of birth, deaths, marriages and work-related problems. And so I hired Taahira. A year after I returned from the field, I finally received all transcripts, in various states of completion and of varying quality.

Upon reflection, I surmised that the difficulties I faced with Gunjan were partly dictated by her perceived senior position within the research community. She had been a BK the same length of time as me, but being a BK since her early childhood afforded her the spiritual prestige of being a *kanya kumāri* (virgin). At times BKs did not know how to position me in their social ranking, and I felt this was the case between Gunjan and I. Being a senior virginal BK perhaps accorded her the right to tell the participants what to say and what not to say without being accountable to me. In India, someone outside of the caste system (discussed in Chapter Three) is termed *candala*, meaning 'fierce'. The original reference is thought to refer to members of aboriginal tribes who had a frightening appearance (Rodrigues 2006). Candala also includes out-castes like offspring from illegitimate caste unions, those who are in ritually polluting occupations like toilet cleaners and leather

workers, and foreigners. Upon deliberating about the awkwardness in our relationship, the problem seemed to be a case of social Indian caste laws interfering with my research methods.

Ethics

The Monash University Standing Committee on Ethical Research for Humans (CF07/1339 - 2007/0357) granted ethics approval for this project. Written and verbal permission from the Brahma Kumaris were obtained from the Chief Administrative Head (who is the person ultimately responsible for the organization worldwide) and the Secretary General (who is responsible for all official forms of service and outreach) of the Brahma Kumaris, and the senior sisters who administer New York and Orissa.

Anonymity

How best to deal with issues of anonymity and consent when conducting research in an institutional context is fraught with challenges. How do we represent our communities with providence – in all of their social, cultural and geographical vibrancy – while fulfilling institutional requirements? In this research, ethical and departmental clearance was conditional upon the assurance of anonymity and informed consent for my participants and the community. To abide by the National Statement on Ethical Research Involving Humans (1999) is critical for Australian universities, but was irrelevant for most of my research participants.

Contrary to the intention of ethics committees, to empower and ensure the free choice of research participants, many were uncomfortable at having to read complex documents, such as the Explanatory Statement and Consent Form, rich in academic detail. I was also conflicted, and felt offering them such a document increased the perceived educational gap between me, as a Western institutionally located researcher, and 'them', Indian village participants. Many participants were not formally educated; some had difficulty writing

and needed certain concepts explained to them, and this introduced additional and unnecessary levels of authority, formality and discourses of power (Foucault 1994). Towards the end of data collection I started giving participants the Explanatory Statement as a take-away document. Many of them accepted it awkwardly, most left it behind, and all of them preferred that I explain the research to them verbally.

Some participants in Orissa mentioned that, because they were from small villages, they would have little of value to contribute. I endeavoured to convince them otherwise. After seeing their sense of self fortified by having their stories validated by being recorded, translated and incorporated in a study they felt was significant, it felt unethical to ask them for a false name in the interests of anonymity. Anonymity can imply that there is something shameful about their story that should remain hidden, that is somehow not deserving of public display. While serving the interests of ethics committees and easing the minds of researchers (Grinyer 2002), Western administrative requirements for pseudonyms can work against the interests of participants (Ellis 2007) who may wish to be recognized. Requesting that participants nominate a pseudonym may implicitly suggest that there is something about their story from which they might wish to be distanced. I suggest that informing participants that pseudonyms will be used in place of their names, in a relationship that is already complexly constructed with differing levels of power may make participants feel alienated from their often deeply personal stories (Grinyer 2002), making them feel that they somehow lack importance. Participants described my position as a BK on the basis of our shared community connections, as a positive and useful thing. Being a long-term BK ensured that I would represent them appropriately and not misuse their stories: in this way, being an insider assured accountability.

In New York, issues relating to anonymity required consideration and negotiation with one participant reluctant to sign anything, despite assured anonymity and confidence. Issues of anonymity revealed themselves to be culturally specific. Originally, I was very

concerned to assure participants that their stories would be kept confidential and anonymous. In Orissa, however, many participants would have liked their names to be stated.

Caution and criticisms

My personal training in and experience of ascetic spiritual life, and my first hand witness of much of the history of the organization over nearly twenty-five years, form the background to this research.

In the last ten to twenty years a myriad of anthropologists have dismissed the exotic nature of the Other and returned to the familiarity of home, to conduct their research. In my own department, the majority of students are researching a topic they are personally connected with in some way. A young middle class Australian woman finds out what it means to be a young middle class woman in India. An Indian national returned to India to study the formal and informal systems and structures of care for people with dementia, a topic that has personal meaning for her. Another Indian national returned to India to talk to 'the guys on the street' with whom he grew up – rickshaw pullers of Delhi. A student from Africa returned to her home-town to explore the food crisis that is affecting her people. Another is conducting fieldwork in Australia on the topic of wellbeing, with a subtext around physical weight, one with which she has had a personal battle. It seems that in our discipline the anthropological gaze is shifting progressively inward (to ourselves) and closeward (to those significant to us) rather than attempting to objectify and display the Other in a futile attempt at objective social science research. Our gaze is becoming more fluid. So was my stance in this research.

Still, being part of a spiritual community is somehow perceived as more problematic, inappropriate and tends to be stigmatized (Arweck 2002a; Cowan and Bromley 2008; Dawson 2003b; Lewis 2005). As a long-term BK, I enjoy certain privileges that bring

benefits and limitations to this study. In some people's minds this may mean there is a conflict of interest or that it is an excuse to advertise my spiritual beliefs. Mid-way through my fieldwork I discovered that being an academic and a BK was a reason to be vilified by a disgruntled ex-BK, and this continued over an extended period of more than three months (6 March to 23 June 2008). Academically this was a fascinating dilemma. In Orissa I was grappling with concepts I had always defended such as privacy, autonomy and responsibility, while learning about what it means to be part of a collective. While trying to manage the sometimes heated discomfort I felt while protecting my private spiritual world in a strange, crowded and unfamiliar cultural context, I found it near impossible to return in an unfettered way to defend the autonomous "I" in a faceless argument with an anonymous participant over the impersonal Internet.

The website (Allen 2009) was created, is administered and regularly updated by an ex-BK who I call 'Jim' from Scotland. When this site was established in approximately 2003, it spread through word of mouth and BKs responded to it positively. It was a forum where many BKs felt they could post questions and engage in honest but anonymous dialogue, sharing questions, concerns and experiences. Although the postings became more negative as time passed and the site creator and administrator skewed the site by dominating most discussion threads, I believe it has helped to facilitate the organizational change towards greater transparency and better communication that is now underway.

Jim's early comments on the website in 2008 were in relation to a small independent film I had performed in called 'The Tao of the Traveller' (www.taotraveller.com), but it did not take long before Jim drew my academic life into his postings. Jim took offence at my research, sending lengthy defamatory letters of warning to my supervisors, and to the editor of a journal (to no avail), as well as posting his caustic opinions on the public Internet site. It felt like a collision of worlds as he articulated my unvoiced fears. The errors in Jim's following passages are not mine.

> Her piece co-written with Wendy Smith[20] - another bit of BK "YAH-YAH" ... (Yet Another Hagiography - Yet Another Hallucination). I just wish more folks in the BK world knew what a hagiography was, never mind recognized one when it hit the press… (Tamasin) is someone that has benefited from a privilege experience within the Brahma Kumari system not on the basis of her own innate spirituality ... or adherence to the *Maryādas* (see Appendix 10) but on the basis of her family's money and her father's social status and talents… On the basis of that, her loyalty and judgment are suspect. Anyone with any integrity would not have accepted such privileges… On the level of personal integrity, any academic would have thought long and hard about choosing a topic so they were personally involved with. If nothing else, it is just too easy. (Source: http://www.brahmakumaris.info/forum/viewtopic.php?f=1&t=1466&p=24544&)

Jim believed I was undertaking research in order to advertise my beliefs, and I felt that therefore the preparation I had done, the work of my supervisors, and the energy and experiences of all the participants could be rendered invalid. I was fortunate to have this experience while I was in the field because of the personal support that the field offered. Also, I was able to talk through these difficulties of being participant and observer with my supervisors before I was well into analyzing and writing up the data. The distinct benefit of this antagonism was that it caused me to reflect again on my motivation for undertaking doctoral research and the methods I was employing. Researching one's own community is not easy (Davies 1999; Hayano 1979; White 2001; Reed-Danahay 1997) and the first editor and greatest critic is usually the researcher. There are two ways that caution particularly manifests. There is a risk of the researcher imbuing the research data with her ideas and not recognizing it or stating it. The other caution is the risk that unconsidered self-editing may reduce clear and detailed ethnographic writing because of an underlying and feared risk of exposure. I experienced both from time to time. Thankfully I had exemplary academic guidance and a wonderfully supportive student body with whom I remained connected electronically from Orissa. However whatever support one may have, when the researcher is in the field she is, in a most implicit way, alone. The experience

[20] (Ramsay and Smith 2008)

with Jim caused an abrupt and unexpected tension between emic and etic perspectives that I was not quite prepared for.

While I was clear and confident with my methods, the postings from Jim kept pulling me into having to engage etically with someone philosophically distant from me, while I simultaneously wanted to be drawn more into the emic world of my Orissa experience to gather good 'thick' data. Before I concluded that the interaction with this person, who I did not know personally, was futile, I was compelled to look at my world, uncomfortably and etically, seeing it as a distanced outsider would see it. Engaging with Jim pushed me to become more flexible in my ability to articulate and unpack my personal stance in this study, and forced me to adapt even when I was not choosing to. It also affirmed my earlier resolve to relinquish control in the field and to let the participants direct the research and for the analysis to also be driven by the data. I would follow, not lead, this research. I would maintain the footings and let the participants build the edifice of their story around me. This was the emic/etic balance I would maintain. This would be a collective story, not one of which I was author. My job was to watch and write, as the data came alive in analysis.

Upon reflecting on all of the above, I have determined that my positionality, subjectivity, and access to other members and to their ideas need not compromise the data, but may serve to deepen them (Arweck 2002b). The analyses of the data confirmed by supervisors have been used to guard against any unintentional skewing of data in each data chapter.

As over time I became less remarkable in my community and more confident as a scholar, the 'me' nobody knows was inside and continued to watch the ebb and flow of happenings in the field. BK philosophy refers to this stage at *saksha drishta* (the detached seer): watching everything, participating in the game of life, but maintaining the perspective of a witness and not being overtly affected by anything.

Data analysis

Grounded Theory starts from the premise of not knowing, and researching in order to discover, rather than analyzing pre-considered ideas. I used this inductive approach in my ethnography, and originally Grounded Theory was the heart of my research design. I often returned to the overarching questions of Grounded Theory; "What is going on?" and "What is the main problem of the participants and how are they trying to solve it?" Grounded Theory was worthwhile, as it protected me from generating theory too early, and gave me permission to 'sit with the data' for an extended length of time. However, I was unable to de-contextualize the data to bring it back to a more scientific paradigm of generalizing concepts, that would explain participants' actions regardless of time and place, as explained in formal Grounded Theory (Glaser 2007).

Therefore I used Grounded Theory as an approach rather than a form of analysis. Grounded Theory allowed inductive inquiry but also called for a deductive approach in the coding. Ethnography gave me the flexibility to be inductive and for my form of analysis to be dictated by the participants. The particularity of my research question about the way in which spirituality may alter the lived experience of disaster is one which – I believe – required the data to be kept with the location and geography in which it was discovered, and not extracted from it, in any way. The participants, locations and questions meant that I would not be building on previous research in this area, but would be looking to discover new understanding from the lives and experiences of the participants. Ethnography seemed the most appropriate choice, supported by some of the principles developed through Grounded Theory.

Coding and analysis

Approaching the task of analysis was daunting; I was reluctant to make up my mind about anything too quickly. I was, frankly, scared of the process of analysis, and chose to spend time printing and reading transcripts to re-familarise myself with participants' stories.

This was helpful in transitioning back from the field. It took me more than three months after I returned to feel that I could approach my study from some kind of academic perspective.

I was reluctant to view my participants' stories and fieldnotes with a critical eye when I first returned, so I would read them as if they were stories, often before I went to bed at night, normally the time I would treat myself to fiction. This way I found I would muse about their experiences and my field notations during the day. They would percolate while I was going about the somewhat menial but necessary task of organizing my data and planning my thesis outline. Often, sometimes after reading some broad theory of philosophy, and when I least expected it, I would experience inner waves of elation as ideas began to come together in my mind. This is when I first looked at the interviews and my field notes with an analytical and external eye. I had to wait until this wave of enthusiasm came before I could open NVivo. The wave literally dictated my work routine for several months. I would then look across interviews, noting similarities, and code them accordingly. I would then often leave coding for long periods, as I found it cumbersome. When the wave resurged, I would look at the data again and watch as new connections began to form.

Despite my initial aim of adhering to Charmaz's line-by-line coding, the data were not 'speaking' to me in that way, and I felt to adhere to my original plan would be working against the data. This was the start of discovering that, while it is important to have an initial structure before one enters the field, the form of analysis also needs to be directed by the data and not solely by the scholar. In response to reading and re-reading interviews, ideas would come to me in the form of chunks of text, so I began looking for codes across interviews in chunk form and coding them accordingly.

Midway through coding, I crosschecked my coding with both supervisors before I continued. Then, when I had more than 240 codes, I started building a hierarchy and

noting broad thematic connections within the data that culminated in overarching themes. I did not abide by the complete disciplined coding methods suggested by Grounded Theory. I stopped at extracting the data from its context and purposely kept the data slightly messy, so I could compare different forms of data (theology, participant observation, case studies, interviews, fieldnotes) and compare one form of contextual mess with another (Law 2004).

Limitations

My aim was not for statistical significance but, rather, to develop a new understanding of the lives of members of the BK spiritual community both in New York and Orissa, and to document and analyze the effect of their practice in times of disaster. Themes generated from this study may open the way for a larger statistically significant quantitative study among all BKs, or a comparative study with members of other spiritual communities, but this is not the intention.

This project cannot account for all BKs' experience of and response to intentional and environmental disaster. Its purpose is to provide an in-depth account of the experiences and understandings that surround how a select portion of BKs make sense of and deal with disaster. Despite this limitation, scholars in the fields of anthropology and psychology maintain that people of different cultures respond similarly in the wake of disaster (Burke 2005; Hoffman 1999; Oliver-Smith 1999b)

During my period of collecting data, the regular rhythm of order and disorder (read Varma 2005) that is my experience of India was reflected in my methods. I have always thought of India as the land of ordered chaos, and I suspect this will now be my description of anthropological research. I decided early on to be guided by this rhythm. I continued to be guided by it, documenting it as much as possible, not overtly trying to gain control. After

the fact, I can clearly state that the field, the data and the analysis were guiding me, and not I them.

Chapter 3

Understanding Soul, God and Time

The wind of knowing
Lights the quiet mountain fire
It will set me free

Philosophy

As briefly mentioned in Chapter One, BK philosophy comprises understandings of the soul, God, time and the world. It also includes more detailed understanding of rebirth, *karma* (the law of cause and effect), the relationship between the physical and spiritual worlds, and social behaviour. Here, I detail these tenets of Brahma Kumaris philosophy in ways that are relevant to the development of the thesis, and include the disciplines to which BKs adhere, in support of their philosophy.

In the very beginning, *Yagya* knowledge centred on the importance of purity, the imminence of world destruction, the position of Brahma Baba as the divine creator and father, and the community as divine helpers and children. Their understandings drew heavily on Hindu scripture and Vedanta[21] philosophy, contingent upon mantras such as *aum tat sat* (supreme absolute truth or all that is) and *aham brāhm asmi* (I am the ultimate transcendence and the foundation of all truth and reality). The theology was fundamental and unsophisticated, with little theoretical or intellectual elaboration, but interwoven with significant and meaningful mystical experiences.

[21] In the Shrimad Bhagawad Gita (Chapter 17, Text 23) Supreme God is designated as '*Om Tat Sat*'.

The people of the *Yagya*'s first generation endeavour to transmit the feelings of those early days through stories, behaviour and *drishti* (spiritual non-verbal communication through the eyes, discussed later in this chapter), when the emotional and existential ride was magical. In the beginning it was not clear where the knowledge, on which their meditation practice was based, was coming from and why members were having collective visions and trance experiences that continued for days at that time. *Yagya* members simply accepted the experiences without question. When there were experiences of ardent belonging and a profoundly revealed meaning of life, as world transformers and somehow instruments for the divine, why would a small band of youth wish to question anything about the revolution that they were living?

Now more than seventy years later people have begun to ask questions, particularly about the distinction between Shiv Baba (God or the Supreme) and Brahma Baba (the founder, and a human being). This understanding did not exist in the beginning, although it was clarified in Brahma Baba's lifetime. Around the time it became clear, many different sisters were having collective experience of trance[22] where they would see Shiv Baba as a radiant point but not know what it meant. Brahma Baba would ask them to go into trance again, requesting clarification. Shiv Baba ultimately entered the body of at least one sister and, speaking directly through her, clarified the separation and important distinction between Brahma Baba and Himself (Janki 2009).

The knowledge of the soul also changed. Initially those in the *Yagya* knew they were not the body, and believed in 'infinite divine light' (see the bottom of Figure 26 on page 115), but distinct knowledge of the soul did not exist. In the 1950s senior BKs say that they believed the soul was in the shape of a thumb. BKs have gradually come to understand the form of the soul, and also the Supreme Soul is a point of light and that if it were visible to

[22] (read Barrett 2001)

the physical eyes it would appear as a tiny sparkling star. "You souls are neither thumb-shaped nor infinite light. You are stars, just like points. I, the soul, am also a point. However I do not take rebirth. My praise is different." (BapDada 2001e:1)

After this declaration, many of the early recordings and transliterations, that contained incorrect knowledge, were destroyed. Current BK theology from the time before Brahma Baba's death is therefore limited to the years between approximately 1964 and 1969.

The soul

Today, a soul is understood to be an individual, indivisible, eternal and infinitesimal point of conscious light energy. Souls reincarnate and are born into new bodies, but transmigration across species does not take place. A human soul remains a human soul, a canine soul a canine, and so on. The soul resides in the centre of the forehead, behind the pineal gland, it is suggested, and lives life and expresses itself through the costume of the body. It is the soul's essential characteristic to express its qualities through the physical form. When a person dies, the BK understanding is that the soul leaves that body and, entering a womb, adopts a new body. It is thought that the first fetal movement indicates that the soul has entered. The soul is born after 4-5 months in the womb, taking its unique personality and *sanskāras* (impressions) inherited from its previous life or lives into its new life. The soul is then influenced by the environment, language, gender, and culture and parentage of its new birth. Each and every soul is completely unique and indivisible, with intrinsic purity and inherent value that gradually becomes tarnished through taking rebirth, but is restorable. This core understanding was written in a recent BK paper to the UN:

> If we understand human beings to be intrinsically good, naturally loving and peaceful, then we must consider the return to this state of goodness and peace to be not only possible, but also a natural and desirable goal for humanity. This awareness would inform a policy of hope and plans of action to recover this essential state. (We are working) towards the recovery of this human condition. (BKWSU 2007a:2-3)

The soul is pure consciousness and is made up three main facets – the mind, the intellect and the *sanskāras* (see Figure 22 below). Simply understood, thoughts arise in the mind. The judging faculty of the intellect then makes decisions based on these thoughts, and these decisions are then either brought into action or not. Manifesting one's thoughts in physical life creates and recreates the soul's unique personality traits, predispositions, and habits that collectively are known as *sanskāras*. *Sanskāras* form a multi-layered filter through which the soul experiences the world, shaping personality, character, state of mind and action.

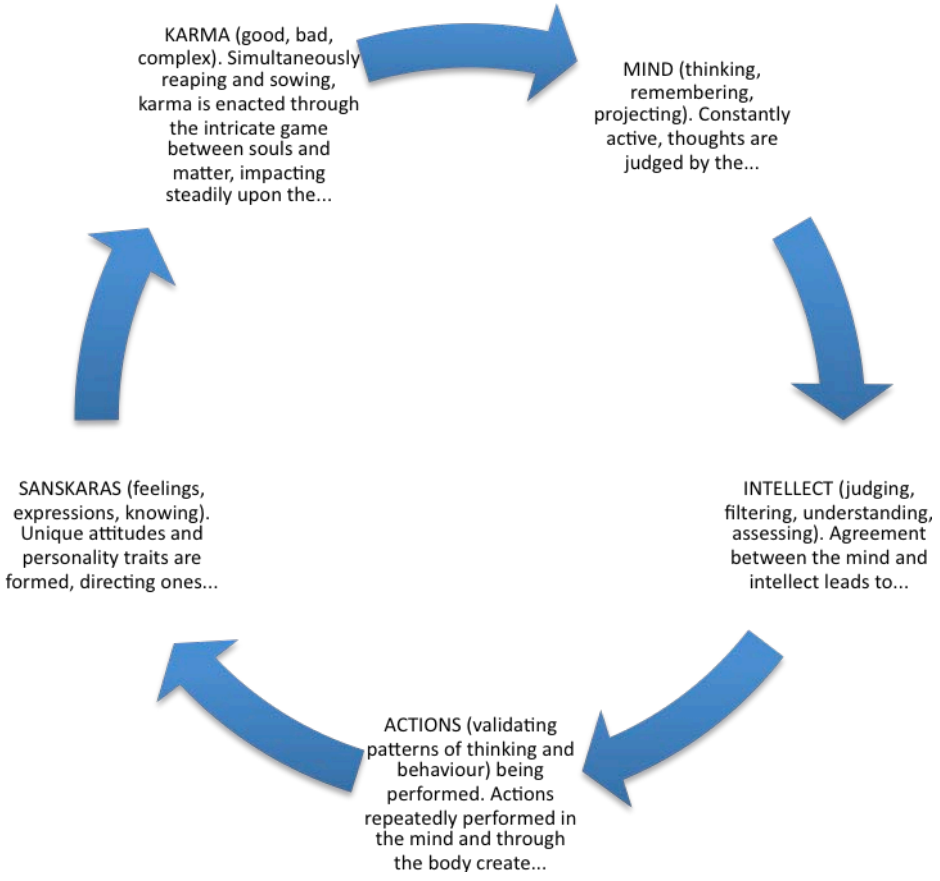


Figure 22. The nature of the soul and its relationship with the external world

The soul perceives and makes decisions based on its *sanskāras*. These tendencies then produce certain attitudes and patterns of thinking that, once again, arise in the mind, and pass through the intellect continually, in large and small ways and on a moment-by-moment basis. *Sanskāras* create the full and complex personality in the same way that

individual frames work together to create the story of a film. The individual frames are not visible, but are the background mechanism of the way in which the story, and in the case of *sanskāras*, the person, is constructed. Actions performed repeatedly, and attitudes held for considerable lengths of time, leave imprints on the soul that arise as substantiation in the mind for future thoughts, decisions and actions.

The Supreme Soul

The Supreme Soul, as the name implies, is God, more commonly known by BKs as Shiv Baba or just 'Baba'. Baba is a common word in Hindi and can mean God, Father, Grandfather or Guru. Although previously mentioned, it is important to reiterate that in BK philosophy there are two Babas. Shiv Baba is the name of God who is the Supreme Soul and not a human being. Brahma Baba is the name given to Dada Lekhraj after starting the BK community and he was unmistakably an embodied soul, a human being. Shiv (benevolent seed) Baba (father) is seen as possessing all the positive attributes of love, peace, bliss, delight, wisdom and power. He[23] is not seen as the Creator of human beings, but rather the Re-Creator, as he restores eternal souls to their original state of purity, completion and perfection. Only He can do this. Brahma Baba cannot, although he was reportedly an exemplar. BKs perceive this relationship between the soul and the Supreme Soul as familiar, frequently referring to themselves as 'children' and God, Shiv Baba or the Supreme Soul as 'mother' and 'father'.

Souls are born into bodies, but the Supreme Soul is beyond birth and death, and so also beyond gender, culture and other embodied states. If a soul were to be physically visible it would appear as a tiny radiant star. God has the same form as all souls: that of a vibrant radiant point of energy. The difference is in God's quality, virtue and power. Because the

[23] Gender is related to the body and BKs understand that God never takes birth as human souls do, and so cannot be identified by gender. However, in Hindi, the language of the founder, the masculine pronoun is used. I also use the masculine pronoun in English.

Supreme Soul never comes into the cycle of being born and reborn, as all other souls do, He is not subject to the same natural laws of entropy and degradation. God is held responsible for a lot of the world's atrocities, but in BK understanding God's responsibility is to love, to teach and to purify - to teach humanity how to put right what has been put wrong. Creations of the physical world, such as law, politics, industry and development, war, hunger, poverty and famine, and all of the associated outcomes, are produced by human volition. BKs from New York who I interviewed explain:

> It is we who have messed up the world, so it is we who must fix it. Many – certainly not just the Brahma Kumaris - are trying to do the fixing, however, it is only God – who is beyond birth and so beyond culture and preference - who can give us the method and the power to do it. (Sun Li)

> The only difference is that we have Baba. It's not that we're right and everyone else is wrong. No, but because we have our meditation, and it's a very pure practice, we get the power to change. That's the only difference. (Maitreyi)

The process by which one can manifest self change is, BKs explain, the practice of establishing, nurturing and sustaining a relationship between the self (soul) and God (Supreme Soul). The understanding and strength gathered from this relationship, that BKs say can be as alive and tangible as any other relationship, is the driving force behind self-transformation and, through this, world transformation:

> Knowledge and (spiritual) power. It's basically those two things. When we apply it that's when we see change. Like we've been saying, "When we change, the world changes." (Galina)

Meditation

BKs form a spiritual community with a lifestyle centred on the practice of Raja Yoga meditation. Raja Yoga means the most exalted or 'kingly' form of yoga. Although yoga is commonly understood to include physical exercises and postures, the word 'yoga' literally means union or to tie closely. BK Raja Yoga (distinct from Pitanjali Raja Yoga) is a spiritual practice of meditation in contrast to physical disciplines such as Hatha Yoga. To be a BK or 'Raja Yogi' is to maintain a state of soul consciousness and to establish and sustain a union

with Shiv Baba. BKs meditate with their eyes open and teach the same practice to others; the aim for both the novice and the master is to be able to create and maintain natural meditative states while being engaged in everyday life:

> I just begin by making my mind quiet. It's not that I finish all my thoughts, but I slow them down, and make them calm and peaceful. Then I can begin to have good, pure and positive thoughts for myself. I start with that. Everything else comes later. (Maitreyi)

The practice of open-eyed Raja Yoga enables positive feelings and good wishes to be exchanged through the practice of *drishti*, a most fundamental form of spiritual *dharnā* (inculcation of divine virtues) and a sacred ritual for BKs. *Drishti* is both a natural spiritual gaze, and the act of exchanging positive energetic vibrations through the eyes. BKs understand that a meditative state of mind creates an atmosphere the vibration of which can be transmitted to one another through the eyes. *Drishti* is considered to be one of the highest forms of expressing spiritual love, power and good feeling between souls. While the eyes are open, attention is focused inward, and so the eyes are passive, used only to transmit vibrations and not to 'see' (Whaling 1995). Often as a salutation BKs will say *om shānti* (I am peace) and exchange *drishti* for a few moments. BKs consider *drishti* to be the highest form of two-way communication between souls, and regard it as a method by which to share the love, purity and power experienced when in a state of soul awareness and connection with God. *Drishti* is considered to contain significant spiritual power or *sakāsh*.

Meditation for BKs is a relationship between the soul and the Supreme Soul. The starting point of meditation is always soul consciousness, and the techniques used by novices are the same as those used by BKs of seventy years in *gyān*. Through the ascetic practices of hypo-arousal techniques (Howell 1997:151) to discipline the mind, BKs first slow their thoughts and maintain mental quietude while concentrating on the self as a soul and remembering the Supreme Soul. The idea is to slow down the mind enough so that thoughts then produce experiences. This practice often produces altered states of

consciousness (Howell 1997). A typical spoken meditation, transcribed from the official website (www.bkwsu.org/meditation), proceeds:

> This instrument of mine, the body is a precious vehicle, a valuable invaluable instrument. But that which is more valuable, and more precious, is the being making this instrument function…. Within this assembly of bones and muscles and amazing organs, is a being of light. In the centre of the forehead is a point of light, that makes my whole world move. I am this being of light. I, the being of light express myself through this body but the body is not I. I am light. I become aware of the power within this point of light. Within I the being of light, is everything that I am, and everything that I have. I am the eternal child of God. And within my own being are my virtues, my powers my talents. In the awareness of who I am, I radiate the light within. And in the awareness of this inner light, I hold my head up high with dignity. *Om shānti* (BKWSU 2009a)

During meditation and in daily life, BKs aim to experience the sustenance and happiness of all relationships, such as those of mother, father, friend, companion, child and guide, with Shiv Baba. BKs say they enjoy a meditative state free of all external supports (including mantras, breathing, positions and chanting), drawing all forms of power and sustenance from Shiv Baba.

The Three Worlds

As well as the mind and character of God, during meditation BKs also commonly focus on the place where the Supreme Soul resides. The 'home' of all souls, including the Supreme Soul, is the Soul World or *Paramdhām*. It is also known as *Nirvāna, Moolvātan,* and *Brahmānd* and refers to the place of essence, meaning and life, beyond that which is inert and beyond the physical world. BKs understand there are three realms, worlds or regions (see Figure 23). Ascending from the grossest to the most refined, they are the Physical World (*Stoolvātan* or the land of inertia), Subtle Regions (*Sookshmavātan* or the land of refined forms of energy, such as thought and vibration) and Soul World (*Moolvātan* or the land of absolute essence).

At the bottom of Figure 23 (below) is the obvious and tangible Physical World made up of matter, the earth and its galaxies. Everything is experienced through the five senses of taste, touch, sound, smell, and sight. In *murlis* it is described as the world of 'talkie'.



Figure 23. The Three Worlds
Source: Art Department, Gyan Sarovar, Mount Abu

The Subtle Regions represented above as a layer of white light, is created and sustained on the basis of pure thought and is the home of visionary experience, trance and creative meditation. BKs who have experienced the Subtle Regions explain that its defining characteristic is a warm, nurturing and gentle white light, with a profound feeling of comfort and belonging. The Subtle Regions is a silent but visual world, where communication is primarily through thought and secondarily through movement. It is the world of 'movie'.

The Soul World is the original home of all souls and the eternal home of the Supreme Soul. It is soundless, beyond thought; it is the land of absolute essence. It is described as a land of warm golden red light. When souls reside in the Soul World, they are in 'seed' form, in a state of deep peace, beyond experience. The most accurate description is that souls are in a dreamless sleep. BKs say the deepest sense of peace is achieved through focusing on the Supreme Soul, in the Soul World. BKs believe the mind can travel through thought. The object of the mind's focus shapes directs the experience of meditation, as does the kind of thought and intent behind the thought.[24] During meditation, BKs practice 'going' to the Soul World and the Subtle Regions as the focus of their attention. BKs think of the Soul World as their metaphysical home.

The Drama

The Drama consists of three inextricably interwoven players: souls, matter and God. The Drama is the physical manifestation of embodied souls playing their part on the world stage through five ages or 'acts,' and is a metaphor of a collective understanding that contains a cohesive logic for BKs (Dawson 2003b). The Drama offers a poetic way in which BKs may describe the gradual change through different epochs of history as souls take rebirth through time. The Drama is the activity of souls and the Cycle is the time the Drama exists within. The Cycle has a relative beginning and end that are linked and related to each other through the Confluence Age, and so BKs see the world in an endless identically repeating cycle of ascent and descent. The Drama and the Cycle (*Kalpa*) were the first clear points of knowledge held by members of the *Yagya* and these remain unchanged. An early illustration of the Cycle is below on page 113.

[24] (for more on the relationship between consciousness and the physical world read Goswami 1993).

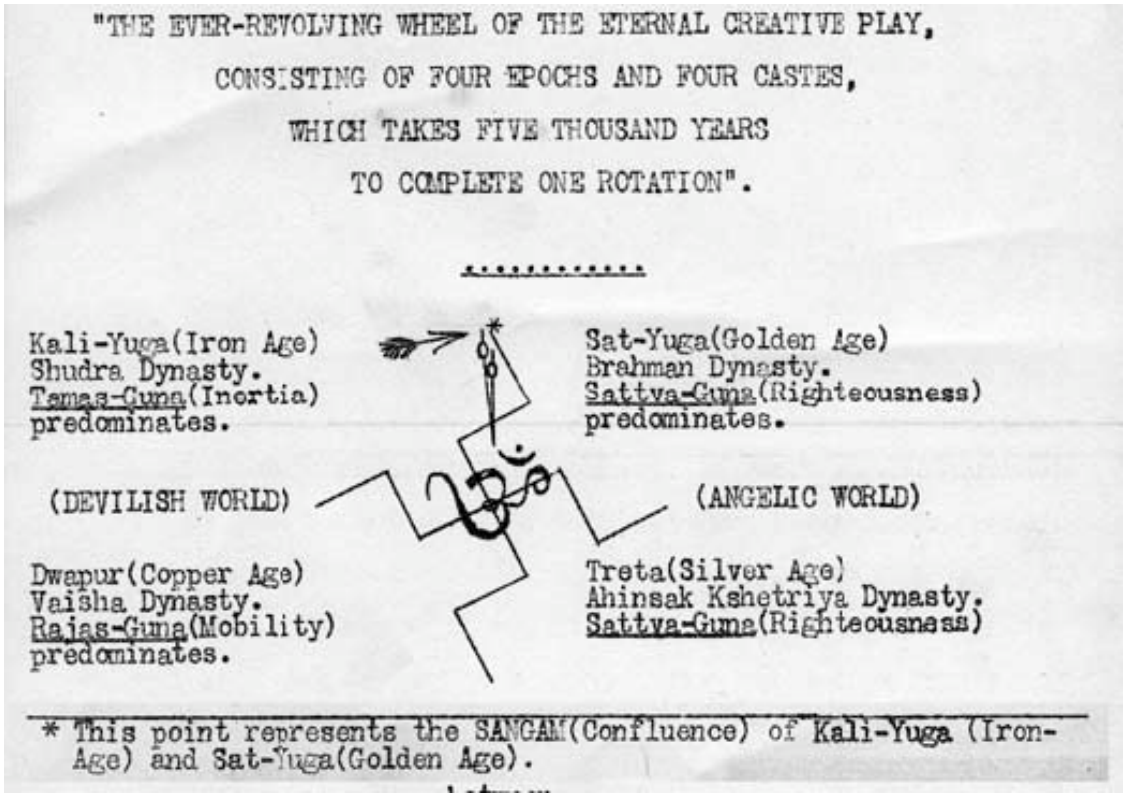


Figure 24. Early illustration (c. 1942) of the Drama Wheel (Radhe 1942: no pages)

The Cycle comprises four ages of around 1250 years each and one small age of approximately 100 years. The entire Drama takes 5,000 years to complete one rotation and souls take a maximum of 84 births. Each epoch moves in a gradual entropic decline of purity and soul consciousness, through the natural passage of time. The descent is from a time of unity, peace and happiness in the Golden and Silver Ages, to one of the duality, suffering and sorrow of the Copper and Iron Ages:

> These five elements pull you down to play your part. You definitely also have to take the support of matter, otherwise this play couldn't continue. This play is of happiness and sorrow… At this time, it is the land of sorrow. (BapDada 2004a:1)

The classic picture of the Drama, still favoured by many BKs, is depicted in Figure 25. It illustrates the first half of the cycle, the descent of each of the founders of the main religions and the time of their entry into and exit from the physical world. It demonstrates clearly the five ages of the cycle, and the point when all souls return to *Nirvana* or Soul World. The blue watermark of the earth shows India as the geographical location where the entire drama is enacted. Included in this picture are written five concepts that are

incompatible with Hindu faith and so reiterated on the classic picture which is displayed at most, if not all, centres in India. The Cycle is sometimes called the Kalpa Tree meaning the tree of time. It displays the knowledge of the cycle, but in more detail and in a different form. Four images of the Tree are below, showing the more intricate patterns of expansion from the Golden Age to the end of the Iron Age. The following pictures also demonstrate the way in which knowledge within the Brahma Kumaris has changed over time.[25]



Figure 25. Classic picture of the Cycle (c. 1965)
Source: Photography Department, Pandav Bhawan, Mount Abu

[25] Many more pictures of the Cycle and the Tree exist, which are interesting in terms of understanding the Brahma Kumaris development of spiritual understanding and social change.

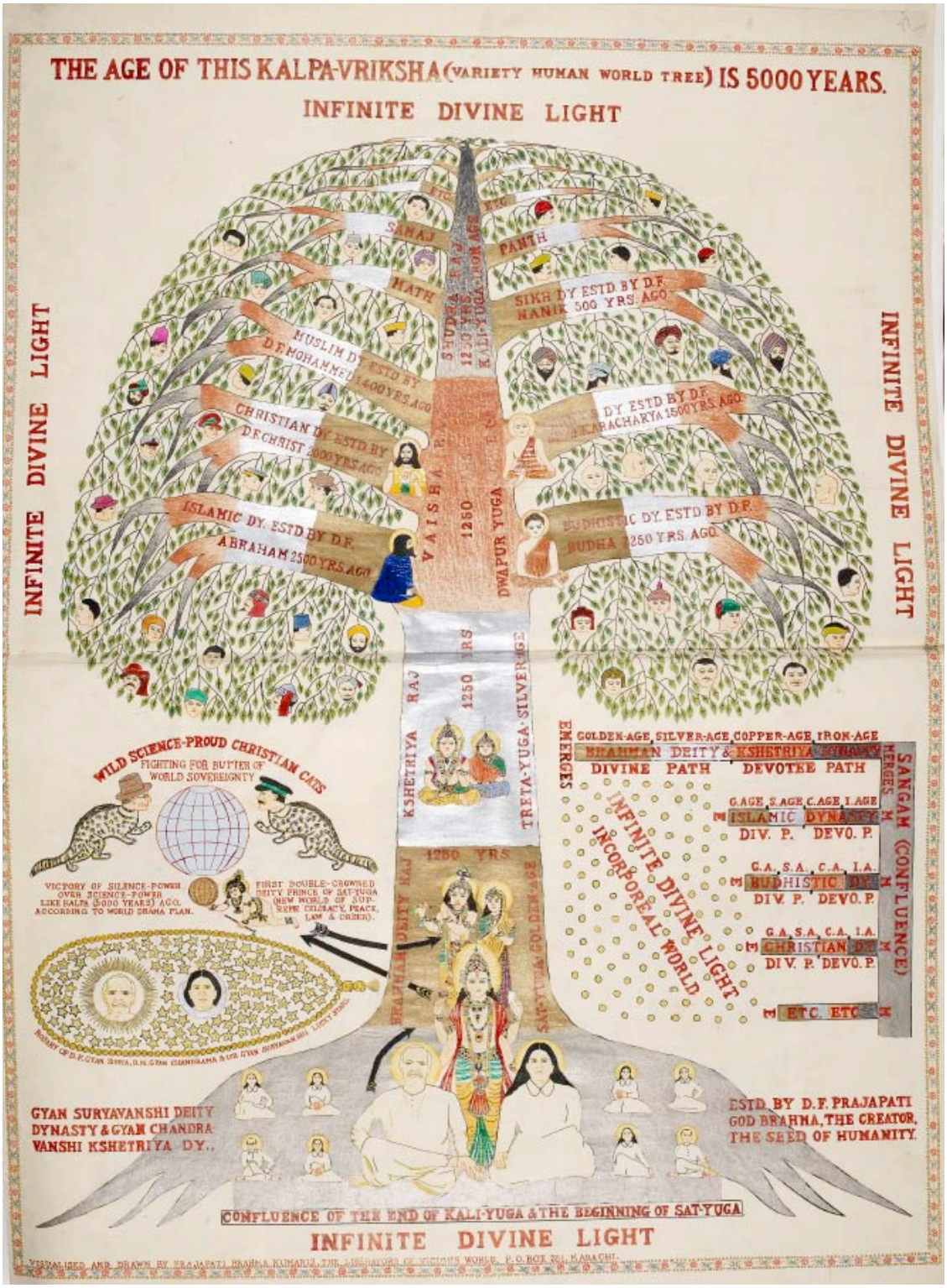


Figure 26. The original illustration of the Tree (Variety Human World Tree 1949)
Source: British Library, London

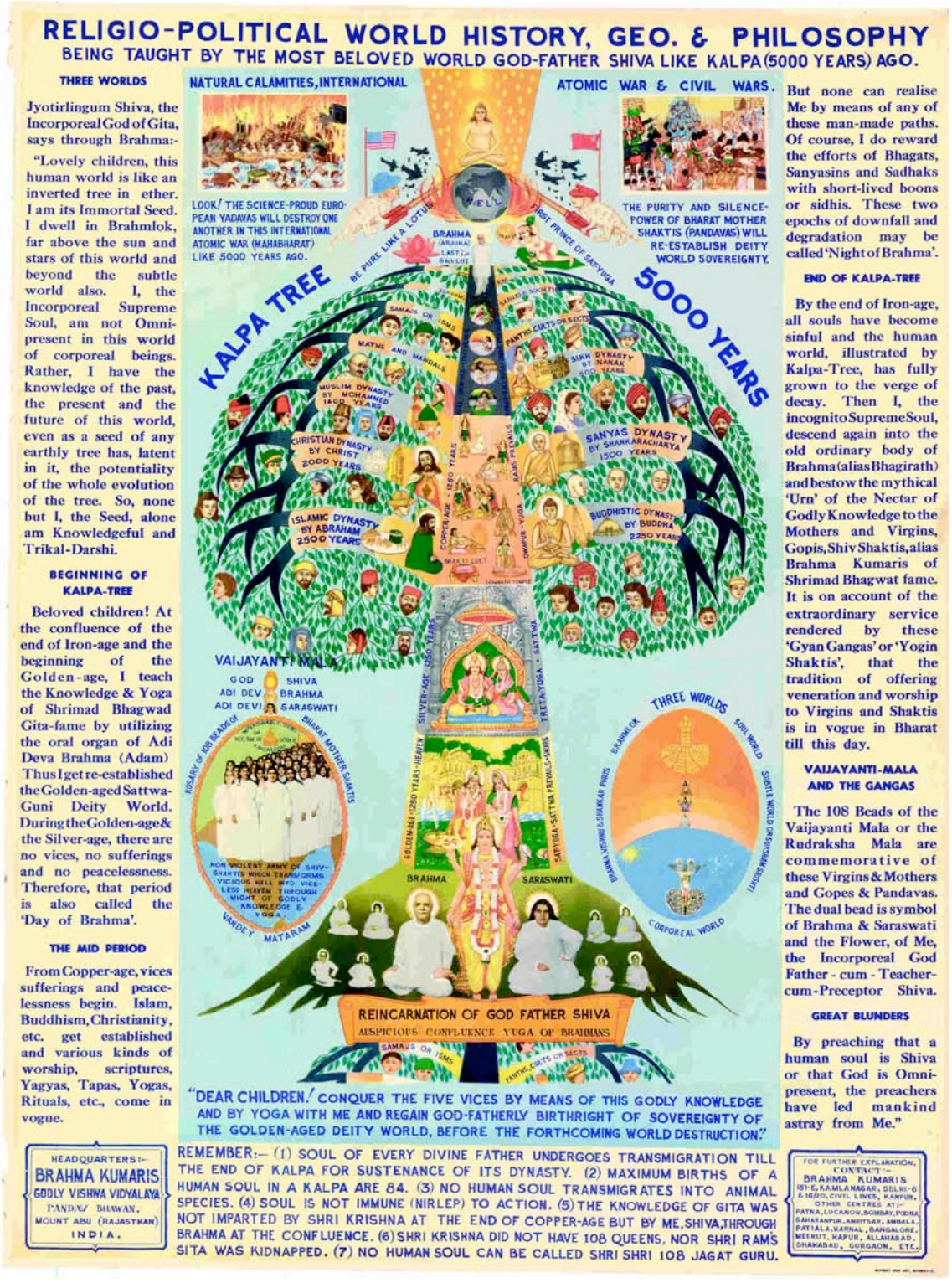


Figure 27. Religio-Political World History, Geography and Philosophy (c. 1965)
Source: Photography Department, Pandav Bhawan, Mount Abu



Figure 28. Tree (Australia c. 2000)
Source: Fitzroy Brahma Kumaris Raja Yoga Centre, Melbourne

The 1949 hand-painted tree identified Brahma as 'God Brahma' (bottom right, page 115), and uses cartoon-like images of Stalin and Roosevelt to indicate the world war. There is no indication of Shiv Baba. Rather, there are markers of 'infinite divine light', as a reminder of the collective visionary experiences early members were having. The 1965 picture (Figure 27 on page 116) distinguishes, but illustrates the Supreme Soul as thumb shaped. The

2000 picture (Figure 28 on page 117) clearly shows Shiv Baba as the seed of the tree, appearing as a point in an orb of light radiating between Baba and Mama at the roots of the tree. Above them are human symbols of the Golden Age and the Silver Age. There is then a copper coloured path, indicating humanity's journey into the different religions, depicted as branches, each beginning at a time of relative gold and progressing to iron. At the top of the tree through the darkness, is the orb of light again and a sprinkling of souls. All souls will return to the Soul World before the tree begins anew. Note, however the contrast between the army of sisters clad in white saris on the left of Figure 27, and people dressed in white and coloured clothes sitting independently throughout the roots of the tree.

The concepts of cyclic time, and a tree that contains all religions, all paths and all people, is an understanding held by other civilizations and traditions (Heinberg 1985). The knowledge of the Cycle and the Tree uniquely shape BKs' perspective of the world, climate change and associated disasters (Babb 1982).

The Play

The Brahma Kumaris employ the analogy of a play to chronicle their origin myth. Within the first decade of their existence, Om Radhe, later known as Mama, writes (Radhe 1942: no pages):

> Now listen. Let us take up once more the example of the ordinary picture play. "LIGHT" is of prime importance here and the "FILM" comes next. But neither is Light praised by the public nor does the Film itself attract much attention. It is really the activity of the various human actors, prominent among whom are the HERO and the HEROINE, that earns the admiration of the spectators. Let us now, therefore, concentrate upon the HUMAN BEINGS of the entire World Bioscope and... the WORLD CREATIVE PLAY. This has been, for long, quite a puzzling problem of the world. As a matter of fact, there is only one huge stage for this huge Human World Bioscope - THIS EARTH, used as the Field of Action where the entire World Performance takes place. The Sky simply stands like a roof with the Sun, the Moon and the Stars serving as the head-lights of this huge stage. There is no world above or world below where human beings reside. And you have visualised through Divine

> Insight and realized through Divine Wisdom all the most esoteric facts of this Creative Play. (Errors and emphasis are in original)

With no *absolute* beginning or end, BKs use the metaphor of an eternal film (Babb 1986) or theatre play, except that the Drama BKs speak of was never created and will never be destroyed. Theatre is created by a tripartite coalition of a director, actors and scenery. Every conventional drama play has a clear beginning, middle and conclusion with associated joy, curiosity, laughter, tension, hope and resolution, following the traditions of the popular Mahabharata and the Ramayana, the two epic Indian stories that have been frequently dramatized and would have been well known by the founders of the *Yagya*. At the beginning of the first act of the Drama, the performers arrive on the stage. Each action is characterized by a sense of anticipation and wonder. In the Golden Age everything is new: the scenery, the performers and the story. Imagination, spontaneity, unity and innovation are its characteristics. Nothing has come before, so there is no need or capacity to dwell on the past. There is no loss, and so there is no need to imagine the future. The 'now' is sublime. BKs teach that when the middle period of the play arrives, the audience is fully engaged with the adventure, and the narrative is often at its most dramatic. Conflict and tension have arrived, new ways of thinking emerge and politics and differences of opinion become part of the story. The audience and actors have witnessed and experienced the narrative of change. The future is imagined as the threads of the past are seen. Finally, as also narrated through Christian, Jewish and Muslim chronicles, there is a loss of innocence and acquired comprehension of difference and division. The drama and tension is at its height, and hope has become little more than a flame in a storm. There is a heroic and magnificent climax:

> Emanating from this Divine *Yagya* is the huge conflagration in the form of this world war, hereinafter called the War of Mahabharata (Radhe 1943:no page numbers)

The audience and the actors are satiated and satisfied. The story is resolved. After the final scene, all the actors, aware that it is the end of the show, come onto the stage to take their final bow. The next evening all the actors return to the theatre and the play begins

again, Act 1, Scene 1. Souls play their parts through the costumes of their bodies and within and upon the scenery of the earth.

Act 1, Act 2

In the purest, most serene and vibrant part of the Cycle, souls gradually begin to enter into the physical world from their home, the Soul World, according to their original level of purity. The first souls take their first birth in the splendid new world that is without parallel. At this early time, the world and its inhabitants live in a state of brilliant harmony. Death contains no sorrow then, as souls are in a state of self-awareness, natural self-sovereignty, and absolute potentiality. Rebirth occurs on the world 'stage,' where souls express themselves through the experience of life. In environmental terms, the beginning of the Cycle is characterized by absolute respect for all forms of nature and life and complete harmony between humankind and nature. Nothing is pillaged, sown or cut. The earth is abundant and alive. The *murli* extracts below are accepted by BKs as factual accounts of what the future Golden Age will be like.

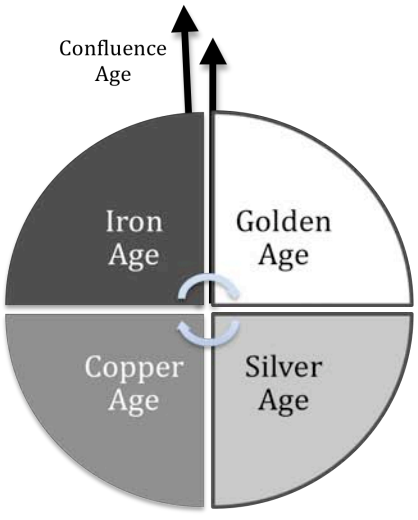


Figure 29. The Cycle of Time depicting the five ages

In the Golden Age, the five elements of nature are the instruments of happiness. The weather will always be like spring. The elements will remain in order. The water there is filled with energy and is clean, with natural minerals and herbs coming from

> the mountains. There is no need for anything artificial…. There is no pollution… There will be no sugar mills but the earth will serve you by giving you the highest quality fruits and flowers to eat. All cooking will be done by solar power. There will be natural beauty there in the form of mountains, birds and flowers. The birds' voices will become natural music. They will entertain you a great deal. There will be no need for wiring. The rays of the sun will touch the diamonds and gold, which will sparkle in such a way that it will appear as if a thousand lights are sparkling. There, because they use real diamonds, one lamp does the work of many candles. You will not have to make effort. Everything will be natural. (*Murli* extract, Lawrence 1996:31)

The completely natural process of rebirth initiates the gentle and protracted downfall of humanity that souls are thankfully oblivious to for thousands of years.

Act 3, Act 4

As time moves forward, by taking rebirth souls gradually begin to lose the self-mastery that was natural in the first half of the cycle. Motivated by spiritual loss, they begin to look for dominion over the physical world. Prophet souls such as Buddha, Jesus, and Mohammed arrive from the Soul World to establish religions in an attempt to alleviate humankind's sorrows, guiding them about how to live in peace. When these religious founders take their first birth, they are in their purest state, and so they easily attract disciples. Religious founders however, like all human souls, continue to take rebirth. As souls continue to arrive from the soul world into the physical world so too the clarity, peace and beauty of souls decline. This is reflected in the physical world:

> Our unity and harmony turned into fragmentation and dissonance. As we grew apart psychologically, the earth we walked on broke apart. And though each (culture and religion) made peace its yearning and love its theory of human relations, the practice of each was prejudice and pride. (Chander 1981:262)

The world slowly becomes tarnished and destitute, mirroring the loss of the purity of all souls, and so time moves everything forward. Souls continue to descend as the Cycle 'turns' and, while the outcome is construed as negative, no-one is to blame. This just happens to be the way the story is eternally scripted. BKs relate that when the world is at its most degraded, the Supreme Soul enters into the body of an ordinary human being.

Through Brahma Baba, Shiv Baba teaches souls how to transform their lives, and so the world, through the practice of meditation, understanding eternal spiritual truths, and living a virtuous existence. This part of the Cycle is known as the Confluence Age.

Act 5 - The confluence

The fifth and most significant age is known as the Confluence Age because of its transitional nature. This short physical and spiritual time period overlaps the end of the Iron Age and the beginning of the approaching Golden Age of each cycle (Figure 29 page 120). The Confluence Age is a small auspicious age of approximately 100 years that BKs believe is significant and is present now. Although the world is physically still embedded in the Iron Age, the Confluence Age is the period when a change of consciousness can have exceptional and long-lasting results, and is an occasion of absolute potential. For BKs it is the focus of their existence. Presently, all souls exist physically in the Iron Age, however by choice one can dwell in the Confluence Age through a change in consciousness.

What most of the world sees as evolution in terms of technological advancement, development and attempts to redress multiple forms of poverty associated with industrialization, the BKs see as devolution, as the effect of human beings forgetting their own spiritual essence. "One of the primary laws of cosmic change may be stated thus: the outward condition of the world reflects the inward condition of the souls who reside therein" (Chander 1981: 261):

> When you souls become pure you receive happiness. There is no question of sorrow. When you are happy you do not have attachment to your body of the…elements. Now you have to renounce all your attachment to the five elements of matter. (Baba 2004:1)

BKs believe that this current period of time, while characterized by sorrow, civil unrest and environmental calamities, holds the greatest potential, in keeping with theories of quantum physics (Goswami 1993; Wolf 1999, 1984) rather than the prophetic religions of Judaism and Christianity (Aune 1991), Islām (Davis III 2004; Willis 1989), and

Zoroastrianism (Boyce 1984; Theater 1986). This particular epoch of confluence is 'auspicious' and 'benevolent,' because it is now that one can acquire the spiritual power to establish new ways of being.

Decisions during this age can be based on understanding eternal spiritual laws, at a time when people are more than ever required to heal the dissonance currently existing in the human-environment relationship. In the cycle of life, destruction is seen by BKs as a natural part of the process of construction. As Mark, from North America, explains:

> The seeming contradictions in looking after the environment and the inevitability of destruction may be a challenge for some people to reconcile. However I would not be one of them. The world of matter is eternal. Earth is matter, which has been and will continue to change. It is again and still in the process of change.

Puppet and puppeteer

By taking rebirth in the world Drama, and playing out parts over many lifetimes, the gradual decline in purity, virtue and power causes souls to lose their self-sovereignty and the slow but certain demise of the natural environment:

> Here, they have to construct huge dams and canals because the population keeps growing so much. At present all the elements have become your enemies and this is why there are earthquakes and hurricanes. Here because the earth is depleted it no longer has any power. It has become barren. There the earth will be so fertile that no one will have to toil it. (Lawrence 1996:31)

Souls decline from a natural state of soul consciousness to an acquired state of body consciousness. They forget that they are actors, and believe they are the role they are playing, thinking they are little more than their costumes. Time being cyclic is intrinsic to understanding the journey of the soul and integral to the discussion on spiritual causes behind decline of the natural world:

> We are souls, non-material units of consciousness, and our bodies are simply temporary earthenware costumes. We knew this once as a datum of experience. We wore a crown of light. But as we proceeded through the play of time, adopting one clay puppet after another, we lost our right understanding… The puppet hypnotised the puppeteer. (Chander 1981: 262)

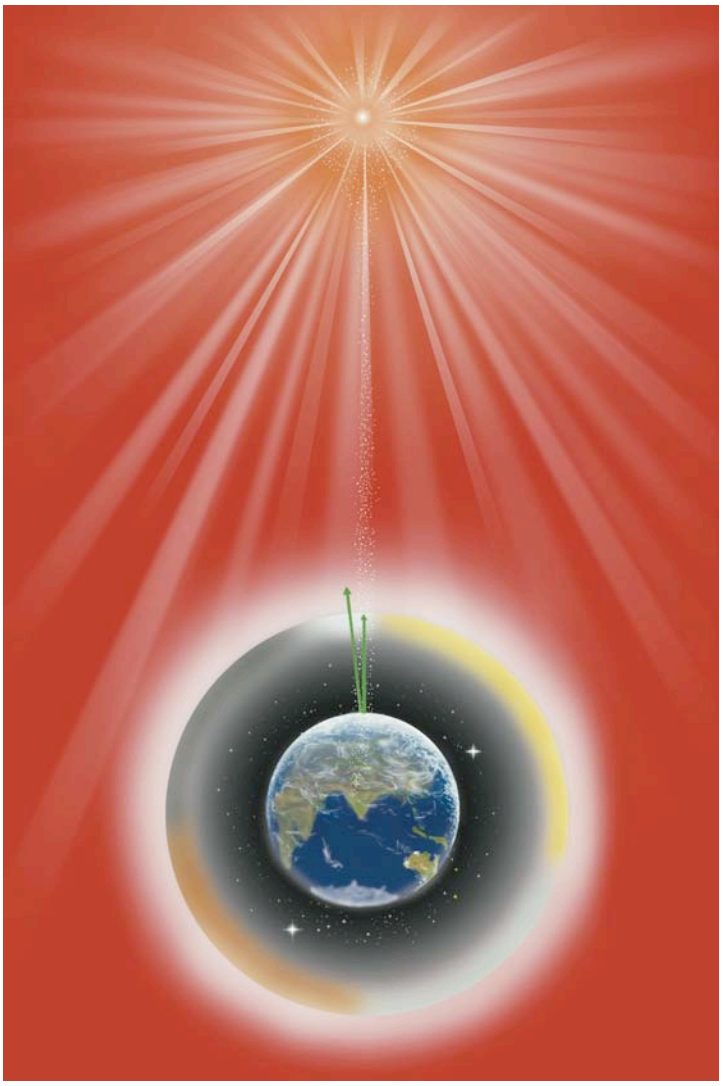


Figure 30. The Cycle of Time and the Three Worlds with Shiv Baba, and souls returning to Soul World (c. 2006)
Source: Gyan Sarovar Art Department, Mount Abu

At the end of the Cycle, after the collapse of all the natural and anthropomorphic systems of the globe, every soul receives liberation and returns to the Soul World (see Figure 30 above). Just to the right of the clock hands are tiny sparks of light, portraying souls journeying back to *Paramdham* before returning to their predestined part of the cycle, to take their first resplendent birth. The visual representation of a radiant star indicates the way in which Shiv Baba's importance has developed in Brahma Kumaris philosophy since the beginning.

After ultimate rest and spiritual rejuvenation, souls are born into the world again at a time of absolute or relative peace, happiness and prosperity. A soul's first birth is dependent upon the original level of the soul's purity, which is determined by the intention, choices, and behaviour of the previous cycle.

In the Iron Age, refined atomic technology is used to cause multitudinous forms of sorrow, genetic engineering is used to alter seeds and manipulate birth, and nature is collapsing under industries' seemingly endless need for fuel. Refined technology with selfish intent, BKs say, is the sign of the end times. Sophisticated technology will be used in the Golden Age, but the consciousness of humanity will be contrary to what it is in the present Iron Age. Therefore, in the approaching Golden Age, science and technology will not cause sorrow, but will support the natural existence of happiness, creativity and play.

Karma

BKs from New York discuss what they think about the natural world, in light of their spiritual reasoning:

> This world is in a state of rejuvenation... And the call is to look after it with care and attention. Nature and the natural elements are imperishable, they cannot be destroyed but through the natural process of entropy they are rejuvenated. My spiritual understanding is that there can never be annihilation, (rather) it is important to understand the natural laws and principles of nature and to live our lives in a sustainable way respecting these laws and principles. This is the present call of the environment. (Gitanjali)

BKs accept that there is an eternal spiritual law - for every intentional action there is an equal and just return. Alignment and balance ensue. Regardless of what the future holds, BKs say that everyone has the choice of living in accordance with spiritual principles now. Thus treating the earth and its resources with care and consideration will create a mutually respectful and beneficial relationship with the environment. People are not immune to experiencing the effect of their actions, either now or in times ahead. For BKs this means that souls are required to be conscious of the way in which they think, speak

and behave, because the soul experiences the fruit of the past and creates the future concurrently. The technique for any self-change, and so world-change, begins at the level of thought, as Sarah from New York, explained.

> Ultimately the environment is molded by the minds of man (sic), and destruction is just a big transformation. At this time, even though everything is very degraded, respect for the environment is still viable. Conservation and care will work ultimately as matter and energy are neither created nor destroyed. Matter simply changes form.

After the devastation and karmic environmental realignment have occurred, all souls will be liberated from sorrow and experience peace. Souls who have lived non-violently on earth will experience the karmic benefits of being born first during the time of complete peace and non-violence in the Golden Age, and so there is some motivation for individuals to take moral public action in the world, such as challenging policy through the UN. However BKs' relationship with the environment may be more fundamental and less immediate.

> On one level I couldn't care less about the environment, because I have a very heightened sense of destiny and the inexorable movement towards destruction and then on to a new golden age. However I recognize that the soul is indeed affected by its actions and attitudes, and so I do think an attitude and orientation of care towards the environment, and many other things for that matter, builds a powerful positive sanskara that I will take with me into the future after this body is long forgotten. (David)

Purity, spiritual caste and sacrificial fire

The foundation of the relationship between souls and the Supreme Soul, and the souls' role in the eternal drama, is purity. Purity only exists in its form of cleanliness and sacredness, in contrast and in comparison with dirt and impurity (Douglas 2002). For BKs, purity exists as a point of inculcation now, when the precise awareness of purity and impurity exists. Brahma Kumaris purity exists as a form of social and material ordering, keeping things socially, physically and mentally in place. This includes maintaining distance between genders, ensuring the purity of food, and bodily restraint. Impurities are rejected elements of their ordered and structured system. However, impurity has a degree

of slippage and is not absolute, as things are not in and of themselves static, but are comparative. Douglas cites the example of shoes (2002:35). Outside and on someone's feet they are not polluting. On the kitchen table however, although their inherent dirt and ability to pollute remains unchanged, their relative and applied impurity increases because the shoes are out of place. To maintain purity, BKs endeavour to maintain a clear dividing line between the two through knowledge enacted through principles. This is relatively straightforward for bodily and material substances.

The soul is pure and the body is impure. Therefore, by association, behaviours based on soul consciousness (and the associated virtues) and spiritual desires are pure, and behaviours based on body consciousness (and associating vices) and sensual desires are impure. Regarding food, things of nature that are acquired non-violently, such as fruit, vegetables, grains and cow's milk[26] are pure, and things acquired violently such as flesh foods are impure. Foodstuffs that are stimulating to the mind are impure, and those that are calming to the mind are pure. However, when it comes to mental approaches and acts of thinking, as described in Brahma Kumaris theology, purity becomes more complicated:

> Purity does not just mean celibacy. Complete purity means that none of the vices should be touched even in thought. Just as in life, *brāhman* people consider any physical attraction or (inappropriate) physical touching to be impure, in the same way, if the mind or the intellect is attracted to or touched by the thought of any vice, that is also considered to be an impurity. (BapDada 1999:171)

Just as matter out of place becomes defiling, thoughts out of place have the same effect for BKs. The only way that the purity thesis can hold is if "internal will and exterior enactment" (Douglas 2002:60) are aligned.

One of the three marks of existence in Buddhism, and included in BK philosophy, is 'impermanence', meaning that no-thing is in a fixed state or has a fixed nature. This

[26] In India cows are sacred, so acquiring milk is reportedly done naturally and non-violently. This is not the case in countries outside of India (Singer and Mason 2006), and some foreign BKs do not drink cow milk because of this.

dynamic state of flux and change gives the perception of time 'turning,' as the Drama endlessly and fruitlessly attempts to restore an ultimate homeostatic balance. No state of either purity or impurity is static. Purity is re-acquired intentionally. Impurity is accumulated incidentally:

> The original religion of the soul is purity. Impurity is an external influence and purity is your original religion… "The original, eternal form of I, the soul, is pure. Once you have recollected that your original and eternal form is pure, and you strengthen that consciousness, you experience it with ease… purity is your intrinsic form. (BapDada 1999:171-174)

The rituals and rules of caste, such as fasting, are used to explicate and elucidate the way in which purity can be acquired and restored internally:

> The *dharnā* of purity is a very subtle matter… All of you keep a fast for purity in the form of a vow. To fast in the form of having a determined thought means to transform your attitude. A firm vow changes your attitud (BapDada 1999:174-176)

Worldly caste

Social life in India is divided into four primary strata, characterized as 'the caste system.' These come from the *Rgveda* scripture dated sometime between 1400 and 1000 BC (Rodrigues 2006), that tells the story of a giant cosmic being, the precursor to human existence, that was sacrificed by the Gods. From the mouth of this being emerged the *brāhmans* (top priestly caste), from his arms the *kshatriya* (second warrior caste), from his thighs the v*aishya* (third merchant caste) and from his feet the s*hudra* (bottom servant caste). This stratificiation of society is one of India's most distinctive features and is detailed in the Laws of Manu. Known both as *Mānava-Dharmaśāstra* and as *Manusmrti*, the Laws of Manu is one of the great scriptures of India, is considered a legal text, a religious volume and a book of philosophy (Doniger and Smith 1991). *Manusmrti* dictates, in great detail, the rules and regulations of social class in Indian society that, when complied with, maintain and uphold the righteous and cosmic order of things. These regulate birth, death, marriage, eating, sleeping, procreation, taxes, redemption, agriculture, gender, work, worship, rebirth, teaching and learning. The prescriptive details

even include the way in which one must drink water: to quench their thirst caste *brāhmans* must drink water while wearing certain clothing, maintain particular bodily positions, create expected sounds and drink a specified quantity.

In smaller culturally specific ways, many societies manage fluctuations in levels of inherent and acquired purity and impurity by undertaking different forms of ritual purification. These rituals enable people within the culture to perform the tasks of every day life while adhering to caste rules. Considering the culture within which the Brahma Kumaris was founded, there was little manifest caste adherence at all:

> Both poor and wealthy are equal. Even Mama and Baba used to wash the dishes and sweep the floor in order to teach everyone. All of that was done to break body consciousness. *Sannyasis* too make their followers do the same. They make important people chop wood etc. so that their body consciousness is removed. (BapDada 2003a:2)

Since its establishment, Brahma Kumaris philosophy has used terminology familiar and meaningful within Hindu society to explicate deeper spiritual laws, in accordance with their understanding. In keeping with this, BKs maintain a diverse view of India's caste system.

In early pictures (Figure 24 page 113), BKs categorize the four epochs of the cycle as characteristic of the four main social classes of India, although their understanding of the caste system is as a system of spiritual rather than physical or social ordering. Each and every soul ascends and descends through the spiritual castes. The caste progression through the Cycle in BK philosophy is such: The Golden Age is inhabited by *devtā* or divine caste souls, the Silver Age by *kshatriya* or warrior caste souls, Copper Age by *vaisha* or merchant caste souls, and Iron Age by *shudra* or servant caste souls. The Confluence Age comprises the priestly caste souls of BKs. Socially the Indian caste system includes *jātis*, which are layers of sub-castes and *gotrā,* family lineage, as well as *candāla*, those out of caste (unscheduled) or untouchables (including foreigners). The Brahma Kumaris theology deals with five spiritual 'caste' divisions, shown below in Figure 31.

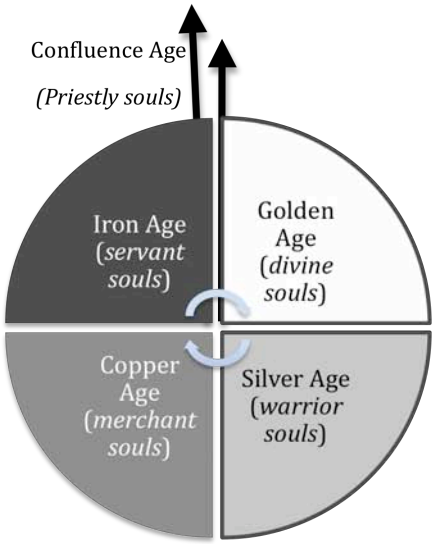


Figure 31. The Cycle of Time indicating spiritual castes

BKs use caste to describe the spiritual journey of the soul. Each and every soul passes through all four spiritual castes on its journey through the passage of time. Whether a soul takes its first birth in the new cycle in the Golden Age or in the Iron Age, it will still pass through the four spiritual castes, which are metaphors for reducing levels of purity. BKs consider themselves to be spiritual *brāhmans*, the true 'twice born' *brāhmans* (Rinehart 2004; Chakraborti 1973), because they have been 'born by the words spoken by Shiv Baba through Brahma Baba's mouth'. As priestly caste souls the Brahmins maintain rules pertaining to food (pure vegetarian), dress (modesty and simplicity), bathing (daily, plus after defecating), sleeping (revising the day and relinquishing it to Baba, before sleeping in Baba's remembrance), waking (early, and sitting in meditation), and bodily purity (gender segregation, speech and behaviour). The worldly caste of a person is dismissed once someone has 'come into *gyān*', or become a BK Brahmin.[27] The most explicit form is refraining from sexual activity, because sexual energy is thought to be of the lowest vibration which is the antithesis of what BKs aim to attain: a highly attuned meditative

[27] For clarity, when referring to caste I use the Hindi term brāhman, and when referring to BKs I use the anglicized term Brahmin.

state, where one authentically experiences the company of God whose vibration is of the highest and most refined quality. Ritual and bodily forms of purity (Table 5 below) are enacted to enable one to inculcate inner purity, with this eventually becoming part of one's nature and personality. Meanings of purity and caste are altered and internalized, becoming a form of self-checking and self-changing.

Table 5. BK ritual and non-ritual forms of purity

Internal	*External*			
Mind	**Body**	**Speech**	**Things**	**People**
• Positive thoughts • Gentle pace in one's thinking • Good feelings for the self • Compassion towards the self • Be here now (do not dwell on the past)	• Chastity (a prohibition against sexual expression) • Vegetarian food, no animal flesh and other food prescriptions • Food cooked in remembrance of God • Food offered to God • Modesty in one's dress • Cleanliness, including bathing after toilet	• Speak less • Speak softly • Speak with consideration • Speak understanding the effect of your words	• Independence • Respect the physical world • Use what you have well • Purchase and keep only what you need • Share easily • Be cautious about using money frivolously	• Compassion towards others • Good feelings for others • Forgiveness • Be prepared to be wrong • Remember everyone is playing their 'part'

A BK caste *brāhman* participant from Jagatsinghpur district in Orissa lived through the Super Cyclone of 1999. As a *brāhman* priest, Rakesh had more intricate rules around food, and, if adhering by social caste, would not be permitted to eat food cooked by BKs of other social castes. His understanding of caste was significantly reframed after becoming a BK:

> There was a caste feeling in people in those days (of the cyclone). But Baba has always said that there should be no caste difference in us. The differences between *brāhmans, kshatriyas, vaishyas* etcetera are man-made. During the cyclone when we had to stay together at one place, it was a realization and kind of God's indication that we are like brothers. We are all children of one father. This caste system was only man-made just like democracy… There was no caste feeling. There were

> *brāhman*s as well as scheduled castes together. All of us got together and cooked food. (Rakesh)

BKs see the caste system, like other systems of the world, as degraded understandings of spiritual truths. Understanding time as cyclic means that the religious and cultural systems of the world, and India in particular, take on unique meaning. To BKs the religious systems of the world are memorialized symbols and ritualized forms of the spiritual practice taught by God in the Confluence Age of the previous cycle: ancient impressions of the pure life that BKs live now.

The state where all souls are in a condition of self-mastery, unique to each one, where all souls live together in absolute harmonious self-awareness, and in symmetry with nature, is not a permanent state. The slow descent of consciousness is brought by the moving passage of time, as "the Cycle continues to turn little by little like a louse" (BapDada 2005b:2), bringing with it a change in spiritual and subsequent physical forms of purity. Matter loses energy and fineness and becomes denser, following the trajectory carved by souls. Consequently everything is centred on the creation, protection and maintenance of purity and, within the Brahma Kumaris, the institutionalized guard against impurity.

As shown below in Figure 32, impurity is always seen as the result of one of the five main 'vices': lust, anger, attachment, greed, or ego. This picture includes blind faith as another, but this is not typically considered a main vice. Purity guards against these in the form of five main 'virtues': love, peace, power, happiness, and knowledge. The soul contains within itself the capacity for both virtue and vice, soul consciousness and body consciousness. However BKs believe the Confluence Age is the only time people can see both clearly, and so create one's own destiny by choice.

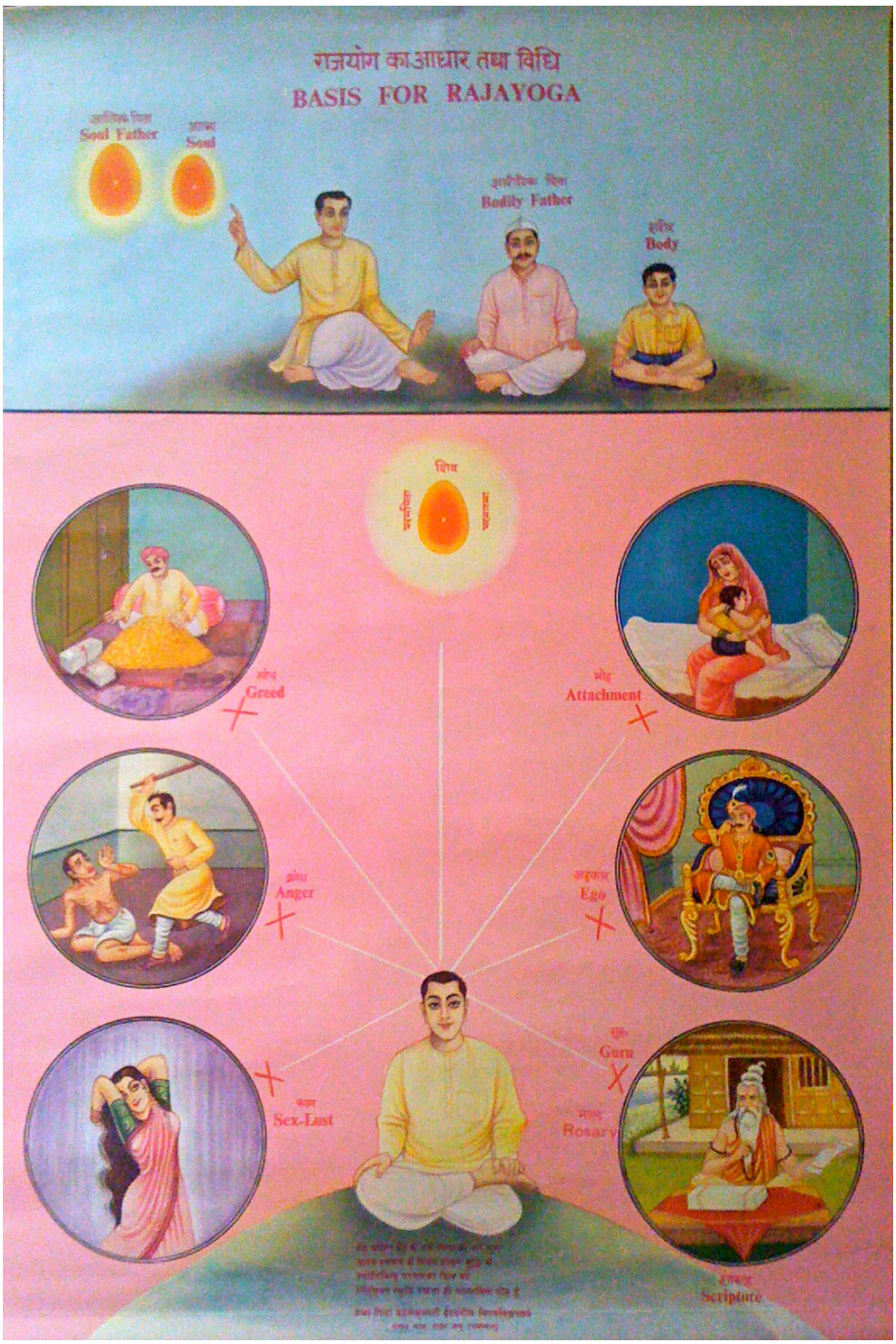


Figure 32. Basis for Raja Yoga illustrating the five main vices, plus worship and scriptures
Source: Madhuban Literature Department, Mount Abu

Impurity comes from over-identification with the body or 'body consciousness', and purity from soul-awareness or 'soul consciousness.' The qualities of each are detailed in the Figure 33. below. The first rung on the ladder of purity for BKs is soul consciousness. The founder and first generation of BKs in Om Mandli had experiences of being separate and

distinct from the body. They say that the experience of 'soul consciousness' was central to their lives. This awareness of being a soul, that is, a point of conscious and eternal light energy, still forms the foundation of Brahma Kumaris Raja Yoga meditation practice. Soul consciousness is first, then God consciousness.

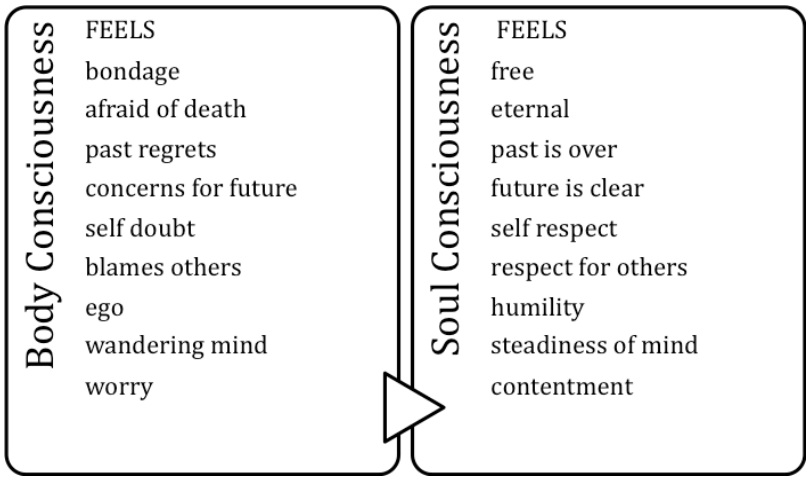


Figure 33. Contrast between the experiences of body consciousness and soul consciousness

BK identity

A BK is considered to be someone who has accepted the Brahma Kumaris Raja Yoga philosophy and lives by its principles. BK members identify themselves as students, and the path of Raja Yoga as a study. This orientation allows BKs to maintain an evaluative and non-devotional attitude to their spiritual pursuits, although the Dadis discourage 'too much thinking'. Informally BKs refer to each other as Brahmins or Raja Yogis although the latter term was more common twenty years ago. Male BKs are *kumārs* (lit: unmarried son), brothers or brahma kumars, and female BKs are *kumārīs* (lit: unmarried daughter), sisters, or brahma kumaris. In Hindi the term *kanyā kumāri* or just *kumāri* can mean virgin and unmarried interchangeably. In countries outside of India the two are not synonymous. However this is not addressed explicitly, and unmarried foreign BKs are still referred to by these terms, regardless of prior experience.

Centres

BKs form a cohesive community. They conduct collective meditation, hold spiritual lectures at centres for other BKs and for the general public, and also attend retreats for their personal spiritual sustenance.



Figure 34. Sisters, in typical dress, on the rooftop of a centre in Orissa

BKs are known, particularly in India, for wearing white clothes (as shown in Figure 34.). In India this is a sign of renunciation or widowhood, and all dedicated sisters wear a white *sari* and a badge that has a symbol of Lakshmi and Narayan on one side (female and male deity), and the *trimurti*, which symbolizes the three acts of God (creation, sustenance and destruction) on the other side. The badge is recognized by most people in India as belonging to a 'Brahma Kumari' or sometimes an *om shānti* sister, so-called because the regular greeting between BKs and BKs and others, particularly in India, is *om shānti*. The red and orange flag waving in the background of Figure 34. has on it a representation of

Shiv Baba. Most, if not all BK homes and centres in India have the same flag waving somewhere on their rooftop.

The flute of knowledge

BK life centres upon daily disciplines and one of the most valued of these disciplines is the *murli* class.[28] The daily morning *murli* class includes half an hour of communal meditation at around 6am and the reading of and listening to the *murli.* The *murli* is the foundation of daily life for BKs and most centres around the world read the same *murli* on the same day, possible with the benefit of the Internet.

There are two types of *murlis*, which I mentioned earlier in the section on hermeneutics. *Sakar* (of the body, of the physical realm) *murlis* are read from Monday to Saturday, and *avyakt* (angelic, beyond the physical realm) *murlis* are read on Sundays. The difference between the style and cadence of each type is significant. *Sakar murlis* are *murlis* that were spoken while the founder, Brahma Baba, was alive, and are considered to be teachings from Shiv Baba channeled through and interpreted by Brahma Baba. Brahma Baba was reportedly conscious the entire time. During the *sakar murlis* BKs sometimes try to decipher who was speaking. They understand that sometimes Shiv Baba would speak, and at other times Brahma Baba would speak. However, BKs listen with the consciousness that it is Shiv Baba's *murli*, during which Brahma Baba became an 'instrument', willingly lending his body to Shiv Baba who used it to teach. Although most were originally spoken more than forty years ago, BKs accept the teachings as relevant to today. During *sakar murlis* the voice often changes from first to third person, and the 'I' may refer to either Shiv Baba or Brahma Baba. It is up to the listener to decide who is speaking:

[28] The *murli* is the flute played by Krishna in Indian scriptures. Krishna played his 'flute of knowledge' all night, attracting and mesmerising the young women around him.

> (Shiv Baba speaking) Some children say that they want to have a vision of Krishna… What benefit is there in that? There is no benefit in having visions. (Brahma Baba speaking) When you souls remember the Father, you become pure. You don't become like Narayan (first Golden Aged king) simply by having a vision of Narayan. You know that your aim and objective is to become like Lakshmi (first Golden Aged Queen) or Narayan. However, you cannot become like them without studying. This does take effort… (Shiv Baba speaking) This special child (referring to Brahma Baba) is also with you. He also says: You can go ahead of me very quickly. There is such a burden on Baba. He has to think about so many things throughout the day. (Brahma Baba speaking) I cannot remember Baba as much as you can. At meal times, I start to remember Baba a little and then I forget. Sometimes I think that Baba and I will go for a walk. Then, whilst walking, I forget Baba. This remembrance is a very slippery thing. (Shiv Baba speaking) Remembrance slips away again and again. You have to make great effort in this. Only by having remembrance do souls become pure. (BapDada 2005c:2)

Avyakt murlis are *murlis* that were spoken by BapDada (the souls of Shiv Baba and Brahma Baba, together) after Brahma Baba died on 18 January 1969. BKs understand that Brahma Baba settled all his negative karma through the power of meditation, accumulated good karma and so became a perfect and complete human being. As a result of his spiritual endeavour Brahma Baba was transformed and, especially in the minds of those who grew up with him, this is unquestionable. After his death, the soul of Brahma Baba ascended to the Subtle Regions where, through his angelic body, he still acts as the instrument for Shiv Baba. This new 'combined form' of Shiv Baba as the Supreme Soul (Bap) and Brahma Baba (Dada) as the angel are referred to as BapDada meaning, grandfather and father respectively. Since Brahma Baba's death, BapDada speak(s) through the body of Dadi Gulzar who, unlike Brahma Baba, is unaware of what is taking place through her body. *Avyakt murlis* differ in quality from *sakar* because they are, some BKs feel, the essence of Brahma Kumaris spiritual teachings. They are less contextualized around Indian culture and hence are considered to be more about all-embracing ideals and lodestars such as power, compassion, understanding, and love.

> BapDada saw that… especially in the subject of love, everyone's face was sparkling. You are knowledgeful children, but the subject of love is also essential... No matter if the problem is as big as a mountain, with the power of love you are able to change the mountain into cotton wool. You are able to make the mountain as light as water. Love is a canopy of protection, and because of that canopy of protection, you remain

> constantly safe. It becomes easy. With love you make the Supreme Soul, God, your Friend and the memorial of this is *Khuda-Dost* (God, the Friend). By making God your Friend, because of the relationship of the Friend, you are able to make any problem easy. God becomes your Companion. Knowledge is the seed and the water of love brings fruit from the seed; the fruit of attainment. The loving children of such a Father do not consider remembering the Father to be effort, but they consider it difficult to forget Him. One who loves cannot forget that love. When you say "My Baba" with your heart and with love, you receive the key of all treasures. So, both Bap and Dada are so loving that they become present in front of those who love them as their Lord. Everyone remembers them, but some remember them with some effort whereas others remain constantly merged in the Ocean of Love. People of the world say that the soul merges with the Supreme Soul, whereas the soul actually remains merged in God's love; it doesn't become merged but remains merged in love. (BapDada 2009:1)

In present times, BKs travel to Madhuban annually to meet with BapDada through the medium of Sister Gulzar. There are approximately ten meetings per year spaced every two to three weeks between October and April, and BKs' annual trip is planned around their chosen meeting. It would be highly unusual for a BK to visit Madhuban and not stay for Baba's meeting. The meetings are held in the evening with the doors to the hall opening at around 4pm. A meeting begins with a class from a senior sister or brother while everyone is gradually being seated, according so social strata: sections are allocated to seniors, sister, brothers, teachers, mothers and double foreigners. After the class there is typically one hour of silent meditation during which time people are generally still milling around finding their seats or returning from an afternoon walk. At around 7pm Dadi Gulzar sits on the stage and enters a trance state of meditation. From then until the end of the meeting at around 11pm she has no recollection of events. After approximately fifteen minutes after Dadi enters trance, BapDada (the souls of Shiv Baba and Brahma Baba) enter Gulzar who remains seated on the stage, and give *drishti* through her eyes. Then BapDada speak an *avyakt murli*, providing contemporary spiritual teachings. Since 2005 meetings have been held exclusively in Diamond Hall, Shantivan due to BK the population expanding. BKs around the world have the audiovisual transmission of the meeting streamed live through the Internet to their local centres, with the help of a secure username and password.

Disciplines and Lifestyle

BKs adopt a lifestyle code they define as *maryādapurushottam* (see Appendix 10: *Maryādas* – Principles for Brahmins, page 365), a term used by adherents of both Hindu and Sikh faiths, and one with complex meaning. The term refers to the code of life, the boundaries, or adherence to principles that one follows to become the highest and most divine amongst humans. The rules of behaviour dictate all forms of physical conduct and social expression, so that BKs are taught to live a virtuous monk-like existence while remaining present in the world (Walsh, Ramsay, and Smith 2007). This involves practices such as individual early morning *amrit velā* meditation at 4am, the daily spiritual knowledge *murli* class at 6am in the morning, and individual or communal meditation at around sunset.

> From the moment you open your eyes, the first transformation should be, "I am a soul: I am not this body." It is on this very first thought that the routine of the entire day is based.... Recognize the value of the early morning hours of nectar. Recognize that this is the time for easy attainment. Take full benefit from this time… be the sovereign (Creating a festival during Amrit Vela:133-145).

The term *amrit velā* is from Sikh philosophy, and is translated as 'hour of nectar'. *Amrit velā* is the purposeful remembrance of God between 2am and 6am, and it is considered to be the foundation of the day and the penultimate opportunity to gather spiritual power to facilitate self-change: "You just have to sit, be soul conscious and remember God. There is nothing else to do." (Samantha)

Food

BKs attribute considerable importance to food and, accordingly, disciplines govern its preparation and consumption. Only pure vegetarian food, without onions or garlic, is cooked by BKs, and it should be eaten while the BK is in the awareness of God, and in a peaceful state of mind. The virtue and importance of food preparation has a long history in India. Hunter (2005:44), a British surveyor and Indian Civil Service officer, wrote "The

priests of Orissa would as soon think of eating rice boiled by a person of inferior caste as they would of using salt evaporated by the human device of fire." At the time, the closer food was to nature, the more pure and sacred it was. Caste *brāhmans* in Hunter's time were only permitted to eat salt evaporated by the sun. Similarly, to eat food prepared by another was out of the question. Today still, the majority of BKs will not eat cooked food unless a fellow BK has prepared it, which can create dilemmas when BKs go home for family dinners and special occasions.



Figure 35. Sisters cooking Brahmā bhojan at a centre in Orissa

After the food is prepared and cooked, it is 'offered' to God before being consumed, and subsequently is called *brahmā bhojan*: this signifies its transformation and purification through the process of offering. This is thought to fill the food with positive, pure vibrations that nourish the mind as well as the body: "We cook food at home and eat it on our own, but when it is offered to Baba, it definitely has a special vibration" (Garwal).

BKs eat *brahmā bhojan* every day, but Thursday is *Satguruwāh* or 'the day of the true guide,' and BKs mark the occasion with specific rituals of cleanliness and food offerings.

It was explained to me in Orissa by a local caste *brāhman* that according to Indian astrology Jupiter is the planet of the guru, which coincides with Thursday. Traditionally extra homage is paid to the guru in the form of donations and extra offerings of fruits and flowers at temples on Thursday. BKs honour their relationship with God as the *Satguru* (true guide and protector) on Thursday. Sunday's importance is more social, as it is the one chance for everyone to gather together.

In preparation for Thursday however, the centre is especially cleaned the previous night and fresh fruit and food purchased for offering. All centre sisters wash their hair and don clean saris in the morning. In India, either a virginal *kumāri* or an older mother, because of their respective states of sexual abstinence and purity, prepares *bhog*. In Orissa a BK mother called Indramata would come every week to prepare *bhog*. The sisters of the centre would cook, and Indramata would prepare the *bhog* tray. The *bhog* tray includes lidded silver containers for the food, a cloth to cover the containers, a plate for flowers placed on top of the cloth when offering, and jugs of nectar made that morning from sugar, rosewater, saffron and cardamom. On Thursdays BKs and guests may make financial offerings into the red and gold container on the right when they go to receive nectar. The system of financial offerings on Thursdays mirrors local devotional rituals in temples.

In devotional rituals, once the food has been 'tasted' by the deity, or in this case Shiv Baba, it may be referred to as *bhog* which is a Sikh term meaning 'pleasure' or 'end', implying that the ritual is completed because the food has been divinely prepared and blessed: the devotee may now eat in pleasure. BKs refer to food offered on Thursdays as *bhog*, and consider that *bhog* is sacred and filled with exceptional spiritual power. Similar food offering rituals take place at Hindu, Sikh and Buddhist temples in India. *Prasād* (a holy offering) is a term used to refer to an attitude of generosity, as well as a material substance

(often food) that is offered to a deity and then consumed. *Prasād* is the give and take between a human and divine being. BKs reason that the rituals of offering and receiving *prasād* in temples are memorialized devotional activities of the previous cycle, when BKs offered pure food to Shiv Baba. Jagruti, a mother from Orissa, reasons:

> *Bhog* is *prasād*. In every temple we call it *prasād* but the *prasād* prepared here in Baba's centre is the real *prasād*. There is no *prasād* superior to this. The first thing is that we call it *bhog* because it is prepared in Baba's remembrance and second, it is offered to Baba. Third, even though I offer at home, there I offer alone, but here we offer together which makes a difference. Sisters are there on the stage offering. And we offer all together. (Jagruti)

Celebrating *Satguruwāh* is not a ritual of *bhakti* (blind faith) but a ceremony of *gyān* (spiritual knowledge), an important distinction for BKs:

> Because it's the day of *bhog* and we have accepted Baba as *Satguru* and Father so definitely we should find one day in a week for him… Every day I cook and offer it to everyone and I don't find there is any particular experience when I finally get to eat myself. But when we come to Baba's house (the centre) then we are the ones who get cooked food. We are not the ones doing the cooking. There is also a difference in preparation, and because it is specially made in Baba's remembrance it gives a special feeling. (Aswani)

> The *bhog* of *satguruwāh* is special because even in *Satyuga* (the Golden Age) we won't be getting that kind of *bhog*. This is why I have a feeling I should not miss the *bhog* prepared at the Centre. It is at the core of my heart that I should take Baba's *bhog* on *Satguruwāh*. (Champa).

Thursdays and Sundays are important days for BKs and are the occasions when most BKs gather together. The *bhog* offering ceremony begins with a senior sister sitting on the stage in meditation. She may be seated on a *gaddi*, a padded seating platform, and the *bhog* tray is placed on the table in front of her. Most sisters meditate, mentally travelling to the subtle regions, visualizing and experiencing a loving informal ceremony where they feed BapDada and BapDada feeds them from the tray. This is done to three special Indian songs the lyrics of which are said to support the meditation experience. The entire gathering meditates together with everyone's attention on BapDada, and not the sister sitting on the stage. She is there as God's 'instrument'. For BKs, to be an instrument is a particular consciousness characterized by humility. An instrument is "one who offers his

every thought and deed to the Father" (BapDada 2001a:1). "The One who has made me an instrument is making me do it, and so the consciousness of 'I' finishes" (BapDada 2008:2). BKs who have responsible roles in the organization are also sometimes referred to as 'instruments'.



Figure 36. Bhog tray, plates, nectar, fruit, and vase for financial offerings

After offering, those in the gathering come forward to the stage and are given nectar. There are usually two lines, one for sisters and one for brothers. The senior sisters remain at the front and pour nectar directly from the jug into BKs mouths as they approach the stage. This is a key part of the *bhog* ceremony on *Satguruwāh* in India. The same ceremony is conducted in countries outside of India, albeit on a modest scale.

Offering food invokes transcendent experiences for some BKs (Howell 1997) and is a connecting point between the Subtle Regions and the Physical World, strengthening the relationship between Avyakt *BapDada* and their 'children', individually and collectively:

> When I offer *bhog* to Baba, in my meditation I carry the plate to Baba and, like me, there are many other sisters in white carrying *bhog* to Baba. Because on *Satguruwāh* we offer *bhog* at every centre so I have the feeling that from everywhere we are

> offering together. It's really very nice. I see everyone as white angels, and I am also one so it feels good. When I make the effort to do it properly then the visions come automatically. I feed Baba and Baba feeds me and I like it. I don't have to make effort but the images come to mind. (Garvani)

I asked Modiva, a BK mother in Orissa, how she went about offering food. She explained her process:

> When I start going to Baba I first make my mind free and then I think that I am not in this world anymore; I am going to *sookshmavatan*[29] to Baba. I am leaving this world but carrying this *bhog* plate in my hand. I start flying up. I fly up and automatically and in a very natural way the vision of Subtle Regions comes to mind. There is a beautiful table with very fine work there. Just as we have fine work here, but I haven't seen anything as beautiful and fine as that in my physical life. From everywhere angels are flying and coming with *bhog* and I find many plates on the table. I never see how much is on the spoon but Baba takes a little from everyone. After that I feel very happy. Those angels all look like you (Tamasin) only. All look like you.[30] (Modiva)

The Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University was founded in a patriarchal society where women were primarily daughters and wives and their first duties were to their husbands and families respectively. The revolutionary movement of the Brahma Kumaris enabled women to choose a lifestyle that in the Northwest Indian society of that time was not otherwise an option for them. Now a global organization, its philosophy and principles constitute a global cultural system that transcends the national cultures of members. Although the knowledge has developed in sophistication over time, and there have been significant social changes between the beginning of the *Avinashi Gyān Yagya* and the Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University of today, group cohesion is reinforced by daily readings of the *murli*. This forms the basis of study, regular social interaction and discussion, and group solidarity. The community cohesion is further reinforced by regular pilgrimages to the Mt Abu Headquarters. In the following chapters I will show that the

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[29] *Sookshmavatan* and Subtle Regions are terms to describe the Angelic Region and may be used interchangeably.

[30] Certain to be influenced by my 'white' face and my white sari.

initial vision of the founder, and the practice of internal endeavour to restore souls and the world to their pure state, continues.

Chapter 4

States of Sentiment and Rituals of silence

Her eyes were diamonds
Cotton *sari* swishing sound
Loving everyone

Post-modern anthropology can pose a challenge to graduate students. In a world where 'anything goes' and more of life is unscripted than ever before, the legitimacy of our work is still driven by science. Yet if one does not engage emotionally in the field with one's research community, our colleagues may consider the study superficial and lacking in sufficient depth (Kleinman and Copp 1993). There is the sense in qualitative research writing that emotions in fieldwork must be appropriately selected, tallied and accounted for (Menon 2000). The personal challenge I faced in writing my thesis, of which this chapter is integral, is my proximity to the topic, and the consequent emotions and other-than-normal states I experienced. This chapter details only fourteen days of that time.

Researching one's own community is not a new endeavour (Anderson 2006), yet one is ideally still expected to maintain some distance from the study site – emotional, psychological and even geographical, from time to time, to ensure rigour and reliability; qualitative researchers still search for acceptance from quantitative methodologists (Barbour 2001; Denzin and Lincoln 2005; Mays and Pope 1995; Morse et al. 2002). Along with this is the concern that for the researcher's experience to be valid, the personal experience of other research participants should somehow mirror or at least affirm it. My experience was a deeply reflective and personal one, and one that was reaffirmed by my observations. The purpose of this chapter is to explore a particular state, and one that does not easily fit previous studies of the anthropology of emotion (Leavitt 1996; Lutz and

White 1986; Lyon 1995; Manderson 2005; Scheper-Hughes and Lock 1987) because of its focus on silence and introspection.

Articulating my place clearly as a complete member researcher, and concluding with a reflexive analysis, I hope to contribute to the theory around analytic auto-ethnography and the way in which we anthropologists analyze personal experiences from the field (Anderson 2006). The data come from my fieldnotes, personal experiences and observations. In this chapter, there are no recorded interviews to draw on and there was no discourse analysis. There was also no coding because at times "coding can become a crutch that prevents us thinking holistically about data" (Kleinman and Copp 1993:24). Instead, I read and re-read the notes that I had written whilst the story in the field was unfolding. I matched my observations and reflections against my training and experience as an anthropologist, testing what may be considered 'good data'.

While I was in New York three friends, who included the spiritual leader of the Brahma Kumaris, died. Death - or as BKs say, "leaving the body" - is part of what takes place in disaster; experiences of personal spiritual praxis and pain provide a template to understand other, less familiar, losses. This was my broad interest and the overarching theme of my study: how does the spiritual practice of BKs shape their experience of disasters, and the associated physical, social and spiritual needs of their local community? Here, I explore the experience and meaning of death and some of the associated mystical experiences I had during my field research in New York and India.

I begin by introducing Dadi Prakashmani; here, I write about who she was and how I knew her. It was in the context of her life, her life in my life, and her eventual death that the experiences discussed in this chapter occurred. Ultimately I suggest that deep personal experience, properly contextualized within the research environment make a valuable contribution to the way in which we, as ethnographers, position ourselves, immerse

ourselves, write and analyze (writing being a form of analysis) our field experiences and the data gathered therein.

My language periodically shifts from past to present and past again. On reflection, the change in temporal measure indicates how I was dealing with the reality of losing someone I had not yet lost; present, past and present again. My field-note entries are indicated by indented text and the edits are minor. I use them to reconstruct the story of the physical demise, cremation and spiritual transcendence of Dadi. All the names used in the narrative, apart from hers, are pseudonyms.

India

Dadi Prakashmani was the spiritual leader of the Brahma Kumaris from 1969 until her physical death in August 2007. I met her first in 1985 when I was a teenager, and she a woman in her sixties, more commonly known then as Dadi Kumarka. In the early days of the *Yagya* Baba changed the children's names: Rama was renamed Kumarka and, after Brahma Baba's death, Prakashmani. The details of Dadi's life gathered here are from my twenty or so years of knowing her. I confirmed information about Dadi with senior sisters who were culturally and linguistically closer to her than I. Any quotes are things Dadi has said to me personally or has shared in classes where I was present.

Dadi was born by the name of Rama in one of the elite families of the close-knit Bhaiband community in Sindh. The youngest of four daughters, her mother was disappointed as she had desperately wanted a son and felt that misfortune had befallen her. However, her father, an astrologer as well as a businessman, determined at Rama's birth that her life would be one of significant fortune. In her chart he saw that, at a young age, Rama would commit her life to God and to humanitarian work.

The first three daughters were already married when the community of Om Mandli began in the 1930s, but they joined anyway, despite the "severe bondages of marriage." Dadi's

three older sisters all left their husbands to 'come to Baba,' creating uproar in the local Bhaiband community. However, Rama's father also lovingly gave permission for Rama to 'belong to Baba,' as he had expected it already from interpreting her chart fifteen years earlier. Rama's mother also surrendered to Baba, with blessings and permission from her husband. At that time, it was uncommon for the male head of the household to allow any form of freedom for women, let alone the choice to lead a spiritual and chaste life. Given the violence experienced by many other women and children in that North West Indian community (Chander 1981; Radhe 1939), Rama was fortunate.



Figure 37. Rama/Kumarka
(c. 1945)
Source: Photography Department,
Pandav Bhawan, Mount Abu

After joining the community, Rama and her sisters renounced their previously affluent lifestyle and gave small heed, as Dadi Prakashmani told me, to the "customs, systems and castes that existed in the world outside." Everyone in the community did manual work according to their talent, age and capacity. The sisters of the community would sew white cotton cloth into clothes, make shoes out of old rubber tires, and fix and maintain bikes so the brothers could use them to buy vegetables at the market. The brothers also worked in

the garden, which they continue to do today. Dadi Gulzar, now the Co-Administrative Head of the BKWSU, still remembers how to fix a puncture. Dadi Janki, the Administrative Head, still nurses sick people from time to time, and knows how to sew. The young girls and mothers would cook, tailor clothes, iron and teach. The brothers would shop, look after train bookings and undertake various administrative tasks, which at that time involved managing simple accounts and ensuring that all funds were used for charitable purposes according to the spiritual ethics of Brahma Kumaris philosophy. The brothers would also write letters to persons of note, sharing their revelations, in some cases translating the daily realizations of the founder into English. The brothers also drew pictures and posters that were inspired by early visionary experiences of the sisters, (an example of which is on page 115). Dadi had been an integral and cooperative part of the community from the beginning and was a committed student, but it was to her absolute surprise that she eventually took over the leadership from Brahma Baba, the founder. They had never imagined a life without Baba.

On 18 January 1969, the elderly Brahma Baba had been unwell earlier in the evening and called Dadi to his room. It was simple and furnished with a hand-made wooden bed, a woven cotton mattress, a small wooden table and chair. "I had finished dinner and Baba called me to his room. It was after eight o'clock. He was silent for a long time. Then he said 'be viceless, be egoless, be incorporeal'." As he spoke those words, "he held my hand and I felt he willed all his powers to me. As I looked at him, I watched his eyes became distant. They had a very far away look. And then I saw the light slowly disappear from his eyes. I whispered to him, 'Baba… Baba…. Baba…?' His hand became so soft. Then his eyes closed and he was gone."

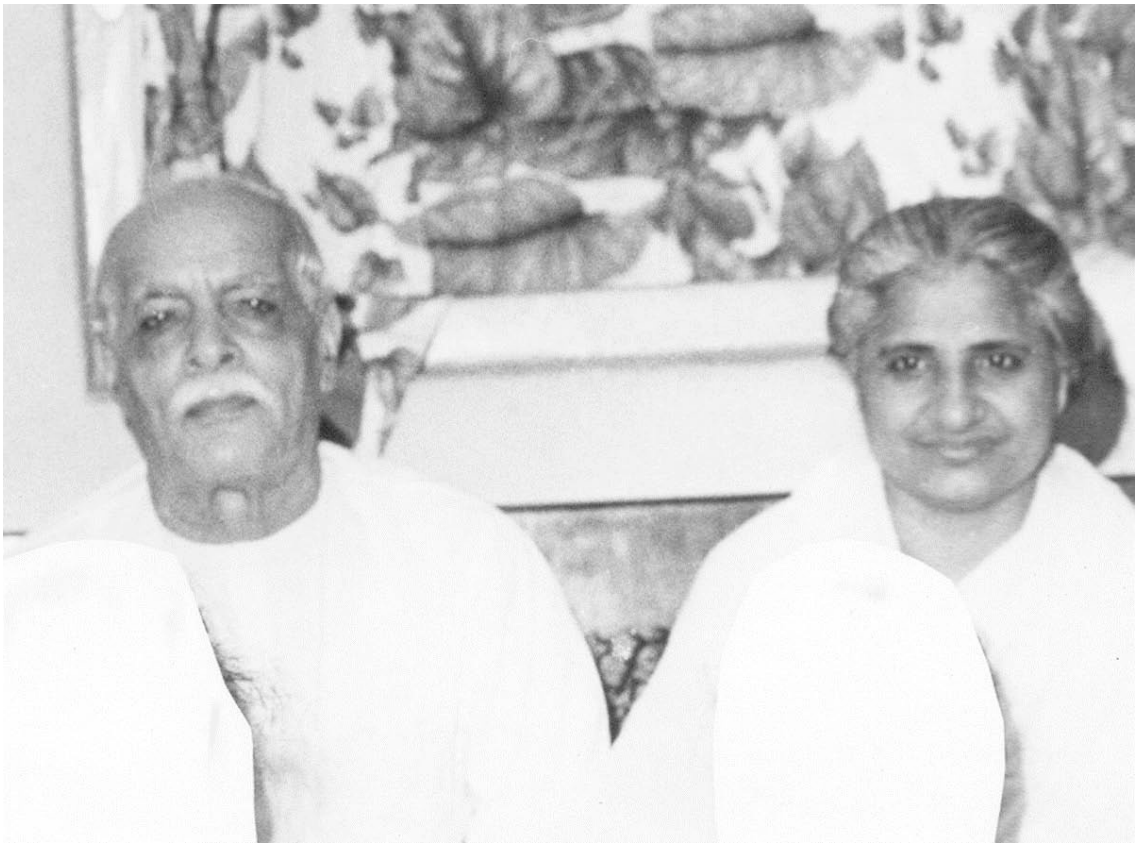


Figure 38. Brahma Baba and Dadi Kumarka (c. 1969)
Source: Photography Department, Pandav Bhawan, Mount Abu

Dadi seemed to take Baba's final teachings as a personal lesson, and embodied them as fully as anyone I have met in the BK family.

New York

Weeks before I arrived to do my field work in New York, a BK sister who had been living in Manhattan moved out of her apartment. I took over the rent-controlled brownstone apartment on the Upper East Side. It sounded impressive, but contrary to the dream I had fashioned in my mind, the five story walk-up building was dull and bare with a strong smell of garbage that, on certain days of the week, stung my eyes. Once I made the journey up the narrow stairwell to the fourth floor, I arrived at a small apartment that was bright and friendly with tree top views, a tiny bedroom and an eat-in kitchen. It was fairly unadorned but was equipped with the essentials – a toaster and a brown betty teapot for physical sustenance, a fold-out futon for guests and a candle for mood. There was gas and

electricity but no phone, so I was delighted to discover a kind neighbor with an open wireless Internet network. It was a comforting link with the world 'outside'. I 'Skyped,' emailed and surfed with gratitude, in between my trips to and from the Brahma Kumaris centre on 5th Avenue mid-town, the Brahma Kumaris New York Headquarters at Long Island, and the United Nations near East 42nd Street at 1st Avenue.

Dadi's wellbeing

Dadi had been unwell for around five years and there had been little change in her condition during that time. There was nothing specifically wrong with her, just a general demise of bodily systems. Dadi's companions and carers would accompany her on regular trips between Madhuban and Mumbai, which is where most of her medical care took place. In her eighties, I knew Dadi would not live forever, although frankly I preferred not to think about it. The global BK community received regular updates from London as to her wellbeing. London is the International Brahma Kumaris Headquarters outside of India, and this centre administers an email circular called *The Rosary.* The Rosary is sent regularly to all centers and individual BKs who have an email address and wish to be part of the list-serve. The content is either authored or approved by senior BKs in London, and it is the main forum of international communication for many BKs, particularly for those in remote areas. The Rosary consists of spiritual classes by Dadis, reports on various spiritual outreach programs, and any news of international BK concern, including Dadi's wellbeing. The regular news that came around about Dadi was always similar – she was in and out of hospital and being taken care of by the best possible doctors. Nothing new.

Morning meditation

I had been in Manhattan for about two months and was getting into a comfortable rhythm of interviewing, wandering, transcribing and observing. My morning routine was set:

> I wake up early, grab my shawl, light a candle and meditate from 4am for about an hour. I then gather what I need for the day and catch the 5:21 downtown bus. After a

short walk across town I stop at the Murray Hill Diner for a bottomless cup of coffee before continuing on my way to the BK Centre for class at 6:30am.

One morning, like any other, I awoke early and sat down for my early morning *amrit velā* meditation. I had just started to feel the familiar sense of peace wash over me when, in a very tangible and not at all other-worldly way, I felt the presence of Dadi Prakashmani, in a way similar to when a guest has arrived in your home, and you walk in the other room for a moment; physically you are alone, yet still aware of your friend's presence. Dadi's company was so tangible that, during my meditation, I looked around a couple of times to see where she was. Sensibly I knew she was not there, but the feeling to look for her was overwhelming because the experience of her company was absolute. Up to then I had not been thinking of her at all. From then on it was difficult not to.

I stayed lost in the residue of that experience as I took my trip downtown to 33rd Street, walked across town to Lexington Avenue and saw the familiar and friendly face of the waiter from the Murray Hill Diner. He was typically overdressed in his crisp white shirt and bow tie, at before six in the morning. I was still holding the cradle of that morning's meditation as we greeted each other. I sat at my green laminate booth on my lavender vinyl bench watching the sun begin to light up the buildings of midtown Manhattan, and I drank my regular coffee. I'm not sure how many cups he poured for me that morning.

The rest of my day occurred as usual, but it was all influenced by the morning's experience of Dadi. As I walked to the centre, I kept people-watching as I am wont to do: the guys in the red caps and white shirts getting their popular hotdog stand ready, people in suits flocking to the smell of fresh bagels and coffee at a familiar street vendor, the constant stream of people entering and exiting Starbucks with their large takeaway coffees, and the shopkeepers hosing down their particular square of pavement that marked their particular patch of business. I said good morning to the guy in the oversized blue shirt who sat on the footpath every morning with his big wet-nosed arthritic dog. We'd been friendly ever since he had alerted me to the stream of personal remnants I was leaving along 5th

Avenue, thanks to the broken zipper on my backpack. The next day I had given him some of my banana cake and our friendship was sealed. I noticed that he still had his carefully placed cardboard sign saying 'please help me eat today' as people in briefcases rushed past – the world of autonomy, the land of "I."

After class, when the morning sun had truly lit up the sky, I spent some time chatting with BKs. I arranged another interview and took the subway uptown to 77th Street, stopping at the local French café for even more coffee, walnut bread and chocolate spread - a necessary start to the day. I bought my fruit from the Spanish street vendor, wandered back home and turned on my computer. Skype opened automatically and I had fifty-nine messages in my inbox. As I watched, more messages arrived, sixty, sixty-one. I went into the other room and changed into comfort clothes. When I returned there were seventy-six, seventy-seven. There was a Skype conference chat about Dadi into which I had been included. I quickly glanced through the messages. I wanted to read everything but also wanted to catch up to the present moment. Many of the messages insisted that Dadi would be okay, she would use her power of purity and meditation to heal herself. But even those convictions had a sense of desperate uncertainty about them. It seemed that Dadi had been admitted to hospital just a few hours earlier following a brain aneurism. There had been no official announcement yet, but there was a sense of urgency in the tenor of the global conversation. She was in critical condition. My experience in the morning now made sense to me. Dadi was visiting people who she had known in life, for a final farewell before her death.

> I have spent five years watching the physical decline of Dadi. I feel a familiar melancholy as I watch the rapid exchange of expressions of love and urgent questioning take place on Skype. I continue to watch and remember.

A cocoon of sentiment

The next day's meditation felt as if the two of us had arranged to meet, unlike the day before when I felt Dadi had searched me out. I continued my day thinking of her. It was like being in a cocoon of silence, a warm blanket.

For years I had known her death was inevitable if not imminent, and for years I mourned the physical changes I saw in her, while simultaneously being gladdened by her ever-increasing spiritual grace and dignity. Recollecting those times, from the distance of my little apartment, I began to understand that in the years preceding her death, I had been trying to grieve my future loss in bite-sized pieces and had felt handicapped by my inability to stop the insistent passage of time that moved everything forward.

The loss was of something greater than simply Dadi. Being witness to the physical decline of Dadi was a constant reminder that the first generation of the *Yagya* was slowly but unfalteringly passing. Those 'original jewels,' as they were commonly called, and with them, the intangible magic and untarnished purity of that time, whether real or imagined, symbolic or actual, was changing. The original jewels connected us with the founder, and Dadi in particular was our trans-generational link that had the ability to bring alive for us the rich moments and silent beauty of those early years.

Telling stories

Dadi would tell us stories in the same way that Baba used to teach them. She would sit on the *gaddi*, a broad padded stool covered in a tailored floor-length white cotton cloth. Instinctively many of us younger ones would come and sit on the floor as near as possible to Dadi, so we could catch the feeling that we knew would be coming as part of the story. The floors were comfortable, as they were covered in light foam padding and overlaid with big sheets printed in traditional Rajasthan designs. When we had all gathered together and stilled ourselves, and were as close as we could possibly be, we would have a few

moments of silence and meditate together, during which Dadi would give us *drishti*. Dadi would sometimes give a barely perceptible nod and a slightly longer blink to signal the end of her *drishti*. Once we were completely melted in a collective experience of belonging, she would tell us about how, when they were little children, Baba would come into their small and unadorned dormitories to say goodnight. He would speak to them as though they were great princesses and princes, as they sat cross-legged on their beds under their mosquito nets. He would tell them of their virtue and wonder and how they would be the guiding lights for the world. These small children would fall asleep feeling like the masters of the universe, the servers of humanity and the helpers of God.

As Dadi told stories, she had the unique ability of being able to take the listeners back to that time so they could feel the truth of it for themselves. As Sabine from Prague said, "It's as if she transmits the feeling to the point where it can be taken up by the soul who is listening, and absorbed. It has a power in it," Suman said:

> Sometimes it feels you can even drink it. It is so soft and liquid and abundant. It becomes something that belongs to the listener. It is no longer exclusively Dadi's virtue or perspective or even attitude, but is an inner state she carries with her and the certainty of it has the power to transmit itself to another.

This is why, as the years passed, I cried as I watched her slowly relinquish the physical world and become different. At those times I would sit in meditation and speak to my mind, as an observer, reminding it of the deeper and eternal spiritual laws that were at work. That would bring me peace. I would often find myself, as the observer of my own grief, reminding myself that death is not terminal. Death is merely a change of scenery for the soul. Souls leave bodies. Ergo, Dadi would not die.

The phenomenon of death

BKs rarely use the word 'death,' because it implies a conclusion. Embodied souls are 'actors' playing different parts through the costumes of different bodies: "All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players. They have their exits and their

entrances; and one man in his time plays many parts" - Jacques in 'As You Like It' (Craig 1954). Each part has a fixed time and place, and after one part is finished, the actor soul leaves the costume body and takes another, playing another part.

> Just as there cannot be an end of the ocean or the sky, so too, this is the imperishable Drama. It is so wonderful! First of all you have to recognize the soul. The imperishable part of 84 births is recorded in such a tiny soul. This is the most wonderful aspect. So many actors simply have all been playing their own part. The soul is imperishable and the Drama too is imperishable; it is predestined. (BapDada 2000a:2)

The stage is the World Drama, and the stage lights are the sun, the stars and the moon. The overarching plot is a classic one of the eternal battle between good and evil, with good ultimately being victorious and everyone receiving liberation and salvation. "Birth to death and birth again, never ending journey, black to white, man to woman, ever changing costume." (Bossert-Ramsay 2003:74)

The phenomenon of death is simple, straightforward, and absolutely unremarkable. Yet it is through the body that one perceives the world. It is through the body and the changes of the body that the soul learns social rules and moral behavior. It is through the body that we create and sustain relationships. It is through the body that each soul develops habits and tendencies that become anchored in cultural and environmental situations, and social, political and religious institutions. It is through the body that the souls is furnished with its assumptive filter (see Chapter Six) or the filter through which it experiences the world as good and bad, right and wrong And it is through the body that the soul experiences life. Without the body, the soul is pure unexpressed consciousness, and the desire to express is inherent within each and every soul. It is through the body that the soul expresses its character. Even the life of a renunciate or ascetic is still action - based on the consciousness of the soul, and performed in relation with the world. Living with the awareness of natural spiritual laws means that as a BK, one endeavors to apply that knowledge so that one does not get so dismayed by the phenomenon of 'death'.

As detailed in Chapter Three, BKs believe in reincarnation. Birth and death occur repeatedly and are, for BKs, little more than a pause or a transition. Yet, although I continue to hold to this philosophy, there is still – as I experienced – a melancholy that can come with the end of someone's 'part.' When a theatre run finishes there is an end of a kind, but one that also gives way to new work and more opportunities. So in some ways a death may be a birth. And it is indeed a new beginning and a continuum of existence, but I would miss Dadi. I would miss her.

Journey to death

19 August until 21 August 2007

For three days in New York, before I flew to India, I felt Dadi's companionship in a natural way, which in itself was strange. Her company was particularly noticeable when I was in meditation. She was vibrantly alive and present. It was as if she had left her body and was travelling around. My relationship with her had been natural and loving, so I felt no need for worshipful meaning or discipular gratification as may occur with the leaders of spiritual communities (Daschke and Michael 2005). Yet the feelings I was having were mystical. In trying to script them, the only word that can come anywhere near touching how I felt was *bhawna*. This is a Hindi word and the closest English equivalent is sentiment, although this is completely inaccurate and qualitatively distinctive. It has been explained to me by BKs who are native Hindi speakers, that *bhawna* contains within it love, belonging, gentle strength, warmth and purity, and is revealed through the face, without the need for overt physical expression. It is based on a deep attitude of care, can be revealed through the eyes and face and communicated with minimal overt expression. It is only ever positive and sustaining. It is a subtle state.

22 August 2007

I knew that her body was vulnerable. I kept hearing and reading – but somehow not believing - that she was better. Now Dadi is on a respirator. The doctors in India say that she is on "bonus time." The heat, life and color of Manhattan have become wan and ashen.

23 August 2007

It is the 23rd.

I have my ticket.

I am leaving for India.



Figure 39. Shantivan campus from a mountain road
Source: unknown

24 August 2007

After a nine hour flight and a four hour drive, I arrive at Talheti, the small town in Rajasthan at the bottom of Mount Abu. Shantivan, the old sugar cane farm, has slowly

transformed into the biggest Brahma Kumaris campus in the world. I enter Gate 1 of the Shantivan village and see the familiar small groups of white clad silent adherents walking, sister with sister, and brother with brother. Gender segregation is normal and expected in the Brahma Kumaris, particularly with the founding principle of celibacy. Shantivan has 6 entry gates, can house 20,000 people, can cook 60,000 meals a day using solar energy, and can house 25,000 people in one hall. Shantivan has a hospital, an automobile repair shop, a medical dispensary, a literature department that sells books, tapes, digital media and kitsch paraphernalia, and a *toli* department where chaste BKs make sweets cooked in remembrance of God, offered to God, and then shared with both BKs and non-BKs as a form of spiritual service. There is a milk department, tea department and vegetable department, a tailoring department, a solar department and a water department. There is a printing press that produces literature to be sent all over India. There are periodicals that have been in circulation for more than 30 years and, in English, now have an international distribution: 'Purity' is published monthly out of the main centre in Delhi and is the most popular, followed by 'World Renewal,' published out of Shantivan. Ten buses that can each hold fifty people are parked in the newly expanded transport department, along with a bunch of BK owned cars and tens upon tens of scooters.

People in white were moving around Dadi's Cottage silently. I added my silent movement to the informal pilgrimage before walking to my room. Winding my way through the village-like streets I took my behavioural cues from those around me. Everything was quiet and restrained, even though I was greeted warmly through the eyes from time to time. *Drishti*. Silence. At the margins of the Shantivan campus was a one bedroom flat. I walked through the swinging fly screen door that led to the patch of grass where we would sleep on woven beds in the hot desert summers. My room was on the middle level of a three story concrete construction. Each room was a twin share with an adjoining bathroom. Both beds were handmade in the carpentry department, with big drawers underneath to house the *rajāis* (cotton quilts in colourful traditional designs) and good

firm mattresses purchased in Ahmedabad. The beige polyester curtains hanging rather stiffly were sewn in the tailoring department, and the bathroom was complete with a fresh towel, a plastic bucket and dipper for bathing. Everything is made at 'home,' and nothing from 'outside'. Home is sacred, outside is taboo (Douglas 2002). I see how easily I accept the division but it makes me feel safe.

> No one is joking or laughing. The atmosphere is tranquil and silent, though not intense. It is meaningful rather, and filled with love and purity and light. It seems as if people are embodying peace and love as they walk around, rather than expressing those qualities in any way. Few are speaking. All move slowly, gracefully and purposely. Perhaps this is the impression given by the soft white flowing material rather than the aesthetic movement of the body. It seems there is no extraneous activity.

Sister Manju, who has been Dadi's constant companion and assistant for the last thirty years, ordered five million bananas today. In India it is understood that when someone dies, the physical atmosphere is one of impurity and so before the burning of the body, and the ritualistic bathing of oneself and the washing of the grounds, the rituals involved in creating pure food are not permitted. Depending on the social customs of their caste, a family may eat only fruit for three days. Manju is preparing for the fasting that we will do after Dadi is gone, although today Dadi is still alive.

> Dadi's body, clad in white cotton, as it has been every day of her spiritual life, is lying in bed attached to a respirator. I meet Manju and we exchange *drishti*. Sister Manju still plaits Dadi's hair every day, despite the fact that Dadi is almost gone. Appearances are important. When I visit Dadi I note how I experience her less now, standing in front of her, than when she had arrived subtly during my meditation in New York.

Leaving the body

25 August, 2007

> Deepak and I are travelling up the mountain this morning. It feels that today will be the day that Dadi will leave us. I don't want to go up but I need to pick up my laundry! I am bringing some photos of Dadi that I have in my little brown photo album - a precious keepsake of some special moments of my spiritual life up to now. I offer to show them to Deepak and he says, "Show me later. The silence is pulling me." I also feel an attraction to remain in silence. The mind wants to be still. I put

> away the photos as I no longer feel like going into stories, no matter how filled with delight, love and sentiment. We are both silent all the way up the mountain.

When we arrived on the mountain, I first went to see a friend of mine who was in the hospital near the main BK ashram. He had had cancer for some years. Sathu was sitting up in bed, supported by pillows. His room had all the natural accoutrements of hospitalization: The bar above the bed with which to pull himself up, a pump bottle of hand sanitizer and chairs for guests, meaningful slogans and pictures of special value stuck on the walls, a walking frame nearby for intrahospital sojourns and - distinctive to BKs - a box of blessings and a separate box filled with *toli*. Every person who came to visit Sathu received from the first box, a small card or slip of paper on which was written a positive uplifting slogan, and from the other box a small sweet. This is a traditional and meaningful exchange among BKs.

Sathu looked weak with little hair, his dear face swollen but still with his beautiful, open and loving expression. As I was sitting with him, getting ready to eat the sacred chocolate he had just placed lovingly in my hand, his mobile phone rang. I leaned over and handed the phone to him. He was quiet for a moment before saying, "oh, okay." He put down the phone. "Dadi left the body."

> I feel peaceful and unchanged. My state of mind seems to remain unaffected. I am already feeling silent inside anyway. I am not drawn to express any grief, rather to go more deeply into silence. Is that a product of the atmosphere and the practice of those around me? Or is this how I will respond when my parents finally pass away? I question whether this is my 'natural' state, whether it has become natural because of my many years of Raja Yoga practice, or whether the collective significance of this event is buoying me in its wake.

I decided that a good place to be was in Baba's room in Pandav Bhawan. Since Baba left the body in 1969, the room where Baba lived has been used solely for meditation. I arrived at Pandav Bhawan and wondered if I was the first to know. Nothing that I could see had changed. Everyone was going about his or her normal duties. A brother in the little cabin at the entrance to the courtyard said, "Sister, Dadi left the body."

> Here I am in lovely silent Madhuban, where there is hardly anyone present. I wonder if I am the first person to sit in Baba's room after the news of Dadi's passing. I begin remembering Dadi and the scenes I had lived with her. I become teary as I recollect them. The chocolate, still in the palm of my hand, melts.

I felt that *bhawna* again, and I felt at the time that I could easily come out of the *bhawna* and into a powerful yogi stage where death was birth and birth was death and the time and space of the body would have little significance. This *bhawna* felt almost like a hypnotic state because it was one I could not exit. Actuality I could have, but I did not want to. The choice was there but I did not seek out that choice. Now, writing, I just feel emotional. I note the difference.

The body and the stage

I have returned to Shantivan at the bottom of the mountain. For the last two nights I have dreamed of Dadi, off and on, all night. Yesterday morning I woke up at 2:30am. Today at 1:45am. It's now 3:50am. Even my sleep was not like sleep. Being a deep sleeper through my life, I was interested at my experience of sleep that was more like restful meditation. I felt like I was lying slightly above the mattress, not sinking into it as I did back home. I awoke more alert and felt more rested, yet slept less deeply. I think about where I am going. I am walking across to where BKs are gathered together for a yoga *bhatti*. A furnace of love was burning for Dadi.

> I just returned from Diamond Hall where there is a constant all night *bhatti* with Dadi's body in a long glass refrigerated box positioned on centre stage.

Diamond Hall was so called in celebration of the Brahma Kumaris sixty year diamond jubilee since the official beginning of the *Yagya*. At the inauguration Dadiji had said that "the name is to remind all who enter that the soul is an invaluable diamond and to remain in that true consciousness of self. To always remain in your elevated self respect."

When I walked down for meditation at 2am I expected to see few people there. The front third was full and all the chairs were taken. Luckily, being so huge, there was plenty of room at the back of the hall on the floor.

2:10pm

The subtle and invisible but abundant powers of love and silence make other normally invisible things become visible. I can see the quiet reverence and unity between everyone. People are hardly speaking at all, and there are thousands here. But it is absolutely silent. I have seen that people are speaking less and meeting through the eyes more.

I am suddenly exhausted.

5:30pm

I woke up late at about half past five, and the ever-smiling brother from Orissa made me a mug of *chai*, that wonderful spiced Indian tea. He used buffalo milk, strong tea from Assam, refined sugar and ginger.

As I am walking to help the buffalo milk digest, I see brother Cannon. He reminds me that there is a meeting in one of the meeting rooms called 'Dadiji's meeting room' with some of the senior sisters. When I arrive there are lots of old BKs who are dear friends. We all meet together and relate stories about Dadi. It is supposed to be an hour. Two and a half hours later we all go to have our dinner of milk, apples and bananas.

8:30pm

There is more meditation. Dadi's body is still on stage in Diamond Hall. Sisters sit to the left of the stage, and brothers to the right. There are stairs on each side of the stage stretching sideways into the audience. There are also stairs up the centre, but they are reserved for seniors who sit on the front couches in the audience. Nothing of this is said, but it is clearly understood. The rear of the stage is filled with flowers, and the other Dadis and senior brothers are sitting on beige vinyl couches. Made by the Shantivan carpentry department, each couch holds four people comfortably. In front of them are handmade wooden tables, covered in lace cloths on which are placed stainless steel cups of water covered with plastic flowered lids. Dadi's body is in a cool box, there is dim lighting and people clad in white are silently paying their respects by walking up the stairs onto the stage where the body and the box are positioned centre stage, strewn with flowers. Each BK stops and stands in silence, before continuing to the other side of the stage and returning down the stairs into the audience. Sisters come up one side, and brothers the other. Some people stop to greet the other senior Dadis as they exit. Most continue to walk by. There is extraordinary order and precision here. Ascending the stairs to the left of the stage with Sister Ludmilla, a long-term friend from Northern Europe, I feel a little trembly. I pull my *sari* around my shoulders to cover my body, to show the audience my respect for Dadi. I am aware that there are constant social messages being communicated despite my yearning for a moment of private remembrance.

Nothing in India is private. The culture is a collective one, and as I ascend the stairs I begin to muse about my own actions, done for the benefit of others who I know are watching me. Culture is the expression of inner sentiments and understandings through language, food, clothes and customs surrounding beliefs about nature and 'the way things are.' It controls relationships and the conduct of these relationships and the boundaries around them. Culture offers systems of agreement and disagreement about the workings of the ordinary day that are bound in processes of time and place, and conducted by people. It also determines what is collectively important to the people of that culture. These are standards, and they become the yardstick by which tradition, change and history are negotiated and conferred.

All this went through my mind as I demonstrated my modest respect for Dadi and status as a *pukka* BK. All achieved with a simple movement of my arm, as I wrapped the end of my *sari* around my shoulder.

> I stop at Dadi's body. Her face is so peaceful. A tilak of sandalwood paste has been placed in the centre of her forehead, garlands of marigolds surround her head and torso, and the body has been sprayed with rose water. Dadi Gulzar, one of the three main Dadis (and the corporeal instrument for BapDada) calls me over. I kneel next to her so we can be at the same level. She says in her sweet accented English "Tamasin, you okay?" I was until then. Somehow despite my meager attempt at observational distance this evening, I start to come undone. I put my head in her lap, sigh heavily and weep. "I miss Dadi." Gulzar Dadi pats me lovingly and says, "Be clean and clear. Past is Past. Remember Baba." Still kneeling with Ludmilla standing beside me, I look at Gulzar. She says again, as she touches me in the centre of my forehead, "Remember Baba."

The sacrifice of fire

27 August 2007

Today *murli* class went on as usual. Nothing, absolutely nothing, interferes with morning class. Ever. There are no 'days off,' no matter what happens. The disciplinary standard is absolute. *Murli* finished at just before 8am, after which various people paid respects to Dadiji, walked up the stairs to the microphone placed in the corner of the stage and sang

devotional songs in her honor, most especially written for this occasion. As this was going on, the Dadis and others who were closest to Dadiji were preparing the body. It was removed from its cool box and readied for the funeral pyre. That happened awkwardly as the brothers struggled with the physical weight and intangible strangeness of maintaining dignity; lifting a load, and keeping events meaningful. I found myself mourning the loss of her body from its cool box too. It had been there for three days. I had become used to it.

> There were many areas of grassy lawn throughout Shantivan, where people would commonly gather in small groups, chat with each other, drink tea, and unwrap little folded newspaper packets of sweet and salty snacks, offering them to each other. Few were doing that today, however. The heat was becoming stifling.

The cremation took place on the centre-most lawn outside Diamond Hall. The carpentry department had built a three-foot platform; upon this lay a foundation of thick branches, pieces of tree trunk and bunches of sandalwood. On this new bed, Dadi would be placed. Although it was just the body and all BKs understand it is just the costume, the shell, the temporary hut of the soul, it felt to me like she still had a cellular presence in the world, and I loved the cells that housed her as well as the soul that is her. The body was placed upon the platform with a clunky grace. The brothers who had looked after her in life now arranged her death. Dressed in their white *kurtas* (traditional pant suit) that were already soiled with the labor of carrying her and readying the platform, they placed branch upon branch, lot upon lot, and layer upon layer of wood, sandalwood and flowers.

By the time Sarah, Ludmilla and I arrived at the cremation ground within the Shantivan campus, there were thousands of mothers and sisters, who had arrived from all over India, trying to get to the plastic chairs at the front, or to sit on the large sheets carefully placed on the grass in front of the cremation site. It had become perilous. The three of us went here and there and every which way, trying to find a way through to the cremation site. I could feel the weight of everyone's bodies pushing me forward, while the hedges to the left of us that bordered the garden were bending at a precarious angle. This physical pressure made everything feel even more hot and humid.

As I am looking around at the scene, I see what appears to be a tall cherry picker. It is a platform that has been especially built for film crews. The death of Dadi Prakashmani was big news in India and all the major television stations had arrived. It was gauche to see moments that were so personal to me, and to others whom I knew, being recorded by strangers as a matter of social significance. For us, it was just that our Dadi had died. I watch the filming, and I notice that the act of observing everything helps me to take power from the circumstances and to not get caught in the emotion that keeps beckoning.

I try to see myself as an observer, to view myself as Other. What am I doing? How do I understand what is happening? I see that I am experimenting with using the *bhawna* that is sitting within me, as a method to protect me from sadness. Being in a state of *bhawna* helps me not to feel constricted or bound by socially dictated ideas around death as a situation of sorrow.

This is one of the tensions that BKs live with, and I observed my tension. The effort for BKs is to take whatever benefit is inherent in the situation - and one must sometimes work to find it – and to exploit it completely so that the feeling of labor or tension melts and the experience of benefit adds to the soul's store of virtue and power. I make the mind quiet and still, and fill myself with the experience of feeling, not thinking. *Bhawna.* I wonder what the result will be. Then I let go of needing to know. And then I feel at peace.



Figure 40. Dadi Prakashmani's cremation (inset shows her closest companions)
Source: http://www.liveindia.com/news/dadi_p3.jpg

The cremation of Dadi's body is an experience that I feel pushing and pulling at everything I am and everything I wish to be. Seeing hundreds, thousands of people from India, with a sprinkling of foreign faces, walking in silence. Hearing the flicker of flames, the gentle breathing of those around me and the swish of white on white material.

> We are sitting close to the funeral pyre. It is so hot and still and humid. I have never experienced heat like this before. We are also sitting directly in the sun. I am trying to shade myself with the edge of my five and a half metre white sari. This one is polyester.

Trish commented that it was as if we were all collectively sharing the experience with Dadiji, as much as was possible. Ludmilla concurred. It added to the beauty and unity of the event. This is Dadi's legacy. When she was alive she made everyone feel as one, and in her death she was doing the same. In other circumstances it would have been physically uncomfortable; everything was steady and still, the humidity was languorous. The only movement was the sweat that dripped and ran and flowed down our bodies. The pyre was still and solid. It was framed and mounded with layers of wood, sandalwood, flowers and incense, more wood and sandalwood, flowers and incense. Ghee was added too, to purify the atmosphere. Dadi's closest companions were standing beside her literally, as were we virtually. With so many thousands of people, there was no shifting with discomfort because of the heat. There was no expression of discomfort anywhere. As far as I could tell, there was only silence and *bhawna*.

> Those closest to Dadi and a few token foreigners are walking up to the platform and draping the body in marigolds and sandalwood, pouring ghee, adding incense sticks.

People spoke in order of seniority, yet no matter the position of the one who was speaking, everyone became a child in front of the grace of Dadi. Her companions spoke tearfully about how they looked after Dadi's body with such care and for so long, and now they are forced to sacrifice it to the fire.

> All I can hear is the noise of still heat and the rhythmic sound of rapid inhalations.

I looked around and all the Hindi speaking sisters were weeping silently. Odd I thought. No one was crying as I have understood crying, but there were tears streaming down every face I saw. Hundreds. Rows and rows of young female faces streaming hot wet tears of love and loss. The sisters were in tears, but it was weeping that was so contained and filled with such regard and unity. Grace. The tears, and the heat and the humidity and the fire, all seemed to add to the ghee and the incense and the garlands. The brothers who

were caretakers of the cremation then stacked more wood on the body, until it was absolutely covered. It was such a beautifully layered fire - platform, wood, body, garlands, sandalwood, flowers, incense, wood, ghee, and more wood.

I did not see who lit the first match and set the fire. It would have been the right person though - either the subsequent spiritual head of the Brahma Kumaris, the senior-most brother, or the closest companion.

> Slowly the wood is starting to burn. Those on the platform are walking around the body in a formal procession, out of deep respect it seems, and then exiting.

Later, an Indian brother whispered to me that it is customary practice during cremation rituals for saints, that their closest companions walk three times completely around the funeral pyre before leaving.

> People are coming up every now and then adding something to the fire. It feels as though everyone is adding something. I am adding my old ways of being. I feel like I am there with her. I surprise myself by becoming aware of the beauty of *satī*[31] - the ideal of being still and sacrificing the self in a display of absolute love and loyalty. This scene feels like the true and original *satī*, where one sacrifices what needs to be overcome or transcended in the self, so that one can become free.

Perhaps this was the true sati, before it became corrupted through time and became an act of externally enforced sacrifice and culturally imposed duty. This atmosphere was sacred and filled with significance.

> I am opening myself to God and to the legacy of Dadi and sacrificing my self once more. One sacrifices oneself many times in many different ways on a spiritual path. Even as the pyre is burning, the atmosphere is so still that the smoke is going directly upwards and not touching anyone. There is no wind at all. It is completely still. It feels like Dadi's love for us. She lived in a state of absolute and complete non-violence, to the point where – even in death – she would not bring the slightest harm to another.

Then it was all over. The body was gone. The fire kept burning. Sitting there in the extraordinary heat, still trying to shade myself from the merciless sun with a pathetic

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[31] Sati is a traditionally a woman's act of sacrificing herself (voluntarily or involuntarily) upon the funeral pyre of her deceased husband. The practice is now illegal in India, but still performed in some tribal areas.

metre of the *sari* that I had worn in Dadi's honor, I reflected on everything that had happened so far. While we were melting and the fire was burning, I remember thinking that surely after this, the rain would come and cool everything off. The monsoon season was over, but still I felt it would rain. Dadi had such regard for nature and the elements that I was certain that the rain would come. Absolutely everything was holding meaning for me that day (Frankl 1978). This was a magic time after all. It seemed only fitting that the elements would serve and honor her as they bid her farewell.

After the cremation

After a funeral it is customary for everyone who attended to remove the impurity of the scene by bathing. Once the body had been cremated, everyone left the funeral pyre, returning to their rooms or dormitories (sisters with sisters, mothers with mothers, brothers with brothers, families with families) to cleanse themselves. As I was pouring water over myself with the dipper from the bucket in my bathroom, a cool breeze filtered through window. I stood there feeling the breeze on my face, grateful. Then the rain came. Gentle, steady rain. And everything was washed clean and made cool. I felt this was a natural law and the return of Dadi's respect for the five elements. They were serving her transcendence.

About twelve of us had lunch together, the first meal in three days for many of us. It was welcome although no one I spoke to, including me, had ever felt hungry or tired during the last few days.

Today Shantivan holds more importance for me, and Pandav Bhawan is an historical place. Perhaps now that Shantivan has been made sacred because of holding this significant event, it will be more meaningful for me and perhaps for other BKs. Shantivan is not Pandav Bhawan, the original Madhuban, the special place on the mountain, but meaning is not born only on mountains.

The anthropology of *bhawna*

Reflecting on the above experiences as an ethnographer, emotions and states of feeling are problematic for traditional social scientific theory because they cannot easily be manipulated into a clear theoretical school of thought. There have been significant changes over the last twenty years with an unambiguous appreciation of the role of the researcher and disorder of social research. Yet emotions, feelings and specifically sentiment do not comfortably fit into either the biological or socio-cultural sides of anthropological theory (Leavitt 1996). The legacy of previous generations of social scientists has left an impression that it is the explicit and cognitive that is valid, sidelining the implicit, intuitive, emotive and emotional. This ultimately results in a slightly one-eyed gaze in the way in which we conduct social research.

The literature on the anthropology of emotion and feeling exists, however most theorists have generally taken one of two positions (Leavitt 1996; Lutz and White 1986; Nelson 1987): that emotion is a result of biology (Fuller 2007), an embodied state related to evolutionary theory, or that emotions are socio-cultural constructions (Jain 1994) and so produced by, and exist because of, an individual's relationship with the social world. Personal descriptions of emotion (Lupton 1998) differ from embodied feelings that have strong physical effects, to the most central aspect of ontology. Feeling is born from the 'soul' or somewhere deeper than – although affecting – the mind and heart. It is a mixture of everything that comes from being human. There are gender differences too, as men understand emotions as physiology and see it as distinct from reason, whereas women are more likely see it as a complex state that is not easily separated from other components of life and experience (Lupton 1998).

I reluctantly wish to discuss the embodied state of my experience of *bhawna*. Reluctantly, because although BK philosophy accepts the body as the chariot through which the soul expresses and experiences life, including emotions, the value of the body is incomparable

to that of the soul. This dilemma needs to be muddled through though. I understand and accept that I am a soul - I am a spiritual being born into a body in Australia. My socialization and enculturation are distinctly Australian, my choice to undertake anthropology, the social and political perspective of my youth, being brought up by my mother, and being part of a spiritual community who places women in front are all vital to who I am, yet secondary to my existence as a soul.

During my fieldwork in India, I focussed on the experience of others whilst attempting to maintain my participant status and observer role in a state of soul consciousness. It was not my intention to be drawn repeatedly into that altered state best described as a state of sentiment or *bhawna*. However, social research is known for offering up surprises in the field. This was mine and, as it was such a subterranean experience, I suspect it has affected the personal lens through which I am learning to be an anthropologist. As such, and as part of fulfilling the academic requirement of rigor, critical ethnography (Anderson 2006), and my personal character trait of curiosity, I explore it.

The energy of bhawna

"The greatest service you can do is through your face," Dadi used to say. Embodied and expressed inner states of *bhawna* are written on the face and illuminated through the eyes. *Bhawna* is an underlying feeling that creates this embodied state, as distinct from the action that brings it about. Sentiment, as it is used in English, can be a thought or idea based on a feeling or emotion. It can be more intellectual. *Bhawna* however has no intellectual component; it comprises feelings that are authentic and lasting, in contrast with emotional, cultural or social expressions of momentary feelings in the mind. *Bhawna* sits outside of the deterministic definitions of irrational and rational and I place it in the field of arational – where the methods used to define rationality are invalid.

During the week of Dadi's death, the feelings I experienced, as well as those I witnessed in others, were rarely emotional and conspicuous. Although Dadi was a woman, as were her closest companions, as am I and as is the majority of the Brahma Kumaris membership, its leaders almost exclusively female, the masculine containment required to be *pukka* dominates accepted behaviour. I felt emotion beckon at times, and I did watch as Sister Nalina spilled out into an emotional state, embracing me as part of her response. It was permitted, but not encouraged. Few responded. This was a surprise, because after being with thousands of BKs over almost a week, I had not witnessed fervent displays of emotion. I felt the tugging power of Nalina's emotion, which was almost contagious, but I stayed in the state of *bhawna*. I remained contained. This felt more like an empowered internal state, generated perhaps because of leading a reflective and spiritual life. That one instance demonstrated clearly the difference between *bhawna* and emotion in the world of BKs. Similarly, when I was on the stage, Dadi Gulzar pulled me back from being emotional into a state of *bhawna* on the basis of her own spiritual practice which is the same as all BKs learn, "Be soul conscious, remember Baba." It is the socially created, individually expressed and mutually affirmed state of spiritual accuracy. *Bhawna,* but no emotion.

Emotion has an important role in human lives (Lupton 1998), but it is more like a hook or a lasso, that is, something that comes from outside the self and pulls at something inside the heart. It is not just expressed through the body; there is an internal embodied force that takes you with it. BKs appear to seek purity, spiritual fortune and a good karmic record rather than being drawn into states of expressed and extrovert happiness. Extroversion can, it is believed, lead to overt acts of celebration and unsuppressed emotion, such as often found in Western cultures (Smith-Lovin 1989). The Indian understanding of happiness is more contained and reserved and suggests that if one is refined and uses the emotional self to work towards a state of self-refinement, this can release one from the suffering involved in reincarnation and move one towards a state of spiritual transcendence (Leavitt 1996). Emotions and emotional states are considered

moral events, rather than just expressions of self or random inner states of the Western and, in particular American, highly celebratory and unsuppressed expressions of happiness.

Bhawna on the other hand is a gentle and powerful energy that invites you to accompany her. *Bhawna* offers a gentle invitation. It is the ideal of the contained woman. Emotion pulls at a hidden state of discomfort that is already inside the self and threatens the boundaries of accuracy. BKs aim to transcend this discomfort with spiritual understanding, 'be soul conscious,' and the power of meditation, 'remember Baba,' without dismissing or suppressing feelings that arise. *Bhawna* is created from internal responses to external events that enter into the mind and the heart, and build meaning over time.

BKs practice soul consciousness that involves transcending the senses and internal states dictated by the body. Yet the body is vital to producing feelings, which BKs still desire in meditation, albeit transcendent, subtle and spiritual ones. Soul consciousness is what – perhaps – allows feelings to stay managed and turn into *bhawna* rather than emotion. The full regalia of external expression are not manifest (Durkheim 1971; Olaveson 2001). Rather the feelings are managed internally and then co-created with others who are performing the same internal management. Affirmed communally, rituals of *bhawna* such as offering food to Dadi after she died, fasting, partaking in the cremation, the subsequent ritual cleansing, sitting in collective meditation are the ways in which *bhawna* is expressed through the social body of this spiritual community. However these forms of expression rarely involve repetition, given the rarity of such occasions, and given the BK focus on both inner and outer silence (Whitehouse 2005).

For years, the stories that Dadiji would tell us every time we went to Madhuban created the internal edifice of *bhawna.* It seems to be a way of using authentic feelings to bring peace in the mind, rather than letting emotion dictate how the mind will be. The heart can

then be triggered by an event such as death, so that the *bhawna* comes alive and fills the mind with feeling, but without the uncontrolled grabbing sensation of emotion. Emotion can be brought to life in a moment, but *bhawna* is stimulated only by a meaningful event that digs beneath whatever is happening on the surface of the mind and in the mind-keeper's world to the deeper layers of the soul. *Bhawna* is not just emotion blended with the tempering power of history, although one could be forgiven for thinking so. History alone can be a journey of the intellect. *Bhawna* is a journey of the self or soul that sits at the centre of mind, intellect and personality, but takes place through stories, memories and history. The energy of *bhawna* is more powerful and all encompassing than emotion, which takes you for a ride and then spits you out at the end, exhausted.

The parallel between the two is that both *bhawna* and emotion bypass or supersede the conscious mind. The difference is that emotion becomes involuntarily expressed, whereas *bhawna* takes the soul into 'state'. But although *bhawna* may bubble over and become more expressive, the state of *bhawna* tends to be inward travelling: *bhawna* spontaneously creates tracks on which the mind is compelled to move while travelling. It is not that one is bound by it. One can remove oneself from a state of *bhawna* by engaging with the outside world in the present moment, but it must be a purposeful removal. One must have a clear aim of exiting the state, because the field of *bhawna* is firm and one cannot easily push through it. For three days before leaving for India, Manhattan city with all of its color, life and personalities, could not penetrate my state of *bhawna*. Emotion, unlike the state of *bhawna*, is an involuntary ride: good or bad, you are on for the duration. Emotion will take you where it will, until the ride is over.

Bhawna holds you with love, grief, beauty and wonder in a state of profound energy. It does not want to let you go. It lets you go about your day-to-day life but *bhawna* wants to hold you to herself in a maternal embrace. *Bhawna* holds the sign 'lest we forget'. It can

stimulate the process of healing and moving through grief, recollecting, remembering and revising moments that are significant and meaningful.

During my time in the field, I travelled the rich and sometimes uncomfortable path between emic and etic forms of engagement and analysis. From where I sit now, I see that each is as important as the other. I certainly do not advocate complete immersion to the exclusion of distance, nor do I recommend the reverse. However, as a student in the final stages of writing, my job is to author myself into my work and to be clear without apology. Through this I hope to ensure transparency and clarity in relationship with my data, and hopefully contribute something worthwhile to the study of ethnographic methods and the theory that our scholarly community is collectively building.

I argue that just as it is important to sometimes break things apart and isolate them from their contextual and holistic form (such as line-by-line coding in Grounded Theory) in order to understand some of the deeper components that build meaning and theory, so it is equally important to lose yourself in the field at some point in order to understand the totality of a perspective. The time to do that will likely be dictated by the natural pull/ push that exists in any ethnographic study (Hall and Callery 2001). It is an act of courage to fall into the field experience absolutely, lose all apparent 'objectivity' and allow oneself to be completely taken by the experience. There are times to discuss and times to analyze, times to converse and times to stay silent, and there are most certainly times to get lost. As researchers we rarely permit ourselves this pleasure, given the fear of being out of control that can often happen at the most ordered of times, in all stages of the research process.

Anthropology still has its foundation in the distant observation of Others, and that legacy will always be with us to some degree. That distance offers us the emollient of properness. However, it is a little like falling in love; who on earth would want to analyze and maintain distance during those short precious and limited moments of new love and new experience? What value would distance and analysis be at the time that the embodied

feelings and unusual and interesting states are calling? Analysis comes later. It is important, but later.

Emotion is a valid form of analysis and scholarly inquiry because, although it feels like a personal, intimate and invisible story, the experience is only extant because of the social world that has produced it. It is a form of embodied sociality (Lyon and Barbalet 1994). Emotion is a bridge between private feelings and public moralities (Scheper-Hughes 1998).

Nelson (1987) discusses the difficulty of using methods born from Enlightenment to explore mystical experiences that people had long before this period, as well as people's experience in different cultural, intellectual and faith settings. I suggest that Enlightenment methodologies are not a suitable fit for the study of human experience. Romanticism rejected the rationalism of Enlightenment and emphasized subjectivity, creativity and the primacy of the individual. These approaches were born at similar times in history and, as Nelson notes, while "concepts that have originated out of the pattern of thought of Western civilization may prove very useful when analyzing the culture in which they arose, (they) may distort totally the social reality of other cultures" (13). However, the New Romanticism (Solomon 1994:14-15) does not separate reason and emotion, but rather positions them as a way in which to properly understand the self and others (Rinpoche 2005). They are the soul of our existence. For BKs *bhawna*, which must ultimately be defined as an internal embodied form of feeling, provides an anchor and form of maturity and wisdom to lived experience. These dichotomous debates in the literature between methods and theories that distinguish the rational or intellectual from the irrational or emotional, the body from the mind, and biology from culture, suggest that even more bridge building through ethnography and anthropological theory is required.

Experiences that are brought on by existential moments such as life, death, or other immediate changes that disaster can bring about, may take people into different states of

consciousness that do not necessarily fit into our ordered criteria of mental health, grief, or joy and general wellbeing. If we are to learn from the more elusive elements of human experience that, while not unfathomable, certainly take courage and dexterity to speak about in the academic field, as social scientists we must become flexible with our criteria of measuring and validating human experience.

Always when we attempt to bind things in language there is a loss in the translation, particularly when it comes to the spiritual, mystical or religious. However, by continuing to encourage current and future generations of social scientists to articulate their personal and subjective experiences, and offer a forum that recognizes these experiences as a worthwhile contribution to social scientific data and methods, we will be rewarded with deeper understanding of people.

Chapter Five Declaration by Candidate

The following chapter is based on 'Changing a Mountain to a Mustard Seed,' scheduled to appear in the *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, January 2010. The nature and extent of my contribution to the work was as follows:

Nature of contribution	**Contribution (%)**
Data collection, writing of the main text, incorporating co-authors suggestions and recommendations, editing and revising.	80%

The following co-authors contributed to the work.

Name	**Nature of contribution**
Lenore Manderson	Supplemented main text with broad anthropological theory. Refined the language of the text. Made important suggestions about the development of the argument and structure of the article.
Wendy Smith	Supplemented main text with knowledge about new religious movements. Restructured text and streamlined the discussion.

Candidate's Signature [redacted]

Declaration by co-authors

We the undersigned hereby certify that:

- The above declaration correctly reflects the nature and extent of the candidate's contribution to this work, and the nature of our contribution as co-authors.
- We meet the criteria for authorship in that we have participated in the conception, execution, or interpretation of the work on the basis of our field of expertise;
- We take public responsibility for our part of the publication, except for the responsible author who accepts overall responsibility for the publication;
- We acknowledge minor adjustments, additions and deletions so this chapter suits the larger body of work in this thesis, including changing 'we' to 'I';
- There are no other authors of the publication according to these criteria;
- Potential conflicts of interest have been disclosed to (a) granting bodies, (b) the editor or publisher of journals or other publications, and (c) the head of the responsible academic unit; and
- The original data are stored at the following location(s) and will be held for at least five years from the date indicated below: December 2007.

Location(s) Social Science and Health Research Unit, School of Psychology, Psychiatry and Psychological Medicine, 4th floor, Building F, Monash University, Caulfield East, 3145. Australia.

Lenore Manderson [redacted]

Wendy Smith [redacted] 11 September 2009

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Chapter 5

From a Mountain to a Mustard Seed: 11 September 2001

A mountain of pain
Becomes a ball of cotton
Serving through the mind

The confusion that follows disaster can threaten identity and rapidly undo people's sense of who they are and where they belong. The destruction of the Twin Towers of the World Trade Centre in New York on 11 September 2001 was one event that precipitated self-examination once the immediacy of the disaster had passed. In this chapter, I explore how BKs, based in centres in New York, apply spiritual knowledge to understand suffering. Drawing on primary Brahma Kumaris texts and ethnographic data from field research conducted in 2007, I illustrate how the spiritual knowledge and practices of BKs uniquely shape their perspective on catastrophic events.

Suffering is a routine dimension of human existence. Its experience is moderated by social, structural and geographic factors, most of which are outside individual control. Various scholars have written compelling accounts of the ways in which, in every society, people seek to prevent, ameliorate, bypass and deny suffering through ritual acknowledgement, risk avoidance and various preventive behaviours (Das 1995; Das et al. 2001; Farmer 2004; Kleinman, Das, and Lock 1997; Scarry 1987; Scheper-Hughes 1998). Belief systems, devotional practices and related spiritual technologies are vehicles that help people to cope with and to make sense of suffering. People find meaning through specific ideologies of causality, and reassurance through the ritual practices that symbolize and reinforce them.

Suffering pervades disaster, a catastrophic event that overwhelms local communities' capacity to respond. In such circumstances people draw on spiritual practices and formal religions for solace (Koenig 2007a), leading to increasing interest in the role of faith-based organizations in supporting their members and others post-disaster (de Silva 2006; Jayasinghe 2007; Spencer and Archer 2008). Different faiths and sects bring distinctive perspectives to disasters and other forms of suffering. My interest is the Brahma Kumaris, and how BKs harness their own suffering and transform it, through specific spiritual practices and ideas, to rewrite a coherent sense of self. I will illustrate that disaster and suffering have unique meanings for BKs.

Disasters are usually experienced as abrupt singular events. However, anthropologists and other social scientists have unveiled many of the hidden systems of disaster (Hoffman 2005; Oliver-Smith 1999c; Quarantelli 1989) as well as their psychological processes (Wallace 1956). Disaster does not happen without cause, but rather, as a progressive phenomenon involving social structures and political, environmental and economic decisions that are embedded in communities over time. Disasters undermine people's sense of stability and certainty, and the rightness and perceived predictability of life. Manifesting through abrupt changes in the physical environment and the social world, people are stripped of their access to material goods and to familiar personal ties, and the usual ebb and flow of everyday life is dramatically disrupted. Some populations are uniquely vulnerable to disaster because of geographic, economic or historical factors, but no-one, including members of affluent middle class populations, is exempt. The geography of Manhattan Island, with its limited escape routes and high population density, is an example of this, as one research participant reflected: "There was nowhere to go, you couldn't get off the island." (Mark)

Disaster destabilises at multiple levels, leaving a raw emptiness and a disabling openness; seemingly without reason, people lose families, homes and livelihoods, and the meanings

associated with these are shattered (Scott 1997; Dyer and McGoodwin 1999; Hoffman and Oliver-Smith 1999; Oliver-Smith 1999a; Scheper-Hughes 2005), using inner responses that are 'neither neatly categorized nor straightforward' (Gerrity and Flynn 1997:109). These changes lead people to question their identity and purpose in life. 'Who am I?' becomes starkly and uncomfortably relevant.

Before proceeding, I wish to clarify my terminology regarding spirituality and religion, since I traverse the two (Koenig 2007, Tacey 2004, Zwissler 2007). The conventional distinction is that religions are social institutions that involve relations of power, systems of knowledge in the form of doctrines and theologies, and ritual behaviours demonstrated through institutional harbors such as churches, temples and mosques. By contrast, spirituality refers to private, internal processes that are negotiated and narrated by the self, sometimes within or through religion, sometimes despite religion or in its absence. While religions traditionally require conformity from their believers, spirituality frequently manifests in different forms of experience and expression; although it tends to unfold in a religious context, it embraces diversity (Pargament and Mahoney 2002). In many cases the basic tenets of a given religion provide meaning to the specifics of disaster, as well as the strength to cope with its fallout of suffering. How much of this relates to an individual's spiritual strength in the context of a religious framework remains a question.

Among BKs, it is important that the ethereal, the internal and invisible become immediate, obvious, tangible and useful. The Brahma Kumaris offers its members prescribed ways to experience the spiritual world in the midst of their daily lives. Brahma Kumaris teachers embrace four disciplines: *gyān* (knowledge), *yoga* (meditation), *dharnā* (virtuous inculcation) and *seva* (service). As I discuss below, knowledge is the understanding of fundamental spiritual truths as understood by BKs, and meditation is the means by which BKs can reflect on those truths and enable their manifestation in different states of consciousness. *Dharnā* is the act of demonstrating, in one's life, peace, power and virtues

as obtained through knowledge and meditation. Service brings together the first three in a way that can bring peace, power and happiness to others. These disciplines offer BKs balance between a life of contemplation and a life of self-directed action, but at the same time, BKs enjoy considerable autonomy, and for this reason, refer to themselves as spiritual rather than religious. Even so, the Brahma Kumaris is tightly organized and rule-bound, and certainly fits with any definition of a religion, with its scriptures, rituals and criteria for membership. In this context, I illustrate the personal responses of BK in New York in the days following the collapse of the WTC, and describe how the philosophy of *seva* provided a framework for outreach,

Research methods

This chapter draws on participant observation conducted between August and December 2007 with the BK community in New York State. The community includes BKs from North America, South America, India, The United Kingdom, Russia and the Ukraine, the Philippines and Lebanon. Most were living in New York and were associated with Brahma Kumaris centres in Manhattan, Long Island or Queens at the time of the WTC collapse on September 11, 2001. I augment recollections of their experiences of 11 September with an analysis of *murlis,* key philosophical texts that are held in high esteem and which provide the basis to the spiritual lives of BKs in New York**.**

To review, the Brahma Kumaris has six locations in New York State: two in Manhattan, and one each in Queens, Great Neck, Albany and Haines Falls. The first location in Manhattan is the BK Office at the UN, established in 1981. This is an administrative site, and no formal teaching is conducted here, although BK members working there routinely take advantage of their co-presence to discuss (or 'churn') the *murli*. The centres in Queens and Albany are residential, and BK teachers, sometimes called *centrewassis* (meaning centre resident), both live and teach there. The Haines Falls centre is residential, located on a 300-acre property in the Catskill Mountains; it holds retreats for different

groups, public and private, BK and non-BK, every weekend. In contrast, the two centres, in Great Neck, Long Island and Manhattan, are non-residential, and supported by BK teachers living in their own homes. The centre in Great Neck, Long Island is located in a beautiful old rambling church with a hall that holds 250, and a dining room that can feed up to 150. It still has the original church pews in the main hall, and the hand carved stone plaque above the door, 'dedicated June 1928.' This former Christian Science church was acquired by the Brahma Kumaris in 1993, and opened a year later as the official Headquarters of the Brahma Kumaris of the Americas Region (including Canada, South American and the Caribbean). The centre in Manhattan is on the 2nd level of a narrow five-story building on 5th Avenue near the Empire State Building. Teachers who are BKs, who adhere to the BK lifestyle principles (see below) and have done so for at least a year, live near these two centres and are present at the centre every morning and evening to give classes, cook food and conduct courses for the public.

As a long-term member of the BKs, my training in and experience of ascetic spiritual life, and witness of organizational history over more than 24 years, provides the backdrop to this study, and affords me unique positionality. During this period of fieldwork, I lived on my own in the brownstone apartment, mentioned in Chapter Four. I was walking distance from the UN Office and the Manhattan centre, and later, the Great Neck centre, like many other BKs in New York. I participated in routine BK life in New York, in special events like the India Day Parade in mid-town, the African American Parade in Harlem, two funerals, open social events, and events reserved only for BKs. In addition, I was a member of the BK delegation to the United Nations DPI/NGO Conference on Climate Change in September 2007.



Figure 41. Tamasin and fellow BKs participate in the African American Parade, Harlem, August 2007

The data on which I draw derives particularly from conversations and interviews about the collapse of the WTC towers and its aftermath. Of the 21 North American BKs interviewed, 16 had friends in Manhattan, worked in Manhattan or were otherwise directly affected by the collapse of the towers. Five participants were involved in other disasters, including a plane crash, war, personal trauma and disability, and two in what they referred to as a "six week atmospheric hurricane" that precipitated organizational change.

The primary aim of this fieldwork was to elucidate how the spiritual practice of New York BKs informed their experience of the WTC collapse. I introduced the research to BKs from Manhattan and Great Neck centres at a Saturday and Sunday morning class respectively, when announcements are generally made. Verbally and with A4 posters, the project was advertised as being about 'how spirituality shapes BKs' experience of disaster.' The posters quickly found their way to the bottom layer of the pin board and the topic was

reduced through word of mouth to being about 'spirituality and disaster.' Interviews were conducted at centres, as these were a natural meeting point and a comfortable and familiar environment for people. Each interview commenced with an invitation: "Tell me what happened on that day." Interviews were purposely open-ended and unstructured, with a narrative approach to allow participants to speak freely about what was most interesting or meaningful to them. Any questions asked were in response to the participants' story for further clarification. Interviews ceased when I had interviewed all BKs who had been in New York during the WTC collapse and wished to share their experiences.

Interviews averaged one hour in length, with the shortest 10 minutes and the longest over 90 minutes, were recorded, and transcribed in full. I sent each participant their transcript, inviting them to comment or change anything that did not properly reflect their perspective and ideas. No substantial changes were made. Interviews were transcribed using Transcriva and analyzed using NVivo. Anonymity was guaranteed to participants and pseudonyms have been used. The data presented in this article are grouped into emergent themes which exemplify the layers of understanding that exist within the spiritual philosophy, practices and ideas of BK life, which contribute to notions about suffering and service. Informal conversations, and observations of the everyday lives and activities of BKs, also contributed to the data. In the analysis, interpretation and the writing of this article, field notes, observations, written data, and the interview transcripts were checked to ensure consistency of ideas.

Ethics approval was obtained from Monash University, Australia, and express approval to conduct the research was also received from the Administrative Head and the Secretary General of the Brahma Kumaris, local centre coordinators, other gatekeepers and individual participants. My long-term engagement with other BKs clearly gave me a privileged and unique standpoint for the research; and I was supported by a supervisor

who has also conducted participant observation research with Brahma Kumaris, as a long-term scholar of New Religious Movements. However, the methods selected, the emphasis on triangulation, and analysis shared with my two supervisors helped guard against any unintentional skewing of data, and ensured that the data were solid, accurately representing the participants and the setting, and that the interpretation was credible.

History and philosophy of the Brahma Kumaris

In 1936, Om Mandli, was established North West India on the basis of Dada Lekhraj's visionary experiences that included one of destruction and one of paradise. Dada started to understand that these two visions were both of this world, but at different periods of history, mirroring the state of human consciousness of each time.

Dada Lekhraj later had a vision of love, power and light that "jolted him to the core of his being" (Chander 2003:41). After taking the name Brahma Baba, he gradually began to recognize that the light was distinct from him, and embodied the immense wisdom, love and purity of God. He understood that he and those within his community, mainly women and children, were endowed with the responsibility of bringing the world back to its former state of peace and harmony through ascetic practices and meditation. They lived in seclusion and intense meditation for fourteen years, during their *bhatti* (Chander 1981). Gradually from 1950 onwards, the sisters of Om Mandli began travelling and teaching others what they had learned. Exhibitions opened and Indian sisters travelled to different countries. From the early 1970s until the early 1990s, in Western countries like the United States of America, BKs lived their spiritual life through the framework of North Western Indian culture (Walsh, Ramsay, and Smith 2007), emphasising their ascetic practices and a firm division between BKs and non-BKs. From the mid 1990s, however, the previously firm divide between BKs and non-BKs became increasingly elastic (Walsh, Ramsay, and Smith 2007; see also Wallis 2004).

BK philosophy insists that the soul and the body are distinct and in a perpetual and iterative relationship, each completely separate yet dependent upon the other. The soul cannot express itself without the body and the body is unable to operate – that is, is dead – without the soul: "When there is no soul in a body, the body is of no use. Such a huge body can only function with the support of such a tiny soul. This is the throne of the soul, the immortal image." (BapDada 2005d:1). A soul is an infinitesimal point of conscious light energy expressed through the vehicle of the body. If a soul were visible, it would appear as "a wonderful star shin(ing) in the centre of the forehead" (BapDada 2001c: 2). When the body dies, the soul takes rebirth, adopting a new body and taking its unique personality into a new life and a new context. Each soul is unique and indivisible, with intrinsic value and inherent purity.

Shaping (*gyān*)

BK Raja Yoga philosophy maintains that each soul has three facets – the mind, the intellect and the *Sanskāras* (impressions). The mind produces thoughts, which are processed by the judging or assessing faculty of the intellect. Manifesting thoughts in action, through the body, anchors them in the physical world, creating and recreating the soul's unique personality traits or *Sanskāras*, molding character over time. *Sanskāras* act as a frame of reference through which life is understood, and considered to be standard and unremarkable. This multi-layered sanskaric filter of the 'assumptive world' (Janoff-Bulman 2006; Neimeyer 2006) is an osmotic one, with information constantly being revised and adjusted by new behaviour, experiences and reactions, shaping personality, character, states of mind and action resulting in further behaviours, experiences and reactions. According to BK teachings, human beings experience the world around them through this fluid inner world. The question of 'who am I' is the first and most basic step of travelling the spiritual path for BKs, and how one responds to this question contributes to how one's assumptive world is formed.

As all sentient beings are immortal souls, so too is the Supreme Soul or God. He is referred to by BKs as 'Baba,' a diminutive of the name Shiv Baba, benevolent father. BKs understand that while God is a tiny soul, He is supreme in all qualities, powers and virtues. He resides eternally in Nirvana, the world of souls, and is never born into the cycle of birth and rebirth as are all other souls: "The Father never takes rebirth. Only once does He enter this body. That's it!" (BapDada 2001c:1). Therefore he is not subject to the same natural laws of entropy and degradation as humans are; He is ever pure, all knowledge-full and the embodiment of love. BKs believe that by temporarily entering a body, God teaches souls how to live again in harmony with universal laws and in balance with nature.

Remembering (*yoga*)

Raja Yoga meditation, as practiced by the BKs, is the two-fold act of remembering God and being in a state of self-awareness or 'soul consciousness,' remembering one's eternal form as a point of light. This act of focused remembering in soul consciousness is referred to as 'the fire of yoga' that contrasts with 'the fire of the vices' or the body consciousness that BK consider as being the way of the world. Predicting times of suffering, an *avyakt murli* explains that

> On one side there will be the fire of destruction, on the second side there will be the fire of vices, on the third side there will be the fire of attachment to the body, bodily relations and physical possessions and on the fourth side there will be the fire of regret (BapDada 1985:2).

While in the state of soul consciousness, BKs establish a loving mental union with the Supreme Soul, even during times of suffering. This meditational practice is the heart of BK life. All other practices such as daily classes, vegetarianism and celibacy are spiritual technologies designed to promote this state of transcendent union.

Doing (*dharnā*)

BKs believe that regular meditation calms the mind and refines the intellect, so that one is not compelled to act on the basis of one's negative habits or attitudes, embedded in the *Sanskāras*, but instead can transform them. BKs aim to acquire virtues at times when one might normally succumb to negative reactions such as anger, jealousy or fear. God works as a moderator, bringing strong experiences of love and belonging, morphing this tension into a welcome process of change, enabling internal change to take place more easily than if one were alone.

This understanding was re-interpreted in the immediacy of the collapse of the WTC towers, and the subsequent escalated discourse of global terrorism, through formal and informal ministration to BK members and others in NY. Below, I focus on the meaning-making associated with this, and examine how it altered BK ideas of suffering and chaos.

Murli class

> I catch the downtown bus at E72nd Street and 2nd Avenue to 34th Street and walked across town to 5th Avenue. It's not easy to walk in a straight line in New York City, even early in the morning. It becomes almost a game, like jumping over cracks and stepping on lines when you're a kid. As I meander through the prams and the vendors and the bikes and the cars and the people and the very, very, very small dogs, I hear the languages and see the signs of the city. I watch the big open-topped tourist buses, with surprised and satisfied faces staring out over the railing. I suddenly feel like a local. (Fieldnotes)

The morning lessons at the centres are daily spiritual sustenance for BKs, and during these lessons understandings about suffering and service are imparted, discussed and learned. BKs are encouraged to attend *murli* classes daily, and this is considered to be the foundation of a successful spiritual life. "If you don't hear the *murli*, how can you imbibe knowledge? This is a study… and so you should never miss the *murli*" (BapDada 2003b). Those who cannot attend the centre are often sent *murlis* to read at home, or are provided with a phone number to call, so that they can receive the essence of the day's class.

> The center isn't the beautiful building that I have been imagining. The Center is in a narrow and metallic looking structure. . I buzz and I hear the door click. When I enter, I am faced with two locked doors – one in front of me, and one behind. I look for a button, buzzer, handle or sign that usually accompanies such situations. Then, through a window in the innermost locked door, I see a demure sister in a white *sari* approach to unlock the door and, perhaps, to unlock the realms of my understanding. She speaks quietly and, despite my best efforts, I immediately feel like a loud, brutish, earth-anchored and ungainly Australian. (Fieldnotes)

The class has a set procedure and format that, while it may be altered slightly to suit local BK communities, is fundamentally the same in all countries. At the front of the room used for the lesson, a seat is reserved for the teacher; a number of chairs face it. In larger centres, there may be a small stage on which the teacher sits. Behind the teacher's chair, there is a representation of Shiv Baba as a point of light, with many rays emerging from that point. To the side, there is often a picture of Brahma Baba and sometimes portraits of senior sisters who have 'left the body.' Lights are dimmed; usually gentle instrumental music is played.

The doors to the meditation centre open at 6am, with an expectation that BK will arrive as near to 6am as possible. Students sit in meditation until approximately 6:30 when the teacher, almost always a sister, moves to the chair at the front of the class and sits, facing participants, to conduct meditation.

> When we arrive on the second floor, the lift opens directly into the centre. I am greeted by another sweet and quietly spoken sister dressed in white, who asks me to 'sign in.' I do so. There are chandeliers, a lovely wooden front desk and polished wooden floors. Dark red carpet cloaks the floor of the teaching area … sacred ground. Deep maroon curtains fall heavily and gracefully over the window, the direction to which we 'students' face during the *murli* (lesson) held each morning. I am the only one here at present. The teacher's chair, a small microphone beside it, is on a small stage about a foot off the ground. I sit on a soft comfortable armchair, upholstered in white, facing a sister who seems somewhat nun-like. She sits in a white sari, her knees together and her hands in her lap, framed by the deep red stage beneath her and the heavy maroon curtains behind her (Fieldnotes).

When the *drishti* begins, Indian music is usually played, although many non-Indian BKs prefer silence. At 6:30am the lights are turned up, a brother places a microphone in front of the teacher, and the teachings begin. Generally the *murli* begins with a summary,

followed by questions and answers. The body of the *murli* is then read; most BKs quietly take notes and save further discussion until after the *murli*. The discussion is termed *murli* revision or *churning.* This comes from a reference to the life of Krishna. There are detailed stories of Krishna as a cowherd, and so there are references in the *murli* to *churning* meaning to turn milk into butter, or in other words, to bring the power out of the spiritual knowledge by turning the ideas over in ones minds and 'grinding your own ingredients.' The body of the *murli* is followed by 'essence for *dharnā* (inculcation),' suggested ways to put the teachings into practice. Many BKs regard the 'blessing,' (a short excerpt from an *avyakt murli* at the end of that days *sakar murli*) as containing particularly profound and relevant spiritual teachings. These teachings help BKs form ideas around the causes of and cures for suffering. *Murlis* are available on a secure site on the internet, and so all centres worldwide may receive the same teachings daily. The class closes with announcements and meditation, after which BKs begin their day. The entire proceedings take around an hour.

11 September 2001

The WTC collapse occurred just after the centre had closed after the morning murli. In response to the WTC, however, the Manhattan centre remained open the entire day, after Gitanjali, a senior BK sister led and advised people to "keep the meditation centre open. Anyone can come and spend the night. Cook food and make sure you have something for people to eat. Everyone should be welcome." One BK brother worked on the 64th floor of the North Tower of the World Trade Centre. He had felt a number of small explosions under his feet moments earlier. Having been in the building during the 1993 bombing, Jogindra alerted his colleagues and made his way to the stairs. While assisting others, he walked as quickly as possible down the stairs, exiting literally moments before the building collapsed. He arrived at the BK centre "all white with ash" (Tamashee), together with a group of people who had escaped:

> We stayed in the centre… and the people that were with me were very happy to meditate… We gave them food and when the trains were finally running they left. (Jogindra)

Rama, a BK sister in her 50s who was at Manhattan centre at the time of WTC collapse, said that:

> People came to the centre after the incident. Brother Jogindra came here (with some others) and spent the day here. Corinne cooked and fed them, spoke with them… about meditation… When they came in here they were shaking and when they left they were smiling.

But for some participants who attended a centre outside of Manhattan, the response was inadequate:

> When I came here there was no mention of this disaster. (The senior sister) was not here so they didn't know what to say or do. We didn't hear any word about September 11. It really turned me off. (Reanna)

Richie, who witnessed the WTC collapse from his midtown office also recounted:

> It was a Tuesday night and every Tuesday night we used to have meetings. Everybody had a story to share… and I went into a meeting about why we had plumbing problems. I thought why am I sitting in this meeting… when today might have been the beginning of the end of the world?

The collective trauma of New Yorkers indicated the need for previous communities to reconnect with each other and talk about what had happened. In the BK Office at the UN, Samantha recalled that:

> The UN was considered an immediate target so was closed. A meeting was desperately needed… but suddenly the NGO community had nowhere to go. The Values Caucus[32] felt we should do something. So we arranged a meeting for all NGOs. We did meditation together… people shared their experiences… we spoke about what community meant and what support we could give one another.

[32] Discussed in Chapter Six.

Self-talk is constructed and reconstructed daily in meditation, as are the teachings, to "talk to yourself in this way" (BapDada 2001b: 3). The collective suffering of the world is considered in BK teachings and is of genuine concern to members, yet up until 11 September, no event had brought ideas of terror into the 'living rooms' of so many Western BKs.

Making sense of sorrow

BKs believe that time consists of a 5,000 year endlessly repeating cycle, wherein souls and matter journey through stages of ascent and descent. The cycle comprises five ages: Golden, Silver, Copper and Iron, each 1250 years in duration, and the Confluence Age of approximately 100 years bridging the two. The first four ages involve the gradual descent of purity, and loss of happiness, peace and power. BKs understand that the Confluence Age is the age at the intersection of Iron and Golden, when God comes to restore the world and restore souls to their original state. BKs believe that this time is now. This means that both nature and souls will necessarily experience upheaval as the demise of the old world takes place, in part, through an increase in catastrophic events both intentional (e.g. in 2001 with the WTC) and unintentional (e.g. the 2004 tsunami).

BK spiritual technology continues to be the practice of soul consciousness where BKs change their attitude to catastrophic events and reshape it:

> If any situation comes then we need to consider it as 'drama' and not a big thing. If you haven't understood and cannot apply the point of Drama then you will turn a mustard seed into a mountain. If you want to turn a mountain into a mustard seed, simply apply the point of 'drama.' (Dadi Janki, spoken during evening class on 7 July, 2009)

This above extract is invariably inward looking. BK Raja Yoga is a path of self-change, and a BK must reflect on his or her own state periodically throughout the day. A favorite BK slogan is "world transformation through self-transformation," reinforcing self-examination and reflection. As a teaching organization, the Brahma Kumaris is relatively new to the idea of social response in disaster, leaving many wondering what kind of

service is appropriate for them in the context of their intimate spiritual practice. It was the harsh immediacy of the WTC events that moved many BKs to discover the benefits of their spiritual practice and to feel that they had something to offer.

In the context of the WTC collapse, the daily tension of self-change was regarded as a possible vehicle to facilitate transcendence and revealed peculiarly self-activating benefits. Mark says that, while in a crowded New York airport:

> I had this feeling come over me that I found to be extremely strange. A hugely strong feeling… the only way I can describe it is like when you get the results to say you've passed (a very important exam)…. I felt so hugely elated. Hugely. Not just oh, I feel fine or I'm calm… I always felt that I'd been doing this Raja Yoga, and nothing happens for me. I just sit and stare really and nothing goes on. That day, I put it down to some effect that was being given to me by an outside entity. You know a.k.a., God, Shiv Baba… or the result of my 'training'. It was a shower of love and bliss. Bliss really, because it was not really so much like love. It was really wellbeing. I did feel like it was coming from outside 'cause it felt so incongruous with what was going on around me.

For those in Manhattan, the knowledge helped them to make sense of distressing experiences. After "watching the second one… drop," Richie, who worked in midtown and witnessed the collapse of the towers from his window, recalled that

> I took a break, went back to my desk (sigh) and I sobbed. Not crying, but it was as if, some wave passed through me. There was a real sense of being hit by this force field, energy, wave. It's almost like a nuclear explosion. There was so much sorrow… but it wasn't my sorrow. It was as if the souls who had just left their bodies had all been released and it was a wave of that release from their sorrow or pain but it was so much at one time in one place that it actually spread out, and that's the only way I can make any sense out of what my experience was.

The spiritual knowledge carried by BKs indicates how they made sense of the mass destruction on that fateful day. Candace attended the Manhattan centre, as did Jogindra, and similarly witnessed the collapse outside of her office window, located one block from the WTC:

> There was a lot of healing here at the centre. Because we brought Jogindra in every two or three weeks. We wanted to hear everything… People would just come… People just needed to talk… to grieve… Sometimes he would say, "you don't know what those souls have to do in their next life"… it really helped to hear that.

The tension of asceticism

BKs live an ascetic life involving disciplines that cover all aspects of life and times of the day. The foundational and central *maryādas* to which BKs adhere are designed to reduce the experience of suffering and enable one to move through difficult times with strength and ease. The disciplines are footings designed to support the two main pursuits of BK life – to know the self and to know God, which is how BKs receive their spiritual power. Despite their ascetic practices and focus on meditation, BK spirituality is surprisingly grounded and practical. BKs are advised to decide for themselves what is right: "First of all listen to these things and then judge for yourself." (BapDada 2003b:2) At times of disaster as momentous as the collapse of the WTC, belief systems and practices can come unsettled as external circumstances pull people into their atmospheric immediacy and urgency. The test and tension for BKs is to remain stable in a yogi stage during such events and their aftermath. This is their training. Being able to become soul conscious or bodiless 'in a second' in order to transcend the atmosphere of intense suffering, is frequently mentioned in murlis (BapDada 1982, 1987, 2003d, 2005a, 2008b).

Suffering as a Brahma Kumari

Brahma Kumaris philosophy sees this world as one in which suffering is inherent and inevitable due to a decline in human consciousness over the cycle of thousands of years, as described above. This decline is demonstrated by an increasing number of actions that are purposely designed to cause sorrow, create fear and enforce attitudes of divisiveness. The WTC was one such event, bringing the message that no-one in the world is safe, and wealthy countries are not immune from violence and war, or responsibility.

Notions of karma and rebirth are fundamental to BK philosophy. When actions are performed on the basis of high consciousness or good intent, they bring the same in return. Karma is a complex system of credit and debit. As the master of one's own life, the soul creates its own reward:

> In the tower of the World Trade Centre I was never worried about anything. When there's a goodness in you, when you do something good… good happens to you. How it happens you just don't know (Jogindra).

The reason for the feeling of suffering is that through rebirth, souls perform actions based on body consciousness and selfish intent that cause suffering to others. BK Raja Yoga brings responsibility for suffering back to the individual as "everything brings its own reward." (Bossert-Ramsay 2003:69) The karmic debt is experienced by the soul as a subtle burden or internal discord that creates tendencies towards negative behavior, resulting in further negative actions, further debt and suffering, similar to the notion of karmic traces and dispositions in Buddhism. BKs' understanding of this enables them to soften the tension of their worldly experiences with spiritual understanding and to make sense of the suffering of others:

> At that moment I was thinking about karma. I didn't want to say it… but maybe those people just settled their accounts…but it was of course shocking (Reanna).

> I know the law of karma…their pain… It had to be settled… whatever they did in their past life (Joseph).

> Collective karma… I know and understand what happened because of the knowledge. It's amazing that everything is in the murli (Tamashee).

BKs explain that suffering begins with forgetting the answer to the most important question of 'Who am I?' "You have forgotten yourselves… you reside in the land of Nirvana… then you have to come into this world to play your part" (BapDada 2008a:1). BK Raja Yoga teaches that suffering is caused by losing control of the mind so that it becomes subservient to the effects of desire, anger or ignorance, and failure to accept the spiritual and eternal nature of the true self. Meditation, for BKs, can free them from the spiritual debt of the past: "Consider yourself to be a soul and remember Me alone and all your sins will be absolved." (BapDada 2005a)

Serving (*seva*)

The way to cease one's own suffering is serving with one's own mind through meditation: "Many storms will come. Take your mind away from the outside storm and consider yourself to be a soul. By considering yourself to be a soul your intellect will not wander anywhere" (BapDada 2008a). Self-service is followed by *mansa seva* (lit.: service through the mind) as a form of service to others.

> It's such a strange thing. People ask me 'describe the moment when you were giving up or (you thought) you won't make it,' and I try to recall those moments. I think because of the practice of meditation, my thoughts were only good wishes for other people. I was not thinking or in anger, I was not nervous… I am not able to recall even a single moment when I was in fear and I think the reason is because I was constantly thinking of helping others... and so my own fear never materialised. (This was) a kind of revelation for me. (Jogindra)

BKs understand that serving through the mind is a tangible and practical, albeit invisible, form of community service.

> Just simply meditate and send good vibrations into the world. Because knowledge would not (have) work(ed) at that time… Maybe just a few words; 'you are a soul and God is with you. We have to all go home (to the soul world). (Reanna)

Tamashee from Queens, who was in Manhattan when the WTC was attacked, explained why she didn't feel any suffering associated with the event:

> I didn't have any problem because I was doing my job: Yoga… My mind was (in) yoga. I was talking to souls (telling them to) be calm. Nothing else can work for (something like) that.

The first spiritual lesson in Brahma Kumaris theology is in relation to self-identity. Potentially, the detailed circumstances of disaster can pull a previously held philosophy of life away from its central point of meaning, creating existential discomfort and internal suffering. Knowledge of the soul is offered as a point of understanding to provide internal stability and solace and power in the event of extreme difficulty.

The reason for all suffering, offered by Brahma Kumaris philosophy, is the tendency to identify ourselves as physical beings, rather than spiritual beings in physical costumes:

"Beloved children… gain victory once again… Why does (your) happiness not remain permanently? You become body conscious. The first enemy is body consciousness. When you become body conscious you are slapped by *māyā* (illusion). Baba only comes once… and teaches you how to be soul conscious" (BapDada 2008b:2-3). BKs use the term *māyā*, particularly to describe the illusory spin of the physical world, body consciousness, and the good or bad experiences generated from body consciousness. BKs explain that all suffering begins with the divisive consciousness that comes from body consciousness, e.g. of physical appearance, ethnicity, age, gender and race. By understanding the self to be a soul, and seeing others as souls also, barriers between people are dissolved, relationships enhanced, and the barriers to human potential, determined by age, occupation, gender or wellbeing, are lifted: "Souls are never created; they always exist" (BapDada 2001c:1).

BK understanding offers solutions through a change in consciousness supported by meditation. Suffering becomes a rudder for the self-navigator; the way in which one directs one's life in response to the suffering leads one out of it. BKs believe that considering others helps still the relentless and self-indulgent tendencies of the mind calms the heart, and restores feelings of connection and belonging to all living beings.

> Afterwards I felt like okay, you're safe, now you have to help those crying souls. (Allison)

> I try to give to the soul… to talk to the soul. When souls all of a sudden leave the body they don't know what's wrong… so I try to give them comfort. (Tamashee)

> All I could do was send them yoga vibrations. What else can work in a situation like that? (Candace)

The act of filling the heart with compassion provides a sense of purpose (Rinpoche 1992) and coolness at a time when the fire of suffering has the effect of its removal. Jogindra and some of his colleagues had walked only a block from the tower when it collapsed behind them. He recalls being able to offer comfort to a distressed co-worker: "Many times in the time of crisis your little tiny help can do wonders. It's just a matter of making people feel

that somebody is looking after them" (Jogindra). Similarly a young woman, who worked only blocks from the WTC and was at the centre that morning, reflects on forms of service

> Do you know how many wandering souls are out there that are actually crying out for help? And based on the meditation perspective… because I know how souls can link to each other, I really had to stay focused and give a lot of positive energy. (Allison)

Attitude and emotion during the experience of suffering is also key:

> The special tool of the power of silence is pure thoughts. With this tool of thoughts, you can see success in whatever you want. Experiment with this on the self, first. Experiment on an illness of the body first, and with the power of silence the karmic bondage will be transformed into a sweet relationship. With the power of silence, the suffering of karma and the severe bondage of karma will be experienced to be like a line on water. So, experiment with the power of silence on your body, mind and *Sanskāras* and become an embodiment of success. (BapDada 2008b)

Maintaining a high spiritual state in the face of great obstacles, BKs teach, softens the blow of suffering: "Make your stage elevated with your constant and stable efforts so that a (test) paper as big as the Himalayas will become like cotton wool" (BapDada 2003b).

BKs share with other mainstream religions, including Buddhism, Judaism and Christianity, the belief that to suffer is to have the opportunity to take a virtuous stand against all forms of hardship. Suffering can be a signpost to change, a method to rise above physical circumstances, and a way of anchoring the mind. BKs aim to change the experience of suffering through a change in consciousness – by "changing a mountain into a mustard seed" (BapDada 2001c:3), "a crucifix into a thorn" (BapDada 1984:2) and "becoming the goddess of coolness who extinguishes the fire (of suffering) (BapDada 1985).

> The power of coolness means the power of soul-conscious love. The Mother, the moon of knowledge, is able to transform any child with the coolness of love… Love, that is, the power of coolness, is able to cool down a soul, no matter in which fire he may be burning. (BapDada 1985:2)

As BKs represent it, the practice of re-writing, re-emerging and re-grinding a spiritual identity reveals its benefits. In disaster, people suffer in part because their autonomy and identity are compromised. With changes in the configuration of social relationships, people's *sense* of who they are often demands a re-authoring (Neimeyer 2006). Once the

previous self is challenged and old forms of identity are no longer valid, one is necessarily required to peel back layers of one's life narrative. The relationship of the self with the external world is reconfigured. For example, if a stay-at-home mother of three loses her husband, this invariably affects her role in life. These significant changes in role require a stripping down, a look at the question of 'who am I' and a rebuilding of a new narrative, not as the mother and wife that she was, but as an adjusted identity, with a re-configuring of purpose and meaning. For BKs, the theory and practice of soul consciousness offers the possibility of stability, and ideally, connection with others independent of one's place in the family, the community, social class or status.

BKs are in a constant process of breaking and rebuilding their sense of self according to daily teachings and practices, as they endeavor to maintain a state of soul consciousness in a body conscious world. They rebuild on the basis of knowledge to answer the most fundamental questions of existence. BK spirituality provides crucial elements to the process of re-authoring that contribute to our understanding of how people move through suffering and re-author their lives.

In extreme events such as 9/11, hurricanes, tsunami and floods, BKs see the evidence of the Confluence Age, a time of chaos and renewal, and are not surprised when such events occur. Even those who were not regular BKs felt that the BK knowledge was useful to them at the time of the WTC attacks and that it offered them the possibility of helping practically, in ways consistent with BK tenets, through service through the mind.

The phenomenon of calmness in crisis may not be limited to the BKs only, but the philosophies and practices of the Brahma Kumaris mean that its adherents, through mundane spiritual practices, prepare themselves for disaster. The collapse of the WTC was a catalyst for BKs to connect the four main areas of BK life: knowledge (*gyān*), meditation (*yoga*), virtuous inculcation (*dharnā*) and service (*seva*). The knowledge reminds BKs that their primary identity is a soul, and that they will be reincarnated over life times through a

cycle of world degeneration, renewal and the return to the golden age. Disasters are part of this natural cycle.

BKs therefore framed the disaster in a personal, individual way, as everyone who experiences a disaster has to do. But in this case, according to BK philosophy, re-authoring is a continual, perhaps life-long, process. BK spirituality provides the sense of one being the navigator. On occasions of great challenge, one chooses to reconfigure one's faith and spiritual knowledge, with memories of other-than-worldly experiences and a practice that transports one to other-than-worldly states using their transcendent practice as a form of service. In disaster, there is a sense of being rudderless, but BKs understand that every living being is an eternal soul, intrinsically powerful and self-sovereign.

Chapter 6

Spiritual Deprivation - Environmental Demise

Earth on which I stand
Glorious sky above me
Eternal friendship

In the previous two chapters, I explored some of the states that can manifest when a person is confronted by an existential crisis brought about by death or abrupt change. Inner states often request a new form of response that may emerge organically without self-consciousness, challenging people in ways that impatiently demand a revision of thinking and behaviour. One of the greatest external challenges that people face collectively now is the widely acknowledged anthropogenic role in environmental degradation. The climate change movement is now a global one, but in tandem with a growing political pressure to avoid catastrophe, the environmental movement invariably comes down to each person's relationship with the environment, and the way in which each one understands her or his responsibility and call to action. This chapter documents the relationship between internal awareness and the external environment from the perspective of UNBKs in New York.

Reflecting the growing concern of environmental vulnerability, a major conference on climate change was held at the UN Headquarters in New York from 5 to 7 September 2007. This provided a mechanism for NGOs affiliated with ECOSOC to contribute to the documentation for the UN Climate Change Conference to be held in Bali in December that same year. The Brahma Kumaris holds consultative status with ECOSOC, and was one of the faith-based participant NGOs at this meeting. In this capacity, BKs contributed to deliberations on climate change, its social outcomes and global consequences.

Data collection in New York

In this chapter, I discuss Brahma Kumaris philosophy in terms of its long and continuing engagement with ideas around climate change, albeit in a different context and with different understanding than that which prevails in the wider community.

Ethnographic data were gathered from informal interviews, and a focus group discussion with UNBKs. Informal conversations contributed to the data, as did observations with UNBKs in the UN environment. These data are supplemented by the position papers Brahma Kumaris have presented within the UN network regarding their response to environmental change and its subsequent social challenges. I observed conversations among the UNBKs, other conference participants and NGO colleagues within the UN system, to better understand the Brahma Kumaris and its work at the UN.

During interviews and conversations I kept my questions as broad as possible, in keeping with the overall interpretive design and phenomenological basis of this study and inquired, "Tell me about the Brahma Kumaris' work at the UN." For many BKs, it is unclear what the role of the Brahma Kumaris is at the UN, and to my knowledge this question had never been formally posed to UNBKs. Focus group participants were invited to talk about the role of Brahma Kumaris at the UN, and to reflect on the reported increase in environmental disasters as a result of climate change.

Field notes, textual data, interview and focus group discussion transcripts were cross-checked with each other to ensure consistency of ideas and to explore discrepancies and contradictions. I discuss Brahma Kumaris' historical stance on climate change, its call to individual responsibility, and the way in which this fits with the present demands by the UN and its constituents to take immediate action to heal the world's environmental trauma. I endeavour to attend to how BKs understand climate change and what they offer as methods to manage it within the context of their spiritual lives.

Faith-based response to climate change

For generations, religious congregations, spiritual communities, and faith-based organizations have been inextricably linked with discussions of climate change, social vulnerability and disasters. Spirituality and religion still claim a good portion of the literature in the social sciences and are well discussed (Tacey 2004; Marty 2003; Brian 1987; Bouma 2003; Grant et al. 2004; Hill et al. 2000; Porth, Steingard, and McCall 2003; Roof 2003; Sloan, Bagiella, and Powell 1999; Spezzano, Gargiulo, and Greer 1999) despite the way in which science has altered our relationship with the physical world through refined knowledge (Porter 1997). Religions offer their practitioners as bringers of counsel and their teachings as methods with which to address social 'evils' and other problems of the world. Religions offer guidance to enable the adherent to transcend past wrongs, and make amends, ensuring a good future.

Disasters, the most tangible result of climate change, were an area in which colonial missionaries sought genuinely to serve through physical aid and social change (Stipe 1999), even if entwined with proselytisation (Padel 1995). These undisguised methods of conversion are not present to the same degree today, yet there is still a residual skepticism and caution about faith-based organizations using disasters as opportunities to prosyletize their beliefs (Jayasinghe 2007). Many NRMs in industrialized nations have changed in response to social concerns and become more socially integrated and less championing of their particular stream of philosophical thought (Olson 2003; Leong 2008; Southern Baptist Disaster Relief 2004). Religious response to disaster has changed substantially over time, and Bergman (2008) documents the 1930s as the connecting point between different forms of disaster relief that, while incorporating faith, instituted 'relief neutral ideals'. Since then, religion has become more integrated into the way in which people 'serve,' with more consideration in the disaster aftermath. For example, Kitchen (2008) explores the reasons why volunteers from religious congregations were

moved towards acts of altruism after Hurricane Katrina, and Leong (2008) looks at the way that religion can be moderated to offer a faith-based solution to those with traumatic histories. Others encourage faith-based organizations to balance their congregational needs with the needs of the communities they serve (Yetman 2006), as well as calling for more collaboration between all participants in disaster response, and building strong relationships of trust between governments, various NGOs (including faith-based) and their populations (Hall 2006). This includes better utilization of faith-based organizations, recognizing them as important in providing social networks and strong trust-based relationships in the community (Koenig 2005). The University of Delaware Disaster Research Centre (Aguirre 2006) has cited a number of formal and informal networks that are poorly recognized by governments as having the capacity to aid in social and physical reconstruction after disaster (Fjord and Manderson 2009). Parent-teacher associations, that link family with education, could easily consider disaster preparedness and response in their regular deliberations. Religious congregations were mentioned, as were local search and rescue groups, and coastal fishing communities that may have unique knowledge of local risks. A comprehensive but by no means conclusive number are included within the umbrella organizations, National Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster (NVOAD 2009) in the United States of America and the Victorian Council of Churches (Smale 1998) in Australia.

The Brahma Kumaris' role at the UN is testament to the need for an inclusive approach to climate change and associated disaster preparedness and response and was visible during my fieldwork in the second half of 2007. This was particularly in the context of UNBKs who participated at the NGO/DPI conference on Climate Change, as I discuss below.

Conference background

In December 2007, over 10,000 people, both in individual capacity and as representatives of 187 countries, and international and national NGOs, participated in the UN Climate

Change Conference in Bali. The Conference attracted substantial media attention, and provided considerable leverage in supporting continuing policy changes at national and local levels to reduce global warming, prevent the worst threats to the social, economic and physical environments, and to develop strategies to manage the effects of inevitable climate change on natural environments and populations.

International attention to global warming has a long history, dating from the institution of the UN in 1948 and its mandate, among other things, to address questions of environment, resources, energy and atmosphere, diversity, sustainability and heritage. The Bali Conference too has a long history. The Framework Convention on Climate Change entered into force on March 1994 (UN) and the Kyoto Protocol (UNFCC 2005) in February 2005, after years of negotiations over goals, objectives and rules of adherence.

As with any UN meeting, there was extensive preparatory work for the Bali Conference. As part of this, the UN Department of Public Information (DPI) in collaboration with the NGO/DPI Executive Committee organized an NGO meeting, held in September at UN Headquarters in New York, to enable participating NGOs to consult with UN officials, government representatives and others to develop strategies in response to climate change. The Brahma Kumaris was one of the faith-based NGOs at this meeting.

Since the inception of their organization, BKs have had a long history of understanding the relationship between the mind and the world around them, particularly as one of their core beliefs is that the environment directly mirrors the consciousness of souls, displaying a seamless relationship between what one does and how one thinks. Therefore, daily behavior impacts on the mind, and conversely, the mind influences the way in which one chooses to behave. BKs understand that through spiritual understanding and the regular practice of meditation, it is possible to gather the inner fortitude to advance self-change. It is this practice that facilitates the greatest change in terms of maintaining an ecologically symbiotic relationship. In this context, elaborated upon in this chapter, self change directly

impacts upon sensitivity to environmental issues and to environmentally considerate conduct.

Brahma Kumaris at the United Nations

In the early 1970s, Dadi Prakashmani visited New York and especially requested to see the site of the United Nations. She paused in silent meditation and after a few moments spoke the words "one day the Brahma Kumaris will be here too." Around five years later a BK picked up some application forms from the NGO section of the Department of Public Information (DPI) and kept them on file at the centre in Queens. When Gitanjali was going through some papers, she came across the forms and decided to submit them. A few months later she received a call from the Chief of the NGO Section of the UN who wanted to meet with BKs who could represent the organization in its capacity as an NGO. The Chief supported the application for two reasons: the BKs were headquartered in India and they wanted organizations from the developing world, and the global administrators and spiritual leaders of the Brahma Kumaris were women. The Brahma Kumaris' application was submitted to the Executive Committee and the organization was granted accreditation in 1980. Between 1980 and 1983 the BKs spent time becoming familiar with the UN system to understand the role of NGOs, as well as building relationships with people within other NGOs, the UN Secretariat and the Government Missions. The role of all NGOs is to act as representatives of a world community, in gatherings of caucuses, agencies and nation states within the UN network. The UN is unique in that it offers a forum for such a dialogue. The NGOs feed local information and concerns into larger UN gatherings and disseminate UN findings to their local constituents, making this relationship between NGOs and the broader UN community literally a global dialogue.

Spiritual expertise

In 1982 an Under-Secretary-General recommended that the Brahma Kumaris apply for consultative status with ECOSOC, as he felt it had an important expertise in the domain of linking spiritual and values-based dimensions to development. Subsequently, in 1983, after a process of inquiry by the ECOSOC Committee, Brahma Kumaris was granted consultative status on the roster of ECOSOC.

> Between 1983 and 1996 we deepened our relationship with the UN by attending global conferences, doing outreach projects to bring UN programs to the various communities around the world and studying the policies of the UN so that we could look for ways to integrate values-based language into the documents. During this time we were aware that what we were offering was having an impact on the UN at some level and the mood was beginning to change as more people began to talk about human-centered development. Specific values were being identified to give purpose to conferences and programs of actions. (Gitanjali)

In 1996 the Brahma Kumaris was re-classified from roster status to general consultative status. This process was one of being scrutinized by representatives of States within ECOSOC, but because of the work they had done over the years they were easily granted the status. General consultative status enables UNBKs to participate in meetings of ECOSOC and DPI, propose new topics for consideration by ECOSOC and DPI, and offer written statements on areas of interest. ECOSOC works with the UN General Assembly to promote economic and social cooperation and international development, and with DPI, which acts as a liaison between the UN and NGOs and other civil society organizations. ECOSOC looks for connecting points between what the UN does within the social and humanitarian field of development with what the Brahma Kumaris do in those same areas, with a focus on spirituality, wellbeing and human rights.

> We help to bring spiritual principles to the United Nations, to help them to see that there are universal truths and that if we start to base our decisions on universal truths, and these (spiritual) principles, then we will get true transformation which is what the United Nations wants. They want a world of peace. This is why all the governments come together, so they can somehow bring about a world of peace. I think how we do it is very effective… We never get tired of telling them and we don't confront them either. We go with the flow. And it's not just about disseminating to

> people in the world but it's buzzing it into the governments' ears at UN Headquarters. (Gitanjali)

From the perspective of UNBKs, this 'buzzing' has had an affect. There has been a change from the marginalization of spirituality, which was at best treated as an afterthought by many at the UN in its early days. As a result of continually reminding different sectors of the UN of the importance of a spiritual perspective, over almost thirty years, spirituality is now being regarded as central, relevant and integral in mainstream UN discussions.

> Our role at the UN is to remind the UN of something that's stated in their charter…they clearly state that the purpose of the UN is to reaffirm faith in the dignity and worth of the human person. (Samantha)

An NGO normally has three permanent representatives to the UN. The Brahma Kumaris had six representatives (five female and one male) at the time of this study, although the activity of each varied. The representatives vary in age and experience both at the UN and as members of the Brahma Kumaris. BKs identify as having a physical age and a spiritual age, the latter reflecting the years they have been a BK. In 2007 the physical ages of Brahma Kumaris representatives to the UN (UNBK) ranged from 28 to 65, spiritual ages from 14 to 50, and years at the UN from 6 months to more than 25 years. The nationalities of UNBKs included British, Indian, Guyanese and American; the breadth and variety of experience is significant. The main official representative is the Regional Coordinator of the Americas. Second in seniority at the UN is sister Gitanjali who submitted the initial application forms leading to the Brahma Kumaris' affiliation with DPI. Joining her at the UN in 1990 was Sister Samantha from the United Kingdom who has since resided at the Queens centre in New York. Operationally, Samantha undertakes most of the daily work and general responsibility at the UN office. The only male representative to the UN is Richie, an American national who has been in New York since the mid-1990s. For the last few years Sister Kate has been coming to New York from interstate during the summer months to help with the administrative work. The most recent representative is Sister

Maitreyi, a young sister in her 20s from India who arrived in New York in 2007 having never been outside of India before.

Since its affiliation with the UN the Brahma Kumaris, through its representatives, has centralized matters of spirituality by writing and disseminating papers and statements about spirituality[33] in areas as diverse as human rights (BKWSU 1997b, 2000a), work and labour (BKWSU 2005), women and gender issues (BKWSU 1995b, 1995c, 1996d), leadership (BKWSU 2004b), racial tolerance (BKWSU 2000b, 2003a), interfaith (BKWSU 1999), development (BKWSU 1995a, 2002), youth (BKWSU 1998), poverty (BKWSU 1996a, 2003b), education (BKWSU 1990, 1996b), children (BKWSU 1996d, 1997a), AIDS (BKWSU 1988) and the environment (BKWSU 1992a, 1992b, 1996c, 2007a, 2009c).

> We've been going to conferences for years, and we would create things on values, and maybe mention something spiritual but now most of the workshops, and certainly the midday workshops at this conference, have values or spirituality as part of them. So, times are changing. And the environment here at the UN is much more open to speaking about these things. (Samantha)

BKs are also invited to attend international conferences called by the UN, General Assembly special sessions and, in September 2007, a High Level Dialogue of religious leaders. All faith-based NGOs at the UN draw the attention of member states and government bodies to matters of the spirit, according to the NGO's particular leaning and the topic at hand, such as climate change.

> Change happens from the inside out – from a seed of awareness to a thought to an intention to inaction. Impacts also happen from the inside out. They take place on a subtle dimension at first – quiet changes in the temperature of oceans, invisible reconfigurations of molecules in the atmosphere. The Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University has a spiritual foundation and spiritual expertise, so our reflections and recommendations for solutions will of course be spiritual. (BKWSU 2007a:1)

[33]All the referenced papers are accessed through the website address http://www.bkun.org/papers/index.html.

BKs, including those positioned at the UN, see the Brahma Kumaris organization as "a learning community and a family." Asked how they saw themselves as an NGO within the UN system Gitanjali explained that:

> Within the structure of an organization the Brahma Kumaris has got as its tenets certain universal spiritual principles, one of them being that all human beings are spiritually related with one another and so we tend to see ourselves as a family as well. So the parameters of an organization are set and then the family based on those spiritual principles forms the spiritual relationship that is the primary tenet of our existence.

The Values Caucus

The Values Caucus at the UN in New York was established following a seminar on Ethical and Spiritual Dimensions of Social Progress in October 1994, to fill a perceived gap in activities of NGOs, and to identify what they can potentially offer the broader community. It was established on the basis of friendship and an alliance of ideas among the diverse faith-based and values-based NGOs affiliated with the UN, including the Brahma Kumaris, the Baha'i´, the Findhorn Foundation, the World Peace Prayer Society, and the Centre for Psychological and Social Change. UNBK has been on the Values Caucus Coordinating Council since 1998, and co-chaired the Values Caucus; it is through this caucus that the Brahma Kumaris is most consistently active. The Values Caucus holds regular formal and informal activities at UN Headquarters, including monthly meetings where an invited speaker presents matters of global concern designed around a core theme of values. These meetings may be attended by anyone within the UN network, but part of their value lies in the alliance they create between NGO members and UN dignitaries, and is consistent with BKs' attention to gaining high-level political support. Meetings of the Values Caucus are designed to encourage discussion and further the relationship between different levels of the UN system:

> Dignity and worth for us are the intrinsic qualities that every human being is born with. It's the peace, the love, the truth, everything. What we have to do is create an environment to allow that to flourish. That is the expertise and the role that we play at the UN… In 1980 you didn't even have a word like 'values' in a UN document. The Brahma Kumaris now co-chair the Values Caucus… This is an expertise that is

> almost intangible. It's soft. But nevertheless they are hearing it. We know they're hearing (it because)… we're seeing it reflected in the wording of their documents… A lot of our spiritual principles are popping up in the deliberations that we can then respond to. (Samantha)

Frequently in their office UNBKs would discuss ways in which to keep centralizing spirituality as a valid area of human inquiry and human capacity that, if articulated, recognized and employed, may help to realize some of the objectives set out in the UN Charter. These discussions are well summarized in their position papers over the last fifteen years (BKWSU 2007b).

> The United Nations Conference on Environment and Development underscored the position of humanity in its triangular relationship with the natural world and development. The Rio Declarations proclaim that "Human beings are at the centre of concerns for sustainable development. They are entitled to a healthy and productive life in harmony with nature." The desirability of all concerned citizens participating in environmental and development issues was asserted, with the overall aim being harmony with the natural world rather than domination…. Ultimately it is in the best interests of an individual or society to live by higher values. Virtue is more than just its own reward; in any sphere of activity it is also the foundation of success whereas actions based on wrong values carry within themselves the seeds of their own nemesis... Vague notions about the future and fears rooted in the past can no longer guide our actions. They must be focused through the prism of spiritual understanding and clear vision of the future we seek. The better world must be born and take firm roots in our hearts before it can lay down roots in the world. (BKWSU 1995a)

Drawing on their philosophy of spiritual virtue as the most powerful tool of practical transformation, BKs aim to highlight the complex relationship between humankind and the earth. They directing peoples' attention to view care for the environment, thoughtfully and personally.

> We must not look at any aspect of human activity as being an isolated entity in itself but see each other's activity, even if apparently separate in time and space, and the surrounding environment, as constituents of the greater play of life overall. By integrating our knowledge of parts under the great canopy of the whole that is spirituality, we may seek out the ways of being and doing that align us with the rhythms and cycles of life and nature and ensure that our behaviour and interaction with others and the natural world is respectful and responsible. While this may seem abstract, it is the basis of the practical wisdom that must underlie the complexity of life and the myriad ways and forms of such interaction if it is to be harmonious, just, inclusive, and sustainable. (BKWSU 2006:2)

The conference

At the core of international efforts to address climate change, is the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and its Kyoto Protocol, compiled by the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. The evidence is compelling and solid. The climate is changing, and it is due to human behaviour, although its seriousness is contested intermittently (Antilla 2006; Boykoff and Boykoff 2007; Climate Change Skeptic n.d). BKs argue that to make any significant change to our personal contribution to climate change, a change of attitude is required.

> By now there is virtually universal acceptance that climate change is being accelerated by human actions. The call of this conference is a call to action. But a call to action without a call to greater discernment and higher levels of awareness will only continue the harmful and self interested patterns of the past. The call of this conference and the call of our time are for a new level of awareness so that the resulting actions will bring a whole new climate of understanding and world benefit. (BKWSU 2007a:4)

As already noted, The 60th Annual DPI/NGO Conference, 'Climate Change: How it impacts us all,' was held at the UN Headquarters on First Avenue 5-7 September 2007, and was designed to give 469 NGOs and over 1700 of their representatives the opportunity to consult with UN officials, government representatives, and environmental experts, in order to develop organizational and community plans to respond to the increasing concerns and effects of climate change.

Due to time constraints, the conference was arranged around seven stakeholder roundtables, of which participants could attend four. At 10am each morning, roundtables with representatives from United Nations, governments, civil society and the private sector were conducted, each with a moderator and four to six speakers. The roundtables were conducted with speakers seated at a panel at the front of the room, and the audience in a semicircle in front of them. If time allowed, questions and answers from the audience were included at the end of each person's speech. During the formal plenary and roundtable sessions, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) reviewed the

latest scientific evidence on climate change (IPCC 2007) and its consequences on ecosystems, water, land use, natural resources and energy, economic and social development, and the health, wellbeing and livelihoods of indigenous peoples (UN 2007).

Networking

The cultural diversity of the General Assembly Hall of the United Nations echoed the subways of Manhattan. The only difference was that those present at the conference were officially advocates of the world's populations. Participants were restless, repeatedly calling for action throughout the meeting, their edginess compounded by the obvious relevance of climate change as people walked from their hotels to the UN complex near the intersection of 42nd Street and 1st Avenue, in sweltering heat and high humidity.

On the first morning of the conference, a networking session was offered at the UN Staff Café. The café is situated at the easternmost point of the UN Plaza, with an expansive view of Queens through a wall of windows facing the East River. Participants sought each other out, guided by the large handwritten signs taped on the windows above long community tables that could comfortably seat twelve people each. Richie and I sat at the 'Mind Body Spirit' table, joining a clinical psychology professor from the International Union of Psychological Science, a "brain technician" from the Korean Institute for Brain Science, and three representatives from the faith-based NGO, the 3HO Foundation (Healthy, Happy, Holy Organization, founded by Yogi Bhajan in India, in 1969).

At our table, despite markedly diverse perspectives, people found common territory in discussions about the impact and relevance of spirituality on the body, the brain, the mind and the soul, and the broad impact that individual spiritual practice has on society. While this discussion was informal, it reinforced the increasing relevance and importance of spirituality to many people and in many different disciplines. Those present told stories of

the way in which spirituality was relevant in their own field and work, resulting in a collaborative publication presented to the UN Secretary General:

> Climate change is likely to impact mental health and psychosocial wellbeing via multiple pathways, leading to new challenges and greater mental illness burden and suffering among affected communities… Concepts such as resilience, post-traumatic growth, and spirituality have increasingly been recognized as important to individual and community recovery… spiritual wellbeing and post traumatic growth, which involves growing from stressful life events and addressing existential questions, may serve as protective factors during times of adversity. (Weissbecker et al. 2008)

The opening session

> The warmly lit, curved, and open sided General Assembly Hall is a combination of arena, theatre and temple. The golden wall behind the podium lends a reverential and profound sense of purpose to the place. Simultaneous translators,[34] reporters, UN recorders and videographers, the latter filming proceedings for Internet video-casting and for television reports, look down on proceedings from tinted glass booths encased within the six storey hall. While geographically confined to one place, the conference is being given the widest reach possible, both immediately through the instruments of technology, and in the future through the passionate intent of its participants. (Fieldnotes)

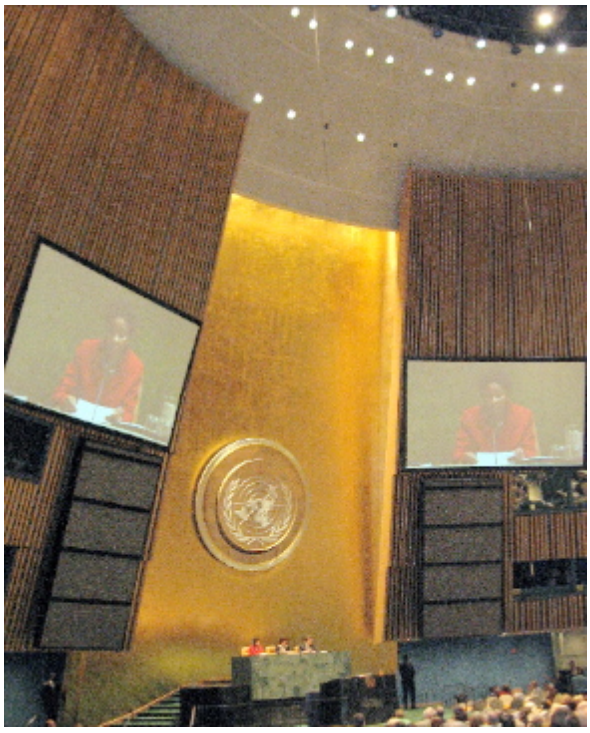


Figure 42. Opening session of the annual DPI/NGO Conference, 2007, New York

Speakers at the opening session reaffirmed people's responsibilities as moral agents, their integral and important relationship with the earth, and the imperative to act. They appealed for participants to consider a change of consciousness and attitude as an important component in the healing of our global environmental dilemma. The faces of UNBKs in attendance were visibly gladdened. The speeches by UN dignitaries were moving, sometimes pragmatic and often inspirational, a portent of the following three days. Inspired, I wrote, as they spoke. "The UN is a family of institutions representing the world," Achim Steiner, Executive Director of the United Nations Environment Program, began,

> … and the people of the world are asking the world leaders, 'What are you doing? What on earth are you doing?' The magnitude and complexity of climate change is revealing itself now and small local positive actions are one of the most powerful ways in which to respond to this problem.

Speakers continued to emphasize the indelible, inevitable and indispensable links between human activities and climate change, and to argue for radical changes in behaviour and consciousness. As Haya Rashed Al-Khalifa, President of the Sixty-first Session of the General Assembly of the United Nations argued, "Each of us needs to identify the need according to whatever our living circumstances are, and we all have a moral imperative to act… It will not cost the moon to save the earth."

The smaller rooms for the midday and afternoon sessions were generally overfull, with men and women from various nationalities sitting on the floor to listen and occasionally to speak. However, most of the meaningful interaction took place walking to and from the sessions, while paying the cashier at the staff café, over tiny sachets of ketchup and small ordered piles of napkins, and at other informal occasions. During one such occasion, a UN representative from a human rights-based NGO commented to me that:

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[34] The official languages at all UN gatherings are English, Arabic, Chinese, Spanish, Russian and French.

> I was speaking to the young lady in the white sari. What she was saying seems very similar to my intention (of bringing spirituality into UN conversations). The lady felt that of course that's the case, because the root is the same. When a tree bears fruit, the fruits are separate but we come from the one tree and we all belong to the same root. I think that also. We all need to work collectively.

I watched as Maitreyi (the 'young lady in the white sari') sat in all the sessions, at times speaking with other participants, but often just quietly listening. Maitreyi's perspective of her contribution to that of the Brahma Kumaris at these deliberations was to:

> Spread the vibration of peace. When I come here, before I go into the briefing, I first go and sit in the meditation room… To feel the spiritual words and vibrations working… It's wonderful. It's a buzz.

Midday workshops

Less formal midday workshops, held daily from 1:15 to 2:30, dealt with environmental degradation, alternate forms of energy, the future consequences of global warming, and faith-based responses to and responsibilities for climate change. Faith-based workshops dealt with a wide range of topics, as their titles suggest: climate change and the mind-body-spirit connection, challenges for holistic health and education; climate change and individual responsibility, the Franciscan way; faith responses to climate change, spiritual responsibility and environmental sustainability; and the ethical and spiritual response to climate change.

The midday workshops were crowded, and there was little time for real discussion after the presentation. What was most noticeable was the spirit of community with which people came together. It was seeing a tall African woman in a bright orange traditional headdress, greeting a priest from Belgium as, finding common ground in the French language, they walked out of the midday workshop completely engaged in discussion. It was watching as two Muslim men made way for a young woman from Harvard when sitting room on the floor had become scarce. It was the enthusiasm with which a man from a remote area of the African continent approached me about the way he has been embraced by the UN community and those who sponsored his ticket. From Tibetan monks

in hand-spun robes, to wealthy women and men in designer suits, from women with elaborate facial jewellery to conservative people in button down collars and long skirts, from huge African men covered in bodily tattoos and bodily decoration to local wide-eyed youth, it seemed that there was representation from every corner of the globe, covering every language, every belief and every political position. Logic says that someone must have been left out, but the impression was otherwise.

Collaborators and sponsors of the midday workshops on faith-based responses to climate change included organizations as diverse as the Armenian International Women's Association, Muslim American Society Freedom Foundation, Rutgers School of Environmental and Biological Sciences, Lama Gangchen World Peace Foundation, Federation of Zoroastrian Associations of North America, and The Episcopalian Church. The workshops were in the form of panel presentations, followed by questions and answers from attendees. Some of the questions raised in the midday workshops were: In the debate on environmental sustainability, where does spirituality fit? What is the nature of the true relationship between human awareness and the quality of the environment? Is there an intimate and unique connection between the laws of nature and the laws of human evolution? Does the degradation of the environment respond to a clash of values and belief systems?

The new ethic emerging from the climate crisis is that religious, spiritual, and faith-based groups share the responsibility to protect our planet for present and future generations. It is not just that climate change has been caused by our behaviour. The effect is not uni-directional. Religion teaches that there are consequences for everything that we do, so there is an interdependent relationship between individuals and the environment. Global climate change affects the mind, body and spirit, and so its effects are physical, emotional, mental and spiritual. The call is to positively engage with the challenge of climate change by considering the way in which people think, feel, believe and behave, rather than looking

solely for physical answers to such an endemic and organic problem. Humankind can take better care of the earth by thoughtfully considering the way in which each one takes care of the self. Concepts such as interdependence and respect for the earth, once common in indigenous cultures, inspired dialogue among religious leaders and practical locally relevant solutions. The Abrahamic faiths in particular discussed evolution in ecological practice and theology, drawing best practice from scripture, as a reminder of the long-term relationship between religion and care for the natural environment. They argued that people should submit to the way of peace; that conceding to this would see people treat the environment, given to humanity in trust, with care and respect. The Baha'i's focus at the conference was on the ethical dimensions of climate change, with its speculations that human and ethical dimensions are often overlooked in discussions about global warming and that religion has a role in highlighting such dimensions. The World Council of Churches implored the world to stop the "insatiable consumption" of the few and to focus on the problems of the many, recognizing the inherent value of all the world's peoples.

Spiritual deprivation, environmental demise

The early members of the *Yagya* lived simply, using little and recycling everything – even making shoes out of old car tires when resources were scarce – but it was imminent destruction that was in the forefront of their minds, not managing climate change or having a small carbon footprint. The founder's mystical experiences, retold, are part of the foundation theology of the organization and BKs' tension is mirrored in this origin theology. How does one practically reconcile the understanding of cataclysmic world destruction - no matter how many steps towards environmental responsibility are taken - with the desire for peace in the world, environmental care and a genuine wish to prevent suffering? I discuss this below.

BKs understand that what or how one thinks forms the foundation of character, behaviour and so life itself. The soul performs actions through the medium of the physical body, on the basis of the cyclical interplay of the mind, intellect and *Sanskāras*, as every action performed through the body gives rise to a correspondingly positive or negative reaction. Thus the condition of the world around us is a reflection not just of the quality of our actions but the quality of our internal spiritual state. Every human action has an effect upon matter, and no one is immune to the effects or consequences of her or his actions.

For BKs, meditation slows down the mind and refines the intellect, so that one is not so compelled to act on the basis of one's habits or attitudes that might be rooted in selfish personality traits. BK philosophy maintains that forgetting the essential truth of souls' immortality, and ensuing greed and selfishness, has ultimately led to environmental degradation:

> We are mortal it is thought; we shall die; we live in an uncaring universe of chance. With such a worldview, it's little wonder that human beings have opted to get the most out of life through material acquisition and sensual pleasure… In this desperate condition, we have despoiled our home, the earth. Yet this whole chain of events was based upon a simple mistake. We are not mortal, after all. (Chander 1981:262)

Twenty-five years later in an interview, Gitanjali affirmed that

> It is important to understand the natural laws and principles of nature and to live our lives in a sustainable way respecting these laws and principles. This is the present call of the environment. Perhaps the real question is how do we "look" at the present state of the environment and what do we "see"? If we look with an insightful and spiritual vision then we will see what we have to do to help support, care for and sustain our natural world. If we look with a vision of what's in it for me/us or survival of the fittest, then what we see will be different.

The Brahma Kumaris' written statement to the Conference, distributed among the delegates, reiterates the connection between the internal awareness and the external environment.

> One of the real benefits of meditation and other reflective practices is the heightened awareness of the internal and external states of the world. We become aware of how anger, fear and sadness in our internal world may be affecting the decisions we make, and the actions that we perform, while it also offers methods to

transform those feelings. When we are able to look at the world without the influence of these negative states, and with a sense of equanimity, we are better able to see clearly what is happening around us. (BKWSU 2007a:2)

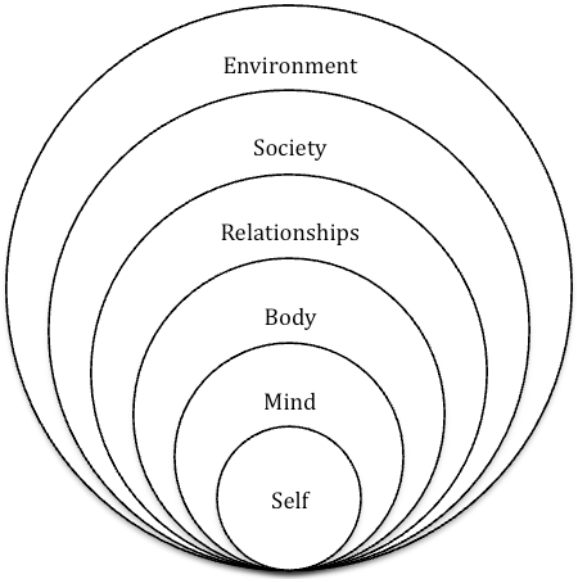


Figure 43. Relationship between the self and the environment

For BKs, the material world is intimately linked to the inner world of awareness, attitude, thoughts and feelings, with the self being the starting point, as shown in Figure 43 above. BKs reiterate that the foundation of any visible and lasting change calls for deliberate introspection because consciousness, action and the environment are inherently connected, and the relationships between them are responsible for the ways that attitudes are exhibited. The first relationship with the environment is the way in which the mind directs the soul's activities through the body. BKs say that although in a human being it is the soul that holds the greatest value, it is the body that is the chariot or the temple for the soul, it and so must treated with regard. Therefore, how the soul performs mundane activities through the body, such as eating, drinking and bathing, is the first point of interaction with the world's natural resources. What the soul then does through the body during the day directly shapes and impacts upon social relationships. Relationships are

the construct of society and, broadly and collectively, BKs believe that each one's actions influence those around them, bringing gradual and broad social changes in the most commonplace ways, reflected in historical change. UNBKs are concerned that, without addressing the subtle inner awareness that informs the outer states, the world's decision makers will attempt to reduce and simplify the problem, apportioning blame unnecessarily, only serving to create more division, without any hope of lasting environmental change. The most powerful entry point to changing one's relationship with the world, BKs attest, is changing one's attitude. Thought is its foundation and, to empower the mind, meditation is a potent tool.

> A meditative or reflective process cultivates honesty and clarity, allowing us to see through the clouds of self-interest to what is beneficial for the whole, to what will be good for humanity and the natural world for which we are trustees. (BKWSU 2007a:2)

BKs explain that a basic spiritual law is that what one craves for, clings to, or desires will never be completely fulfilled or satiated. Conversely, respect and regard are returned in kind. Economic development and attitudes of consumerism have demanded ever more production and energy consumption at individual and state level. Consequent rapid capitalistic expansion has resulted in land clearing, polluting forms of energy, and environmental degradation, resulting in overall environmental loss. This law speaks to the way in which people relate to the environment. Attitudes of grace and care made manifest will result in behaviours that are mindful, sensitive to and aligned with environmentally benevolent principles. In informal conversations, UNBKs proposed that consumerism is caused by a state of spiritual deprivation. Samantha reasoned that:

> The soul - the conscious living essence that is each living being - feels a sense of spiritual deficiency caused by a lack of self-awareness. So, the soul on one hand repeatedly looks outside the self for fulfillment and on the other hand blames others for his or her internal state… a lack of spiritual awareness. And because it's so easy to focus on the external world it causes chronic consumerism and low-level environmental abuse over a long period of time. People generally attempt to fill the

> internal void by accumulating more and experiencing more from the external physical world. But because the void is spiritual not physical, it can never be satiated by physical means. The only way to change the outside is to change the inside first.[35]

The closing session

On the final day, as we were leaving the Closing Session of the Conference, Sister Grace, a representative from the Catholic order of Carmelite nuns, another faith-based NGO, reflected that it no longer felt as if we (faith-based NGO representatives) were out on a limb discussing abstract ideas or issues any more. Sister Grace said to me:

> Because climate change is directly affecting people's lives, and is now in their own backyards, wherever in the world those backyards are - these issues are affecting everyone, and people know that it demands a change of attitude. That's where we (faith-based NGOs) come in. It's when we change that the world will change.

I recognized this slogan. I had seen 'When we change, the world changes' on t-shirts, cups and pens at BK literature stores. Despite its kitsch presentation on bits of paraphernalia, this is a message BKs believe and teach.

On the final day, all NGO representatives were invited to make anonymous changes to the suggested document via a ballot. UNBKs noted the absence of spirituality and called for its inclusion. Significant changes were implemented, so I presume that others NGOs also noted similarly. As a result of the recommended changes, spirituality was included as a key concept in the Final NGO Declaration that preceded the Climate Change Conference in Bali (UN 2007). It reads:

> We affirm that climate change is mainly anthropogenic and is one of the most serious threats humanity and our environment have ever faced which if not addressed will cause… significant damage to our economic, political, cultural, social and spiritual structures. (2007a:1*)*

> In order to implement the Framework for Action – recognizing that our views on challenges and opportunities will evolve as this process continues – we request that the Framework process should network NGOs that might not otherwise typically

[35] For more about the connection between environmental ideologies and millenarian themes, read Robbins and Palmer 1997.

> collaborate by bridging the spectrum of NGO concerns interconnected by climate change… as well as mental, spiritual and physical health. (UN 2007a:2)

BKs do not believe in divine intervention in the traditional sense of God handing out reward and retribution. In its stead, Brahma Kumaris' philosophy is that God comes as the parent, teacher and guide in order to love, teach and support, but that each individual soul is responsible for her or his spiritual debts and credits, for her or his life circumstances, and for any suffering she or he may cause or endure, and certainly for the way in which she or he lives with the environment. BKs offer the solution that through reflective practices and meditation, one can gather inner strength and a clearer vision enabling one to abide by eternal spiritual laws so that – ultimately – this collective change in attitude and behaviour can help to restore the environment and the world to a natural state of balance and harmony. There are universal spiritual laws that govern all aspects of life; relationship with the self, with others and with matter. BKs believe that the world, in its current state, cannot be salvaged, but that it must be transformed. The seed of world transformation lies with our own transformation:

> I am all for a better environment and a pure world is the result. Not just by not polluting, but by taking our individual steps of conserving, using resources well, and also internalizing habits of generosity and respecting. The souls will carry these qualities with it. So no matter where or how the soul will find itself, the earth, the world and matter will be respected, treated generously. By using resources well, in return the soul will be treated well. (Richie)

Spiritual purity

BKs feel that they must help themselves and others to deal with approaching disaster and suffering foremost through maintaining a state of spiritual purity, which will convey a state of peace and strength to others around them and the world in general. Depending on the level of one's transformation, one can also be a resource to others during disasters: "If within yourself you have… made yourself ever-ready, then through your own readiness… all souls can be benefited" (Lawrence 1996:18)

The Brahma Kumaris therefore brings complexity back into discussions of world issues. Issues of climate change, the BKs argue, must be resolved holistically. While doing good and taking care of the environment physically, the Brahma Kumaris philosophy values the inner world, and does not give particular significance to making decisions solely based on physical proof or scientific evidence. BK philosophy puts the responsibility for world change back into the hands of each and every individual:

> By changing our own mental environment, we shall change the face of the earth itself. The replenished earth shall give birth to a new society, technologically advanced yet also completely divinely virtuous. This is not a dream, but a revealed reality. This is Raja Yoga. This is the pure path to planetary transformation. (Chander 1981:264)

The Brahma Kumaris does not see its millenarian beliefs and its concerns about global warming as incompatible or illogical. BKs recognize this period of time to be one of great possibility. Consciousness and attitude are the seeds of the actions that created the world of paucity, inequity and degradation in which we now live. The actions taken yesterday have created the world we live in today. Similarly, the actions taken today write the script for the circumstances of tomorrow. . When this is understood, one becomes aware that we, as a global population, and I as an individual within that population, contribute to and are responsible for the state of today's world. Considering the above principle, BKs maintain that each individual, as well as collectives such as governments and multilateral agencies like the UN can act with care and regard in consideration of the environmental paucity that is the cause of increasing natural disaster and suffering.

Those in positions of leadership rely on teams of advisors for their decision-making. With financial, scientific, social and political advisors, one has to ask how often the spiritual advisor is consulted. When – if ever - is the spiritual perspective taken into account as one of the areas of understanding necessary for a holistic perspective? Instead of regretting the past, this is a call to action for the present; BKs offer the idea that a spiritual

perspective provides a balance between accepting responsibility for the past and acting with care and regard for the environment from now on.

The declaration from the UN NGO/DPI Conference was one in which NGOs committed themselves to developing a framework to be implemented over the ensuing 12 months. It included both individual and collective action plans to tackle issues of climate change. NGOs also reiterated their pledge to be active partners of the UN, local governments and civil society, to implement adaptation and mitigation strategies. The Conference Declaration was subsequently presented to the Secretary-General.

Since this conference, the Brahma Kumaris has undertaken physical and spiritual actions towards taking care of the environment. Possibly the largest solar energy construction in the world was recently completed in Rajasthan, India. This natural energy will support an entire village in Talheti, home to more than 20,000 people. An increasing number of Brahma Kumaris centres are installing solar energy and tanks, according to their capacity and resources. Retreat centres worldwide have adopted green policies, including recycling and reusing materials where possible and establishing organic gardens. The Brahma Kumaris Environment Initiative 2009 was recently established, will be presented at the Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen, December 2009, and aims to be implemented across the global Brahma Kumaris community. Meditation also continues at Brahma Kumaris centres around the world, with special sessions for recent events precipitated by climate change, like the 2009 bush fires in Australia, floods in India (2008) and earthquake in Italy (2009).

Both the participants and conveners considered the Conference to be of remarkable importance given that the NGO community, for the first time in sixty years, produced a Conference Declaration. Of particular note is that the declaration included spirituality as a matter of central importance, recognizing in particular that climate change is primarily anthropogenic and, if left unmanaged can cause significant damage to the physical and

non-physical structures of our world (Weissbecker et al. 2008; Reichman et al. 2008). In the final agenda, while recognizing that nations and communities are diverse in culture, beliefs and attitudes towards climate change, spiritual health and wellbeing was again recognized as one of the central areas relevant to all, and one that must be addressed by the NGO community.

Chapter 7

Re-authoring Disaster in Orissa

Tumbling inside
Feeling sorrow she makes peace
Shaping a new life

Three days before the cyclone there had been a loudspeaker warning for the entire Jagatsinghpur district. I had been away to a court case where I was acting on behalf of 106 farmers… we were trying to keep our land. When I returned, I found that people in my village – it was of medium size with 300 people - were getting prepared for the cyclone. The wind started slowly on Thursday and then it was very much severe on Friday and Saturday. On Friday the wind… it blew so strong and got stronger and louder. The wind was spinning around and around. We could watch everything flying in the air. My eight family members and I were in my house. My mother was ill and also at home – we live in a mud hut with a straw roof, and it is in a low part of the village. We were talking about the wind and suddenly we realized that there was water in our house. Then the sky got completely black and we could only listen to the sounds and feel the wind. I couldn't see even my son standing in front on me. And the water was rising quickly. There was wind, flood-water and rain. Fifty feet from my house there was a (concrete) building. My mama was 60-70 years old then and we could not take her to the building because the wind and water were spinning so badly. So in the hut together we managed to lay mama on the bed and cover her with a blanket.

Then eight of us, we all went to the building and stayed there with about seventy other families taking shelter there. Out of everyone it was only me who was in *gyān*. In my family my wife is in some other religious community. We have many Babas here, so she is with another Baba. I don't know how many hundreds of people were there that night. The water was still rising and we all had to go the second floor and we stayed in the building the whole night. We listened all night to the sound of coconut trees breaking. Seeing them you wouldn't think they could ever break. That night they became like little sticks. There was nowhere to go and nowhere to become fresh (toilet) either. Everything had to be done just like that. We also had a dog and a cat barking and squealing in our building from time to time. So many animals were in distress. You could hear them all. It never stopped.

It rained heavily throughout the night and in the morning the waterfall was somewhat less. The whole night my mother was at home in our hut. I saw our cattle shed had been destroyed and the cows and buffalo started swimming to the road. We tried to put straw on them to keep them warm and protect them from the water, but three or four of our animals eventually died. Then I thought that my old mother must surely be dead. We went back and saw the hut was broken but she was alive,

> so we took her with us to the building. Then our question was what to eat. I was remembering Baba and at that time also I was saying don't worry, nothing will happen. We will be okay. We had water rice (a simple local dish), and there had been a devotional celebration so we had something left from that. Remember we told you it was 'Indian biscuit?' Well, it's not a biscuit, but it's a special food offered as *bhog* in the temples. Then, even though the shop was submerged in water, someone managed to bring rice and flour from there. So we at least had something. Then people started cooking non-veg, and I don't take non-veg, so I just ate chapatti. I had a strong feeling that whatever we have is enough for us and nothing will happen to us.
>
> Eventually on Saturday the wind came down, so people started making shelters on the express road. It was a higher place, so people felt safer. On the express road there were so many people living under tarpaulins, but there was only one for each family. Either we had to sleep in the mud or in the rain. We had to choose. There were a lot of trees too on that road. We found some wet rice on the way to the express road, and managed to cook that. After living there for eight days we came back to the village to try to repair our broken hut. Then people started cutting the trees that were on the express road. Then we too had to start cutting the trees because we needed the wood to cook. No-one ever came with relief for us. My house is 13 km from the main town, and we knew they were providing relief there so I went 13 km by bicycle and collected milk powder for my village.
>
> All this time I was in a continuous link with Baba. I found out some days after the cyclone that, after fifteen years of fighting, we farmers had won our court case. I was so happy.

The Super Cyclone still stands as one of the most devastating environmental disasters in the subcontinent, affecting millions. In this chapter I draw on the recollection of BKs, many of who lived in the small villages that were destroyed during those two days in October 1999. I aim to elucidate BKs' sense-making and the ways in which their various spiritual technologies shaped their experience of disaster, their subsequent internal management of it, and associated notions of care and outreach.

I first explore what suffering is and what it means in the context of disaster. I also elaborate on what spirituality means for BKs, and I contextualize it in the work of others. However, the heart of this chapter rests with the theory of re-authoring (Neimeyer 2001, 2006), elaborated in narrative and psychology studies, and its analytic utility to understand the processes and experience of suffering and the sense-making that proceeds

suffering. While more often used to understand the rebuilding process post-trauma, and in meaning-centred counseling (Wong 1998b), and positive psychology (Pargament and Mahoney 2002), I use this re-authoring theory here to discover more about the role of spirituality in restoring meaning (Frankl 1962; Marshall 2009) among BKs. There are parallels between the chronic tensions of identity that exist in daily life for BKs and the ways in which they managed the experience of the 1999 Super Cyclone.

Global vulnerability

We live in a time of enhanced vulnerability at many levels. Together with an increase in reported disasters, there are new and more sophisticated ways in which suffering is produced, with a heightened awareness of the needs of people in such contexts. For example, the world financial systems are in a reportedly feeble and perilous state, and the media accounts of this in mid 2009 provided regular coverage of how this is resulting in institutional hardship and individual suffering. Concurrently, political and civil wars continue, with each side feeling ever more justified in its stance and action. Internal conflicts and acts of genocide have become more dangerous and complex, demanding ever more from helping organizations (Burkle 2006). One of the world's greatest technologies – the Internet – is responsible for endorsing new forms of cruelty and suffering (Willard 2009). The divide between rich and poor has continued to expand despite great work by benefactors, humanitarians and aid agencies. Global warming has increased the endlessly finer balance of risk and survival for people and their nations. There is now increasing discussion too of the role of religion and spirituality in response to disaster.

Suffering, sense-making and disaster

Disasters always involve a degree of suffering, and the experience of suffering intrudes into people's experience of wellbeing (Scheper-Hughes 2004). Unlike debates about other subjective human experiences, suffering is frankly understood, as something distressing

that must be curtailed (Farmer 2004; Gouwens 1996; Gilkey 1985). Yet it can never be completely understood from its outward signs and cultural manifestations (Kleinman and Kleinman 1996; Scarry 1987; Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois 2004), and reactions to disaster and consequent suffering are neither necessarily predictable nor clear to the observer.

Both expressed and non-expressed responses to grief and suffering are born from multi-layered experience. Significant traumas may result in one becoming mute (Scheper-Hughes 1992), or impede the ability to express oneself (Scarry 1987). Suffering can disengage language from reason. Experiences are described as being 'beyond words' or 'unfathomable' and the sufferer remains silent and finds a voice through silence (Das 1996; Ross 2001). Suffering is deeply personal, and the experience can challenge every part of personhood and identity, stripping the individual of a consistent sense of self (Scarry 1987). Even so, suffering can be constructive acting as a signpost in one's life and a signal to change. While unpleasant, it may hold certain value for the human journey and, while often hidden, quiet and privately held, may result in significant individual and social change (Schwarcz 1996; Tedeschi, Park, and Calhoun 1998). If there is a meaning in life at all, there must be a meaning in suffering (Frankl 1962).

Among the BKs in Orissa, the suffering associated with the cyclone, used routinely as a standpoint from which to assess other disasters and crises, takes its shape and finds content in relation to Brahma Kumaris philosophy, and the value of spiritual understanding reveals itself in relation to the cyclone and its aftermaths.

The Super Cyclone

The data here are based on individual recollections and retrospective analysis, yet gathering data in Orissa had a sense of inherent importance because the geography is such that enquiries on disaster take on immediate and material meaning. It became all the

more real when Orissa was inundated with floods while I was there and, while dealing with their own losses, people's discussions on how to best serve others ensued.

UN-based BKs, and BKs elsewhere in the world, interpret their responsibility through their faith and have extended their roles to outreach and community service. However, outreach is generally localized, ad hoc, unorganized and rarely systematic, although there are exceptions (such as the BK centres in Sri Lanka after the 2004 tsunami). Few people in Orissa are aware of or are able to comprehend the international community and its humanitarian work; rather, participants' lives are defined by the everyday hardships of their own environment.

BKs in Orissa affirm this view with personal memories of the 1999 Super Cyclone, the most severe tropical in Indian meteorological history. There were, in fact, two cyclones in rapid succession: the first cyclone on the evening of 17 October devastated the Orissa coast; winds reached 200 kph. Eleven days later, while communities were still recovering, a second cyclone hit the same area, with unprecedented winds of 300 kph devastating the entire coastline. These cyclones affected almost 16 million people. At least ten thousand people were killed, almost two million hectares of crops were damaged, and millions of houses were destroyed (Palakudiyil and Todd 2003):

> Ten members of our family, we all went to the roof and just a few days earlier my father had cut the branch of a banyan tree that was very near to our hut. It was raining so heavily that we could not see anything outside. We were not even able to see face to face. Water was also spinning. It was rushing at such a high speed that it was spinning. The wind and the water took away some of the house, and that banyan branch acted as a boat for us. We could see animals and people dying in front of us. Lifeless. All our crops were washed away. Other family members started crying, "what are we going to eat?" My father said, "Just hold onto that branch of the banyan tree." Our entire house was washed away and we were just holding onto that branch. (Aahlaad)

Local people in Orissa emphasize that the numbers of deaths are underestimates, as large numbers of people in every village were unregistered and so were not counted in the official toll.

> When we found our grandmother, she was all white. She was white on white and had become bloated. She still had her arms wrapped around her legs. She was floating along with so many other things in the water (Jaishree).

Their own accounts are prosaic, grounded in the realities of their everyday lives:

> Everywhere there were broken trees and dead animals. Some were trapped under the trees and had died, some were trapped and suffering. (Shekhar)

> The wind was howling and screeching. It sounded like a snake… And the seawater swept away many many people. It was too horrible to watch. (Ramesh)

> There were snakes and scorpions everywhere. Even dropping from above our door onto us when we came back to our home. Even when the wind finished howling, we were standing in the water and there were so many stinging things. (Parvati)



Figure 44. Displaced women in makeshift housing, ten years after the Super Cyclone

Ten years after the cyclone, families are still displaced from their villages and are unable to earn a livelihood through regular cultivation.

> There was water absolutely everywhere and in it were the dead bodies of people, cows and dogs. There was a bad smell everywhere. Many houses had collapsed. Even some of the big buildings collapsed. Those who had paddy in their houses lost everything. People had a lot of food material in their houses but because for three days it was all in water, everything got ruined. (Manju)

> Since then, sometimes the seed grows very well but sometimes it won't grow at all. The water brought so many things with it that the soil is different now, so we never know if we are going to be able to eat properly or not. (Ravi)
>
> From our tiny village a total of seven people were dead. And the river water washed away the entire village. All the houses, all the crops. Everything was gone. There was nothing to eat. (Urvashi)

Some families continue to move, taking their tarpaulins with them as they look for work. Others have managed to stay in 'homes' that still show clear signs of the cyclonic devastation, because after almost a decade they still do not have the money to make the most basic repairs.

In a small crowded village of 250 people in Jagatsinghpur, a mother lost her husband to the cyclone and her house was seriously damaged. Walking through the village, I was unaware that somebody lived there until Sister Padma called out the woman's name. A skinny elderly woman, Andamayi, peered out at us from under the tin sheeting that served as her door. I followed Sister Gunjan as she ducked under the tongue of contorted metal. I had never seen anyone live alone in Orissa: her isolation was striking. One small room, although partially collapsed, was all that was still livable. When Anandamayi saw me, a stranger, she embraced me and wept. She explained through her tears that she had three sons, and a three room home, so had felt fortunate knowing that her home would be, according to tradition, filled with new daughters (in-law) and children. It is tradition for the bride to move into the groom's home, as they become part of the paternal lineage, also becoming carers to the groom's parents as they age. Andamayi would be taken care of and loved. Now, since losing her home in the cyclone a decade ago, her sons had moved in with the families of their respective wives. This, along with being a widow, was a disgrace for Andamayi and she was now a source of shame for her children. I left Anadamayi's broken home when it became dark, feeling handicapped in my inability to assuage her sorrow and

shame. Coastal villages experienced a disproportionate number of deaths (Alexander 2004).[36] However, morbid situations such as this are no less tragic.

Baleshwar floods

In a state where up to 80% of rural populations rely on cultivation to earn a living, an unremarkable flood can also have dire consequences for food crops and employment. On 17 June 2008, heavy rainfall affected the North Eastern states of India, including Assam, Bihar, West Bengal, Kerala and Orissa. In Baleshwar district, 436 villages were affected, in some cases resulting in broken roads, bridges and homes being destroyed (see Figure 44 below) Although the floods of Baleshwar district were not nearly as destructive as the Super Cyclone, entire villages where the roads and houses are constructed from mud were effortlessly washed away.

A representative from the Orissa State Disaster Management Association explained that the train to Baleshwar would be filled with emergency supplies. We caught the train days after the flood, as soon as the railways were open, and there were no supplies to be seen. After the floods relief was inconsistent, turning proud people into beggars. There was little parallel between what I read in the newspaper and what I saw with my eyes. Instead, our carriage was brimming with concerned villagers returning home.

When we arrived at Basta village I saw bridges broken, roads smashed and homes destroyed. The BK centre had also been damaged (see Figure 45 and Figure 46), although as a concrete house, the building was still solid.

[36] (to find out more about the way in which figures are manipulated in the Indian government of Orissa read Padhy 1987).



Figure 45. Villagers prepare to mend broken roads, after the Baleshwar floods



Figure 46. Sisters clean the centre after Baleshwar floods, with the fading water line in the background

In the *murli* room, the water came up to the outstretched hands of a picture of Brahma Baba, filling BKs with humour and hope. As they were cleaning and searching for what they had left that was usable, the sisters said, smiling "See, Baba was playing with the water. He was reminding us that this is just a game." BKs write themselves a new narrative, re-authoring the disaster.

The anthropology of disaster

Definitions of disaster tend to vary on a disciplinary and thematic basis (Quarantelli 1998), but government and non-government agencies and disaster managers define disaster broadly as a hazardous situation causing significant loss of life and natural devastation that overwhelms local capacity, necessitating external assistance (Sundnes and Birnbaum 2003). For BKs a disaster such as this is a call to serve and, because it affirms their theology and faith, can provide them with a sense of purpose and framework through which to make sense of the disastrous events.

Still, the design of a disaster is such that through everyday discourse and mass communications, including the print and broadcast media, it is often presented as a unique catastrophic event that radically affects all people's lives and livelihoods. The structural footings that shape the impacts of disaster and their fallout are rarely addressed (Erikson 1994, Fjord and Manderson 2009). Acute environmental disasters typically unfold with abrupt changes in physical circumstances, in which people lack power to intervene. Yet the causes of and responses to disaster are both profoundly chronic and progressive, involving social structures and political and economic decisions. These events of disaster can be environmental, such as the Super Cyclone and Baleshwar floods, or human-induced such as explicit acts of social oppression, war or political terrorism like the 2001 World Trade Centre collapse.

In disaster, people are rendered vulnerable as the normal ebb and flow of life is disrupted, roles are challenged, and standards of living drastically altered. Even the term 'vulnerable' can fluctuate in meaning, sometimes almost becoming a cliché that simplistically applies culturally and politically determined criteria to a human population living with chronic structural risks. It becomes real when people like Indravadan (Figure 46 below) who lost his home and most of his village in the Baleshwar floods say, "After everything got broken, the government didn't give us any shelter. UNICEF gave us one plastic sheet in place of our house. What were we supposed to do with that?"

Globalization has advanced vast structural inequalities that produce unremitting suffering to much of the world's population (Chuengsatiansup 2001; Farmer et al. 2004), reinforcing patterns of vulnerability that continue to put people at risk of disaster. Social states such as marginality and vulnerability are common for most of the world's population. The causes and consequences of a rapid onset disaster can be difficult to distinguish from everyday risks related to nutrition, shelter and hygiene that contribute to the long-term vulnerabilities of many communities (Wisner et al. 2004) which BKs and others have to manage daily. A complex web of religious, cultural, psychological and social factors further influences levels of coping and vulnerability, which makes apportioning blame and claiming responsibility a quagmire (Fjord 2008). The responsibility is often left to those most in need, such as local BKs and others after the cyclone.



Figure 47. A couple standing outside their home after the Baleshwar floods.

Defining spirituality

Spiritual care is connected frequently with notions of humanitarian service, combining social and medical care with spiritual and emotional support and guidance (Koenig 2007b, 2007a; Patterson 1998; Chandler 2000; Daaleman, Cobb, and Frey 2001), but more broadly, the provision of spiritual care in times of crisis as a method to ameliorate sorrow and suffering is entering scholarly discourse from diverse perspectives, in particular Buddhist (de Silva 2006; Chhean 2007), Islamic (Basit 2007), interdenominational (Olson, 2003), Protestant New Age (St. Amant 2003), Christian (Smith 2000), and Jewish (Pollock 2007). It is also an ongoing conversation within the mental health sciences (Managing the Psychology of Fear and Terror 2004; Stanton, Bower, and Low 2006; The Royal College of Psychiatrists 2007).

Spirituality is a highly debated term. Despite the cultural construction of belief systems and their institutional sanctuaries (churches, temples, mosques), spirituality here refers to non-earthly experiences that typically defy description. Individual engagement with the spiritual is, at best, poorly represented by language bound by history and culturally embedded meaning. I offer five interconnected areas that form the soft boundaries of the term 'spirituality.' These are: meaning, values, transcendence, connection and becoming (Martsolf and Mickley 1998) which I have augmented in Figure 48 to reflect the participants' experiences.

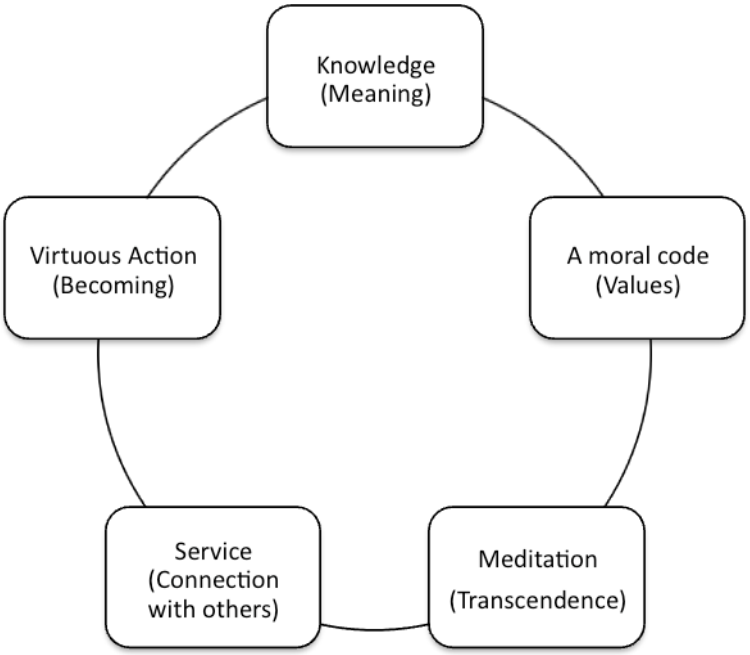


Figure 48. The boundaries that form the definition of spiritual for BKs
Source: adapted from Martsolf and Mickley 1998.

These five terms are reflected in a number of studies investigating spirituality (Brome et al. 2000; Bouma 2003; Chiu et al. 2004; Cunningham 2003; Koenig 2001; Piedmont and Leach 2002; Tacey 2004) and were reflected and affirmed during field research with the BK community. I draw on participants' experiences of the Super Cyclone to better elucidate the meaning of these five terms as they apply to this study.

Meaning refers to the way in which people make sense out of, and find significance in, life events (Frankl 1978). This is connected with overall life purpose, articulated in cultural terms but shaped by individual experiences, capacity and context. In the context of spirituality, meaning may either reaffirm or challenge a faith in universal principles, a supreme benevolent being, and/or a big picture perspective that takes the *absolute* importance out of the here and now. As described above in Chapter Three, BKs understand the world to be a 'Drama'. Capitalised in English because of its specific use and importance, Drama is a term used to describe an eternal interplay of souls, matter and God that takes place on the world stage, recurring in a predestined cyclic pattern of time called the Cycle. Within the Cycle the energy of souls and matter devolves from harmony to chaos, happiness to sorrow, unity to duality and peace to suffering. So, for BKs, disaster is a natural and expected state of affairs. At the confluence of every cycle, God comes to restore and renew souls and matter by teaching souls how to live in harmony with each other and nature again. Therefore, scenes of devastation as witnessed at the time of the Super Cyclone, and in countless smaller local disasters (floods, storms, drought, cyclones), are meaningful to BKs because they feel that, at times of difficulty, they can be of service to souls on multiple levels.

> After the cyclone, we will help to distribute relief. We will do that, but the most important service is to treat everyone with goodwill, good thoughts and have good wishes for all. As Baba has said, wherever destruction has happened, remain there in spiritual consciousness and give good vibrations. No other service is beyond that. (Ramesh)

> Mental peace. They require mental peace. We can bring back their state of mind to a balanced stage through our practice of powerful meditation. (Naranjan)

The *murli* was a constant reference point for BKs during the interviews, with many sentences beginning with "Baba said" as a prelude to their sense-making. This indicates how powerful their scripture of the *murli* is in enabling BKs to find meaning in what would otherwise be unexpected and horrendous events:

> In the *murli* today, Baba said that nature has been given a big big broom for sweeping. While we were reading the *murli* we looked out from the window and saw

> the big banana trees on the ground and coconut trees broken. Everything had collapsed. Because everything was happening as per the *murli* I thought this would be the end… We were content because we knew that what Baba says is happening.
>
> I knew that, whatever will happen, Baba has already said that is all written in the Drama. Baba has already said 3 days before, that *vināsh sāmne khada hai* (destruction is in front of you)… so we were prepared. We were not worried at all. (Shashi)
>
> We can help other people realize the reality of what is happening… That ultimately there is nothing to be worried about. (Manju)

Values lead one to reconsider the ethics and morals that form the foundation of one's life, character and relationships. This includes ideas of what it means to be right or wrong, good or bad in one's thought, speech and social behaviour (Kleinman 2006). In Brahma Kumaris theology, the value of purity is emphasised, affecting personal spiritual practice and BKs' participation in everyday activities. Purity is the foundation of their moral code. As well as external forms of purity, previously discussed, internal and refined forms of purity such as an attitude of benevolence, a clean compassionate heart, and an unshakeable inner state of peace are emphasized in their discourses.

> When there is cleanliness in thoughts, words and actions the soul becomes peaceful. The face becomes peaceful. Check to what extent there is purity within. Purity is the main aspect in this Brahmin life. Think about it very carefully; purity is the mother of peace and happiness. (Janki 2005:3)
>
> Purity is the mother of happiness and peace. Purity is the key to all attainments... Make a promise with determination: I have to give peace and happiness and I have to take peace and happiness. (BapDada 2005b:1)

Participants echoed the sentiments above as they used the *murli* to establish a coherent narrative while also finding faith-based forms of humanitarian aid:

> (It felt like) everyone was going to die and everything was going to finish, so I thought we should spread the vibration of peace and happiness. We too had lost everything in water. But we didn't have even a little bit of unhappiness… I was also feeling that this is a very tough time when people need to be able to tolerate whatever is happening. They need real power, so through mental power I was trying to spread the atmosphere that they will have the power to face, they will have internal happiness and peace. (Devi)
>
> Physically we can do whatever we can for them. And together with that we can spread the vibration of peace. (Manju)

Transcendence refers to establishing a relationship with something greater than the self. Transcendence may also involve moving beyond patterns of thinking that have previously brought experiences of sorrow, limitation and suffering. Transcendence may be through meaningful fulfilment or loving encounters (Frankl 1978) such as, in the case of BKs, a relationship with God experienced through meditation. Transcendence also implies a sense of deep connection with high principles and universal laws, and moving beyond being dependent on the physical world. For BKs this dependency is body consciousness:

> Every morning at 3 o' clock I sit in meditation and I get lost in the remembrance of God. I am not even aware that I have a body. I don't have that body consciousness any more and I always have a feeling that whatever is happening is happening for good. (Tulsi)

> Constantly I was in remembrance of Baba. I felt a lot of power and peace from Baba and distributed it among other people who were there. (Ganesh)

BKs meditate as a form of personal transcendence that lifts them out of what they see as a chronic and pandemic over-identification with the body. Soul consciousness and remembrance of God is where BKs feel they receive their power. It is this power that they say they draw on whilst simultaneously offering subtle support to others through the vibrations they create with their mind. "Self narratives are the very substance that is disrupted by trauma and loss, and that public and private narration of tragedy and transition is heavily implicated in post-traumatic resilience, repair and transcendence" (Neimeyer 2006:78).

Connection is a form of negotiation where one establishes and deepens a dialogue with the self, God, others and nature. Faith-based reasoning enabled one BK to find a deeper meaning during the Super Cyclone, enabling her to feel able to contribute something worthwhile to the physical elements on the basis of her faith and spiritual practice.

> These two days of the cyclone I meditated a lot. I was talking to God and I had some insight… I was feeling that (the job of) my thoughts were to order nature. I was speaking to the water and saying, "You must stop now. You cannot increase any more." And it happened that it didn't rise anymore. It stopped. So I was feeling that yes, we are the ones who can (work with) nature. (Devi)

While Devi's practice was to give to the elements, Jagdish's practice was to remain beyond their influence:

> Baba has spoken many a times about destruction so I felt it was a rehearsal of that and an examination to make our internal stage strong. It gave us the feeling that even if you don't get water and food for many days even just with the remembrance of God you can survive. And that's the only way. I felt it very strongly.

Becoming is about movement, transformation and the act of drawing understanding from the past into the present, in order to construct one's future. It may involve renewal and reconfiguration of attitude:

> There was a younger brother I was with who started crying, seeing the situation and then I said, "You don't worry. Baba is with us. Baba has told us in advance what will happen. So don't worry, let's see what happens. (Adesh)

Maintaining a fluid perspective (Halemba 2008) and being prepared to alter the way in which life is viewed (Agrimson and Taft 2009) are spiritual methods that work as methods to restore meaning (Ai et al. 2005):

> Whatever we see in this world will be destroyed. Its time is up and destruction is inevitable. So we must always be prepared. We should not be sad, rather accept the Drama and accept everything happily. (Suresh)

> We saw in front of our eyes what would happen in the future. Baba says we would see that. So inside we had even more faith in Baba. (Gulab)

As evident above, meaning, values, transcendence, connection, and becoming are part of psychological cognition demonstrating the overlap between spirituality and psychology in the process of sense-making (Levy, Slade, and Ranasinghe 2009; Leavey 2008; Cashman and Cronin 2008). Psychologists have called for more specific detail on what are effective faith factors that sit between the scholarly disciplines of positive psychology and faith-related research (Ai et al. 2005). This reconfiguring of outlook captures much of what is at the heart of re-authoring and the growth that can result (Calhoun and Tedeschi 2006).

Re-authoring as an explanatory tool

Re-authoring, as suggested by Janoff-Bulman (1992; 2006), is a form of deeper and more complex reframing, as it involves writing a new life narrative rather than just seeing things in a new light. Re-authoring begins with the premise that each person has an interwoven tapestry of memories, thoughts and behaviours that have been affected by and impacted on the lives of others. This tapestry goes towards creating the person's assumptive world, forming attitudes that become the filter through which life is experienced. The assumptive world of the 're-author' includes the self, family, other social relationships, and community. It is a fluid world open to external influences, particularly in times of heightened awareness, as occurs with disaster.

Overarching schemas offer a sense of safety and steadiness, and are formed through a process of action, response and feedback that takes place between individuals and the social worlds they inhabit. Once this assumptive world is challenged and the old filter through which life was viewed is displaced, a new identity and perspective must somehow be woven, so that a coherent meaning can be gleaned from what has occurred.

The assumptive filter then acts as a frame of reference through which life is understood, and considered to be standard and unremarkable, however it may seem to others. The filter is an osmotic one, with information constantly being revised and adjusted by new experiences throughout life, either gradually or abruptly. This re-writing of one's life narrative that occurs with both disaster and spiritual endeavour, frequently engendered by suffering, can result in growth.

Disaster tends to impact on multiple levels of existence and is an experience that can rend one's filter, leaving a raw emptiness and a disabling openness (Scott 1997). Inherent in disaster are instability and uncertainty, because of the rapid changes that occur in the physical environment and the social world. Attitudes, thoughts and faith-based

understanding and feelings provide a number of threads that a person may use to weave this new perspective of reality, as demonstrated in the above experience. This can cause an inner tension as old ways of thinking and viewing the world no longer tell the 'truth' or reaffirm the way things appear to be, particularly in the social and environmental disruption so characteristic of disaster. It is this process of rapidly breaking, creating and recreating ways of thinking, to create a new way of being, that can be termed re-authoring. This is usually a gradual process. With disaster however, a person is required to undergo an unusually rapid readjustment, leading many to face an existential tension in relation to their lived experience.

Living through an acute disaster calls on individuals to reassess all that is considered true and solid within their assumptive world, in some way or another. The process of experiencing suffering and the tension of imminent and necessary change, followed by internal questioning and negotiating new ways of thinking, are part of the re-authoring process. Re-authoring occurs on a continual basis, and reflects the endeavours of individuals to find an existential logic and coherent identity that they can carry with them as they move through their lives.

Spiritual practitioners

I suggest that members of all religious communities are necessarily more reflexive than their secular counterparts because most religious teachings contain important forms of self-reflection through prayer, discourse and congregational activities. However, I suspect with BKs this is more so; because of the principles of celibacy, BKs are not born BKs. Adherence is intentional and self-determined. Also, their path involves an absolute focus on self-change as the basis of world-change and its associated responsibility. BKs refer to the regular and daily practice of re-authoring as 'changing ones *sanskāras*.'

A central component of BK spiritual technology is being self-reflective to the point where one checks motivation on which basis one is acting, particularly in relationship and connection with others. Associated conflicts are managed and are often light-heartedly termed 'the dance of *sanskāras.*' BKs understand that the filter through which one lives has been tainted by body consciousness as a result of taking repeated rebirths and so is no longer 'pure'. The aim of BK life is to restore one's pure state through virtuous action based on spiritual principles and power gained through meditation:

> All the human beings of the world are body conscious. No one knows that they are souls, whereas you are becoming soul conscious. (BapDada 2000c:2)

Therefore it is imperative that BKs become a witness to their own *sanskāras*, which in re-authoring theory is the assumptive filter. The difference for BKs is that they purposely view this filter and reflect on it daily, changing stances repeatedly from participant to observer and managing any association tension. They aim to detect any influences upon it, and whether they are pure and God-directed or impure and ultimately illusory:

> The body is false. The body is not true. The body is non-living. It is made of the five elements… The Father comes to change you children from ugly to beautiful and from thorns into flowers… This world is a jungle of thorns. People continue to hurt one another… Therefore, the Father says: Children, renounce body consciousness and consider yourself to be a soul. (BapDada 2005a p. 2)

BKs live with continuing social pressure and contradictions in terms of their own spiritual practice and in relation to others. The foundation of their life is at odds with many of the values and everyday practices of ordinary social life: "People of the world think it is impossible to live in a household and yet remain pure, whereas you easily adopt celibacy" (BapDada 2001c:1). This tension of living with a philosophy that is often antithetical to the belief systems, values and practices of the broader community demands that BKs rewrite an identity that is true to their spiritual path but does not cause conflict in their community and is not incongruous with their daily life. For BKs, this existential tension is at the heart of re-authoring.

BK theology and practice is in contrast to the dominant paradigm of the Western world and, as explained previously, is at odds with some of the main tenets of Hinduism, the religion that most closely embraces it. Their ascetic practices demand that BKs sustain a consistent re-authoring (Walsh, Ramsay, and Smith 2007), as they continue to lead ordinary lives, working and living with their families while maintaining principles and understanding that is at odds with the communities in which they live:

> People in this era of darkness don't know that the age of truth is being established. Previously we also did not understand this. They do understand that what is new has to become old. But still people's attention is drawn to the world. You have to forget this world. (BapDada 2005a, p. 1)

BKs continue to navigate, aiming to remain authentic to daily demands and responsibilities while repeatedly and continually transcending body conscious attitudes, consciousness and ways of the material world.

Because of the existential and questioning nature of spiritual paths, spiritual practitioners frequently explore and seek to explain the reason for suffering and the nature of change. In BK philosophy, to understand, accept and control the mind is deemed the key to enlightenment, and so the mastery of one's own mind is the tool to release the self from suffering. The method of release from suffering for BKs is systematic, with a strong focus on internal reflective practice and private ruminations, reinforced by virtuous action and disciplined rituals designed to promote and sustain strong spiritual awareness. BKs are encouraged to deal with suffering and difficulties mindfully, managing necessary change and associated tensions thoughtfully and peacefully.

Being on a spiritual path calls people to re-author their own narrative in a myriad of ways. Areas of life that offered safety and solace, and were considered secure and certain are disputed. The questions 'Who am I?' 'How should I live?' and 'Where do I belong?' become keys to the process of the re-authoring of self, based on new knowledge and faith. These questions are also reflected in the social scholarship of disaster (Fischer III 2002; Gist

1999; Ripley 2008; Ursano, McCaughey, and Fullerton 1994). Situations that demand change impatiently, causing tension and suffering, call into question the very architecture and meaning of everyday life. In the process of change, attention is focussed inwards to the soul, that is, the actual self, as distinct from everyday life roles such as mother, teacher and researcher for example, all of which can change in a moment. As part of the required re-authoring, there is a process of pulling away from the limited or perishable.

> This body is old and decayed; you should have no attachment to it. This is an aspect of knowledge. It is not that you do not have to take care of your body. But internally you have to understand that this is an old skin that you will eventually have to shed. This is unlimited renunciation. (BapDada 2000b, p. 3)

The re-author separates herself from materialistic causes of suffering, while working to remain authentic in life and in relationships on the basis of renewed understanding. Ironically, this very process may cause suffering, or at the very least a tension. Even when one takes on a new spiritual framework there is a loss of support systems, either because they are rendered meaningless in light of a new self- and world-view, or because others, who are uncertain of the person's new worldview, choose to pull away. Hence a re-authoring of self occurs necessarily, based on new knowledge, faith and remarkable experiences. Existence is rewritten in relation to the external presentation of life.

In both disaster (EMA 2002; Hoffman 1999) and spiritual endeavour (Sutcliffe 2003; Tolle 2005), people can experience euphoria, as the old is taken away and one stands unfurnished, raw and – in a sense – free from lifelong constraints of role and identity, and with a new sense of camaraderie and belonging. Once the previous self is challenged to the point where old forms of identity are no longer valid, one is necessarily required to peel back layers of one's life narrative to re-author a new self (Frank 2000; Gillam and Guillemin 2004). In many cases (Calhoun and Tedeschi 2006), people who have lived through disaster report remarkable growth as the relationship of the self with the external world is reconfigured. Depending on what form the disaster has taken, this arbitration may create further levels of peeling away and rebuilding. With BKs this is done through

reaffirming the identity as a soul, performing daily meditation and shaping their understanding through *murlis*. By providing a practical way to restructure individual, physical and social worlds, re-authoring can become a powerful method of recovery and healing (Todeschini 2002). Faith-based reasoning and the spiritual technology of meditation may support and offer additional tools for the re-authoring process.

Concluding thoughts

The World Health Organization (WHO) has emphasized the need for greater psychosocial care post-disaster (Gist 1999; Roberts and Ashley 2008), and in Australia, spiritually sensitive social care is now being integrated in the curriculum of high level disaster training (Gray 2008; Spencer and Archer 2008) and forms part of the government's response to disaster (EMA 2002). However, little is mentioned about creating faith-based resilience in communities *prior* to disaster. BKs indicate three forms of understanding that contributed in their ability to moderate their experience of the Super Cyclone: a belief that they have a capacity to serve themselves and others through the mind; a tendency to find purpose and meaning in life's difficulties through their theology; and the practice of meditation that offers BKs a sense of transcendency that can lift them out of the tragedy of the moment. Just as one stockpiles utensils and food, and rehearses behaviour appropriate to safety and physical resilience in disaster, BKs stockpile the practice of meditation and positive thinking, coupled with thoughtful good action, as a method to develop inner endurance.

Spiritual practitioners learn to be dexterous when managing chronic existential tensions and forms of unusual existential inquiry. It is often existential tension and inquiry that presents itself to people during disasters, so spiritual practitioners may potentially be well placed to offer spiritual care in disaster settings, and contribute their expertise to create resilient and better prepared communities better able to deal with hazardous, and sometimes catastrophic events.

With suffering in disaster, regardless of the nature of suffering and extensiveness of loss, to move forward one must rebuild also on the basis of new knowledge of self, and one's family and community, galvanized by the "who am I?" and "what is my purpose?" questions. The resolution of these questions may vary according to one's fundamental values and styles of identification with the physical or non-physical world. Whatever forms the questions that arise, they reflect back on the self, initiating reflective thinking and demanding answers of a sort. The self may remain unresponsive, but moving from a point of unresponsiveness and engaging with the process of transition is the beginning of re-authoring.

Spirituality provides important elements to the process of re-authoring; understanding of universal laws and tenets of good living, a feeling of connection with others and with nature, and a sense of meaning that all contribute to *purposeful* suffering that plays a part in the process of moving through the experience and re-authoring one's life narrative. The dying of old ways of being pushes individuals into negotiating a new relationship with the self and the external world. Including spirituality in discussions about the way in which we care for others during disasters can only serve to broaden the places that we look for ways that we may help people to manage their experience of suffering.

Chapter 8

Spirit Possession and Purity in Orissa

She knew and feared him
He entered uninvited
Kālī threw him out

The subject of spirit possession introduces fascinating existential, evidential and theoretical dilemmas for anthropology. Since the discovery of the germ, possession has been medicalized - as have many other social and personal phenomena – with physical sciences isolating and naming certain components of complex social and mystical experiences as pathology.

In this chapter I draw on fieldwork conducted in Orissa, in which I explored the way in which the spiritual technology of members of the Brahma Kumaris' ascetic meditation community shapes their experience of disaster. I focus on the spirit possession of one of the sisters, and the ways in which other members of the community sought to manage and explain it. I explore the phenomenon of possession in relation to BK understanding of soul, death, transcendence, possession, spirituality and purity.

Spirit possession is a highly symbolic and interpretive term because of its unquantifiable nature, the multiple meanings of both words and the fact that the phenomenon does not fit easily with causal explanations of physical science and the associated revelatory powers of the physical world. Possession inspires debates about reality – is it just another way of dealing with dissociation and other mental health vulnerabilities? Or is it true that a spirit can possess the body of another?

As people invariably try to pin down 'spirit possession' and anchor in some kind of meaningful way, every scholarly discipline seems to view it differently. The medical

sciences classify it as a disorder (APA 1996), biological sciences suggest it is the result of a chemical imbalance, the psychological sciences explain that it is a form of auto-hypnosis, dissociation (Budden 2003) or hysteria (Castillo 1994) or non-conscious manipulation. Social scientists refer to it as a culturally specific auto-hypnotic phenomenona (Taves 2006) and locally understood phenomenon (Hayes 2006), and religion may classify it as the work of a bodiless spirit, the return of disobedience to principles of purity or a karmically acquired encounter (Miyamoto 2006). Others note and analyze trance and shamanism as part of the possession phenomenon in fieldwork (Glazier 1997; Halperin 1995; Tart 1969; Winzeler 2008).

As anthropologists work in an increasingly globalized world, our disciplinary approach allows for inconsistencies and paradoxes to exist comfortably side-by-side (Anderson and Clack 2004). By its nature, possession questions reductionist science as the pinnacle of 'rigorous' research and 'fact,' because "strong objectivity is formed by working with insights from multiple standpoints, including, most significantly, standpoints from the margins rather than the centre of power" (Harris 2004:77): Facts are shaped by the knowers and their processes of coming to knowledge. This is distinct from weak objectivity, which privileges certain forms of knowing, and methods of knowledge acquisition, over others.

I draw on a particular case study from my fieldwork in Orissa, India (2008), of spirit possession as experienced first hand by Sister Rajni, a sister living in a Brahma Kumaris Centre in Orissa. Rajni was possessed by the spirit of a man called Mohan. In this case Rajni, the witnesses of the possession, and those at the periphery of the scene create a collective knowing, forming the rigorous and contextualized understanding of the sister's possessed state. The data come from more than fifty pages of notes taken during and

immediately after the event, as well as participant observation over two days.[37] Sundari translated both Rajni's and Mohan's speeches; I recorded nothing but wrote furiously. The translations are indicated in indented text.

I narrate the background of this possession before explaining the basics of *Tantra* theory - Mohan's main spiritual practice - which involves the manipulation of the physical world through spiritual means. I tell the story that was told to me by Mohan, and I continue to narrate the communication between Rajni, Mohan and others who were present over a twenty-four hour period. Finally, I explore how BKs made sense of the experience through their understanding of the spiritual world, and their main principles of purity, and how these were protective.

After I tell the story, I offer an analysis of the possession, building on anthropological understanding of possessive phenomena that has been documented so far. My primary argument rests on BK philosophy for three reasons. BK philosophy was the reason for the conflict between the two parties in the first place, shaping the particular forms of difficulty in their relationship. BK philosophy offers a strong spiritual framework with which to view the experience. And BK philosophy was the belief structure of those who were present during those two days, allowing an emic perspective of events. During analysis some persistent themes emerged: the protective factors of purity in the lives of BKs, the role of fear and humour in shaping BK experiences, and the blurring of the clear divide between *lokik* (worldly) and *alokik* (spiritual or otherworldly) methods of healing. The narrative advances the credibility of mystical experience and broadens anthropological understandings of the many ways in which spirit possession manifests.

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[37] Consent forms were out of the question, as the clarity and autonomy required to abide by the western academic principles of research ethics was conflicted: Personhood was unclear and the sister was in a difficult and vulnerable state. How and from whom was I to get 'consent' when one body was being inhabited by two entities: one unwelcome and one experiencing a unique form of vulnerability. Asking for two signatures was a degree of strangeness I could not entertain.

Ghosts and souls

Brahma Kumaris philosophy positions itself outside of Hinduism, although the understanding and social expression of its spiritual practice are heavily influenced by North West Indian culture. The first understanding that forms the foundation of BK philosophy is knowledge of the soul. The soul is absolutely distinctive from and a polar opposite of the body. In true Cartesian style, this dualism defines the body as limited, elemental, gender-specific, large and mortal. As discussed in Chapter Three, the soul is unlimited, transcendental, without gender, infinitesimal and immortal. Natural laws govern the comings and goings of souls in bodies, and the veracity of this is unquestioned by BKs. BKs see their path as one of spiritual education based on this understanding of body and soul, which is the first and foundational lesson. Because of this understanding, BKs tend to demystify transcendental phenomenon on the basis of knowledge and understanding and what I would term spiritual rationalism. *Murlis* are original lessons, but are revised continually, and are the basis of BK renewed understanding and the daily management of different experiences. The topics of death, rituals and possession, while not spoken of freely among the BKs, was read out in *murli* class during my time in Orissa:

> When a body is cremated all trace of name and form finishes. What do you cremate in your life? You have the same body, but you cremate the old *sānskaras* and this is why it is called dying alive… What would you call someone who has been cremated if they then appear in front of you? You would call that a ghost. So here too, if the *sānskaras* that have been cremated were awakened again, what would you say? That is also a ghost of *Maya* (illusion), is it not? Ghosts are chased away. They are not even spoken about. (BapDada 2004b:28-29)

BKs believe that a soul can inhabit the body of another against their will, particularly if that soul has died or 'left the body' in tragic or abrupt circumstances or, in the case of Mohan, is someone of particular ill will. The majority of BKs outside of India have not seen or experienced negative forms of spirit possession and there is little concern about it. However in India, particularly in Orissa where *Tantric Vidhya* and other methods of spiritual manipulation are common, these systems are treated with a fearful respect.

People with *Tantric Vidhya* abilities are thought to be able to manipulate bodiless souls at their will, causing stress, illness and death to others. The *murli* states that:

> Nowadays, there are many people in the world who have occult powers. They continue to cause one another sorrow. This is the world of ghosts. (BapDada 2002c:6)

> Souls who don't have bodies continue to wander around. They are called ghosts. They continue to wander around until they receive a body. Some of them are good and others are bad. (BapDada 2001d:6)

A ghost is when a soul has become malevolent, which can happen because of deeply negative attitudes held within the soul for a long time, or because of performing bad actions and accumulating negative karma. Either of these may prevent the soul from taking a 'clean' rebirth. Because of BK beliefs about the clear and unremarkable distinction between the soul and body, as well as *gyān* (spiritual wisdom and understanding) and *bhākti* (blind faith and worship), the phenomenon becomes doubly normalized. BK theology reframes the *lokik* fear of ghosts into a method for self- reflection and spiritual study, and transforming negativity:

> Finish it, burn it but don't then take the ashes back with you. If you take the ashes back with you, they will come back. They will become ghosts and come back. Therefore, finish all of them in the Ocean of Knowledge before you leave. Achcha. (BapDada 2003c:23-24)

Background of the possessive relationship

Sister Rajni

Like most sisters in Orissa who reside in BK ashrams, Sister Rajni grew up in a village, was in her early thirties, and had been a BK since her teens. In India, and particularly in rural areas and traditional states like Orissa, women do not have intimate relationships before marriage. The risks are too high. Depending on their caste or class, a woman who is intimate with a man before marriage, even in the case of non-consensual sex can be cast out of the village, and at worst murdered by a close male relative (Freed and Freed 1964;

Watts and Zimmerman 2002; Krantz and Garcia-Moreno 2005).[38] Being a dedicated sister within the Brahma Kumaris is akin to marriage. After they have completed formal education, young women usually dedicate themselves to the service of God by making a public oath of obedience, simplicity and chastity. Those who become dedicated remain unmarried (see Kosciariska 2008) and their vows are for life. Depending on their families, it may be possible for those who decide to exit the Brahma Kumaris to leave and get married. Others may be shunned and have nowhere to go. While outside of India, BKs may be just as dedicated, in India the social implications of 'being surrendered' (or dedicating ones life to purity and the service of God) are vastly different. In Australia, for instance, the choice is personal and the pledge is self-monitored. In India the choice is public and the community monitors adherence.

The location

Vishwa Shanti Sarovar is a retreat centre located between Cuttack and Bhubaneswar, set back from the roadway at the end of a long straight dirt driveway, surrounded by cleared agricultural fields. Vishwa Shanti Sarovar consists of two buildings, one on the left that houses the kitchen, meditation room, living room and accommodation for senior sisters. The other on the right comprises a classroom on the first floor and - still under construction at the time of fieldwork - accommodation for approximately 20 people in twin share rooms on the ground floor. It is common during the evening for people to sit outside between the two buildings, as it becomes cool and breezy in the late afternoons. This is a welcome change from the relentless still heat of summer days. When I arrived, with sister Sundari and brother Gopal (who was driving), four sisters who lived there were sitting on the stairs that lead to its entrance. Each was dressed in a white *sari* with

[38] For more information read the monthly journal 'Violence Against Women' pulished by SAGE and available via login at http://vaw.sagepub.com/.

her hair knotted in a long black oiled plait. Two brothers nearby were dressed in traditional white *kurta pajamas* and were clean-shaven – unusual for India where men above the age of fifteen usually don a moustache. One brother was sitting in a plastic chair some distance away and the other was standing up, leaning against the pergola. There were small empty teacups and stainless steel dishes containing scant yellow crumbs, indicating that tea-time, a great legacy of the British, had finished. Everyone's focus was on a sister who was seated in a plastic chair, set apart from the brothers and other sisters, speaking in rapid repetitive Oriya, seemingly without taking a breath. She appeared disheveled and upset.

It is not uncommon to see sisters a little tired and unkempt, as the local sisters work hard, cooking, cleaning, washing and teaching. Sisters often have special tasks assigned to them too, according to what they like to do and what they may be particularly good at. But there is a context to their work that makes any uncleanliness permissible in the realm of 'service'. Messiness as a result of activities such as cooking, teaching, accompanying a teacher, conducting a spiritual art exhibition or spiritual education program elsewhere in Orissa, travelling or doing *karma yoga* (mundane activities in the remembrance of God) is permitted. It is an automatic and accepted result of maintaining the rightness of things (Douglas 1970).

This sister didn't appear to have been doing any of those things. She also didn't seem to be sitting as a sister would sit, but was flailing her arms about and sitting with her legs splayed out, using poor Oriya and the most disrespectful forms of speech. This was unusual as BK sisters always use the respectful form of speech, save with small children. Rajni had her hair oiled and tied in a plait, with a centre part like a 'good' sister. She was in her white *sari* as well. But the hair was disheveled and the *sari* was dirty. Her eyes seemed unfocussed and she was not making eye contact with anyone. Similarly, although she was speaking, she did not seem to be addressing anyone in particular.

One of the brothers who had driven her here explained to me that this was not Rajni, the sister I had heard about. Apparently this was much more in keeping with the character of brother Mohan, the brother who had been intent on destroying her, before his untimely death.

Before the possession

Sister Rajni had surrendered her life to the service of humanity as a BK ascetic and was living with a younger sister Gopi in a small village centre, as is common in Orissa. Most people in the small village knew each other and so people quickly learned about the centre. Given the importance of devotion and the reputation of the Brahma Kumaris for holding interesting spiritual lessons, many village people visited the ashram. There was the added intrigue of having classes conducted by young unmarried women who normally occupy a junior place in any social or community setting. Because of these qualities, and the provision of free and tasty pure vegetarian food, people from the village started coming to the centre. One particular young man called Suresh was attracted to the teachings and also to Gopi. But he had habits of food and drink considered impure by BKs and in most places of devotion in India. Nevertheless, Suresh enjoyed the classes, and after attending the centre for some time, he decided to change his lifestyle: he stopped drinking, quit smoking, and became a vegetarian. One thing that did not change however, was his attraction to Gopi, which he displayed from time to time.

It is widely known that BK sisters follow principles of celibacy. This is held in high regard in India, so for a man to molest or attempt to molest a BK sister is a grave act, although women who are molested are still frequently seen as culpable. From the accounts of four sisters and two brothers, and supplemented by Mohan when he spoke through Rajni's body, I pieced together the following story.

Rajni found out about Suresh's attempts to seduce Gopi and quickly transferred Gopi to another ashram. The move disturbed Suresh. Suresh was friends with a large middle-aged man called Mohan who was the leader of the social group with whom Suresh used to associate. Mohan held great authority within the group, and resented any suggested change to their social habits of eating goat meat, drinking alcohol and smoking. Although Mohan and Suresh were friends, Mohan was a man of little sentiment. While he cared for his aunt and his wife, he was dispassionate towards everyone else including his children. Mohan told me that his aunt and wife started visiting the BK sisters, and his aunt even donated a new oven to the centre, infuriating him. Mohan explained, through the body of Rajni, that he resented the arrival of the BK centre, as many of his friends had stopped drinking, eating meat and smoking.

> When I first came to the centre the old sister (Rajni) in the centre introduced me to Sister Gopi and told her about my history and habits and that she should guide me. Rajni told me to leave it all, which I didn't like.

This was an affront to Mohan on many levels. As I listened to him, considering a new definition of what an 'interview' might be, Mohan continued:

> I am a *Kālī Sādhak*, and I am a powerful one. I am halfway through getting my rings of *sādhana*.[39] In a gold shop once I caused a lot of damage. I threw dirt with a negative vibration of evil intent at the shop window. Then a short time later the shop was broken into by that same window and three *lakhs*[40] of valuables were stolen from there.

A *Kālī Sādhak* is one who worships and commands the powers of *Kālī*, considered to be the most formidable and fearsome Hindu goddess. In pictures (see Figure 49 below), *Kālī* is shown as having dark skin and piercing eyes, and wearing a necklace of skulls and a skirt of human arms.

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[39] Duties applicable to ones caste or spiritual endeavour.

[40] A lakh is 100,000 rupees. A crore, another commonly used term, is 10,000,000 rupees.



Figure 49. A typical picture of Kali fully adorned standing over Shiva
Source: www.vampires.com/
kali-vampire-goddess

Wielding a machete, *Kālī* holds the decapitated head of a man in another of her four arms. Below her is a man slaughtered and lying dead at her feet, and there is sometimes one on bended knee with prayerful hands, begging for mercy. Devotional pictures may show *Kālī* standing over *Shiva*, who is considered by many devotees to be the greatest of all Gods, indicating *Kālī's* status as the ultimate and supreme creator.

As with any form of devotion, the acts and intent of the devotional practice depend on the devotee as well as scriptural teachings and guru mentoring. Mohan was known in the village as a man of particularly bad will, and a powerful *Kālī Sādhak* who had harmed and killed many, including infants, through multifarious methods including chanting, twisting their necks and casting spells from a distance:

> I was asked to kill a family. So I got some people who didn't like the family to give them some food that I had 'worked with.' They ate it, and they died in a road accident shortly afterwards.

Mohan attended the centre a few times, because of his aunt and Suresh, but stopped after he refused the sisters' requests to not drink and smoke before attending classes. As a result of his continued impurity, Mohan was not allowed to partake in Thursday rituals of eating *bhog* (pure food cooked in the remembrance of God).

> Others were invited but the centre-in-charge never invited me for *brahmā bhojan* and that bothered me. She used to invite others. And even though there was no meat or fish in the *brahmā bhojan* I wouldn't have minded, it used to smell good.

At times the younger sister Gopi used to visit Mohan's home and share food with him and his wife. However Rajni didn't approve, calling him a drunkard and telling him not to come to the centre unless he changed his habits. Feeling rejected, he resented the sisters at the ashram even more and threatened them: "If (I arranged it so that) there is no centre left there, then where will people eat their food?" Therefore, when Suresh came to him and asked Mohan to "do something to Rajni so that Gopi could come back", Mohan was only too happy to oblige. "I only want Gopi at the Centre," said Suresh. "She is good looking and fair but the other one is dark." Mohan thoughts turned to *Tantra* as he thought of ways to get rid of Rajni.

Tantra

Hindu spirituality is a form of worship, devotion and faith that can easily embrace most forms of understanding. While the primary religions have a founder or a prophet, there is no distinct beginning to the Hindu faith. The Vedas, Upanishads, the Gita, the Ramayana, the Mahabarata and the Mallik are all scriptures that sit within the Hindu religion. Some would say that Hinduism is not a religion but rather a social description of a people (Baird 2003; Hawley and Narayanan 2006). Others say it is a geographical title (Walker 1968).

Hinduism embraces *Tantra*, although *Tantra* is not exclusively Indian. *Tantra* denotes a religious system connected with Shakti worship, or worship of the feminine, and comes from Buddhist and Hindu mystical or religious texts dating between the 6th and 13th

centuries. *Tantra* played a significant role in this case study because Mohan endeavoured to kill the sister through *Tantric Vidhya* before ultimately possessing her. "*Tantra* is first and foremost an initiatory tradition. A tradition works in the opposite way of science. The latter is, by definition, an organized system of information on the facts and laws of the manifested universe… *Tantra* is based on symbolism and mythology, whereas science situates itself on the purely cerebral level" (Ray 2006:17). Its practitioners explain *Tantra* as a structure by which one develops understanding of psychobiological energies, and the ways in which to use subtle energies to attain self-realization and mastery over the self and the physical world (Rawson 1973). *Tantra* draws in understanding of meridians, which are a set of pathways in the body along which vital energy is said to flow and are key to diagnosis and treatment in Ayurvedic and Chinese medicines. *Tantra* also employs Ayurvedic principles of bodily wellbeing (Svoboda and Lade 1998), and meditation techniques (Ray 2006). *Tantric Vidhya* is the structure, laws and the manifestations of *Tantra*. Thoughts are an integral part of *Tantric* success, along with chanting, rituals of goddess worship and careful use of the tools of the physical world. There are few books on *Tantra* written in detail in English due to the esoteric nature of its teachings and its transmission through the guru/ disciple relationship in the context of which the knowledge, stories and rituals are passed on (Rawson 1973; Ray 2006).

Disciplines of Tantric Vidhya

Early Aryan texts dated at 300 BCE describe a form of social ordering that is the foundation of the current caste system. In traditional India, caste determines what people can and cannot do in every sphere of their life, including food, work, housing, relationships, friendship, gender roles, devotional practices and places of worship, life, death and marriage. It covers every sphere of social existence. The ways in which members of one kinship group abide by their practices can elevate the status of the entire clan, adding to their prestige, fortune, good karma and prosperity. This can directly affect

potential clan alliances within the system of marriage and a subsequent increase in social status over generations. The dualism inherent in *Tantric* worship can be very isolating as it disregards many of the rules of caste that regulate peoples' decisions. The caste system dictates clear rights and wrongs, what is pure and what is taboo. *Tantra* involves a cycle of abstinence and indulgence, at times indulging in the five impure components of meat, fish, a particular grain, alcohol and sexual intercourse that are taboo in many social sectors making *Tantra* practitioners literal out-castes. (Ray 2006; Broido 1988; Rawson 1973) Even if one does not wish to indulge, it is part of the discipline of *Tantra*, and a disciple of *Tantra* is required to adhere just as firmly to *Tantric* principles and customs, as if it were a caste system. *Tantra* is also a practical rather than theoretical path and must be implemented in order to gather the power available from its methods. Because many of its requirements are stringent, practicing *Tantric Vidhya* can result in forms of social exclusion.

I spent two hours with a *Kālī Sādhak* in Orissa to understand more about their philosophy and practice. His particular talent was in using methods of *Tantra* to foretell the future utilizing the astrological component, and to heal ills and right wrongs with mantras, herbs and his own meditation practice. But he also spoke of the power of *Kālī* worship, *Tantric* methods, and the care with which they must be used. While he went into the finest details and a myriad of complexities during our time together, the main thing that was clear is the belief that *Kālī* is a fierce and supreme mother goddess for the people of India. These beliefs are particularly strong in Eastern India, and Kolkata was so named in her honour.[41] *Kālī*'s energy is described as fierce and it can be used for good or bad with equal strength, but each brings its own consequences, as she is the source of all creation.

[41] Kolkata is the official name for Calcutta since 2000, with the aim of removing the India's legacy of British rule, and has its roots in Kalikata, in turn believed to be a version of Kalikshetra meaning "Land of [the goddess] Kālī."

Tantric Vidhya has a reputation of inspiring fear, respect and awe, as it involves many esoteric and unknown practices, secret understandings and methods of bringing harm and/or benefit to those who request or command its power. I had wondered why the sisters I lived with would remove their loose hair, turn it in their fingers until it became a small bundle and then spit on it before discarding it. When I asked one of them about it, she laughed. "I hadn't thought about it. We're taught to do it from such a young age it has become automatic. It's so our hair doesn't get 'misused.'" *Tantric Vidhya* practitioners command esoteric power by using the bones and hair of a *kumāri*. The bones of a *kumāri* are required to have control over evil souls while the hair of *kumāris* is used for slightly lesser tasks. This is quite a business in India. People are paid by *Kālī Sādhak*s to find the body of a young girl or woman who has died but not yet been cremated so the *Kālī Sādhak* can use it as a resource for *Tantric Vidhya*.

Shiv Shakti, Brahma Kumaris and Tantra

The *Tantric* pantheon embraces both *Shiva* and *Shakti* as inseparable entities. Brahma Kumaris philosophy talks about 'the combined form'; the soul *Shakti* combines with the Supreme Soul *Shiva* (Shiv Baba) in a deep meditative link to enable pure spiritual power to manifest in the world during this end period of *Kālīyuga* (Ray 2006), a time of transition, devastation and restoration. In *Tantra*, *Shiva* is the male symbol of creation that must be joined with *Shakti*, the feminine energy of creation. Brahma Kumaris philosophy explains that those who dedicate their life to self-transformation on the basis of the highest purity at the level of thought, word and deed are *Shaktis*, or ones who make the highest form of purity and power manifest. Although personified and worshipped in female form in Orissa, BKs believe that *Shakti* is a quality rather than a gender; therefore the title of *Shakti* applies to both men and women in the Brahma Kumaris. BKs believe that the true understanding of '*ShivShakti*' (the combined form of *Shiva* and *Shakti*) is when the pure

Shakti (the soul) is absorbed in remembrance of *Shiva* (the supreme soul, Shiv Baba), bringing the union of perfect pure and creative energy into the world.

It was interesting to observe the *Tantric* practitioner, a worshipper of *Shakti*, in a spiritual struggle with a sister whose beliefs tell her that she is the manifestation of *Shakti* in the combined form with *Shiva*. I continued to watch the struggle, sitting outside Vishwa Shānti Sarovar feeling the breeze on my face. I sat and listened to Mohan tell his story through Rajni's body.

Mohan's story

> My friends came to the BKs and afterwards they didn't feel like eating meat and drinking alcohol anymore. I had a group who I used to do that with, but then because of BKs the group disbanded and also my relatives, including my wife, came to the BKs. I didn't approve. So I was happy to do something to the sister in charge of the centre. I was very happy to do it.

Mohan felt the BKs threatened the authority that he held among his friends. He was the main man in his group, and he wielded a certain social power through his authority of the scriptures. The BKs undermined all of this:

> As long as I have meat and alcohol and don't know anything I am fine… I have read the scriptures and I know them… but now my friends who have been to BKs are not listening to what I am saying and it is threatening the authority that I held before. They don't accept my ideas now.

This possession is a continuation of an ongoing story between Rajni and Mohan. Mohan tries to reason through the circumstances of his own death using his devotional understanding of karma.

> I had tried to kill the sister-in-charge. In Harichandharpur I did *sādhana* for two days to get to her. I went to the head skull and put the name of the sister-in-charge in the skull. And this situation was like a curse on me and I know this is why I died. As I was flying through the air off my bike I knew my skull would break. I tried to kill her that same way. I was doing puja (ritualized devotion) to burn her skull. This is why it happened this way.

I was fascinated (Crapanzano, 2006), captured by the "irresistible forces of alterity" (200). "What do you mean you tried to kill her that way?" I wanted to understand how this battle of spiritual wills was being played out:

> We take a skull and then think about someone with evil intent to harm him (sic). Then whatever we want to happen to that person we do to the skull and it happens to the person. I have done it so many times and I have never failed. But the sister was so lost in yoga that it wasn't working even though I was trying. I was disturbed and so went out with my wife. I was drinking and remembering this sister, angry that she had not died according to my will. I went the next day to check she was dead and she was conducting a meditation class. I couldn't understand this.

Mohan was not discouraged and looked for other ways to bring his intent to fruition. As Mohan speaks he almost seems ashamed that a woman defeated him. He intersperses the story by telling me what a big man he was:

> So when that didn't work, I went to the *adivassi* (tribal) area and there were three mothers with small children sleeping in their arms. I took the small children, twisted their necks and then offered their bodies to *Kālī*. Then I drew the name of the sister on a piece of paper and wrote – 'she will die today'. I wrote that repeatedly all over the paper and did the vidhya required. The next day I went to the centre to see that she had died and I saw her cooking. This was the first time I had been unable to do it. I thought she must have some power. I had killed 2-300 people before that. This upset me. She was a woman, but still I felt she must have had some special power.

Mohan then tells me about the evening of his death. He explains to me in detail how he dies, his process of dying and the internal commentary that continues as he observed his eventual demise:

> That night I told my wife to bring a blade so I could cut my thigh, bleed myself and offer my blood to *Devi* (*Kālī*). I did that puja. Then later we went out. I was a big fat man and I was on my motorbike. A truck came from the front and because of the headlights I couldn't see properly and didn't know it was so close. I came off the bike and I was flying, flying, flying. Oooooaaaaaahhhhhhh (a long moaning sound).[42] My wife was there too but she was okay. I got a hole in my head (from the accident) and I said to my wife, the children are in your hands now. My back was broken at the waist, the left side of my head was damaged and my skull had a hole in it. Three people carried my body away in a truck.

[42] One of the brothers who had accompanied the sister and Mohan to Vishwa Shānti Sarovar said that Mohan had been witnessed making that same sound as he died.

He paused for breath. I had a glass of water.

After the accident

When someone is cremated, a mud pot or *dasha* is included as part of the ceremony and it is believed that when the body is burned, the soul enters the *dasha*. During the popular *Diwali* (festival of lights in October), it is Oriya custom that householders invoke ancestors in a particular corner of the home. After Mohan's death it was in this corner that the *dasha* was placed. On the tenth day after someone dies, the mud pot is then brought from the graveyard to the person's familial home and placed in a particular corner of the house; there the pot is broken. It is believed that the departed soul is present at the time. This ceremony took place at Mohan's home, with the centre sisters in attendance. BK sisters will often attend the funerals of those who have come to the centre. The eldest male or closest female relative breaks the pot on the tenth day to release the soul, freeing it from its bondage of that life. I include the story of the time surrounding this ceremony, and the possession, as told to me from four different perspectives.

Sister Chandra's perspective

> When Mohan's *dasha* was broken, Rajni was present and she was shocked by the sound. The brothers from the village felt that the soul of Mohan may have "taken his chance" then. Her fearful nature made her vulnerable to the invading spirit.

Mohan's perspective

> On the ninth day after the accident I was wandering around near where the accident happened and then I saw the sister-in-charge on the balcony (of the centre). There was a fragrance coming from her like beautiful incense. I thought how could that fragrance come from a dark body like that? Then I saw her in the form of *Kālī*. But she was more beautiful than my *Kālī* that I worship. So I wanted so much to embrace her and when I embraced her then I entered her. How is it that I saw *Kālī*? I was thinking all the time, is this *Kālī*? My *Kālī*? Then I realized where I was and that I could take care of her this way. I could complete my task.

Rajni's perspective

> I felt afraid after he died, because I knew that he was trying to bother me. So I didn't come out of the house for eight days. On the ninth or tenth day, I only came on the balcony to have my tea. I felt some disturbance then and came back inside. Then for

the last three days he has been bothering me so much… coming inside, using my body. He is causing me so much trouble from the inside. He should just go to Baba. I keep telling him to please go. Why can't he take rebirth and just go?

Gupta's[43] perspective

I knew that something was wrong because her behaviour was different. She was not that educated, so when the details of Mohan's life were being related through her body and the mannerisms and comments were the same as his then I knew he was there. I also knew he was a powerful *Kālī Sādhak*. Everyone knew that. Of course, purity is there and Baba is there. That has been helping her. Otherwise she would be dead, I am sure. But if something has been created with *Tantric Vidhya*, the same method has to be used to remove it. Remembrance alone won't work. So we came.

Purity at play

BKs have a form of spiritual technology they refer to as 'traffic control' (TC) or 'TC' which is a discipline for the mind. Like Muslim prayer times, BKs stop for a few minutes every couple of hours (at 7:30 10:30, 12:00, 2:30, 5:30, 7:30 and 9:00). One stills the mind, and meditates, controlling the 'traffic' of one's mind. BKs stop whatever they are doing, sit quietly and silently, and enter a meditative state with their eyes open. People are reminded by specific music that is set to play through a loudspeaker at the above times. That evening at 7:30 pm, the regular song started playing, indicating it was time for TC. The BKs became quiet, turned their attention inwards and stopped listening to Mohan. Gradually Mohan became restless, moving about in his chair yelling, chanting *Kālī* mantras and demanding that we listen to him. "Listen! Listen!" Ignoring him, and already sitting in an informal circle around Mohan, the BKs began to meditate in silence. Mohan started yelling, "Stop! I can see the light and I don't like it!"

After TC, Brother Gopal and the two brothers from the village where the possession had occurred were stimulated by what seemed to be a juvenile sense of play. In response to Mohan's comments above, they decided to taunt him, perhaps thinking it may make him

[43] Gupta is one of the brothers from Rajni's village who accompanied Rajni to VSS in order for Mohan to be exorcised.

leave Rajni's body. The sisters of Vishwa Shanti Sarovar initially sat close together at some distance away on the steps. Little by little, however, everyone became involved in two particular activities that Mohan seemed to feel in a heightened way. Although no longer normal practice for BKs, chanting *om* was done in the revered early days of the *Yagya*, and is still felt to hold great collective strength. Remembering Shiv Baba, although a silent practice, is thought to be the most powerful form of spiritual practice for BKs. These two disciplines combined caused Mohan to yell even more, resulting in the brothers' absolute delight. Seeing Mohan become visibly uncomfortable, Gopal disappeared, moments later returning from inside the retreat centre with a picture of Brahma Baba and Shiv Baba (represented as a point of radiant light). As he held them in front of Mohan's face, Mohan kept hitting out at them and turning away.

> I don't believe in your Golden Age and I see 33 deities here. I only believe in stealing, harming, meat and wine. An evil soul can't stay here so I will stay out there in the tree. One of my friends is there. That is where we stay when we don't have a body, in the trees.

He could not tolerate the light, Mohan told us and he also explained that he would start doing his own internal practice. Whatever he was doing internally was supplemented by complex mantras that were recognizable by some of the BKs as high Sanskrit, but completely incomprehensible to me and to everyone else who was there. He spoke his *shlokas* (Sanskrit verses) and then left the body.

* * *

The atmosphere, behaviour and demeanour of Rajni returned, and she came inside the centre to eat dinner. She had not eaten for three days. Rajni explained that she had never had such sorrow and difficulties since being at that centre in her village.

> For seven or eight days after he left the body, I was afraid and I didn't come out of the centre. Mohan didn't know anything about that at the time. He said he wants his subtle body to stay in the village so that he can prevent an ashram from being there. He has said such awful slang swear words to me, ones that I have never heard in my life before. And he just won't leave me alone. Why is he doing this?

After quickly finishing her meal, Rajni moved towards the doorway of the centre. The other sisters cautioned her to stay inside the pure atmosphere of the centre, and warned her against leaving. "Stay sister, Mohan will not come in the centre." However, as she approached the threshold, the alternate behaviour and Mohan returned.

> I know I cannot challenge the purity of the sister in charge. She has been a BK since she was twelve. I tried to kill and harm her and in meditation all she keeps saying is for Baba to have mercy on me and that I should become free.

Mohan's cadence changed.

> She is asking for my liberation even though I want to harm her. But why does she talk about this point of light? God is omnipresent and she keeps telling me to go to the light. I don't like her concepts and I don't want to go to the light. It's uncomfortable; I don't like the power of it. And your Brahma Baba is standing there in between, waiting for me with a stick… Previously she was giving me good wishes and pure feelings but for the last two days she has wanted me out.

Theories of spirit possession

In many non-Western cultures, individuals can experience multiple selves through the normative practice of spirit possession and other altered states of consciousness (Scheper-Hughes and Lock 1998). Trance healers deliberately go into trance and become possessed by a spirit known to them, who uses their body and social existence heal. Generally medical anthropological descriptions of possession presume pathology. Religious anthropologists write that spirit possession can manifest when women are socially oppressed and peripheral to the hierarchy of power.[44] In the Brahma Kumaris, the hierarchy of power is feminine and Rajni held the power in her village as the local sister-in-charge. Douglas (1996) suggests that the phenomenon occurs because women are "pinned only weakly into the central structure of their society" (1996:27), and that women express their spiritual independence through manifesting forms of possession, even as a

[44] Read Lewis 1971, and Douglas 1996 who each discuss Lewis' Malinowski Memorial Lecture in 1966, in particular status ambiguity and forms of vulnerability. Cf. with Wilson 1967

"self-activating response to a threat" (Kwilecki 2004:483).[45] This doesn't apply to the global network of the Brahma Kumaris whose culture and society is strong, cohesive, and female driven and sustained (Lalrinawma 2004). Lewis (1971) indicates that for marginal and oppressed members of society, possession cults offer an emotional outlet for those who do not have license to express themselves freely.[46] Others (Bourguinon 2004; Gadon 2004) offer similar arguments regarding female agency for those who hold a power-less position in society. The strong female driven social world in the Brahma Kumaris lives in tension with the Indian social world from which BK sisters are sequestered. With regard to conceptualizing possession, Boddy (1994) suggests that the challenge may lie with us. The past question of "how is it that other peoples believe the self to be permeable by forces from without" has now become "how is it that western models have repeatedly denied such permeability?" (Boddy 1994:427) This moves anthropologists to take a more sensitive, intelligent and emic position in relation to possession phenomena (Klass 2003). Adopting multiple stances during data collection and analysis allows more complex forms of 'objective' knowing (see Harris 2004) to emerge, more accurately reflecting the perspective of those whose worlds we study, and enhancing our knowledge by accepting their forms of knowing.

Puttick (2003) make the interesting observation that in the Brahma Kumaris:

> Women are teachers as well as administrators... They are concerned with women's issues and spiritual leadership. However Brahma Kumaris women become core members by being fully 'surrendered,' and their prominence derives from their mediumistic capacities, channeling *murlis* (sermons) from their dead founder. As a result, their power is veiled. . . through the device of possession. Women, even when they possess power, cannot be seen to wield it. Hence, the importance of spirit

[45] See also the work of Ackerman 1981, and Ong 1988 on mass hysteria/spirit possession in semiconductor factories in Malaysia where the female workers were un-unionized and had no avenue of protest.

[46] Cf. Susto, a common form of spirit 'illness' or fright sickness attributed to soul loss after a traumatic event (Lee and Balick 2003)

> possession, where women are the instruments or mouthpieces of a male spirit. (italics added, Puttick 2003:240).

However, out of the entire membership of over 900,000, it is only Dadi Gulzar whose body is used to channel *murlis*. In 1969 in the months immediately following the founder's death, two sisters were given the choice of having the role as being the medium or, more accurately in terms of BK understanding, the 'instrument' of BapDada. Dadi Gulzar and another sister were both offered the role. A close companion of Dadi Gulzar's told me that the decision as to who should be the instrument for BapDada was an unremarkable event. BapDada needed a corporeal instrument to speak through, and the sisters were to decide between them who should do it. After a few days Dadi quietly accepted the position, and has been the sole medium of BapDada since then. In the 1980s and early 1990s sometimes Dadi Gulzar's body would be seated in the same position on stage for twelve hours without changing position. Still, Dadi is not considered a medium by BKs but rather as an 'instrument' for BapDada.

Like Dadi Gulzar, other BK sisters do go into trance states from time to time, like for instance when a *sandeshi* (or 'messenger') is offering *bhog*, and BK sisters willingly induce altered states of consciousness generated through meditation.

For the last twenty to thirty years BK sisters have generally been discouraged from going 'into trance,' instead relying on specially appointed trance messengers for clarification, and messages. The trance messenger sisters or *sandeshi* explained to me how they sit in meditation and remember Shiv Baba. Their mind becomes quiet and then Baba 'pulls' them. Externally it is unremarkable. The sister sits in meditation after having bathed, donned a clean white sari, washed her hair and often spent the morning or preceding time in silence. She sits in meditation while special songs that have evocative lyrics are played, although I understand that these are more for the spectators who are also sitting in meditation, rather than the *sandeshi*. The *sandeshi* says that after Baba 'pulls' them, they go to the subtle world or *sookshmavatan*, the silent region of thought (Goswami 1993).

Externally, when the sister enters the trance state, there is a small jerk and the sister closes her eyes. She is often smiling and her breathing becomes slow and regular. The *sandeshi* explains that this is when she has "arrived" in the subtle world after which "Baba shows a scene." This scene emerges in front of the sandeshi and often contains symbolic images that are explained through thought by the subtle Brahma Baba. She watches as a observer participant. The *sandeshi* is in that state normally for between ten minutes and half an hour before 'returning', indicated by her opening her eyes. It often takes a while before she starts speaking, as the experience of silence is reportedly quite profound. She then reports to the gathering the message that has been explained to her through visual images and thought-based communication. At no time does the *sandeshi* leave her body nor is it believed that any spirit enters her. For BKs it is an unremarkable phenomenon, albeit a special form of experience for her, and a significant message.

Talismans and Ghosts

We watched the sun begin to set at around 9 pm, and meditated. There was little else to do. I tried not to laugh when Mohan started rolling around on the ground and rubbing dirt on Rajni's forehead. Apparently he was trying to apply ash or *guni*, as is the custom of *Kālī Sādhak*s when they are about to perform some *jadu* or 'magic.' While this scene was going on, I tried to see clearly when Mohan was 'in' and when he was 'out.' For the next couple of hours, it seemed that there were stages where he would enter Rajni's person completely and speak, times when he would exert a strong influence over her, and other times when he was at a distance with a less, but still disruptive influence. Later, as we were readying for bed, a sister came in and gave Rajni what looked like an iron bolt. "Take this", she said giving it to Rajni. "A soul cannot enter if you are holding something iron."

That was the last I saw of her, as it was already 10:30pm and, as usual, we would be rising before 4am. I went into the senior sisters' bedroom, where Sundari and I would stay, according to the natural position and social ordering of the centre.[47] The younger sisters had already prepared our beds. The firm mattresses were covered in clean white sheets. At the bottom of our respective beds was a soft cotton Nepali shawl in case we wanted a light cover for the night. Our mosquito nets had been put up, suspended by four poles attached to the corners of the bed. I happily climbed under my net and smiled at the young sisters who tucked it under the mattress afterwards, ensuring absolutely no mosquito could get in. The fans were turning lazily, the lights had been switched off, the red plastic Shiv Baba light was on,[48] and I was asleep in less than five minutes.

I awoke for *Amrit Velā* at 3:45am to Sundari's gentle voice. "Jasmin?[49] Are you awake." "Yes." "Did you sleep well?" "Yes, did you?" "No, I was having meditation all night. I felt like Mohan might come into me and try to strangle me."

I recalled a trip to conduct interviews I had taken earlier, in another remote area of Orissa. A small group of us had been sitting out in the garden before bed and as we were chatting, someone mentioned that they had heard there was a ghost in the vicinity of our village. I woke up in the middle of the night to see the sister with whom I was sharing a room

[47] For more about the position and ordering inherent in Indian society read Varma (2005) particularly

[48] All Indian centres have a meditation light or 'Baba's Light'. A small light globe is encased in a large red convex oval slightly larger than a man's hand. The shade, which looks remarkably like a large red plastic egg, has a tiny hole in the centre and cut outs around the sides. When the light is turned on the red plastic ensures a warm light, and gentle white rays emerge from the side cut outs, and a tiny white point is visible in the centre. This light is used in most bedrooms as a reminder of God's protection and remembrance.

[49] My name is hard to pronounce in India so I was known as 'Jasmin'.

sitting upright on the edge of her bed.[50] "Are you okay?" I asked. "I'm just worried this ghost might come and get me," she replied.

Another time, I was at Vishwa Shanti Sarovar and sharing a room with Karunamata, the senior sister of Orissa. In the Orissa heat, I found sleeping on my back the most comfortable position. I was lying on my bed with my arms stretched out above my head and Karunamata cautioned me as she was readying for bed. "Don't sleep on your back. It becomes easier for souls to come into you. Baba always taught us to sleep like this." She demonstrated by lying on her side with her hands under her cheeks. "This will keep you safe." We lived together for months and I never saw her sleep in any other position.

BK theology: Ghosts and spirit possession

Possession puts twists and turns on the minds that attempt to constrain this essence of consciousness with logic. Yet, for some, possession is an almost daily occurrence and a somewhat unremarkable phenomenon. For BKs it is not particularly exotic as their theology offers them a clear distinction between the soul and the body even supporting and teaching a state of meditation among its student body known as *ashariri* or, figuratively speaking, the practice of being 'bodiless.' To speak of a soul coming into or leaving a body is not other-worldly in an esoteric sense. It is quite a normal state of affairs.

> Physically, the soul goes and enters a small body. A ghost comes like a shadow. How it continues to wander around is also a wonder. According to the Drama, when a soul doesn't receive a body, he wanders around. He takes on the form of a shadow. Don't occupy yourselves in those things too much. Remember the incorporeal one. Forget your own body and the bodies of others. Simply remember the Father… This is the pilgrimage of remembrance. (BapDada 2002d:14)

Possession in the Brahma Kumaris is supported by solid cultural logic that sits in a receptacle of history and tradition. Forms of expression and spiritual relationships contain

[50] Girls and women rarely sleep alone in Orissa, as protection against ghosts and sometimes men.

meanings, worlds and spirits, and clear rules and regulations that govern all of it. Outside of India BKs must manage different and additional tensions as they endeavour to live in a culture that may not easily support their spiritual beliefs and practice.

In Orissa, spirit possession and the use of *Tantric* methods to either manipulate souls or the elements of nature, are widespread and garner a fearful respect. Because of this, even BKs who dismiss worldly devotional practices and forms of worship in favour of their 'remembrance' and 'pure lifestyle' abide by certain cultural rules to afford their metaphysical safety. BK theology addresses the phenomenon of spirit possession, but always redirects it towards self-change which is the over-riding lesson in the Brahma Kumaris:

> You now belong to the Father. Whatever evil spirits you do have inside you will all be removed. The foremost evil spirit is the ego of body consciousness. When you remember the Father, no evil spirit would dare to come in front of you. (BapDada 2004c:9)

Self-change will bring world-change at this time of *Kālīyuga* that is recognized by multiple forms of suffering and sorrow:

> Sweet children, to remember a corporeal body means to be ghost conscious, because bodies are made of the five elements. You have to become soul conscious and remember the one bodiless Father. (BapDada 2003f:7)

Curiously, in the days surrounding this experience, the morning *murlis* - revised and re-distributed quinquennially from Brahma Kumaris Headquarters - referred to bodiless spirits, possession phenomena, the meaning of ghost in BK understanding, and the methods to protect oneself:

> At this time all human beings are evil. There is the suffering of karma in a physical way too. Souls cause one another sorrow through the body. Even if a soul doesn't have a body, he still causes sorrow. Children have seen ghosts. It looks like a white shadow. However, you mustn't think about that. The more you remember the Father, the more all of that will end. Those are also karmic accounts…. Evil souls cause sorrow with a body and also without a body. (BapDada 2004d:9-10)

> Don't allow any ghosts to enter you. Even the ghost of attachment destroys all truth within. So protect yourself from ghosts. Connect your intellect's yoga to the one Father. (BapDada 2002c:9)

While discussing bodiless souls openly is not encouraged, bodiless souls are mentioned clearly in the *murlis* from time to time:

> Impure souls that wander around are called ghosts. The exorcists who remove those ghosts are very clever. You children should not have any evil spirits in you. We are exorcists who remove evil spirits. No one apart from the Supreme Father, the Supreme Soul, can remove the evil spirits of the five vices. (BapDada 2003e:23)

The *murlis* draw on stories from devotional paths and connect the allegories to BKs' aim and responsibility for self-transformation:

> This is the kingdom of Ravan,[51] the ghost. The ghost (vices) is in everyone. It is his kingdom now. It isn't just the ghost of anger. There are the ghosts of all the vices (lust, anger, greed, attachment, ego). Ghosts don't allow your intellect to connect in yoga. Instead, they break the intellect's yoga even more. The Father comes and inspires you to conquer the ghost. (BapDada 2002c:6)

The next day

When I went into Baba's room for *amrit velā* Rajni was already there, looking tired. During the night she felt that someone had been trying to strangle her, so for the rest of the night she slept in Baba's room and kept Dadi Prakashmani's picture on her chest. Thereafter she felt safe and slept well. We had planned to leave early to go to the *Kālī Sādhak* who would exorcise Mohan. But we would have to wait until Mohan entered before we took her to the *Kālī Sādhak* since, if Mohan wasn't there, there would be no-one and nothing to exorcise.

That morning the sister in charge of Vishwa Shanti Sarovar asked Rajni to read the *murli* to the class. This is considered an act of charity and believed to bring considerable karmic benefit and spiritual power. I sat at the front of the class in the centre of the room on the floor, an appropriate distance away from the brothers who were sitting on the other side.

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[51] Ravan is a powerful character within Hindu mythology and is considered the form of evil. Portrayed as having ten heads, the significance of this in BK theology is that evil has become manifest in the world because of the five vices in women and the five vices in men. A most important Hindu festival is Dushera, where after a fight between Ravan (the personification of evil) and Rama (the personification of good), Rama is victorious and the effigy of Ravan is burned.

Rajni seemed a little bit tired and lacking in energy but generally okay, until - as is the custom for visitors in India - a brother welcomed her with a flower.

She accepted the flower and smelled it after which she became steadily more jumpy and distracted. Rajni reasoned that the fragrance of the flower had attracted Mohan. After reading the *murli* for ten minutes, she broke down and started to cry. Through her tears she explained that she had been fine when she was in Baba's room meditating, but after she was given the flower she felt that Mohan had started to disturb her again, although from a distance.



Figure 50. A typical toli box

Another sister and I helped Rajni off the small platform stage and brought her to our car. It was a big old Tata Sumo four-wheel drive, complete with long horizontal scratches down the sides from navigating typically too-narrow alleys during its ten-year life. We all piled in. On the dashboard was a pink towel with *om shānti* written on it in Hindi, a pink box of *toli* that – as with every box of *toli* – brandished the message 'as the food so the mind, as the company so the person,' and two bottles of water: one for drinking, and one for the

leaking engine. There was a fine layer of dust upon everything. There was tape holding together various plastic bits of the dash and paneling that were threatening to come apart, vinyl to cover any holes, and a dusty plastic yellow flower attached to the air vent with the help of a long piece of wire. As Mohan entered and started expressing his desire for goat meat and making blood sucking sounds, we drove away.

Gopal was driving. Sister Chandra was in the front next to him. In the back seat were - from left to right - Sundari, Rajni (and Mohan I presume) and me. In the far back where the luggage is carried were the two brothers who had accompanied Rajni (and Mohan) to VSS. As we drove along, bouncing around with the help of all the potholes Rajni said, "he has made me mad and my mind is not working at all. I have the feeling that someone is dragging the energy out of me and causing me pain. It's causing me a lot of sorrow."

Mohan interrupted: "For three months, I haven't been able to conquer her. I am going to kill her. It is because of her curse that I died. She is feeling in her meditation forcefully that she wants me to go. Now I am feeling vengeful."

Rajni returned as she began a commentary to herself with deep force. "Why is he doing this? Why is this happening? I have good yoga… I do good service." She groaned. "It feels like Mohan is beating and trying to strangle me." Rajni held a small Oriya book of BK spiritual knowledge against her head, and spoke the affirmations, "Both my body and soul are becoming pure. No evil soul can do anything to me because I am Baba's." She repeated this commentary to herself out loud. Then, looking disgusted, she said, "Mohan is swearing at me. Why does he say such words? I've never heard such words in my life." The closer we got to the *Kālī Sādhak*, the more Mohan was distressing Rajni. "Why did she transfer Gopi from the centre? Why did she open a BK branch in my village?

At a loss as to what to do to ease Rajni's discomfort, Sister Bhawna resorted to talismanic measures. She tied a metal key chain with Brahma Baba's picture on it to the end of Rajni's

sari. As Mohan resisted, we knotted it on. Rajni said, "He is trying his best to enter me but is not able to. The two powers are battling it out. Baba, he should not enter me, he should not enter me, he should not enter me."

Mohan was becoming angry. The closer we got to the *Kālī Sādhak* who would perform the exorcism, the more irritated he became. The more irritated and fearful he behaved, the more arrogant and descriptive he became.

> I was a *Kālī Sādhak* and I had half of my rings. I was very powerful. I killed many with *Tantric* methods. I drained blood from the body and I cut off human heads. People use to give me money and so of course I would kill for them. You wake at 4 o'clock, but I wake at 2 o'clock and worship the rosary of skulls. But in my life at 48 I have only completed half of my *sādhana* so I will stay in this body until I finish it and then I will have full power. I have been bodiless for days and still haven't been unable to do what I want. I haven't been able to kill her. I'm hungry. I want to stop and get that goat.

The brothers in the back of our car chuckled whenever Mohan did something apparently typical to his character. Whilst being genuinely concerned for Rajni, they took hearty delight in seeing the behaviour of a smoking, drinking, angry, fat, middle-aged man being expressed through the body of a mild-mannered, young, dedicated BK sister. Matters of such an irreconcilable nature were often considered terrifically entertaining.

I mentally extricated myself from the scene so I could look around and see where we were. Convoluted roadways, lined with rice paddy fields, rivers, palm trees and mud huts, led us through village upon village upon village, until we arrived at our destination that would have been – on another day – a thriving market. Today the area, about the size of football field, was shaded in multiple dirt-coloured canvas cloths sewn together haphazardly with tough twine. This dusty parachute shaded the ground that was swept clean, save for remnants of betel nut snacks and tiny plastic packets of indefinables. There was no one under the canopy, but on the other side of the dirt road, littered with potholes and puddles, was a small line of people steadily growing outside the *Kālī Sādhak's* outpatient

clinic. A skinny golden dog trotted past our car. Even at 8am we were told it would be a two-hour wait. So we parked. And we waited.

Witnessing the dialogue between Rajni and Mohan, it was clear that Rajni was becoming exhausted, drained and deeply distressed. How could I offer support at a time like this, in the absence of a corporeal foe? Remembering the key chain, I took off my gold ring. A gold ring holds special significance for BKs and is given to the younger generation by the most senior generation of Dadis, as instruments. Indian sisters receive it when they surrender. Sisters and brothers receive it having made a solemn vow of purity, although in the case of foreigners it is often received in the absence of ceremony but with the same symbolic meaning. For Indian sisters, getting the gold ring is often part of their public surrender ceremony where – like a marriage – their entire family would be in attendance. It therefore becomes an important symbol in their daughter's life. Other than personal meaning, it had never occurred to me that my ring would have other uses. As Mohan was looking the other way, while he was talking incessantly with his eyes closed, I placed my gold ring on his finger. Then it was time for TC meditation. Mohan instantly became irritated and tried to flick my ring off as if it was hot. "I have three rings of *sādhana* (spiritual power and accomplishment), so what can yours do?" he yelled. He kept trying to remove it saying it was interfering with his *sādhana*. Whenever we had collective meditation, Mohan became proportionately more agitated. Getting no response, as we meditated, he asked for a cigarette. After a small respite where he mimicked inhaling cigarette smoke, he said,

> If I'd entered I would have killed everyone here. Because of the ring I'm not able to kill anyone. I would've completely twisted your fingers before if I could have. Take this off. I cannot do my *sādhana* with this ring on. It is hurting me.

Sister Chandra grinned and immediately removed her ring and placed it on Rajni's other hand. In response Mohan would periodically twist and turn in discomfort, "I am unable to

do *Kālī sādhana* because of these two rings. I am unable to remember *Kālī*, but only your *Shiva*. Get these rings off of me!"

After waiting for almost three hours in the car, and clearly bored with our company, Mohan started calling out to people through the car window. He yelled out to one man asking if he drank alcohol. When the man replied in the affirmative Mohan said, "Good, let's be friends and drink together although you will drink 1 litre and I will drink 10. You will eat 1 kg of meat and I will eat 30." Although the stranger looked a little surprised, as people in India are very familiar with the BKs, it was absolutely normalized when we explained it was an 'evil soul.' "Oh, of course," he said, nodding and smiling as he walked away. Another regular day in Orissa.

A short while later, Rajni spoke and complained of body aches. "The ring is giving Mohan pain. Draining his energy. He wants to disturb me with his thought but is unable to do it fully because of the ring. He also said that he will see people here in the car, if they want a consultation." A consultation? "Why not?" I thought. Two minutes later, as I watched the friendly golden dog dig a hole in a pile of shaded dirt nearby, Mohan offered to read my palm. The dog curled up into his cool bed, looked at me and sighed. It couldn't get much stranger than this.

After a short pause, I faced the front of the car again and listened as Mohan, still sitting next to me, tried bargaining. Sundari was enjoying translating, but was becoming exhausted. "Come on. Take these rings off and I will read your palm for you. I know palmistry. All these people in this place, they would all come to me. More people than this used to come to me," he said indicating with his head towards the outpatient clinic. Sister Chandra was keener than I was. "I'll show you my palm," she said. "I won't see a BK palm!" Mohan snapped. Apparently Mohan had thought I was a non-BK because I was foreign. Sister Chandra jeered, "Because it's lucky, that's why you don't want to see it." He said, "If you put it in front of me, I'll spit on it."

Sister Chandra's mobile must have rung at least seven times during the day, always to ask what we were eating. We had biscuits and water. The biscuits were sweet biscuits from the centre and had been offered. We fed Rajni a biscuit and then half way through eating it Sister Chandra mentioned that it was good that Rajni was having something that had been offered. Mohan spat it out, "I'm not accepting into this body anything that BKs offer."

Just as I thought everything had relaxed and it couldn't get any more peculiar, Mohan suddenly bowed Rajni's head and started chanting. As he looked at each of us, the eyes were glassy; he appeared to be looking through us. This was the first time Rajni's eyes had been properly open. As Mohan looked through her eyes at each of us, he called out the name of a god or goddess. Gopal was Ganesh, the elephant God of Wisdom; Sundari was Durga, the Invincible Goddess; Chandra was Lakshmi, the Goddess of Wealth; I was Santoshi Ma, the Goddess and Mother of Contentment. He was having visions of the four of us as deities. My self-esteem increased to new heights. Then the scene passed.

During the four-hour wait, we experimented with different methods of disrupting Mohan. Gopal put his finger on Rajni's forehead, which made Mohan restless. Then one of the sisters put Gopal's teachers badge (a symbol of commitment and purity although not to the same degree as sisters' gold rings) on Rajni's forehead. We would collectively whisper *om* mantras into Rajni's ears. When we did that it appeared that the internal conflict between Mohan and Rajni would settle down. Or else Mohan would complain and then disappear. Rajni would reappear for a short time, we'd feed her some biscuits and she would rest her head on one of our shoulders.

At the Clinic

Eventually our appointment with the *Kālī Sādhak* arrived. We gathered quite an audience. Whether it was because of the inappropriate body language and vulgarities coming out of

the mouth of a local BK sister, or the tall 'pink' foreign sister kitted out in full Indian BK regalia, I am unsure.

As we approached the building, the first thing I saw was a rusty and dusty Ambassador car with no glass in the windows, parked under an overhanging part of the relatively new corrugated tin roof. The overhang itself was propped up by various bits of bamboo. Leaning against the overhang were two long ladders made from long and short pieces of bamboo wound together with thick twine at every join. It seemed as if it they were there to provide access to the roof. The disheveled two-room building was made of lime green cement and covered with its new roof. On the left was the waiting room that was empty, save for long hard simply-made wooden benches covered in a beige flecked vinyl sheeting placed around all four sides of the room. A fan was overhead, spinning at full speed. On the right was the room with the *Kālī Sādhak* ('*Sādhak*') and his assistant, the *Kālī* Cleric ('Cleric').

Sādhak was sitting at the desk on the far right corner of the room. On his desk were cardboard boxes filled to the brim with little scraps of paper on which were written single words or short sentences. Perhaps they were mantras, I thought. There was a vial of clear liquid nearby. The vial was a slightly bigger version of the medicine vials one finds in hospital emergency departments in Australia, complete with the metal top and the grey rubber centerpiece, made so you can either pierce it with a syringe or pull off the stopper. This vial was filled with Ganges water, which is what herbalists, Ayurvedic practitioners, and other healers use to mix their medicines. At the nearest edge of the table was a simple metal box with a slot in it. Many could not afford to pay, so this way the financial burden on people was removed. Payment was by donation. Looking at him sitting behind his desk, this *Sādhak* was quietly spoken and had a steady manner about him. Behind him on the wall was a collection of images of mandalas and Hindu goddesses neatly arranged with local writing scrawled across them. One felt they were deeply significant in the context of

where we were. There was a wooden bench to the left of *Sādhak*'s desk. It was smaller in size but similar to the ones in the waiting room.

A statue of *Kālī* stood in the far left corner of the room: a two-foot high indistinct black image covered in bright red flowers and a dark orangey-red sandalwood and turmeric *tilak* (a religious and decorative mark worn in the centre of the forehead) in the middle of what I presumed was her head. The statue appeared old and loved. *Kālī* had her typical necklace of skulls, a skirt of arms, and was holding the head of a demon she had sliced off with a machete. There appeared to be a black demon at her side begging for her mercy. Darkness in the scriptures is often to be feared and implies lack of virtue. In Hinduism when Krishna is portrayed as blue or 'dark,' it represents the mischievous deeds that he performed in his youth. It became clear why almost every soap, powder, oil and toothpaste that is sold in India guarantees to make you 'fair'. Just to the right side of *Kālī* was a grass mat on which the Cleric was seated. He peered out at me from under a thick grey wipe of ash across his forehead, the same ash I had seen at the base of the *Kālī* statue. He was shoeless, dressed in a dirty white *lunghi* (a long knee-length ream of cloth worn around the waist by men), and a yellowing handmade cotton shirt; he carried something in his hand. This small man had a *tilak* (a sacred dot in the centre of the forehead) of deep red, and three white lines smeared across his forehead on top of the ash. It appeared there was some rice and turmeric stuck on there as well. Behind him were little boxes and pieces of paper that were used to contain herbs and mix medicines.

We sat down and waited our turn. No consultations were private, and there was a woman currently in exchange with *Sādhak*. Meanwhile, Mohan behaved as someone of a lower caste would. He kept tapping on a male stranger's shoulder while seated on the bench next to him. Then Mohan's attention turned to the Cleric. Every time Mohan got up and started to go over to the Cleric, who was seated on the ground, we restrained him. He didn't have the strength of the big man who he reportedly was in his previous life, which is just as

well. Perhaps the rings were helping. The shy young woman turned to leave. I saw third degree burns to her face and neck, and hopelessness in her expression. She left the room. Then it was our turn.

As I was restraining Mohan from putting his arm around the man sitting next to him again, the younger Cleric politely directed us to the 'waiting room.' When we entered, people slid along the benches and made room for us. We kept hold of Mohan's hands because, although at that time he was not aggressive, Rajni's hands were small and Mohan kept trying to shake the rings off. Sundari and I sat holding Rajni's hands while Sundari explained to *Sādhak* that the problem was an 'evil soul' to which he replied with *agyaã,* the Oriya equivalent of 'Oh, I see.' While it is common for the *Sādhak*s to deal with such instances, perhaps it was not the case for the many grinning faces staring at us comically through the glassless windows. People were delighted to see a BK sister vociferating about how the BKs should shut their centre in Ghutagaon and let people drink wine and eat goat meat. This was gradually becoming the most marvelous existential psycho-cultural tragic-comedy.

A little while later, the Cleric came in and asked us to lay Rajni down and to hold her arms and legs. I was concerned again. Ethics. How do I reason through this? What was the Cleric going to do? He had something in a spoon so I didn't think it could be that bad. Perhaps, I thought, it would be like when your mother gives you a spoonful of medicine to stop your throat hurting. However, this was not something to be swallowed. In the concoction the Cleric put up Rajni's nose was black pepper, Ganges water, and ash from *Kālī* puja. The accompanying mantra was inaudible to me, as I was at the other end of the bench, holding down Rajni legs as she writhed instinctively against this awful brew being spooned into her nose. Sundari put her hand over Rajni's mouth so she would have to ultimately snort the pepper ash mix up her nose. Evil souls enter through the nose, I was told, and so this is how they must also leave. This mix would repel the soul of Mohan. As soon as Rajni had

sniffed the stuff up her nose, she jumped to her feet with remarkable athleticism. Every orifice in her face leaked. She spat, wept and sneezed as she tried to clear her nose of the black pepper and sacred ash.

The soul of Rajni returned for around ten minutes, during which time she lay in Sundari's lap, speaking gently. Then Mohan returned again, sat bolt upright and, motioning to the ceiling fan said, "I will go up there. There are hundreds of my friends of my clan there (bodiless souls who haven't taken rebirth). I have troubled her enough." Then he changed his mind, "No. I died prematurely so I will stay for another 25 years until I take rebirth." We took Rajni into the Cleric again. The *Sādhak* did not seem surprised that Mohan hadn't gone easily. *Sādhak* said something to the Cleric who then handed him a big red flower that I had seen earlier on the idol of *Kālī*. It had been purified and empowered by being offered to *Kālī* earlier that day. The Cleric muttered and started gently touching his fingertips very deliberately to different parts of Rajni's face and forehead while continuing to mutter inaudibly. He then took the red flower and touched it all over her face. I didn't know any more whether it was Rajni or Mohan, but whoever was in control looked as if their dying wish was to inhale as much fragrance from the flower as possible. When Rajni/Mohan started making strong sniffing motions, the *Sādhak* started making intricate movements with his hands and muttering Sanskrit mantras. I corrected my earlier thought that things couldn't get any stranger.

Then, quite suddenly, Rajni's face fell forward onto the flower as she began exhaling repeatedly through her nose. "Did you tell her to do that?" I asked the *Sādhak*. "No," he explained, "It happens automatically as the soul is being pulled out of the body through the medicine and the mantras." We walked into the small waiting room again, with Sundari holding the flower to Rajni's nose. Rajni exhaled powerfully through her nose one more time before collapsing on the bench. She sat up and began exhaling and wiping her nose. "She's taking the bad air out," our Cleric explained. Then Mohan was back. "They're trying

to take me out of the nose," he said. "I'm no longer in the forehead." Then Rajni returned, "He's stuck in my nose!" She blew her nose and laughed a distressed and desperate kind laugh. "He's stuck and he won't go from my nose!" "What should we tell her to do?" we asked the *Sādhak*. "Nobody has to tell her what to do," the *Sādhak* said, "Whatever has to come out, will come out of the nose." Mohan derided, "I am only half out of her. Give me the flower to eat and I will enter the body completely again." Rajni blurted out, "The soul won't come out. It's stuck in the nose." Rajni was laughing in a slightly tormented but genuine way, "Cut the nose off. The only problem is the nose." The Cleric came in with a spoonful of red sticky liquid that looked very much like cherry flavoured cough syrup. "It will clear everything," he said, handing it to me. While I was pouring it up Rajni's nose, *Sādhak* told Sundari to throw the red flower away. She did so. The Cleric chanted something and threw water at Rajni's face. Rajni collapsed against my shoulder, and slept.

As this strange scene came to an end, with Rajni's face dripping Ganges water down my *sari*, the Cleric handed us a *tarbeej* for her. A *tarbeej* is a combination of herbs, ash of *Kālī* puja, and a rolled up mantra inside a small aluminium cylinder that is tied with a thread onto the upper arm of the person requiring treatment. Our Cleric first put the mantra on the forehead of the *Kālī* idol, then put it in the vial, and sealed it tightly. He gave us two plastic bags filled with herbs and medicines to give Rajni over the next few days. They were designed to keep Mohan out and to help restore her strength. We left. But nobody had told us that when Sundari disposed of the red flower it was supposed to touch the ground.

We got back in the car. The ride in the existential amusement park had come to an end. I returned home exhausted and slept for three hours that afternoon.

The next day after we had returned to our centre, Sundari and I received a phone call. Mohan had entered Rajni again. When Sundari threw the flower away, she had thrown it in

the rubbish bin. It had not touched the ground, and so the ritual had not been completed properly.

Afterward

We heard that Rajni's brother had come to take her back to her home village, where their local *Kālī Sādhak* completed the exorcism successfully. She spent three weeks at home with her family. When I saw her just before I left Orissa, she was unsure where she was going to live but, for certain, it would not be back in that village. Rajni was unwilling to talk about her experience for fear of re-living or invoking something similar. She felt it was best not to discuss it at all, which I respected having witnessed most of the possession. She seemed well and was in the company of supportive BK sisters when I spoke with her. It was interesting to finally meet her, outside of the harrowing situation when Rajni was visibly weakened with the alternate personality at the helm. She seemed a friendly, simple, and quite ordinary BK sister.

A framework that reduces the experience of possession to an externalization of an inner psychological process "cannot adequately account for cases in which an individual may experience her own desires and those of her possessing spirit as antithetical or even irreconcilable" (Hayes 2006:157). Further, topics like spirit possession are challenging to script because "human spirituality transcends logic and rationality" (Nelson 1987:11), therefore methods of analysis born from Enlightenment and the early days of social science do not serve the phenomenon well.

I have tried to position myself sympathetically with this possession case. The metatheorists of possession (Bourguignon 1976; Crapanzano and Garrison 1977; Lewis 1971; Oesterreich 1930) to some degree all explain the phenomenon of spirit possession as a form of interpretation or cultural distinctiveness, implying it is a form of belief, and so deflecting the experience as something exotic and Other. Although reductionist

perspectives have decreased in recent times (Keller 2002), one of the most sympathetic definitions of possession is "any altered state of consciousness indigenously interpreted in terms of the influence of an alien spirit" (Crapanzano and Garrison 1977:7). Eastern philosophies are often bound by paradox and it is always an onerous task to draw on theories to analyze an experience such as possession that is, frankly, hijacked by limp and languid linguistic attempts at description. If we are to place spirit possession as a culturally specific form of embodiment, then we surely must position ourselves more clearly and not consider ourselves – Western trained anthropologists – as the yard stick by which our research must be measured.

In BK philosophy each and every soul is beyond gender, yet in its descriptive form *Shiva* (God, of which there is only one) is referred to as the Bridegroom and *Shaktis* (souls, of which there are many) as brides. These terms are utilized by BKs as methods by which to formulate a tangible and authentic relationship with the Supreme. Then, through ascetic practices of a vegetarian diet of food that is cooked in God's remembrance and offered to God, early morning silent meditation and celibacy, coupled with the practice of 'traffic control' and other times of regular meditation, one makes manifest the power of purity that is used to transcend and conquer all forms of impurity, manifest and unmanifest.

For BKs the end of time of *Kālīyuga* is the time when impurity in all its forms is at its extreme, and the only way to overcome impurity, which is the cause of all sorrow, is through purity at the level of thoughts, word and action. The tension in the life of BKs is the eternal battle between the light and the dark or 'purity' and 'impurity,' and it is this war that was blatantly played out between Rajni and Mohan. Because of this fundamental purpose, to restore the world to its true and original state of balance, harmony and purity, the lifeblood of BKs is twofold: 'remembrance' (pure thought) and 'service' (pure words and action). These are the two methods that Rajni recited when questioning and resisting intrusion by Mohan. Mohan, the representative of impurity, penetrated the body of Rajni

against her will. As a BK sister and a *Yagyarakshak* (protector of the sacred fire, see Chapter 9), Rajni is endowed with the responsibility of remaining absolutely pure and therefore resisting the push or pull of any and all forms of impurity. Her effort was to maintain the integrity of both the mind, given to God in her initial surrender, and the body, dedicated to God's work of purifying the world. While Mohan was expressing impure desires through Rajni's body, it was her job to make sure that none of them came to pass, despite his status as a *Sādhak* or his abilities with *Tantric Vidhya*. Her manifest and unmanifest purity demonstrated its potency by resisting Mohan's initial *Tantric Vidhya* efforts to take her life, and cause irreparable harm to her when he was alive. Then, after his death and her subsequent possession, the combined power of Rajni's surrounding spiritual community, the communitas (Olaveson 2001) acted as a form of protection as other BKs performed rituals of purity, to make purity manifest. The fear that people often experience around *Tantric Vidhya* was shared by some of the sisters, but their fear was not disabling, and so the rituals of purity were performed with a sense of lightness and entertainment that also acted as a form of protection against impure forces of darkness. Fear is the greatest portal to potential spirits, and purity, which BKs consider the mother of peace and happiness and so lightness, is the greatest guard.

Symbols of spiritual power such as purity of place (being over the threshold of the centre), purity of mind (Rajni's own ruminations, the collective chanting of *om* and establishing states of remembrance of Shiv Baba, who is *patit pāvan* the purifier), talismanic symbols of purity (gold rings and – to a lesser extent – badges), and pure food (which is seen as a way to maintain spiritual as well as bodily strength), all served to safeguard Rajni against two threats: demise or death by *Tantric Vidhya* and impure acts performed through her body. So through thought, word, action, community, food and talismans, Rajni was protected against total subjugation from Mohan and his impure will. Yet, it was not BK practices that ultimately dispelled Mohan. He was conquered by the same forces that he attempted to apply to Rajni, yet the *Sādhak* and Cleric applied *Tantric Vidhya* with pure

intent, confirming the understanding of *Tantric Vidhya* as a powerful force that can be used for benefit or harm.

Scholars and scientists, both physical and social, endeavour at times to define spirit possession in the frame of their own particular discipline. I refer to Evans-Pritchard (1969) and Nelson (1987) who argue that the greatest problem in anthropology and certainly – in my view – in an existential crisis such as spirit possession, is translation. Linguistically words are inherently limited as they only serve as markers to define a non-linguistic experience. One can only truly understand an experience by entering, into considerable depth, the world of the experience without deduction, before stepping out again to reflect academically on the experience.

Whatever the 'objective' reality of this experience may be is inconsequential and ultimately irrelevant. "Spirit possession is an unquestioned given in the world in which the individual believer finds himself" (Crapanzano and Garrison 1977:10). In the case of Rajni and Mohan, the experience served Rajni as she anchored her relationship with Shiv Baba as a method of protection against her foe. Others offered spiritual alliance and social reinforcement in their care of her through talismanic methods, chanting, remembrance, and their participation in the exorcism. Ultimately the victory was Rajni's, as Mohan failed to kill her or truly harm her, as was his intent. She affirmed herself as a good yogi and a powerful *Brāhma Kumāri*.

Moving from one form of subjectivity to another, using ethnographic data rather than utilizing a singular reductionist approach (Keller 2002:47), can add to building complexity and rigour in theories around mystical experience and the anthropology of religion. Out of the many social science disciplines, anthropology is uniquely reflective and so inherently able to problematize. The discipline and its proponents rarely consider themselves to be absolutely right or to offer theoretical developments as quintessential, but rather contribute to an ongoing international trans-generational conversation about human

existence that gives a name, form, colour and movement to many things that would otherwise remain side-lined, medicalized or represented as irrelevant. This problem is one in which I delight.

Chapter 9

Yagyarakshak: Protecting the Sacrificial Fire

Pure fire burning
To create, nourish, protect
I am the *Yagya*

The Brahma Kumaris is an organization predicated on purity. BKs say that Shiv Baba entered Brahma Baba and gave him, and those with him, the task of restoring the world to its original state of completion and perfection, by living lives founded on purity, virtuous action and Raja Yoga meditation. The ideal of purity is stated clearly and regularly in their classes, *murlis* and informal exchanges, is legitimized through their rituals and principles. I reaffirmed this through participant observation. What constitutes the greatest state of emergency to BKs is not a flood, cyclone or act of war, but an immediate threat to or violation of purity.

In this, my concluding chapter, I endeavour to reveal the various subtexts of fire, purity, protection, and belonging, in what is the overarching theme of this study: purity and the role of BKs as the custodians of purity and how this state becomes the interface with disaster. I use data gathered from a focus group with New York UNBKs and their detailed discussion on the *Yagya* to illuminate this topic. As mentioned in Chapter Two, the data from this focus group reflects similar discussions, conducted recurrently during my fifteen months of fieldwork.

Fire

Fire is a natural symbol that can free (as with seed pods), destroy (as with paper), transform (from clay to brick) and transmit (as in incense). Its symbolism can lead to its use in diverse cultural settings. Fire is a stimulant and a communicator. In Hinduism it is

believed that through fire one can communicate directly with the Gods (Bahadur 1996). When !Kung medicine men become frenzied after conducting ceremonies of healing for days on end, they attend the fire, pick up embers, and set their hair ablaze because "fire activates the medicine in them" (Marshall 1962:250). Contact with the fire is believed to purify the souls of devotees, *brāhman* priests say, bringing them into close relationship with the object of their devotion. In the *Vedas* it says that by creating sacrificial fires human beings can be transformed and nature transfigured, and that through this people can maintain substantial control over the world (Rodrigues 2006).

Although its form is certain, the shape of fire threatens margins and boundaries, and so introduces elements of the unknown. Its very nature is risky. Fire fighters I worked with have said that each fire has a unique personality and a character (Reynolds 2007): while destroying other life forms, fire is a life form itself. Even when the edges of fire are perceived, they can quickly mutate. Anything in contact with the fire is changed, heated and purified. "By putting gold into a fire, the alloy is removed. This is the fire of yoga through which sins are absolved" (BapDada 2002b:1). Any idea is vulnerable at its margins (Douglas 1970), and so it is with the notion of purity. All margins by their nature are potentially under threat, and threatening, ideological frontlines, sites of constant risk. Whether the fire is metaphorical or literal, the rules are the same. In BK theology principles of purity guard the boundaries, but principles only arrive when someone implements them and acts as a mediator for others.

Participants in both New York and Orissa frequently used the metaphor of fire in their conversations. The earliest official name for the Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University was *Avinashi Gyān Yagya*, meaning 'the indestructible sacred fire of knowledge'. BKs consider that, when Shiv Baba first touched the mind of Brahma Baba that was the flame of pure intent that ignited the *Yagya*. The first spiritual technology they learned was the 'fire of yoga.' Those early days were characterized by the allegorical *bhatti*. A *bhatti* is

literally a furnace where something is transformed. For BKs, it was a period of intense collective spiritual practice. The Om Mandli youth of the 1930s were the first to learn about 'the fire of destruction' and about the demarcations between purity and impurity and became the custodians of purity. *Yagya* (sacred fire) was also used as a metaphor for individuals, places, principles of spiritual integrity, and the organization. Dadi Janki, the Administrative Head of the Brahma Kumaris, explains the *Yagya* and the organization as one and the same. BKs are custodians of the *Yagya*, and its institution. The *Yagya* has expanded and so now, by necessity, is structured as a formal organization. But its essence is still the sacred fire of purity, the same as the very first day, with BKs at its margins, administering it.

The *Yagya* has central and important meaning for BKs. BK spiritual teachings include descriptions of 'volcanic states of meditation' and cautions against 'the fire of the vices.' A BK, citing a *murli* from the 1990s, was inspired to use the 'the matchstick of determined thought,' as a way to ignite his spiritual endeavour. The repeated metaphorical fire that wound its way through this study is no less real for BKs than the powerful physical form of energy that can effect terminal change in a short amount of time.

Yagya

My question to the focus group participants, and to others in the course of this study was "What is the *Yagya*?" In response, participants spoke of the real *Yagyas* performed by *brāhman* priests, and the metaphorical *Yagya* at the heart of the BK spiritual path, although not explicitly distinguishing between the two types of *Yagyas*. For clarity here, I use the participants' term *Yagya* to define the Brahma Kumaris *Yagya* and the term *bhakti yagya* to define the physical devotional fire that is part of Hindu practice in India. Gitanjali begins by talking about *bhakti yagyas*:

> A *Yagya* is a fire that gets created with a purpose. For instance, if someone on the path of devotion were to create a *yagya*, that y*agya* is created because there are

> certain forces that are in existence and they want to get rid of those forces. If there is a natural calamity people in the community may want to create a *yagya* in order to bring good omens and to remove the bad omens. In our case the *Yagya* is the creation of a body of knowledge that becomes meaningful to peoples lives when studied and when practiced. We are here to move from body consciousness to soul consciousness. That would be the purpose of creating a y*agya*: an outcome. To move from darkness to light. To move from *Kālī*yuga (Iron Age) to Satyuga (Golden Age). It's a process. A *yagya* is created to remove the bad omens that are standing in the way of a spiritual evolution. A y*agya* indicates that there is a dynamic movement. (Gitanjali)

A *bhakti yagya* is an ancient Vedic fire ritual, performed for the benefit of the social world or for cosmic good. In the *Vedic* scriptures (Jamieson 2003, Olson 2007), *bhakti yagyas* would often enact events of the cosmic battle between gods and demons, order and chaos (Rodrigues 2006). *Bhakti yagyas* are exceptionally symbolic, both in representation and outcomes.



Figure 51. Devotees at a *yagya* in Orissa, praying to dispel harmful forces of nature

In Orissa, outside of BK culture, many people held ardent faith in the power of a properly ignited *bhakti yagya* to dispel potential harm. When an area was at risk of flooding, a

bhakti yagya was performed. Thousands of people lined up around the six-foot square unkempt fire to catch a glimpse of the flames. Placing their hands over the fire, and then touching their hands to their eyes, forehead, and chest, they would mutter thanks and praise under their breath, believing that the heat from the pure flames would protect them, and by association their kin, from evil or misfortune. When the area flooded anyway, people presumed there was an error in the *bhakti yagya* ritual, rather than a balance of nature's forces, despite widespread belief in karma.

Mediators

Physical fire has an unclear and moving line. Without a *brāhman* priest as a mediator, fire is an unrestrained element of nature. Fire is not sacred, unless there is someone to moderate and delineate its margins. *Bhakti yagyas* are created as sacrificial fires by *brāhman* priests and are thought to provide nourishment to the Gods. Devotees - including the priest – make offerings of milk, ghee, yoghurt, rice and other grains, sandalwood and other fragrant seeds, spices and woods. In a *bhakti yagya*, the offering is made and accepted via the *brāhman* priest as the indispensable mediator, whereupon it is purified. The priest will then take a flame from the *yagya* and bring it in front of the devotee in return, allowing the devotee to absorb the purity and fortune inherent in the flame. The atmosphere of having made the offering is carried with the devotee and continues to work its influence in the devotee's life. It is an equitable exchange and both sides – offering to the *Yagya* and receiving the pure flame - are ordinary items that, through fire, are transformed and purified:

> In a (bhakti) *yagya* can anybody throw things into the fire. Anybody who's part of it? Or is it just the *brāhman* priests? (Samantha)

> You can't just walk in from the street and say, "here I am, I'm part of it," and then throw something into it. There are allocated people that are the main actors of the *yagya*… (Gitanjali)

> … But you can be invited to do it. I've been to a temple and as a guest they invited me to throw some sesame seeds and… (Richie)

> That could have been a courtesy, but that doesn't mean you're part of the *Yagya*. (Gitanjali)

Just as the *brāhman* priests are moderators of their *bhakti Yagya*, so too BKs are the moderators of their *Yagya*. Among BKs, there is a further but undefined sense of spiritual kinship. A soul is 'close' to the *Yagya* and belongs intrinsically, rather than on the basis of action:

> That quality of sacrifice and the quality of understanding… when you see the truths lived in the life... you know it's like when you say this is a *Yagya* soul… you have that recognition when you meet certain individuals, that this one is a *Yagya* soul. (Samantha)

The term *yagya mata* (*yagya* mother) can apply to anyone who sustains the *Yagya*, but these are often real mothers who quietly work in the background cooking, sustaining people and following the principles of purity:

> A *yagya mata*… is someone who is chosen to be close, and they have chosen to follow and be a part of the *Yagya*. They keep it going no matter where they might be, even if they're travelling around. Some *matajis* (respected mothers) have been around a long time and are always following the disciplines and always doing good things, so it doesn't necessarily have to be one place but it is more of the intent, dedication and connection to what started it. That would be the principles. The ways of doing things. Recognition. Relationship. (Richie)

Having people to protect, maintain and make sacrifices into the *Yagya* becomes important, because fire becomes imbued with the quality of whatever has been burned in it, meaning it can take on polluting or purifying qualities (Douglas 2002). "There is no danger in seeing or touching an… unpurified person… but let such a person come near a fire, and any food cooked on those flames is dangerously contaminated" (ibid:191). Fire can be highly absorbent and risky. The 'impure' menstruating Lele woman could not poke the fire, for fear her husband would fall ill (ibid). In the Old Testament, Leviticus XXI it says, "No man that hath a blemish… shall come nigh to offer the offerings of the Lord made by fire. (Leviticus 21 n.d.:135).



Figure 52. The *brāhman* priest, kneeling on the right, monitors the *yagya* that is filled with offered coconuts

Offerings, sacrifices, disciplines

In the *Yagya*, contributions are made in the form of offerings, sacrifices and disciplines. Offerings are forms of cooperation, drawing in a wide variety of relationships and alliances from among the extended BK network. Offerings may be of time, money, energy, or talents. BKs understand that offering something to the *Yagya* or the organization means that these things will be used towards world benefit:

> We have friends of the BKs or our contact souls or people who are close to us who we do invite to 'throw in' in terms of a courtesy, in order to help them to feel connected, in order for them to earn their fortune or whatever it is. (Samantha)

BKs enable others to 'throw' an offering into the *Yagya*. However, a sacrifice to the *Yagya* differs from an offering. BKs understand sacrifices to be more personal than offerings, and such sacrifices are usually in the form of vices, negativity or *sanskāras* that someone may want reformed, transmogrified or purified. To sacrifice something means to have the firm

internal intent to change it. Sacrificial success is assured when the pledge is ignited with the 'match of determined thought.' A sacrifice made with selfish intent (to be seen to be 'good,' for example) will not bear the same fruit as a determined sacrifice made with the pure intent to benefit the self and others. In both the *Yagya* and *bhakti yagya*, offerings invite a predictable return. Sacrifices, on other hand, can be limited or invite extraordinary fortune:

> It is a sacrifice to be inside those *maryādas* (disciplines). It is a kind of sacrifice that the members of the *Yagya* do, like our Dadis and all the main ones (BKs) really. You have to have honesty and purity. I think the first ones who belonged to the *Yagya* made such a powerful sacrifice into that sacred fire. There are the ones who are completely sacrificed, and who have that quality of sacrifice. The *Yagya* started at one place, but it's worldwide and in every place. (Maitreyi)

BKs become caretakers, positioning themselves where they wish to be in terms of the heart of the *Yagya*, the hottest part of the 'fire.' They position themselves as the ones who keep it going, who keep the 'flame' alive. The *Yagya* contains a universal intent but still, despite its nebulous boundaries, it has a geographical identity, and it is purest at its point of establishment:

> I also believe that the *Yagya* is universal. But I don't believe that it is just in one place. I believe it was started in one place, which is Pandav Bhawand, Madhuban, so that place represents the purity of what began, but every place that was created thereafter, the fire in that place will burn brightly based on how close to that original place it is. In terms of how closely they follow it. (Gitanjali)

> Yeah, a lot of times here (NY) we have to send something to the *Yagya* and so there's a sense that it's in another place or it refers to other people rather than including everybody. So when it is said that 'we need to help the *Yagya*,' this is often connected to particular people in a particular place – the seniors and Madhuban, although there is a permeable definition of what that means. It has happened more than once that people say "we have to help the *Yagya*,"or we have to ship this or send this to the *Yagya*. This is as opposed to speaking like the *Yagya* is right here amongst us. It is here amongst us, but it is external also. Part of that might be because there is a core group. Shiv Baba started the *Yagya* and He's absolutely central and there are other rings that circle out from that centre. But sometimes it seems that there is 'us' and 'them' involved in the definition of the *Yagya*. (Richie)

Sometimes the metaphysical margins of purity are understood in limited ways, with the ideals and metaphors representative of spiritual purity being physicalized and giving rise

to body conscious attitudes. Such attitudes expressed themselves when BKs used artificial boundaries to compartmentalize other BKs, who are all *yagyarakshak* (protectors of the *Yagya*), into forms of 'us' and 'them.' It was visible through acts of gender segregation in the class room, social class separation at meal times in Orissa, and the delineation between BKs in New York as those thought to be 'seniors' were offered front row seats and 'juniors' were asked to sit behind. 'Teachers' were distinguished from 'students' in every day language, 'dedicated sisters' from 'householders' in the car in Orissa, and 'instruments' from those who were not.

All BKs were cautious about accepting things from the impure world 'outside.' Whether it was something considered important, like food, in New York, or something as ordinary as sending a fax in Orissa, BKs encouraged me to 'not take from outside', in an attempt to maintain closeness with the inner circle of the *Yagya*, the original and purest source. To be close to the inner flame, one needs to make sacrifices.

> If I decide - and this is where the clarity of what the *Yagya* is - okay, I want to do it 100% according to the vision that the founder of the organization had of what the *maryādas* are, what the disciplines are… and we know those disciplines… Then I position myself. No-one positions me in a *yagya*, but I position myself as one of the people who want to be closest to (metaphorically) stoking that fire and to keep it going. If I want to do it 50% it's fine, I can still make sacrifices and offerings. The fire won't say not to offer into it, but I am positioning myself according to how much I want to commit. (Gitanjali)

Protecting the *Yagya*

As protectors of the *Yagya*, BKs have to keep the principles of the *Yagya* 'alight' twenty-four hours a day, just as the *brāhman* priests must keep the *bhakti yagyas* constantly aflame. However, unlike the *brāhman*s who are attributed the role of *bhakti yagya* caretakers by ancestry, tradition and birth, BKs make the choice to be *yagyarakshak*, by standing at the symbolic margins of the *Yagya*, by abiding by disciplines of purity. They protect the *Yagya*, 'stoking' it with pure intent, sacrificing all forms of negativity into it, and trusting in its transformative powers and its protective capacity. Ones position within

the organization may be decided by someone else, but being a protector of the *Yagya* is self-determined.

> I think the *Yagya* is more internal. This is a family where we are all bound together in following certain *maryādas* to protect ourselves from the external omens, or negativity or whatever it may be. (Maitreyi)

> It's interesting that you (Maitreyi) said in order to help the *Yagya* move forward there are certain principles that need to be followed or maryādas. (In bhakti *yagyas*) there are certain people who are the ones, who need to be following those principles to be able to throw things into the fire, if we're talking about that kind of *yagya*. It's also the response to a need of the time. And there's also an element in it that's to do with protection isn't there? Isn't it that when a *yagya* is created it also protects those who take part in that y*agya*? It offers a protection in the process. Meaning there's a sort of protection that's offered to all of those who participate in that (physical) y*agya*. (Samantha)

> Usually that protection would be inherent in the common practice that they are doing. For instance, for us, the remembrance of God would be the way that everyone is guaranteed a protection in this *Yagya*. (Gitanjali)

> Following certain *maryādas*, being inside the discipline of that and making the organization run properly and move forward is protecting the *Yagya*. (Maitreyi)

If the *Yagya* of purity is protected and strengthened, then the *Yagya* will act as a protective force to all who have sacrificed something into it. This protection is of the *Yagya,* not people within the *Yagya*. BKs must protect the *Yagya*, while the *Yagya* protects people.

> When I say I have to protect the *Yagya* - that's a very interesting thing. Because sometimes there may be a conflict between two sets of people and I may be deciding to support one set of people, but then I say, "I'm doing this because I'm protecting the *Yagya*." For me protection of the *Yagya* is not about protecting people even though eventually that's what you do, but it's about protecting the principles that these people need to uphold. To me that is protection of the *Yagya*. Also, if I want to protect the *Yagya* I can't take sides. What I have to do is check whether I am living by those principles that I'm seeing violated. And if I myself am living by them then I'm protecting the *Yagya*, but if I'm taking the side of a person I'm not protecting the *Yagya*. (Gitanjali)

Therefore, the role of BKs is to protect the sacred flame of the sacrificial fire. They understand that the *Yagya* will ultimately banish all evil and negativity and allow everyone to receive peace and happiness through the establishment of a pure world. The

proof of the *Yagya's* beneficence is the degree to which the fire of purity is manifest in someone's life.

> The people who protect the *Yagya* are basically the keepers of the wisdom. And… it's not that the wisdom is recorded somewhere and people can go into the vault and check on it. But the protectors of the *Yagya* are the keepers of the wisdom who hold it in the way they live their lives. So if anyone wants to know whether the wisdom works in this *Yagya* they can only see it through the way someone lives their life. The proof of whether the *Yagya* works or not is not in a vault, but it is in the way of the person. The proof is in that person's life. So in this *Yagya* here, the challenge will never come to the written text. The challenge of whether the knowledge is right or wrong… the text of it will never be challenged. What will be challenged is the way the person lives. To me that's what differentiates truth. When it comes to truth, it is never what's written on a piece of paper but it's always the way … that truth shows up in someone's life. (Gitanjali)

These underlying principles are the essence of the *Yagya*, protected and sustained by BKs. The sentiment of the importance of *Yagya* connects present BKs with the original generation, and with the purpose and vision of Om Mandli, the original *Yagya*. Those days have sacred value for BKs, maintained through allegory. In a time of expansion, remembering the *Yagya* helps BKs identify with the original purpose of the organization; people must hold onto the seed of principles and vision while the tree of the institution expands.

> Just as we were speaking about these spiritual principles that the *Yagya* has been founded on, these are spiritual truth that we need to, or are - to different levels - bringing into our lives, showing up in our lives, and living by because this is what we believe will transform the world, and what will take us from dark to light. I was also noticing that with the conversation around the *Yagya*, I felt a lot more connected to speaking about that than speaking about the Brahma Kumaris as an organization. There's a different feeling when you speak about it as the *Yagya*, so if we could somehow bring that feeling, that we're all connected to, into the work that we do… so we feel that connection and that feeling will connect to other people. Because when we feel it then other people feel it. (Samantha)

Fieldwork fire

In this thesis, each chapter includes a form of fire. Dadi Prakashmani, an original member of the *Avināshi Gyān Yagya*, left her body in 2007. In the days surrounding her death, there were extensive periods of silent meditation during which BKs maintained all night *yoga*

bhattis to create an atmosphere befitting such a guardian of purity. New York BKs witnessed and were affected by the collapse of the World Trade Centre, which burned before crumbling in a pit of dust and rubble. UNBKs joined other faiths in the annual NGO/DPI conference and discussed ways to balance what BKs see as inevitable environmental demise of 'destruction' and genuine concern and care for nature and humanity. "The fire of destruction is the greatest fire… when the flames are burning on all four sides, the foremost activity of you elevated souls will be the donation of peace. That is, you must give power" (Lawrence 1996:17-29). BKs, who lived through the devastation of the Super Cyclone and, to a lesser degree the 2008 flood, managed the external form of disaster by re-authoring on the basis of their theology. They used the fire of yoga too, as a way in which to harness and manifest meaning from those traumatic days. Fire became a form of service as the quality of food was purified through cooking in Gods remembrance. In the case of Rajni and Mohan, the disaster was the penetration of a body dedicated to purity, by a soul who was understood to be impure. A BK dedicated sister is a symbol of what is pure, and the standard and recognizable image of those who are *Yagyarakshak*, that is, those who protect the *Yagya*. For BKs, nothing based on vices caused by body consciousness should be performed through the body. The task for the BKs who accompanied Rajni was to act as her guards: to maintain the boundaries of Rajni's purity on her behalf, by controlling impure expression through her body and ultimately ridding the body of the threat.

Yagyarakshak: Guardians of purity

Fire becomes an important metaphor when trying to understand how one can maintain and mediate clear boundaries between purity and impurity.

> A *Yagya* is a fire. And to me it is always inclusive because the igniting of the fire is based on certain fundamental principles of life. And so if that's what's stoking the fire – the principles - it means that anyone has got the potential to live by those fundamental principles of life. (Gitanjali)

BKs are thoughtful and considered about their role as protectors. They understand purification as a process and see no soul as being in a fixed state. Every soul, other than the Supreme Soul, moves from pure to impure, returning to pure again, through the cycle of time and through rebirth. Ideas of purity exist as markers and guidelines that BKs use to check their internal spiritual compass from time to time, so they can do their work of being *yagyarakshak* in this Confluence Age.

> The *Yagya* was started based on principles... (Samantha)
>
> … That you need to live by, not just articulate or know or subscribe to. (Gitanjali)
>
> So, just listening to what you're saying, it's all like we're little *yagyas* on our own in that way. (Samantha)
>
> Which are? (Tamasin)
>
> Brotherhood. Universal brotherhood. Recognizing that as a human being my spiritual relationship is with God. Certain things like that. I need to have purity of intention when I am participating in this *Yagya*. I need to have an honest heart and I need to have pure and clean intentions. I'm going through a purification process, and I need to understand what this means. These are all principles of the *Yagya* that keep the fire getting brighter and brighter and brighter. (Gitanjali)

Final thoughts

The spiritual philosophy and praxis of BKs significantly and radically alter their perception of world events, their ideas of what it means to 'serve,' and what they consider to be a disaster. What the media and general population consider to be disasters, either natural or anthropogenic, such as cyclones, floods and mass murder, are normalized through BK philosophy. This is *Sangamyuga*, so BKs see that it is right that the balance of nature, environment and souls be restored through what is perceived as chaos and disaster. It happens every Cycle and so it will happen again. It is nothing new. The daily theological lessons educate BKs about how to manage their internal state of mind during such times. Through their spiritual praxis and philosophy, BKs find meaning for themselves, and adopt spiritual ways to manage their suffering. BKs also find unique ways

to be of service to others despite the physical limitations of circumstance that disaster brings.

The data from this study, and the analysis I have offered, have implications for different fields. Both environmental and intentional disasters have increased in frequency over the last two decades (IFRCRCS 2006). The natural sciences, define disaster by the material damage from hazardous events. Anthropology recognizes that disasters are always multifactorial and cannot be disengaged from the psychosocial structures that lie beneath them (Oliver-Smith, 1999). People's social and psycho-religious needs post-disaster tend to be left to the community (Doughty, 1999) and are generally not part of the policies pursued by official agencies. However, the Emergency Management Australia's (EMA) publication series (EMA, 2003), among others (Massey 2006; NVOAD 2009; The Sphere Handbook 2004) address psychosocial needs and identify the spiritual as germane. As an area that many scientists and policy makers approach with reticence, the appositeness of spirituality requires further exploration through empirical studies. BKs experiences of disaster enriches our understanding of the mechanics of disaster, and the role that spirituality has in the interplay between the lived experience of people and the vulnerable environment around them, and the meaning-making (Frankl 1962) that bridges the two. In this regard, I see the data from this project as a bridge between scientific policy and social need.

To adequately equip people to respond to disaster, we must broaden our understanding of the ways in which people, separately and collectively, as individuals and collectives, manage and respond to traumatic circumstances that cause suffering. While acknowledging all forms of faith and non-faith, religion and secularism, there may be inherent capacities in faith-based organizations that are, as yet, under utilized in the disaster context. Suffering is manifold and so too are its solutions. If disasters are normalized for BKs, and certain other spiritual communities, their experiences may enrich

the methods people use to bring solace to those who are suffering, in ways that may be practical, non-proselytizing and cost effective, although that would be the subject of a different study.

This research contributes to a flourishing area of academic enquiry in relation to spirituality and disaster, introducing rich data from a vibrant global new religious movement. My aim has been to deepen the understanding of what it means to be spiritual and, in so doing, to further develop research directions pertinent to the anthropology of religion, the anthropology of disaster and disaster management theory. The reflexivity of our discipline is increasing, and the questions we ask and the answers we offer are constantly being reframed. What is most required in topics such as spirituality and disaster, which are so entwined with what it means to be human, is to keep the discussion fluid and the dialogue open, and so continue to learn about the profusion of different ways in which lived reality manifests.

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Appendix 1: Publications during Candidature

Ramsay, Tamasin, Lenore Manderson, and Wendy Smith. 2008. Changing a mountain into a mustard seed; spiritual practices and responses to disaster among New York Brahma Kumaris. *Journal of Contemporary Religion* (25:1, in press).

Ramsay, Tamasin. Addressing humanitarian concerns: Suffering, service and spirituality in the disaster setting. *Prehospital and Disaster Medicine* 24 (3).

Ramsay, Tamasin, and Wendy Smith. 2008. Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University. *International Institute for Asian Studies Newsletter* 47 New Religious Movements (Spring):1,4,5.

Weissbecker, Inka, Nancy E. Wallace (eds.) Elizabeth Carll, Brian Flynn, Sarah Gogel, Judy Kuriansky, Darlyne G. Nemeth, Tamasin Ramsay, Norma P. Simon, David M. Simpson, Sandra E. Sephton, Edward E. Sievekingya K. Tsekenis, and Sandra A. Witt (in alphabetical order). 2008. The impact of climate change on mental health and psychosocial wellbeing: Guidelines for action. In *NGO Report on Climate Change to the Secretary General* edited by L. W. Roeder Jnr. New York: United Nations.

Appendix 2: Presentations during Candidature

Ramsay, Tamasin. Spirit possession and purity: A case study of a Brahma Kumaris ascetic. Paper presented at the conference on Medical Anthropology at the Intersections: Celebrating 50 Years of Interdisciplinarity, Yale University, New Haven, USA, September 24-27 2009.

Smith, Wendy, Ramsay, Tamasin, Spreading soul consciousness: Extending and managing the global reach of the Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University. Paper presented at the International Symposium on Management and Marketing of Globalizing Asian Religions, National Museum of Ethnology, Osaka, Japan, 10 – 14 August 2009.

Ramsay, Tamasin. Addressing humanitarian concerns: Suffering, service and spirituality in the disaster setting. Paper presented at World Congress on Disaster and Emergency Medicine 2009, Vancouvernaday 12-15 2009.

Ramsay, Tamasin. Consciousness and climate change. Paper presentation at United Nations Environment Program, World Environment Day, Orissa, India. June 5th 2008.

Walsh, Trevor, Ramsay, Tamasin, Smith, Wendy, The Transplantation of eastern spirituality into a contemporary Australian socio-cultural environment. Paper presentation at Spirituality in Australia Psychological: Social and Religious Perspectives. (University of Western Sydney, Australia) July 20th 2007.

Ramsay, Tamasin, Re-Authoring the self: Spirituality and suffering in the context of disaster. Paper presentation at Transitions: Health & Mobility in Asia & the Pacific (ARC Conference, Monash University, Australia) June 24–26 2007.

Ramsay, Tamasin, A psycho-spiritual program of response to disaster. Paper presentation at 8th Asia Pacific Conference on Disaster Medicine (Tokyo, Japan) November 20–22 2006.

Appendix 3: Ethics Acceptance Letter



Standing Committee on Ethics in Research Involving Humans (SCERH)
Research Office

Prof Lenore Manderson
Social Sciences and Health Research Unit
Faculty of Medicine, Nursing and Health Sciences
Caulfield Campus

14 June 2007

CF07/1339 - 2007/0357: Post traumatic growth, spiritual response and resilience during disaster: Manhattan and Orissa

Dear Researchers,

Thank you for the information provided in relation to the above project. The items requiring attention have been resolved to the satisfaction of the Standing Committee on Ethics in Research Involving Humans (SCERH). Accordingly, this research project is approved to proceed.

Terms of approval

1. This project is approved for five years from the date of this letter and this approval is only valid whilst you hold a position at Monash University.
2. It is the responsibility of the Chief Investigator to ensure that all information that is pending (such as permission letters from organisations) is forwarded to SCERH, if not done already. Research cannot begin at any organisation until SCERH receives a letter of permission from that organisation. You will then receive a letter from SCERH confirming that we have received a letter from each organisation.
3. It is the responsibility of the Chief Investigator to ensure that all investigators are aware of the terms of approval and to ensure the project is conducted as approved by SCERH.
4. You should notify SCERH immediately of any serious or unexpected adverse effects on participants or unforeseen events affecting the ethical acceptability of the project.
5. The Explanatory Statement must be on Monash University letterhead and the Monash University complaints clause must contain your project number.
6. **Amendments to the approved project:** Changes to any aspect of the project require the submission of a Request for Amendment form to SCERH and must not begin without written approval from SCERH. Substantial variations may require a new application.
7. **Future correspondence:** Please quote the project number and project title above in any further correspondence.
8. **Annual reports:** Continued approval of this project is dependent on the submission of an Annual Report. Please provide the Committee with an Annual Report determined by the date of your letter of approval.
9. **Final report:** A Final Report should be provided at the conclusion of the project. SCERH should be notified if the project is discontinued before the expected date of completion.
10. **Monitoring:** Projects may be subject to an audit or any other form of monitoring by SCERH at any time.
11. **Retention and storage of data:** The Chief Investigator is responsible for the storage and retention of original data pertaining to a project for a minimum period of five years.

All forms can be accessed at our website www.monash.edu.au/research/ethics/human/index.html

We wish you well with your research.

[redacted]

Mrs Lyn Johannessen
Acting Human Ethics Officer (on behalf of SCERH)

Cc: Dr Wendy Smith, Ms Tamasin Ramsay

Postal – Monash University, Vic 3800, Australia
Building 3E, Room 111, Clayton Campus, Wellington Road, Clayton
Telephone +61 3 9905 5490 Facsimile +61 3 9905 1420
Email scerh@adm.monash.edu.au www.monash.edu/research/ethics/human/index/html
ABN 12 377 614 012 CRICOS Provider #00008C

Appendix 4: Interview Guide

Life as a Brahma Kumar/i.

What was happening in your life around the time that you became a BK?

What does being a BK mean to you?

What attracted you to becoming a BK?

What keeps you a BK?

What sustains you the most in your *brāhman* life?

Spiritual Challenges

What is 'spirituality'?

What does being 'spiritual' mean to you?

Could you talk about a time that was spiritually challenging for you?

How did you deal with it?

How do you feel about it now?

Disaster Experience

Could you tell me when and where the disaster took place.

Who were you with? What were you doing at the time?

Do you remember how you felt?

What was the most challenging thing about it?

How did you deal with it?

What was the greatest support for you at that time?

How do you feel about it now?

Thank you for your time today.

Appendix 5: Focus Group Guide

Brahma Kumaris at the United Nations

Who are the Brahma Kumaris?

What is the *Yagya*?

What is the Brahma Kumaris' role at the UN?

What do you feel is the Brahma Kumaris' social spiritual and organizational responsibility in the event of a disaster?

Do you think that spiritual outreach is required after a disaster? If so, is the BKWSU or BKUN in a position to perform that role and if not, what do we need to do?

What is the role of the BKs and/or the *Yagya* over the next few years?

Appendix 6: Explanatory Statement (English)

MONASH University
Medicine, Nursing and Health Sciences

EXPLANATORY STATEMENT

My name is Tamasin Ramsay and I am conducting a research project as part of a doctorate degree that has the full support of BapDada and the seniors. This statement explains what this research project is about and what you will be doing as part of this research.

Project Title: Spiritual response to disaster: An ethnography of the Brahma Kumaris.
Chief Investigator: Professor Lenore Manderson, Social Sciences and Health Research Unit.
Primary Researcher: Ms Tamasin Ramsay, Social Sciences and Health Research Unit.
For the Degree: Doctorate of Philosophy (PhD)

Research Objective
This study focuses on the lived experience of Brahmins. The aim of this study is to understand more about the way in which leading a spiritual life shapes and alters BKs experience of disaster.

Who Can Participate
To participate, you must be a BK and have experienced some kind of external disaster such as natural disasters or acts of war.

How it Works
In New York I will conduct interviews with Brahmins who were in Manhattan during the World Trade Centre collapse on September 11, 2001. The interview will take approximately one hour and can be done at a time and place suitable to you. The data from your interviews will help to form a picture of how spirituality works in situations of chaos, noise and uncertainty such as disaster. These interviews are a very important part of this study.

The Risks:
During the interviews, I will ask you about your experience of disaster, and this may bring up painful or difficult memories. If you do become upset or feel you need some support, I will arrange it for you in confidence, at no cost to you.

The Benefits
The aim of this research is to learn about what contributes to people's resilience in the face of traumatic events, such as disaster. The information gathered during this project could help to alter the way in which world leaders currently respond to disaster giving spirituality a more central place in situations of chaos and sorrow. No research to date has been undertaken exploring the tangible effects of the spiritual beliefs and practice of Raja Yoga. As BKs, we may discover little known effects of our own practice.

Research Reports
After I have analyzed all the data, I will write a report that will be made available to all participants. After receiving my PhD I will visit each place and give a presentation of the

findings. Other people who may be interested in this are humanitarian aid workers, social scientists, disaster managers, policy-maker and government officials. The results of this study may be presented at conferences, published in academic journals and in magazines or books.

Your Information
All the records that I gather from our time together will be kept for 5 years in a locked cabinet at my home. This is a secure and private location and only I will have access to it. In all publications and presentations, I will not disclose any of your personal information, unless you would like me to.

Participation
You may choose to participate or not to participate in this project. It is up to you. There will be no consequences if you agree and then decide to withdraw from this research at a later date. During the interview you may stop the interview at any time, or refuse to answer any questions. You may also change your mind after the data is gathered and request that your information not be used for this study. You may withdraw at any time, until the results are analyzed and/ or published. If you do withdraw and wish to speak to someone about it, that will be arranged for you too.

Further Information
You are welcome to contact me any time with any questions, concerns or feedback. My phone number is (347) 221 4932 and my email address is tamasin.ramsay@med.monash.edu.au. You may find out more about my university at http://www.monash.edu. The web page of my department is http://www.med.monash.edu.au/spppm/. I also have a local academic advisor at Columbia University. His name is Professor David Abramson and he is the Head of Research at the National Centre for Disaster Preparedness, Mailman School of Public Health at Columbia University.

Should you have any complaint concerning the way this research project is being conducted, please do not hesitate to contact:

The Standing Committee on Ethics in Research Involving Humans on:
Telephone +61 (0)3 9905 2052 Fax +61 (0)3 9905 1420
Email: scerh:adm.monash.edu.au

Academic Supervisor (Manhattan)	**Academic Supervisor (Orissa)**
Dr. David Abramson	Dr. Sucheta Priyabadini
Columbia University	KIIT University
dma3@columbia.edu	sucheta@kiit.ac.in

Appendix 7: Explanatory Statement (Oriya)

ମୋନାଶ ବିଶ୍ୱବିଦ୍ୟାଳୟ

ଭେଷଜ, ନର୍ସିଙ୍ଗ ଏବଂ ସ୍ୱାସ୍ଥ୍ୟ ବିଜ୍ଞାନ ବିଭାଗ

ବିସ୍ତୃତ ବିବରଣୀ

ମୋର ନାମ ଭଉଣୀ ଜସ୍ମିନ୍ (ତାମାସିନ୍), ମୁଁ ଅଷ୍ଟ୍ରେଲିଆର ଜଣେ ବ୍ରହ୍ମାକୁମାରୀ। ୧୯୮୪ ମସିହାରେ ମୁଁ ଏବଂ ମୋର ମାତା ପିତା ଈଶ୍ୱରୀୟ ଜ୍ଞାନ ପ୍ରାପ୍ତ କଲୁ। ଅଷ୍ଟ୍ରେଲିଆ ଏକ ସୃଜନାତ୍ମକ ମୁକ୍ତ ଭାବନା ଓ ମୁକ୍ତ ସଂସ୍କୃତିର ଦେଶ। ପ୍ରାକୃତିକ ସୌନ୍ଦର୍ଯ୍ୟର ଅପରୂପ ଗନ୍ତାଘର ରୂପେ ପରିଚିତ ଅଷ୍ଟ୍ରେଲିଆର ଜନସଂଖ୍ୟା ୨ କୋଟି ୭୦ ଲକ୍ଷ। ଅଷ୍ଟ୍ରେଲିଆର ଏକ ଆଗଧାଡିର ଗବେଷଣା ବିଶ୍ୱବିଦ୍ୟାଳୟ ଭାବେ ମୋନାଶ୍ ବିଶ୍ୱବିଦ୍ୟାଳୟ ସୁପରିଚିତ। ବାପଦାଦା ଓ ବରିଷ୍ଠ ଭାଇଭଉଣୀମାନଙ୍କ ସାହାଯ୍ୟରେ ମୁଁ ଉପରୋକ୍ତ ବିଶ୍ୱବିଦ୍ୟାଳୟରେ କରୁଥିବା ଡକ୍ଟରେଟ୍ ଡିଗ୍ରୀ ଅନ୍ତର୍ଗତ ଏକ ଗବେଷଣା ପ୍ରକଳ୍ପ (ଅଷ୍ଟ୍ରେଲିଆ ସରକାର ଦ୍ୱାରା ସୌଜନ୍ୟପ୍ରାପ୍ତ)ର ପରିଚାଳନା ପାଇଁ ଅକ୍ଟୋବର ମାସ ପର୍ଯ୍ୟନ୍ତ ଓଡିଶାରେ ଅଛି। ଏହି ବିବରଣୀରେ ମୋର ଗବେଷଣା ପ୍ରକଳ୍ପଟି କ'ଣ ଏବଂ ଏହି ଗବେଷଣାର ଅଂଶୀଦାର ହିସାବରେ ଆପଣଙ୍କୁ କ'ଣ କରିବାକୁ ପଡିବ ତାହା ବ୍ୟାଖ୍ୟା କରାଯାଇଛି।

ପ୍ରକଳ୍ପ ଶିରୋନାମା : ଆଧ୍ୟାତ୍ମିକ ମନୋଭାବ/ ପ୍ରତିକ୍ରିୟା: ବ୍ରହ୍ମାକୁମାରୀଜ୍‌ର ଏକ ଅନୁଶୀଳନ

ମୁଖ୍ୟ ନିରୀକ୍ଷକ : ପ୍ରଫେସର ଲେନୋର ମାଣ୍ଡରସନ୍, ସମାଜ ବିଜ୍ଞାନ ଓ ସ୍ୱାସ୍ଥ୍ୟ ଗବେଷଣା ଇଉନିଟ୍

ପ୍ରାଥମିକ ଗବେଷକ : ତାମାସିନ୍ ରାମ୍‌ସେ, ସମାଜ ବିଜ୍ଞାନ ଓ ସ୍ୱାସ୍ଥ୍ୟ ଗବେଷଣା ଇଉନିଟ୍

ଡିଗ୍ରୀ : ପିଏଚ୍.ଡି.

ଗବେଷଣାର ଲକ୍ଷ୍ୟ:- ଏହି ଅଧ୍ୟୟନ ବ୍ରହ୍ମାକୁମାରୀ କୁମାରମାନଙ୍କର ଜୀବନ୍ତ ଅନୁଭବ ଉପରେ କେନ୍ଦ୍ରିତ। ଏହି ଅଧ୍ୟୟନର ଲକ୍ଷ୍ୟ ଆଧ୍ୟାତ୍ମିକ ଜୀବନଶୈଳୀକୁ ଅଧିକ ଭଲ ଭାବରେ ବୁଝିବା ଓ ବିପର୍ଯ୍ୟୟ ସମୟରେ ଆଧ୍ୟାତ୍ମିକତା, ବି.କେ.ମାନଙ୍କର ଜୀବନକୁ କିପରି ପ୍ରଭାବିତ କରେ ତାହା ଦର୍ଶାଇବା।

କିଏ ଭାଗ ନେବେ:- ଭାଗ ନେବା ପାଇଁ ଆପଣ ଜଣେ ବି.କେ. ହୋଇଥିବା ଦରକାର ଏବଂ ବାହ୍ୟ ବିପର୍ଯ୍ୟୟ ଯେପରିକି ପ୍ରାକୃତିକ ବିପର୍ଯ୍ୟୟ କିମ୍ବା କିଛି ଯୁଦ୍ଧକାଳୀନ ଅନୁଭୂତି ଆପଣଙ୍କର ଥିବା ଦରକାର।

କିପରି କାର୍ଯ୍ୟ କରେ:- ଓଡିଶାରେ ବନ୍ୟା, ବାତ୍ୟା ଭଳି ସ୍ଥାନୀୟ ବିପର୍ଯ୍ୟୟ ଅନୁଭବ କରିଥିବା ବି.କେ.ମାନଙ୍କର ସାକ୍ଷାତ୍କାର ମୁଁ ନେବି। ସାକ୍ଷାତ୍କାର ପାଇଁ ପ୍ରାୟ ଏକ ଘଣ୍ଟା ସମୟ ଲାଗିବ ଏବଂ ଆପଣଙ୍କ ସୁବିଧା ଅନୁଯାୟୀ ନିର୍ଦ୍ଧାରିତ ସ୍ଥାନ ଓ ସମୟରେ ନିଆଯିବ। ଆପଣଙ୍କ ସହ ସାକ୍ଷାତ୍କାରରୁ ଯେଉଁ ତଥ୍ୟ ମିଳିବ ତାହା ଆଧ୍ୟାତ୍ମିକତା କିପରି ବିଭ୍ରାଟ, କୋଳାହଳ, ବିପର୍ଯ୍ୟୟ ଭଳି ଅନିଶ୍ଚିତ ପରିସ୍ଥିତିରେ କାର୍ଯ୍ୟ କରେ ତାହା ଦର୍ଶାଇବାରେ ସାହାଯ୍ୟ କରିବ। ମୋ ଅଧ୍ୟୟନରେ ଏହି ସାକ୍ଷାତ୍କାରର ଏକ ଗୁରୁତ୍ୱପୂର୍ଣ୍ଣ ଭୂମିକା ରହିଛି।

ବିପଦର ଆଶଙ୍କା:- ସାକ୍ଷାତ୍କାର ସମୟରେ ମୁଁ ବିପର୍ଯ୍ୟୟ ସମୟର ଅନୁଭବ ପଚାରିବି। ଏହା ଆପଣଙ୍କୁ ଆପଣଙ୍କର ଦୁଃଖଦାୟକ ସ୍ମୃତିକୁ ଜାଗୃରିତ କରାଇବ। ଆପଣ ଯଦି ମାନସିକ ଅଶାନ୍ତି ଅନୁଭବ କରିବେ କିମ୍ବା କୌଣସି ସାହାଯ୍ୟ ଲୋଡିବେ, ମୁଁ ବିନା ମୂଲ୍ୟରେ ତାହା ଆପଣଙ୍କ ପାଇଁ ବ୍ୟବସ୍ଥା କରିଦେବି।

ଉପକାର:- ଏହି ଗବେଷଣାର ଲକ୍ଷ୍ୟ, ବିପର୍ଯ୍ୟୟ ଭଳି ମାନସିକ ଯନ୍ତ୍ରଣା ଦେଉଥିବା ଘଟଣାରେ ମନୁଷ୍ୟ ନିଜର ସ୍ୱ ସ୍ଥିତିକୁ ବଜାୟ ରଖିବାରେ କ'ଣ ସାହାଯ୍ୟ କରେ ସେ ବିଷୟରେ ଜାଣିବା। ଏହି ପ୍ରକଳ୍ପ ସମୟରେ ଯେଉଁ ତଥ୍ୟ ସଂଗ୍ରହ ହେବ ତାହା ବିଶ୍ୱନେତାମାନଙ୍କର ବିପର୍ଯ୍ୟୟ ସମୟରେ ପ୍ରଚଳିତ କିମ୍ବା ସାମ୍ପ୍ରତିକ ପ୍ରତିକ୍ରିୟାର ବିଧିକୁ ବଦଳାଇବାରେ ସାହାଯ୍ୟ କରିପାରେ। ବିଭ୍ରାଟ ଓ ଦୁଃଖଦ ପରିସ୍ଥିତିରେ ଆଧ୍ୟାତ୍ମିକତା ଓ ରାଜଯୋଗ ଅନୁଭବର ନିର୍ଦ୍ଦିଷ୍ଟ ପ୍ରଭାବ କ'ଣ ଏ ସମ୍ପର୍କରେ ଆଜି ପର୍ଯ୍ୟନ୍ତ କୌଣସି ଗବେଷଣା ହୋଇନାହିଁ।। ବି.କେ. ହିସାବରେ ଆମ ନିଜ ଆଧ୍ୟାତ୍ମିକ ଅଭ୍ୟାସର ପ୍ରଭାବ କ'ଣ ତାହା ଆବିଷ୍କାର କରାଯାଇପାରେ।

ସମାଜିକ ବିଜ୍ଞାନ ଓ ସ୍ୱାସ୍ଥ୍ୟ ଗବେଷଣା ଇଉନିଟ୍

ଯୋଗାଯୋଗ: ଭଉଣୀ ଜସ୍ମିନ୍ (ତାମାସିନ୍ ରାମ୍‌ସେ)

ଫୋନ୍: ୯୪୩୮୫୫୫୫୯୪, **E-mail: tamasin.ramsay@med.monash.edu.au**

ଗବେଷଣାର **ଲିଖିତ ବିବରଣୀ:-** ସମସ୍ତ ତଥ୍ୟ ବିଶ୍ଳେଷଣ କରି, ମୁଁ ଗୋଟିଏ ରିପୋର୍ଟ ପ୍ରସ୍ତୁତ କରିବି। ଏହା ସମସ୍ତ ଯୋଗଦାନକାରୀମାନଙ୍କୁ ଦିଆଯିବ। ମୁଁ ମୋର ପିଏଚ୍.ଡି. ପ୍ରାପ୍ତ କରିବା ପରେ ଓଡିଶା ବୁଲିବାକୁ ଆସିବି ଏବଂ ଅନୁସନ୍ଧାନର ସିଦ୍ଧାନ୍ତ ଉପସ୍ଥାପନା କରିବି।

ଅନ୍ୟ ଯେଉଁମାନେ ଏ ସିଦ୍ଧାନ୍ତ ଜାଣିବା ବିଷୟରେ ଆଗ୍ରହୀ ହୋଇପାରନ୍ତି; ସେମାନେ ହେଲେ ମାନବ ହିତାଧିକାରୀ, ସମାଜିକ ବିଜ୍ଞାନୀ, ବିପର୍ଯ୍ୟୟ ପ୍ରବନ୍ଧକ, ନୀତି ପ୍ରଣେତା ଏବଂ ସରକାରୀ କର୍ମଚାରୀ। ଏହି ଅଧ୍ୟୟନର ଫଳାଫଳ ସମ୍ମିଳନୀରେ ଉପସ୍ଥାପନ କରାଯାଇପାରେ; ବିଦ୍ୟାଳୟ ସମ୍ବନ୍ଧୀୟ ବିବରଣ ପୁସ୍ତକ, ପତ୍ରିକା କିମ୍ବା ପୁସ୍ତକ ରୂପେ ପ୍ରକାଶ କରାଯାଇପାରେ।

ଆପଣଙ୍କ ପାଇଁ ସୂଚନା:- ଆପଣଙ୍କଠାରୁ ସଂଗୃହୀତ ତଥ୍ୟ ୫ ବର୍ଷ ପର୍ଯ୍ୟନ୍ତ ସଂରକ୍ଷିତ ରଖାଯିବ ଏବଂ ଏହି ତଥ୍ୟ ବିଷୟରେ ମୁଁ ଏବଂ ମୋର ପ୍ରଫେସରଙ୍କ ବ୍ୟତୀତ ଅନ୍ୟ କେହି ଅବଗତ ହେବେ ନାହିଁ। କୌଣସି ବ୍ୟକ୍ତିଗତ ସୂଚନା ମୁଁ କାହା ପାଖରେ ପ୍ରକାଶ କରିବି ନାହିଁ।

ସ୍ୱେଚ୍ଛାକୃତ ଯୋଗଦାନ:- ଆପଣ ଏହି ପ୍ରକଳ୍ପରେ ଭାଗ ନେବାକୁ ଇଚ୍ଛା ପ୍ରକାଶ କରିବେ ନା ନାହିଁ ଏହା ଆପଣଙ୍କ ଉପରେ ନିର୍ଭର କରେ। ଆପଣ ରାଜି ହୋଇ ପୁଣି ପରବର୍ତ୍ତୀ ସମୟରେ ପ୍ରକଳ୍ପରୁ ଓହରି ଯିବାପାଇଁ ଚାହିଲେ ବି କୌଣସି ଅସୁବିଧା ନାହିଁ। ସାକ୍ଷାତ୍କାର ସମୟରେ ଆପଣ ହଠାତ୍ ସାକ୍ଷାତ୍କାର ବନ୍ଦ କରିପାରିବେ କିମ୍ବା କୌଣସି ପ୍ରଶ୍ନର ଉତ୍ତର ଦେବାକୁ ମନା କରିପାରିବେ। ତଥ୍ୟ ସଂଗୃହୀତ ହେଲାପରେ ଆପଣଙ୍କ ମନ ପରିବର୍ତ୍ତନ ହେଲେ ଆପଣଙ୍କ ସୂଚନାକୁ ଏହି ଅଧ୍ୟୟନ ପାଇଁ ବ୍ୟବହାର ନ କରିବା ପାଇଁ ଅନୁରୋଧ କରିପାରନ୍ତି। ଫଳାଫଳର ବିଶ୍ଳେଷଣ ବା ପ୍ରକାଶନ ପୂର୍ବରୁ ଆପଣ ଯେ କୌଣସି ସମୟରେ ଏହି ପ୍ରକଳ୍ପରୁ ଓହରି ଯାଇପାରିବେ ଏବଂ ଯଦି କାହାକୁ ଏ ସମ୍ପର୍କରେ ଶୁଣାଇବାକୁ ଚାହିବେ ତେବେ ଆପଣଙ୍କ ପାଇଁ ସେ ବ୍ୟବସ୍ଥା ମଧ୍ୟ କରାଯିବ।

ଅଧିକ ସୂଚନା ଏବଂ ଯୋଗାଯୋଗ:- ମୋ ସହିତ କୌଣସି ପ୍ରଶ୍ନ ସମ୍ପର୍କୀୟ ଯୋଗାଯୋଗ କରିବା ପାଇଁ ଆପଣଙ୍କୁ ସ୍ୱାଗତ। ମୋର Ph. No.- 9438555594 ଏବଂ E-mail Address: tamasin.ramsay@med.monash.edu.au ଆପଣ http://www.monash.edu ୱେବ୍‌ସାଇଟ୍‌ରୁ ମୋ ବିଶ୍ୱ ବିଦ୍ୟାଳୟ ସମ୍ପର୍କରେ ଅଧିକ ଜାଣିବାକୁ ପାଇବେ। ମୋ ଡିପାର୍ଟମେଣ୍ଟର ୱେବ୍ ପୃଷ୍ଠା http://www.med.monash.edu.au/spppm/ ମୋର ଜଣେ ସ୍ଥାନୀୟ ପରାମର୍ଶଦାତା ଡକ୍ଟର ସୁଚେତା ପ୍ରିୟବାଦିନୀ KIIT ବିଶ୍ୱ ବିଦ୍ୟାଳୟରେ ଡେପୁଟି ରେଜିଷ୍ଟ୍ରାର ଅଛନ୍ତି।

ଏହି ଗବେଷଣା ପ୍ରକଳ୍ପ ଯେଉଁ ପ୍ରକାରେ ଚାଲିଛି ସେ ସମ୍ବନ୍ଧରେ ଯଦି ଆପଣଙ୍କ କୌଣସି ଅଭିଯୋଗ ଥାଏ ଦୟାପୂର୍ବକ ନିମ୍ନଲିଖିତ ଠିକଣାରେ ଯୋଗାଯୋଗ ପାଇଁ ଦ୍ୱିଧା ପ୍ରକାଶ କରିବେ ନାହିଁ।

The Standing Committee on Ethics in Research involving Humans

ଫୋନ୍ +୬୧(୦)୩ ୯୯୦୫ ୨୦୫୨ ଫ୍ୟାକ୍ସ +୬୧(୦)୩ ୯୯୦୫ ୧୪୨୦

E-mail : scerh@adm.monash.edu.au

ସମାଜିକ ବିଜ୍ଞାନ ଓ ସ୍ୱାସ୍ଥ୍ୟ ଗବେଷଣା ଇଉନିଟ୍
ଯୋଗାଯୋଗ: ଭଉଣୀ ଜସ୍ମିନ୍ (ତାମାସିନ୍ ରାମ୍‌ସେ)
ଫୋନ୍: ୯୪୩୮୫୫୫୫୯୪, **E-mail: tamasin.ramsay@med.monash.edu.au**

Appendix 8: Consent Form (English)

MONASH University
Medicine, Nursing and Health Sciences

CONSENT FORM

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research. This project is voluntary, so you may change your mind or withdraw if you wish to without consequence.

This form is to say that you have agreed to be part of this research project, that you've had the research project explained to you, and that you have read the Explanatory Statement or had it read to you.

I agree to participate in an interview or focus group discussion and for the discussion to be recorded

I understand that I will be sent a transcript of the audio file at my request.

I understand that any and all information I provide is confidential and my name, personal details and identifying characteristics will remain confidential.

I understand that data from the interview will be kept in a secure facility for 5 years after which time it will be destroyed. Only the researcher will have access to my information.

Name _____

City and Country _____ Gender F M

Year you became a BK _____ Physical age _____

Email _____

Signature _____

Date ____/____/___

Appendix 9: Consent Form (Oriya)

ମୋନାଶ ବିଶ୍ୱ ବିଦ୍ୟାଳୟ

ଔଷଧ, ନର୍ସିଙ୍ଗ ଏବଂ ସ୍ୱାସ୍ଥ୍ୟ ବିଜ୍ଞାନ

ସମ୍ମତି ପତ୍ର

ବିପର୍ଯ୍ୟୟ ସମୟରେ ଆଧ୍ୟତ୍ମିକ ପ୍ରତିକ୍ରିୟା / ଅନୁଭୂତି: ବ୍ରହ୍ମାକୁମାରୀଜ୍‌ର ଏକ ଅଧ୍ୟୟନ ।

ଏହି ଗବେଷଣାରେ ଯୋଗ ଦେବା ପାଇଁ ରାଜି ହୋଇଥିବାରୁ ଧନ୍ୟବାଦ । ଏହା ଏକ ସ୍ୱେଚ୍ଛାକୃତ ପ୍ରକଳ୍ପ ହୋଇଥିବାରୁ ଆପଣ ଯେତେବେଳ ଚାହିଁବେ ଏଥିରୁ ଓହରି ଯାଇପାରିବେ ।

ଏହି ସମ୍ମତି ପତ୍ରରେ କୁହାଯାଇଛି ଯେ ଏହି ଗବେଷଣା ପ୍ରକଳ୍ପର ଅଂଶୀଦାର ହେବା ପାଇଁ ଆପଣ ସମ୍ମତି ଦେଇଛନ୍ତି, ଆପଣଙ୍କୁ ଗବେଷଣା ପ୍ରକଳ୍ପ ସମ୍ପର୍କରେ ବୁଝାଯାଇଛି ଏବଂ ଏଥିରେ ଦିଆଯାଇଥିବା ବକ୍ତବ୍ୟ ଆପଣ ପଢିଛନ୍ତି କିମ୍ବା ଆପଣଙ୍କୁ ପଢାଇ ଶୁଣାଯାଇଛି ।

ଏହି ସମ୍ମତି ପତ୍ରକୁ ସାବଧାନତାର ସହିତ ପଢିଲେ ଆପଣ ବୁଝିପାରିବେ ଯେ ଜଣେ ଗବେଷଣା ସହଯୋଗୀ ଭାବେ ଆପଣଙ୍କର ଅଧିକାର କଣ ? ଆପଣ ଏକ ସାକ୍ଷାତ୍‌କାରେ ଅଂଶଗ୍ରହଣ କରିବେ ଏବଂ ସେହି ସାକ୍ଷାତ୍‌କାରଟିକୁ ରେକର୍ଡ କରାଯିବ । ଏଥିପାଇଁ ପାଖାପାଖି ଏକ ଘଣ୍ଟା ଲାଗିବ । ଯଦି ଆପଣ ଚାହିଁବେ ସାକ୍ଷାତ୍‌କାରର ଏକ ଲିଖିତ ବିବରଣୀ ଆପଣଙ୍କ ସମୀକ୍ଷା ଏବଂ ପ୍ରତିକ୍ରିୟା ପାଇଁ ମୁଁ ଆପଣଙ୍କ ପାଖକୁ ପଠାଇପାରେ । ଏହି ସମୟରେ ମଧ ଆପଣ ଯଦି ପ୍ରକଳ୍ପରେ ଭାଗ ନେବା ପାଇଁ ନ ଚାହିଁବେ ତାହେଲେ ନିଜକୁ ପ୍ରତ୍ୟାହାର କରିପାରିବେ । ଥରେ ତଥ୍ୟ (ଡାଟା)ର ବିଶ୍ଳେଷଣ ହୋଇଗଲା ପରେ ଆପଣ ନିଜକୁ ପ୍ରକଳ୍ପରୁ ପ୍ରତ୍ୟାହାର କରିନେବା ସମ୍ଭବ ନୁହେଁ ।

ଆପଣଙ୍କ ନାମ, ଠିକଣା ଏବଂ ଆପଣଙ୍କ ବ୍ୟକ୍ତିତ୍ୱକୁ ପ୍ରମାଣିତ କରୁଥିବା ଭଳି ପରିଚୟକୁ ଆମର ସମସ୍ତ ପ୍ରକାଶନରେ ଗୋପନ ରଖାଯିବ । କୌଣସି ନଥିପତ୍ରରେ କିମ୍ବା ମୌଖିକ ଉପସ୍ଥାପନାବେଳେ ଆପଣଙ୍କର ବ୍ୟକ୍ତିଗତ ନାମ, ଠିକଣା ଆଦିକୁ ପ୍ରକାଶ କରାଯିବ ନାହିଁ । ଏହି ପ୍ରକଳ୍ପ ପାଇଁ ଆପଙ୍କଠାରୁ ସଂଗୃହୀତ ତଥ୍ୟ ୫ ବର୍ଷ ପାଇଁ ସଂରକ୍ଷିତ ରଖାଯିବ ଏବଂ ଆପଣଙ୍କ ବିନା ଅନୁମତିରେ ପୁନର୍ବାର ବ୍ୟବହାର କରାଯିବ ନାହିଁ ।

ନାମ: ..... ଲିଙ୍ଗ.....

ସହର ଏବଂ ଜନ୍ମଭୂମି (ଦେଶ): ..... ସହର ଏବଂ ବାସଭୂମି (ଦେଶ): .....ଆୟୁ: .....

ଲୌକିକ ବୃତ୍ତି: .....ଜାତି: .....

ବାବାଙ୍କ ସେବାରେ ଭୂମିକା: .....ସେବାକେନ୍ଦ୍ର: .....

କେଉଁ ବର୍ଷ ଆପଣ ଜ୍ଞାନ ପ୍ରାପ୍ତ କଲେ: .....ପରିବାରରେ ଜ୍ଞାନରେ କେତେ ଜଣ ଅଛନ୍ତି: .....

ଇ-ମେଲ୍:.....ଫୋନ୍: .....

ମୁଁ ଉପରୋକ୍ତ ବିବରଣୀକୁ ପଢିଲି ଏବଂ ରେକର୍ଡ କରାଯାଉଥିବା ସାକ୍ଷାତକାରରେ ଭାଗ ନେବା ପାଇଁ ରାଜି ଅଛି ।

ଦସ୍ତଖତ ..... ତାରିଖ / /

ସହଯୋଗ ପାଇଁ ରାଜି ହୋଇଥିବାରୁ ଅଶେଷ ଧନ୍ୟବାଦ । ଆପଣଙ୍କ ବିନା ଏହି ପ୍ରକଳ୍ପ ସଫଳ ହୋଇପାରି ନଥାଆନ୍ତା ।

ସାମାଜିକ ବିଜ୍ଞାନ ଓ ସ୍ୱାସ୍ଥ୍ୟ ଗବେଷଣା ଏକକ

ଯୋଗାଯୋଗ: ଭଉଣୀ ଜସ୍ମିନ୍ (ତାମାସିନ୍ ରାମ୍‌ସେ)

ଫୋନ୍: ୯୪୩୮-୫୫୫୫୯୪, E- mail: tamasin.ramsay@med.monash.edu.au

Appendix 10: *Maryādas* – Principles for Brahmins

Pilgrimage of Remembrance at Amrit Vela. It is essential for Brahmins to get up in the morning before 4:00am and sit in meditation from 4:00am to 4:45am.

Attending Morning Class Daily. Baba says "You should never miss gyan murli." Murli is for study. Murli is shrimat for your efforts and food for your intellect. Murli will solve all your problems. After showering in the morning, it is essential to have study of gyān and yoga regularly.

Observing Celibacy. Shiv Baba says, "Sweet children, the power of Brahmacharya purifies your intellect and helps to you become yog-yukt." Try to observe purity of thought, word, deed, *drishti* (vision), vritti (state of mind), relation and contact, and be yogi.

Eating Pure Food. "As your food, so will be your mind." Your food should be sattwic, (pure) vegetarian, prepared by a yogi and eaten in silence. Never accept tamsic (impure) things like tobacco, alcoholic drinks or drugs of addiction.

Keeping Good Company. Company will colour you. In order to be elevated, have company of your true Father and yoga-yukt, gyani souls.

Inculcating Divinity. This is the true decoration of Brahmin Life. This is your true religion.

Doing Godly Service. This divine karma is the best karma of Brahmins.

Noting Chart. This is the first means of progress.

Giving Happiness to Others. Never hurt any soul due to any of the vices especially anger in thought, word or action.

Keeping Godly Principles. If you break any Godly Principle, i.e. make a mistake, write a letter to Baapdada or the instrumental senior sister in order to decrease the burden. This will prevent further mistakes and you will be helped.

Causing Disturbances. Madhuban as well as the teacher in charge of the centre retain the right to forbid any soul from attending classes if he is causing a disturbance due to vices.

Staying at the Centre. At a sisters centre, no brother can stay without the permission of Madhuban or zone-in-charge and similarly; at a brothers centre, no sister can stay without this permission.

Printing of Literature. If you are printing any literature, you must obtain permission from the zone-in-charge. Your Godly service will be successful if you take guidance from the instrumental serviceable sisters in charge of centres.

Discussing Worldly Affairs. Brothers and sisters who come to the centre, have the aim of self progress and study of gyan and Raja Yoga. So no-one should discuss business at the centre, nor should they lend or borrow money from divine family members.

Visiting Another Centre. If any student is visiting another city, he must take a letter of recommendation from his teacher.

Going to Madhuban. A student must observe all principles for at least twelve months before going to Madhuban, only then do they benefit. (Six months for foreigners.)