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New Religious Movements



NEWSLETTER

The Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University

The Indian-based BKWSU arose from a Hindu cultural base, but distinct from Hinduism. It began in the 1930s as a small spiritual community called *Om Mandli* (Sacred Circle), consisting primarily of young women from the Bhai Bund community of Hyderabad Sindh, now part of Pakistan. Since the 1960s the community has been known as the Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University (BKWSU), translated from the Hindi, '*Brahma Kumaris Ishwariya Vishwa Vidyalyaya*'. It is significant that the movement included a 'world' focus in its name, even though active overseas expansion did not begin until 1971.

tors are all ethnic Indian women although they have long been resident overseas. National coordinators may be ethnic Indian, local members, or third country nationals, and some are males. In this sense the BKWSU closely resembles a multinational corporation (MNC) in tending to have home country nationals posted to key management roles overseas, with a degree of localisation at the host country level. The use of third country nationals, or members from one overseas branch posted to lead another overseas branch, attests to the strength of its organisational culture and the strength of shared values of its members.

BKWSU is an international non-governmental organisation (NGO) that holds general consultative status with the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) of the UN and consultative status with the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). It is also affiliated to the UN Department of Public Information (DPI). It is a truly global organisation: with over 7000 centres

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TAMASIN RAMSAY AND WENDY SMITH

The BKWSU headquarters in Mt. Abu, Rajasthan, India, were established in 1952. There are Regional Coordinating Offices (RCO) in London (coordinating Western Europe, South Africa, the Mid-

dle East), the US (America and Caribbean Islands), Russia (Eastern Europe) and Australia (Australia and Asia). The National Coordinating Offices are located in all countries where the activities of the BKWSU are carried out and are officially registered bodies. The six main coordina-

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in 128 countries, territories and islands including Africa and the Middle East. Of the countries where BKWSU has centres, a number are located in places of unrest. There are centres in Lebanon, Kuwait, Israel, Jordan, Iran, Pakistan, China and Egypt (BKWSU 2006). In many of these places the BK representative must be extremely cautious and present spiritual ideas in a way which is compatible with the ideas accepted within that culture. This has been true of the proselytisation process of the major religions today, Buddhism and Christianity for instance, when they themselves were NRMs. Since its early days of service, BK practice has been to establish centres on the invitation of someone from the local community (Nagel 1999). So, while the BKs believe that the world will become an increasingly difficult place to inhabit, they consistently place themselves in some of the most challenging areas.

BKs conduct their main teaching activities and programmes in a 'centre'. Each centre is independent, yet there is regular communication amongst all levels of the organisation, and a key feature is that the top leadership are extremely accessible to those at lower levels of the hierarchy and indeed to ordinary members. In that sense, they show all the characteristics of Servant Leadership: humility, leadership by example, nurturing, empowering and a refusal to be treated as gurus or objects of reverence. Centre coordinators are appointed by RCOs, who also determine their transfer postings around the organisation. Coordinators are chosen for their 'spiritual stature' rather than age, gender, and so on, and this does not necessarily correlate to their length of membership in the organisation. While all members have a recognised and important place in the organisation and all are equally beloved by God - the Supreme Soul - there is a concept of 'numberwise' which describes one's position in terms of spiritual stature in a 'rosary' of members. Because of the fact that human resource management in the organisation is based on this principle, there is usually unanimous support for the choice of leaders and conflict over positions of authority is rarely seen.

History

BKWSU's founder, Lekhray Kripalani, was the son of a schoolteacher, a follower of the Vallabacharya sect and part of the Bhai Bund merchant community. He was pious, had a number of gurus, and enjoyed going on regular pilgrimages. While he was young, he saved up his earnings as a small merchant of wheat and entered the diamond trade. He quickly developed a reputation in the jewellery business and, as time passed, he became friends with many of the rulers and wealthy classes of North West India, who became his loyal clients.

Over a period of months, Dada Lekhray (Dada is a term of respect for an older gentleman. We will continue to refer to him as Dada or Dada Lekhray), had a series of striking visions and ecstatic spiritual experiences, some of which were blissful and others disturbing. His first vision was of Vishnu, the Preserver of the Universe in Hindu cosmology, which was accompanied by the feeling of being bodiless and bathed in bliss. A voice said 'You are This'. Some time later he had a vision of light. Dada's next vision was of a catastrophic world collapse that left nothing but chaos, wreckage and misery in its wake. The sorrow and suffering he witnessed was incomprehensible. Following his spiritual experiences, Dada rapidly lost interest in his

jewellery work and began spending extended periods of time in contemplation. He read extracts from his favourite religious scripture, the *Shrimad Bhagawad Gita*. Many of his local Bhai Bund community attended the readings, as such gatherings were common at that time. What was unusual was that the attendees, often women and children whose husbands were away on business, the basis of the Bhai Bund economy, would regularly experience themselves to be bodiless, have visions of Dada as Krishna, an important Hindu god, and of themselves as princes and princesses in a paradisaical world. In October 1937 Dada Lekhray, later known as Brahma Baba, placed his entire wealth into the hands of a small group of women followers. This spiritual community adopted the name of 'Om Mandli'. For 14 years, the small group lived in Karachi, in relative isolation from the rest of society. Many women returned to their families, but some remained. The group slowly grew to a self-sufficient community, of between 300 and 700, devoting their time to intense spiritual study, meditation and self-transformation.

The *Om Mandli* was founded in a patriarchal society where women are primarily daughters and wives and their first duties are to their families and husbands respectively. The BK movement was particularly revolutionary at the time, as women chose to live celibate lives, which in Hindu society was not an option for them. In the Sindh culture of the 1930s only men were considered worthy of the life of a spiritual renunciate (Nagel 1999, Puttick 1997). Yet through association with Dada Lekhray, women of all ages and status were having profound spiritual experiences and

leaving their family homes. Many of these founding members of the organisation underwent physical and emotional abuse when they left home, when, as unmarried women, they decided to remain unmarried or, as married women, they withdrew conjugal rights and informed their husbands in writing that they were free to re-marry. The abrupt declaration of independence from women and girls was seen as a direct threat to family values and, because of this, there were a number of uprisings, with subsequent court-cases and attempts to destroy the spiritual community (Chander 1983, Nagel 1999).

Since *Om Mandli*, the BKWSU has continued to expand. In 1971 the first overseas centre was established in London and in 1981 the BKWSU received NGO status with the UN, by which time its membership had grown to 40,000. In 1984 overseas expansion was evident in approximately 30 countries. In 1986 the BKWSU conducted its first international movement, the Million Minutes of Peace, for which it received seven UN Peace Messenger awards. As international membership has continued to increase, to 100,000 in 1988 and 800,000 by 2007, the organisation has built two new campuses, Gyansarovar (1995) and Shantivan (1998), at the top and the foot of Mt Abu respectively, to accommodate pilgrims who come in their tens of thousands from within India and from overseas for the regular meetings with the Supreme Soul, Shiv Baba.

Following the death of the founder in 1969, three Dadis ('elder sisters' in Hindi) from the original group of the 1930s were designated as spiritual leaders of the organisa-

tion: the Chief Administrative Head who is in charge of the whole organisation, and two Additional Administrative Heads, one overseeing the Indian regions and one, based in London, overseeing the international regions. Despite these titles, the Dadis are more like traditional elders who give spiritual guidance to BKs at all levels and guide the direction of the BKWSU in its service activities.

BK identity

BK members identify themselves as students and informally refer to each other as 'brahmins' or 'BKs'. BKs form a spiritual community with a lifestyle centred on the practice of Raja Yoga. Raja Yoga, the most exalted or 'kingly' form of yoga, is a spiritual practice in which, through meditation, the practitioner seeks to establish and sustain a connection and relationship with the Supreme Soul or God. A BK is considered to be someone who has accepted the Raja Yoga philosophy and lives by the principles. BK philosophy comprises understandings of the self, God, time, rebirth, *karma* (the law of cause and effect), the world and social behaviour.

Those in the *Om Mandli* had experiences of being separate and distinct from the body, and this experience of 'soul consciousness' was central to their life. This awareness of being a soul, that is, a point of conscious and eternal light energy, still forms the foundation of BKs' meditation practice. All the disciplines and rituals they follow are in support of this relationship they experience with the Supreme Soul. BKs believe that all living beings, including both humans and animals, are souls; infinitesimal points of conscious light energy that live life and express themselves through the vehicle of the body. Each soul is unique, indivisible and intrinsically pure and valuable.

Disciplines and lifestyle

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 early morning meditation (4.00am) and a daily spiritual class, as well as abstaining from alcohol, tobacco, sexual activity and drugs. BKs attribute considerable importance to food and accordingly there are strict principles; only pure vegetarian food, without onions or garlic, is cooked while in the awareness of God, and in a peaceful state of mind. After the food is cooked it is 'offered' to God before being consumed. The majority of BKs will not eat cooked food unless a fellow BK has prepared it. BKs regularly have periods of silence and contemplation and frequently attend retreats for their personal spiritual sustenance, as well as teach meditation and other classes at centres. The majority of BK members follow these principles whilst looking after their family and leading a relatively standard life according to the culture and country in which they live.

Organisational change

In comparison with other NRMs the degree of change and adaptation to local cultures has been minimal in the BKWSU due to the strict principles of daily life which constitute a spiritual technology for establishing the relationship with the Supreme Soul. For the inner circle of members, there can be no modification of these principles. However, in the way the organisation relates to the wider society, there have been some adaptations. When the BKs were new to the West, there was an emphasis on traditional teachings, practicing meditation and living the disciplines

of the path. However, since the late 1980s, the movement has reconfigured its identity to interact more with the wider community and be of service in response to social change. A recent study on BKWSU by Walliss (2002), based on interviews and visits to a number of BKWSU centres in the United Kingdom, suggests that the organisation has undergone a transformation. BKWSU has moved from a clear perspective of world rejection in its early days - when BKs lived an almost cloistered existence - to a state of world ambivalence, where the imminent destruction has not yet taken place. Walliss determines that the movement has gone from one where members isolated themselves from the world, through being solely a teaching organisation in India with firm ideas on the date of world destruction, to a social movement that, placed in a post-modern world, has adapted itself and now offers a variety of programmes to suit the needs of different groups of people (Living Values 2002).

Thus BKWSU is a millenarian NRM now situated in a post-modern world. BKs are now involving themselves more in present day social concerns, such as education, disaster response and health outreach that may serve to make the current world a better place to live. The BKs certainly believe that world calamities, war and natural disasters will only increase, and cannot be prevented (Piven 2004). Yet they also believe in the peace that manifests through self-awareness or 'soul consciousness', and the love and power received through the practice of Raja Yoga meditation as a solid technique for dealing with increasingly calamitous world events and disturbing life events and helping others to do the same.

Howell and Nelson's study of BKs in Australia (1997) follows the trajectory of the organisation. Their study notes the focus on principles such as celibacy, which is unusual among NRMs. They cite the way in which members have adjusted their spiritual practice in western settings as a key to the NRM's success. They acknowledge the BKWSU international expansion, and how it is positioned in the context of wider society, while also noting the disciplines and cohesion of its members. The remarkable status of women in the BKWSU is recognised in a number of scholarly texts on the BKWSU (Babb 1984, Howell 1998, Puttick 1997, Skultans 1993, Sudesh 1993). The fact that the girls and women of the community chose to lead spiritually autonomous and celibate lives, and were subjected to many forms of violence and suffering, may be what led to their early seclusion and world rejection. Babb refers to BK as 'indigenous feminism in a modern Hindu sect', noting that original members were primarily women and that 'the sensibilities of women have contributed in very important ways to the ideology of the movement' (Babb 1984). One recent study explores the role that the BKWSU has had on changing cultural opinions of women (Lalrinawma 2004). Lalrinawma interviewed both male and female members and, coupled with participant observation, he determined that BK teachings and practice had brought about a significant change in the status of women and the regard that men held for women, within the confines of the BK community.

As a global organisation, akin to a multinational corporation in terms of its global sweep, membership size, property holding and budget size, the BKWSU is distinguished by its practice of spiritual



principles in management, leading to, comparatively speaking, very low levels of conflict and organisational malaise in an institution of this size and cross-cultural complexity. This organisational harmony must be attributed to the fact that members share a common 'organisational culture' of practices for all key aspects of daily life, such as a clearly defined daily schedule, including attending early morning class and periodic pauses for meditation, vegetarianism, and celibacy. These are standard across the globe, in other words, they constitute a global cultural system which transcends the national cultures of members. This group cohesion is reinforced by daily readings of a text, the *murli*, the same one being read throughout the world on a particular date, which then forms the basis of study and discussion. The global community's cohesion is reinforced by annual pilgrimages to the Mt Abu headquarters to participate in mass meetings with the Supreme Soul, Shiv Baba, through a trance messenger, and through regular daily meditation and the effort to attain a state of soul consciousness which transcends gender, social status and other culturally determined roles and relationship

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In the Japanese corporate world, the multinational retail group Yaohan, which declared bankruptcy in 1997, was unusual in its close involvement with a Japanese new religious movement, Seicho-No-Ie. An examination of the interaction between these two organisations suggests both possible synergies, and serious potential pitfalls in the interaction of multinational corporations and new religious movements.

Blurring the boundaries between corporation and religion

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In her thought-provoking contribution to the Autumn 2007 edition of this newsletter, Wendy Smith suggests a number of parallels between multinational corporations (MNCs) and new religious movements (NRMs). As I have argued elsewhere (Matsunaga 2000), in the case of Japanese MNCs and NRMs in particular these parallels are striking, despite the contrast in the social status within Japan of the two types of organisation (MNCs are elite, highly respected organisations, while NRMs tend to be regarded with suspicion, particularly since the Aum poison gas incident of 1995). In addition to the common organisational characteristics noted by Smith, similarities can also be found in narratives of the lives of the founders of MNCs and NRMs (Matsunaga 2000: 40-43); ritual activities of Japanese corporations (Nakamaki 1992, 1995); and the deployment of ideas, practices, and techniques derived from religious organisations, including NRMs, in company training programmes, in particular those aimed at new recruits (Rohlen 1973, 1974; Reader 1995).

I want to extend the comparison of Japanese MNCs and NRMs through the examination of one particular case where a multinational Japanese company, the (now bankrupt) supermarket chain Yaohan, was closely and publicly linked with a Japanese NRM, Seicho-No-Ie. Although it should be noted that this kind of explicit public linkage is highly unusual in Japan, this case is of interest as it gives an opportunity to explore the interaction between an NRM and an MNC in a context where both are seeking to expand their global reach.¹

Seicho-No-Ie, meaning the House of Growth, is a new religious movement founded in Japan in 1930, and was originally organised as a publishing company, publishing the thoughts of its founder, Taniguchi Masaharu,

before officially becoming a religious organisation in 1941. Put simply, the movement teaches that there is a world of reality in which human beings are perfect, children of God; and a phenomenal world of our perceptions. All problems come from the phenomenal world, which is an illusion. If we cultivate the right state of mind, and thus put ourselves in touch with the world of reality, these problems will disappear. In the emphasis on changing one's life through changing one's state of mind, the influence of the Positive Thinking movement is evident. At the same time, notions familiar from writings on Japanese society and ethics are also stressed: for example the importance of gratitude, especially to one's seniors.

An adaptable philosophy

The philosophy of Seicho-No-Ie has proved itself to be adaptable to the business context in Japan, as its elements have been harnessed to the promotion of a work ethic which emphasises effort and the importance of service to others through work. During World War Two, Seicho-No-Ie was active among medium and small sized enterprises in Japan as part of the drive to increase efficiency and production, and in the post-war era Seicho-No-Ie established a subsidiary organisation called 'The Prosperity Association', which holds seminars, lectures and research meetings devoted to questions of business and management. In the 1990s its most well-known member was Wada Kazuo, president of the Yaohan retail group, who became head of the Prosperity Association in 1995.

By the 1990s the Yaohan retail group had grown from a small, family-run greengrocers with a single store in Kanagawa prefecture to become a multinational chain of stores with branches in countries including China, the US and the UK. Wada Kazuo was the eldest son of the couple who opened the original Yaohan store, and was largely responsible for the company's expansion. Both Wada Kazuo and his mother, Katsu, were active members

of Seicho-No-Ie, and, unusually in the Japanese corporate context, chose to give Seicho-No-Ie a central role in the development of Yaohan.

As the Yaohan business began to expand, and to open more branches within Japan in the 1960s, the company began to offer induction training for new employees, in line with the general pattern for large Japanese companies. However the Yaohan programme was distinctive in its strong emphasis on spiritual training² based on the principles of Seicho-No-Ie. In particular, the idea of expressing gratitude to customers through 'service' – that is, hard work in the store, was stressed. This use of Seicho-No-Ie teachings caused a crisis when an employee reported Yaohan to Taniguchi, the founder of Seicho-No-Ie, suggesting that the Wada family was using Seicho-No-Ie teachings to exploit employees. This led Taniguchi to contact the Wadas, and to suggest that their approach could cause a serious misunderstanding.

Inextricably linked

The response of the Wadas was surprising. They decided to formally extend the connection linking their family with Seicho-No-Ie to the entire Yaohan company, so that henceforward all Yaohan employees would also be members of Seicho-No-Ie. Employees who resisted, some on the grounds that they did not wish to become members of an NRM, were told that they could seek jobs elsewhere, and in the end the majority complied. Yaohan training programmes continued to have a strong Seicho-No-Ie content, and in the following year Yaohan held a six day induction course at a Seicho-No-Ie training centre, which included elements such as Seicho-No-Ie style meditation.

Seicho-No-Ie's close involvement with Yaohan continued to be important during Yaohan's overseas expansion. The first country targeted by Yaohan