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Version: Version of Record

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Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University (BKWSU)

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Published: 15th January 2021

Suzanne Newcombe and Silke Steidinger. 2021. "Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University (BKWSU)." In James Crossley and Alastair Lockhart (eds.) *Critical Dictionary of Apocalyptic and Millenarian Movements*. 15 January 2021. Retrieved from www.cdamm.org/articles/brahma-kumaris. (First published 29 Sep 2017 censamm.org/resources/profiles/brahma-kumaris.)

Historical Introduction

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

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

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

In 1971 the Brahma Kumaris began establishing missions outside India. Women continue to hold most of the senior leadership and administrative positions. Today the group is led by three female devotees who joined the movement in the 1930s, Dadi Janki, Dadi Hirdaya Mohini (popularly known as Gulzar), and Dadi Ratan Mohini. However, the Brahma Kumaris stress that men are welcomed and can be found in most administrative and organisational roles.

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

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

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

There are different layers of membership, members being referred to as students at all levels. In 2004, the Brahma Kumaris reported approximately 1,500 active members and 100 teachers in Britain. In the 2011 UK National Census, 442 individuals gave their religion as “Brahma Kumari” (in the 2001 UK census it was 216).

Beliefs

The basis of the movement’s beliefs is that the practice of Raja Yoga will bring a mental union of the individual soul with God or the Supreme Soul (Shiva) and create natural peace and happiness. The Brahma Kumaris teach that there is only one God and God’s fundamental form is a point of light; this single God (Shiva) was purely manifested through Brahma Baba and now manifests in Brahma Kumari Gulzar, also known as Dadi Hirdaya Mohini. Indian philosophical concepts of karma and reincarnation have an important place within the Brahma Kumaris’ belief system.

According to the Brahma Kumaris’ teachings, the root of all human tragedy and suffering is believed to be due to “body consciousness”. The Brahma Kumaris attribute the vices of lust, anger, greed, attachment and ego to the individual having “body-consciousness” rather than being established in “soul-consciousness.” When one is in a state of “soul-consciousness” it has qualities of love, peace, happiness, truth, bliss, and purity.

While many people simply practise Raja Yoga, those who are interested in further involvement are encouraged to take a series of courses that explain Brahma Baba’s revelations and the Brahma Kumaris’ beliefs in more depth. Seven key concepts are detailed in a “Seven Day Course” of one-hour lectures on each topic. After these concepts are accepted and understood, members are allowed to hear and read what are believed to be direct revelations of God *via* Brahma Baba. These revelations, called Sakar Murlis, are primarily found in transcriptions of Brahma Baba’s mediumship. The last five years of the Sakar Murlis are read aloud at Brahma Kumaris centres every morning except Sundays. Since Brahma Baba’s death, the Brahma Kumaris believe that he, together with the Supreme Soul, has continued to communicate through the medium of member Dadi Gulzar (b. 1929), who has been a member since 1937. Only a few of

these messages, called Avyakt Murlis, are issued each year. These are read and re-read by members at Brahma Kumaris centres on Sundays. While the murlis provide the foundation of the Brahma Kumaris worldview, they only become accessible to members after considerable commitment to the organisation has been made.

Millennial Beliefs

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

Their "world tree" theory states that the Brahma Kumari souls alone are the embodiment of "truth" and "light" and hence located on the highest branch. Non-Brahma Kumaris are seen as "other" in that they are not seen by Brahma Kumaris as apocryphal but in need of an anchor which Brahma Kumaris believe they can provide. In Brahma Kumaris belief non-Brahma Kumaris face first mental and then physical erasure during the apocalypse which is described as inevitable.

The Advance Party, a splinter group of The Brahma Kumaris who see themselves and The Brahma Kumaris organisation as two sides to Brahma Kumaris spirituality who will eventually reunite to transform this world from hell into heaven, predicted that the apocalypse would occur between 2004 and 2008, which is widely side-stepped by the group as a whole. It was stated on their website that Dev Dixit will be revealed as "World Emperor" or "Shri Nayaran" who will control the world through 108 souls followed by a merging of the Brahma Kumaris and the Advance Party forming 225,000 couples. These couples were predicted to not be leaving their bodies during the destruction of the world but instead becoming the Golden Age ancestors of the entire human civilisation. The whole world was supposed to expire between 2006 and 2008 after which, between 2008 and 2036, the 225,000 couples will undergo divine transformation of their bodies and will give birth to 225,000 twin children, one male one female constituting the 900,000 souls present (four times 225,000 - the couples and sets of twins making up 450,000 each) at the beginning of the Golden Age. In 2036 the Golden Age will begin the coronation of "Prince Krishna" who will adopt the title "Shri Nayaran" from his father, the World Emperor. Due to this level of detail, Walliss (2002) argues that like so many other millennial groups, the Brahma Kumaris had to negotiate the millennium by having to justify the non-event to members as well as outsiders. The many members on the periphery of the movement often are oblivious to this or it does not matter to them. Like other groups like the Jehovah's Witnesses, the Brahma Kumaris have abandoned date setting but instead speak in more vague terms that the destruction is close. The term destruction has largely been replaced by the term "transformation".

Practices

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

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

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

Ideally, a Brahma Kumaris would rise at 4am for the first meditation practice of the day, attend the 6am group meeting at a Brahma Kumaris centre and also practise meditation at various points throughout the day (called "Traffic Control"). Followers often use "Om Shanti" as a greeting, which they translate as "I am an eternal and peaceful soul." In India Brahma Kumaris membership can offer an alternative lifestyle for Indian women who do not accept an arranged marriage or are widowed, though today the membership is frequently comprised of families.

Masterclass in Raja Yoga

Controversies

Millenarian beliefs have caused concern to non-member friends and family when Brahma Kumaris members have wanted to base important life-decisions on these beliefs. Some former members have

found the teachings of Brahma Kumaris' spiritual superiority and the coming "end times" difficult to forget as they try to integrate with the wider society after leaving the movement.

The emphasis on celibacy and encouragement to limit all physical contact can cause marital stress. The discouragement from eating meals not cooked by Brahma Kumaris can also cause tension with friends and family. Non-member spouses can find these teachings very difficult to accept.

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

Some of those raised within the movement have complained about the authority given to leaders as God's representatives and the guilt associated with experiencing negative feelings such as anger and sexual desire.

While there are no allegations of widespread or systemic child abuse in the movement, some former members have complained that the Brahma Kumaris were slow in implementing formal child-protection policies. The Brahma Kumaris report that rigorous child protection policies have been in place since 2001.

In India, the Brahma Kumaris have also been controversial. Brahma Kumaris consider Hinduism as a corrupted version of Shiva's revealed truth. This position has angered some Hindu groups in India, particularly the nationalistic Arya Samaj. Some claim that the measures used for crowd control at Brahma Kumaris celebrations are heavy-handed. The Brahma Kumaris' encouragement of women to shun marriage and become celibate is unpopular with many parents and relatives of members in India. For those whose families gave their dowry to the Brahma Kumaris, often when they member joined as a teenager, any possibility of a future marriage becomes difficult if not impossible; an Indian woman in this situation leaving the Brahma Kumaris would find it difficult to be respectable in ordinary Indian society. This is a situation that critics argue puts unacceptable pressure on women to remain Brahma Kumaris. The Brahma Kumaris have also been criticised by some former members for having differential treatment towards Western members and higher caste Indian members than low caste Indian members. Brahma Kumaris sometimes visit the homes of those recently bereaved (details of the recently deceased and the families' addresses are often announced in newspapers within Indian communities). While the Brahma Kumaris maintain their visits are only to offer comfort, some have believed that the purpose is to persuade surviving family members to join.

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

Further Reading

From the Brahma Kumaris:

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

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

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

For a Sympathetic Approach:

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

For an Academic Approach:

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

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

Samta P. Pandya (2017). "South Asian gurus, their movements and social service." In Beth R. Crisp (ed) *The Routledge Handbook of Religion, Spirituality and Social Work*. Routledge, Abingdon.

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

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

Whaling, F. (2012). *Understanding the Brahma Kumaris*. Edinburgh: Dunedin.

For a member's perspective:

Hodgkinson, Neville (2013). "Henpecked to Heaven? My Life in a Brahma Kumaris Retreat Centre." In Timothy Miller (ed). 2013 *Spiritual and Visionary Communities: Out to Save the World*, Ashgate: Aldershot. 51-64.

For a Critical Approach:

Former members have organised an anonymously run website at www.brahmakumaris.info detailing their concerns and providing information about the movement, it also attempts to provide "support to current and former members, their friends and family".

Note

This profile has been provided by Inform, an independent charity providing information on minority and alternative religious and/or spiritual movements. Inform aims to deliver accurate, balanced, and reliable data. It relies on social scientific research methods, primarily the sociology of religion. Inform welcomes feedback, comments, corrections, or further information at inform@kcl.ac.uk.

Article information

Suzanne Newcombe and Silke Steidinger. 2021. "Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University (BKWSU)." In James Crossley and Alastair Lockhart (eds.) *Critical Dictionary of Apocalyptic and Millenarian Movements*. 15 January 2021. Retrieved from www.cdamm.org/articles/brahma-kumaris. (First published 29 Sep 2017 censamm.org/resources/profiles/brahma-kumaris.)

Downloaded: 2021-01-15

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