Custodians of Purity

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An Anthropological Study into the Mystical World of the Brahma Kumaris

By

Tamasin Ramsay

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

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Dadi, here it is.

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

~Anonymous

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PREFACE

Yajñarakṣak (yagyarakshak) is a fusion of two Sanskrit words: *yajña* (yagya) and *rakṣak* (rakshak) and encapsulates the absolute essence of this book. A yajña is a Vedic fire ritual that involves three actors; the fire which purifies and opens a pathway between the physical and the spiritual worlds, the devotee who makes offerings into the fire, and the rakṣak who protects the sanctity of the fire, ensuring everything happens in the right manner to secure the best omens for all. The fundamental point is that everything put into the yajña is purified. The Brahma Kumaris have identified their community as a Yagya since the organisation's founding years in Sindh, pre-Partition India. Through their practice of Raja Yoga meditation, which is akin to a purifying fire, both the self and, consequently, the world are transformed. "When we change, the world changes" encapsulates the essence of their practice.

This book is the director's cut of my doctoral thesis[1] which was necessarily bound by the confines of my research question, which focused on the Brahma Kumaris and their relationship with disasters. Custodians of Purity has given me the opportunity to explore the more mystical inner world of the Brahma Kumaris and to delve further into how this relates to the practical mess of human life. So why did it take me fourteen years to get this book out? Because, whilst reshaping my academic work, I kept coming up against the academic comfort zone—a barrier that took me years to even notice. Finally, with the help of a penetrating memory that woke me in the middle of the night, I experienced an internal compass reset that would reshape the narrative of this book.

I had recently returned from the field and was early in the writing-up phase of my doctorate. After sharing some chapters with my professor, she summoned me to her office. Lenore Manderson, with her bright purple streaked hair and piercing gaze, challenged me. She looked for a moment towards my humble scrappy chapters that lay amidst the books of scholarly giants. "These are goooooood. But… What aren't you telling me?" She re-directed her gaze squarely at me, eyeballs to eyeballs. I replied in a

[1] Tamasin Ramsay, "Custodians of Purity: An Ethnography of the Brahma Kumaris" (Doctor of Philosophy, Monash University, 2009).

voice that was smaller than I had intended. “Ummm… I included everything that was… relevant”. My stature shrunk as my hands found each other on my lap. “Aha”, she asserted, pointing her red pen up in the air. “You can’t just speak to patterns, Tamasin. You need to embed yourself more deeply in the narrative. You're not just observing; you're an integral part of the research. You’re the filter. You’re the lens through which your data becomes understood by others. “Your writing MUST” she said, tapping on top of Veena Das,[2] “reflect your active role and personal insights to maintain scholarly integrity.” She smiled as she saw tentative understanding grow on my face. And, as one does with a beloved puppy, she coaxed me out her door. “Go on now. Go. Go. Go and write.”

Lenore emphasised the importance of using my own experiences as a lens to interpret the data, urging me to write in a more fulsome way. Anthropology is a feisty discipline that thrives on the complicated mess of human lives, one of the many reasons I love it. And within the discipline, auto-ethnography is a method of analysing and writing data that prioritises the lived experience. This challenges the anthropologist to remain anchored in the data while including her/ our/ my instrumentality as a human to illuminate the topic at hand. “If our task, as researchers, as *social* (emphasis in original) scientists, is to study the social lives of humans, then we cannot relegate elements of human lives or experiences to the periphery, nor can we bracket out the ways our lives and experiences are intertwined with our research projects and participants.”[3]

The comfort of the academic sphere is deceptive; it offers a sense of security, but this can come at the cost of genuine self-reflection. It was a profound realisation, a decade post-doctorate, that while we, as anthropologists, excel in observing and analysing the lives of others with a keen and reflexive eye, we often shy away from applying the same rigorous scrutiny to ourselves. Our training prepares us to navigate between the roles of participant and observer, to shift perspectives from emic (insider) to etic (outsider), all to provide a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of cultures, phenomena, and human behaviours. However, this balance typically involves a level of vulnerability from our participants

[2] Veena Das is Krieger-Eisenhower Professor of Anthropology at Johns Hopkins University. Professor Das is a notable anthropologist who specialises in the anthropology of suffering and the structures of everyday life that cause and enable gendered violence, poverty, and visible forms of violence.

[3] Tony E. Adams, Stacy Holman Jones, and Carolyn Ellis, *Autoethnography: Understanding Qualitative Research* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 8.

that we seldom demand of ourselves. To do this work properly, I would have to include parts from my personal journey with purity that hadn't even found a comfortable home in me yet.

And so, Lenore's words from long ago were a welcome intrusion to this writing project. Her teachings, and those of other contemporary scholars,[4] gave me the courage to utilise autoethnography as a method to include the misfit bits, including the misfit me, in this work. My self-inscription stands alongside, and integrates with, participant case studies, focus groups, life histories, interviews, and field notes, in this book. In retrospect, excluding oneself from the narrative of anthropological work is an exercise in futility. Leaving oneself out never works.

Some practical notes about the book relate to authenticity, privacy and readability. To protect the privacy of those who entrusted their stories to me, I have used pseudonyms and modified place names and dates ensuring that the factual integrity of their lived experiences remains intact. In cases where privacy is not a concern, real names and places are mentioned. I have chosen to italicise foreign words upon their first use, except for common or naturalised terms. Diacritics are applied to key Hindi terms to ensure accurate pronunciation and comprehension. A detailed glossary at the end of the book provides definitions with diacritics to further support understanding and respect for the original language. Proper nouns are presented without diacritics or italics, even when derived from another language. For example, a yajña is a sacrificial fire or, as referred to in this book, a spiritual fire created through meditation and disciplines of purity. The Yagya represents the BK community founded on the yajña of purity and Raja Yoga meditation.

I hope the intimate exploration of purity in this book encourages readers to reflect newly on the notion of purity, not as an abstract concept, but as a living, dynamic force that shapes us all. My wish is for each reader to reflect on and connect with their most essential purity. My hope is that it inspires you to protect, preserve and celebrate that which is pure and transformative within and around you.

To my life-long friends who are my family, my tribe, you are my anchors, standing by me through all manner of moments, always there to restore, refresh and rejuvenate me. Professor Lenore Manderson AO, and Dr. Wendy Smith, thank you for your exceptional guidance during my higher

[4] Deborah Reed-Danahay, *Auto/Ethnography: Rewriting the Self and the Social* (Oxon: Routledge, 2020).

degree studies and for carefully curating me the whole way through. My Odisha sisters and brothers, my colleagues in the field, you have filled my heart and these pages with treasures. Barbara, my mother and a master crafter of the written word, your unwavering support is a foundation like none other. Eric Le Reste and Sandi Scaunich, both good friends and fellow authors, thank you for your thoughtful, insightful, and supportive comments on earlier drafts. Without your contributions, this book would not be this book. I owe special appreciation to my Brahma Kumaris companions—elders and peers—who have been my teachers and strong companions through the decades. Many within the Brahma Kumaris community helped to awaken a curiosity in me. You have brightened my mind with intellectual stamina and calmed my heart with yogic silence. I cannot fathom how I would be without you all. Notably, I extend my profound thanks to Anthony Strano, my first teacher. Your loving support as a true friend convinced me I belong here. Continuing this journey of gratitude, Pamela Donnellan, your judgment-free persistence, and bravery have taught me the nature of true friendship, of which you are the embodiment. Heartfelt thanks to my band of senior yogis, the Dadis, Didis, and Dadas, living examples of strength, purity, and vision. The Dadis, particularly, have illuminated my spiritual path, teaching me courage, lightness, and authenticity. I extend my thanks to teachers from other paths—Peter Noble, Ram Dass, and the insightful instructors of the Theravada Forest tradition of Vipassana. With you, I have learned self-acceptance and found a home. The deepest love, acceptance, and profound connection I have ever known are from and with the One. The Divine. My Beloved, I dedicate everything to You.

INTRODUCTION

The Brahma Kumaris[5] teach that the journey to self-sovereignty begins with the singular teaching: "become pure." The concept of purity can remain elusive[6] though, often being relegated to the print on commercially sold bottles of water. Thankfully anthropologists have articulated purity's often unrecognised meaning to human life.[7] Meaning is one thing, but what is purity's utility if any? What are the benefits if they exist at all? Purity can easily elude the confines of language hiding itself in cultural codes of morality.[8] Purity's gentle possibility can be obscured by censorious morality rife with oppression and judgement.[9] The concept of "becoming pure" raises more questions than it answers, highlighting the reality that this pursuit goes beyond mere superficial changes. And indeed, it does for the Brahma Kumaris (BK). Purity offers BKs a way of love in a fractured world, and a path of hope in a world filled with despair. This book delves into the nature of that purity through research conducted over two years.

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[5] The full name of the organisation is Brahma Kumaris Ishwariya Vishwa Vidyalaya and translates to mean a Godly learning institute for the world, administered by the daughters of Brahma. The word "kumārī" means "young unmarried girl" or "virgin." The term is often used in a respectful or formal context to refer to young girls before marriage.

[6] Kurt Gray et al., "The Problem of Purity in Moral Psychology," *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 27, no. 3 (2023).

[7] Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge, 2002); Michael Herzfeld, "Purity and Power: Anthropology from Colonialism to the Global Hierarchy of Value," *Reviews in Anthropology* 39, no. 4 (2010): 288-312.

[8] Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2007).

[9] Joshua Harris, *I Kissed Dating Goodbye* (Multnomah Books, 1997) 6., was a controversial book at the time and widely cited. It's also worth reading Irene Gedalof, *Against Purity: Rethinking Identity with Indian and Western Feminisms* (Taylor & Francis, 2005). Gedalof approaches the topic of purity from a post-colonial critique of white feminism to reject the notion of purity as it pertains to the contemporary woman.

BKs[10] teach that purity is the foundational energy of every person's essential spiritual origin. Purity is the liberating original energy of every soul. Like oxygen, purity is not easily perceived by the mind or the senses, yet it is vital. Just as we thrive on oxygen without much thought-yet become desperate for it once it is in short supply-so it is with purity. It underlies many fundamental positive states of being such as peace, happiness, compassion, self-respect, clarity of mind and belonging. When we have it, we experience a variety of unique and blissful states of being that purity supports. However, when we lose it, we may feel empty and lost, fruitlessly searching outside ourselves for something that lies deep within. Raja Yoga, as taught by the Brahma Kumaris, offers a pathway for individuals to return to their own unique purity.

The epistemology of the Brahma Kumaris posits that humanity has moved from a state of inherent purity in a world of harmony to a collective nadir of delusion in a world of impurity—the present period. Conflict and despair are rife; environmentally, politically, and economically, the world is as fractured as the relationships between its people, families, and nations. The teachings of the Brahma Kumaris invite everyone to reclaim their original pure state through the path of knowledge, meditation, personal virtue, and service. Uniquely, they draw a direct connection between self-transformation and world-transformation, attesting that it is possible to achieve the necessary change within one lifetime. The journey back to each one's inherent purity, although individual, helps to create the global shift of consciousness through which all souls are freed from this world of sorrow. When we change, the world changes.

But what does this call to purity involve? How does one "do" it. In this book, purity is reconceptualised not as a static goal but as an ongoing, dynamic process of deep self-engagement and introspection. We explore the lives of four very different women to illuminate the variety ways that purity manifests in the mess of someone's life.[11]

Pankaja is a woman determined to pursue a spiritual life, despite cultural norms that restrict such paths to men. In her quest to lead a life of purity—a privilege typically reserved for males in India—she endures a series of trials that lead to a profound personal breakdown. Through her struggles,

[10] People within the Brahma Kumaris community identify as BKs.

[11] Victor Turner writes about the essentially messy and disordered nature of human life and the ways in which humans seek order, clarity, community, and agency within such mess. For more, read Victor Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society* (Cornell University Press, 2018).

Pankaja emerges as a compelling figure of compassion and leadership, exemplifying remarkable resilience and influence in the face of severe tribulations. Aisha is a young BK teacher who is possessed by an impure spirit. The invasion of her body by this malevolent foreign entity is deeply distressing to her. However, we learn how her disciplines of purity, and the mystical practices conducted by her spiritual community save her life, giving Aisha the energy to withstand the invading entity until, ultimately, it is repelled. Dadi Prakashmani is a female spiritual elder and the head of the Brahma Kumaris. She is essentially the living form of purity, known, seen, and experienced by many in her community. In Dadi's death the power of her purity keeps working as it did in life which we see the effect of through documented fieldwork. Then there is me. As a child of Australia in the 1970s growing up with my mother, there was not much in the way of family, connection, or cultural safety. Purity becomes an energy that restores my self-respect, sense of belonging and offers me a strong and abiding purpose in life.

Purity is a transformational energy, but it is not a quick fix. Its effects become apparent when reading about the lives of these women. Purity acts as a clearing energy underpinning many of the qualities that we humans seek, such as love, wisdom, compassion, and peace. It dispels the dross of illusion. Purity is a power that can cut through regrets of the past and anchor the soul in a deep original self-respect. Purity is the principle that restores balance, acting as a lodestar.

Purity stands in contrast to impurity and invites one to review one's entire life-with all its hurdles and mess-with compassion. It offers a judgement free invitation to be uniquely the best self we can be, fostering an equanimous attitude towards the self and wonder in others. Purity also acts as a rudder that guides the intellect and soothes the mind amidst life's tumult. It mitigates the influence of external threats and the illusions that vie to tarnish its essence. Fundamentally, purity is the genesis of love, equipped with the remarkable power to purge the heart of all hauntings, leaving only the resplendence of love.

Yet, this journey of purity is neither straightforward nor monolithic. Purity manifests through attitudes of unconditional benevolence and in ways of perceiving others and oneself that transcend physical identities. It is expressed through actions that naturally spread happiness, effortlessly and without expectation of return. The personality of purity motivates one toward inner self-sovereignty—a state of complete self-awareness free from internal conflict, guilt, or blame. In this clarity, like water unclouded,

one's true self is fully revealed. This allows those in the presence of such purity to also come to know themselves.

Purity is also not merely one thing. As each part of a living landscape in the forest is utterly unique and boasts an incomparable interconnected design,[12] so too does each soul carve a distinct path through life under myriad interconnected influences. The energy of purity drives this individual expression of one's best self through one's personality. When we are nourished by purity, the world at large benefits. Just as the network of nature is vast and what happens to one happens to many,[13] so too is our journey with purity. Though individual, it is connected through endless pathways that benefit the world. This inner purity, resilient and adaptable, shapes itself uniquely in each one's life. And through our inner change, the outer world is also changed.

Despite its exalted status, purity is also not impervious to threats.[14] Ego, culture, tradition, and history can all masquerade as purity leading to misdirection and misunderstanding. The disciplines within the Brahma Kumaris are designed to ease souls into the return journey to purity, a path requiring courage, honesty, and persistence. But these same disciplines designed to cultivate purity can create a false sense of pride, making one vulnerable to spiritual bypassing.[15] Those following the disciplines that support purity, without doing the requisite inner work, can create a spiritual superiority, marginalising the journeys of others perceived as less pure. Yet the energy of purity seems to have remarkable perseverance power.

The narrative of this book unfolds through the case studies of four women—Pankaja, Aisha, Dadi Prakashmani, and the author herself—whose lives exemplify the multifaceted quest for purity. These case studies serve to illuminate the struggle and triumph of working towards this ideal, revealing the resilience required to safeguard the yajña's metaphorical flame. This flame symbolises the purification process not just of individual

[12] Peter Wohlleben, *The Secret Wisdom of Nature: Trees, Animals, and the Extraordinary Balance of All Living Things: Stories from Science and Observation* Trans. Jane Billinghurst (Vancouver: Greystone Books, 2019).
[13] Peter Wohlleben, *The Secret Network of Nature: The Delicate Balance of All Living Things* (London: Random House, 2018).
[14] Alexis Shotwell, *Against Purity: Living Ethically in Compromised Times* (University of Minnesota Press, 2016).
[15] Robert Augustus Masters, *Spiritual Bypassing: When Spirituality Disconnects Us from What Really Matters* (North Atlantic Books, 2010).

souls but of the collective world, underscoring a messy yet earnest journey towards authentic transformation.

Further, this discourse expands upon the notion of purity, moving beyond its nature as an ideal to explore the deeper, more complex layers of mind and culture that obscure our inherent purity. Purity is a deeply personal yet universally shared expedition. This book explores the demands of reclaiming one's pure essence amidst continued distractions and false representations. This study reveals the intricate dance of guarding the sacred fire of transformation, inviting readers into a profound engagement with their innermost selves.

CHAPTER ONE

THE HOUSE OF RAJA YOGA

When I walked into the Brahma Kumaris (BK) meditation centre feeling a misfit, an outcast and generally ill-prepared for most things, something stirred in me. Combined with everything that had happened in my short but colourful past, I believe what happened in the Centre during those days and weeks planted the seed of my interest in anthropology, the study of the mysterious human.

Fresh out of high school, it is 1984. I am in Sydney, Australia working as a young actress and have just moved in with my father in his Kings Cross flat. My journey into adulthood has left me wondering about where the world is heading. There are the cold political tensions between the USA and the Soviet Union, and the fiery violent tensions in the Middle East, while people in Ethiopia are starving. I also feel uncertain about many inner things. One of those uncertainties is living with my father. Although we'd been close in my single-digit years, he hadn't been around much since then. So now, well into my double digits, I feel unsure about how to relate to him beyond awkward conversations about nothing in particular. Sharing a flat with him was not altogether comfortable. So, I was happy when there was an excuse for us to go on an outing together.

My father had received an invitation to attend a meditation program for actors at the Brahma Kumaris Raja Yoga Centre.[16] All through my childhood I'd been drawn to Eastern philosophy, embarking on eccentric journeys with EST (Erhard Seminars Training), dabbling in ESP (extra-sensory perception) cards with my mother and experimenting with sitting in hand-crafted pyramids, awaiting enlightenment. Despite fleeting aspirations of becoming a parapsychologist, one interest remained steadfast: meditation.

[16] Official Brahma Kumaris teaching locations are referred to as "Centres," akin to ashrams in the way they foster a disciplined community life dedicated to spiritual practices and teachings.

My only previous encounters with meditation were through the lens of Baba Muktananda, a guru whose watchful eye from a framed photo in our house seemed to follow me around the room. I would attend meditation gatherings at actors' houses with my mother. While the grown-ups were all bouncing and moaning in meditation, I would sit quietly, gazing through the windows and watching the clouds form and un-form.

Leaving my father's apartment for the day event at the Raja Yoga Centre in Bondi, we walk through the streets of Kings Cross towards his car. My wish, as he drives us silently to the Centre, is that today will help us reconnect.

Tucked away on a main road, just a ten-minute stroll from Bondi Beach the muted pink entrance bears a hand-painted wooden sign that swings creakily and crookedly, announcing itself as the "House of Raja Yoga." Crossing the threshold, I notice that the inside is painted pink and cream. There is a soft and peaceful feeling, and a few people are chatting quietly while others take their seats on the floor. Pictures of Indian figures adorn the walls, but Baba Muktananda is noticeably absent. The atmosphere appeals to me, and I find myself wondering about their guru.

A young sister in a white sari greets us. My father is a well-known Australian theatre actor in his late 40s. A charismatic figure with dark curly hair, an open-necked shirt, and pointed orange suede shoes, he fills the doorway. I stand back shyly as he raises an eyebrow, scratching his beard when asked to "please remove your shoes." The main sister, a powerful woman of Irish ancestry with thick red hair, piercing blue eyes, and an indefinable strength of presence would become a lifelong friend. She eyes the two of us carefully. She smiles at me while my father unties his laces. Then looks at my father. Then at me again before offering us a seat in the main room.

I find my place among other curious young people and settle in. I see that the sisters in the Centre are a friendly group of young people with an obvious communal spirit. Being the only child of an only child, this appeals to me. Brother Anthony, an Australian-Italian brother in his early thirties is conducting the day. Seated on a padded backless seat called a *gaddī*, he speaks about bringing spirituality into the arts, emphasising discipline as the pen that shapes one's craft. Anthony introduces the practice of Raja Yoga meditation to the fifteen of us who are there, and

describes the practitioners as *brahmins*,[17] so called due to their disciplines.

In India, a *brāhmaṇ* traditionally hails from the priestly caste[18] and the high spiritual practice of that caste is generally restricted to men. However, the Brahma Kumaris break free from this social norm, where Raja Yogi Brahmins or "BKs,"[19] encompass both genders and anyone with the inclination to practice is welcomed. BKs also adhere to a set of disciplines that guide every facet of daily life including diet and dress, morning meditation and learning through to routines of bathing, sleeping, waking and general social behaviour. Although external and superficial in nature, Anthony explains that all the disciplines support the deeper yogi life and help bring peace to the mind, support self-respect, strengthen the heart, and give one the energy to serve and the tendency towards compassion and equanimity.

Anthony's face seems filled with ease, and between words he looks upwards thoughtfully in silence before he turns back to us to speak. The room is draped in carefully sewn white cloth, along with everything and everyone in it and resonates with a tranquil ambience. As the lights dim and Indian instrumental music begins to play, Anthony turns his head resting his gaze on each of us during the meditation. The open-eyed practice is unlike any I have encountered before. It is engaging and unique. I like it. I learn later this open-eyed gazing is called *dṛṣṭi* ("drishti").[20]

Dṛṣṭi, for BKs, is a meditative gaze that involves transmitting spiritual energy through the eyes and considered to contain significant spiritual power. The raja yogi goes within, enters a state of meditation, and shares the atmosphere and vibration of that experience through the eyes. While

[17] Throughout the text I use the term "brahmin" to identify a student of the Brahma Kumaris, and "brāhmaṇ" to identify those who are born into that priestly Indian caste.

[18] Robin Rinehart, Contemporary Hinduism: Ritual, Culture, and Practice (Bloomsbury Academic, 2004); Haripada Chakraborti, *Asceticism in Ancient India in Brahmanical, Buddhist, Jaina, and Ajivika Societies, from the Earliest Times to the Period of Śaṅkarāchārya* (Calcutta: Punthi Pustak, 1973).

[19] Female and male BKs are referred to as kumārīs / kumāras (lit: unmarried daughters/ sons).

[20] Dṛṣṭi is a Sanskrit term that means view, gaze or perception. It can refer to a focus open-eyed meditative gaze, as well as referencing one's inner vision or the way in which one perceives the world. For more about dṛṣṭi within the Brahma Kumaris, read Lawrence A Babb, "Glancing: Visual Interaction in Hinduism," *Journal of anthropological research* (1981).

the eyes are open, attention is focused inward, and so the eyes are passive, used only to transmit vibrations and not to "see."[21] BKs consider dṛṣṭi 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 in meditation. Their practice of Raja Yoga rather uniquely fosters an atmosphere conducive to the sharing of spiritual vibrations. Dṛṣṭi is understood to be the highest forms of expressing spiritual love, power, and good feeling through the eyes.

After the lights come up, an animated discussion ensues about why BKs wear white, where their teachings come from, and how it all began. We learn that in its founding land of India, wearing white symbolises renunciation and simplicity. When Anthony began telling us about the tumult of the early years, the power of the young women, and the rebellion by the local community to that power, we all remained seated on the floor and stayed much longer than we had anticipated.

[21] Frank Whaling, "The Brahma Kumaris", *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 10, no. 1 (1995) 18.

CHAPTER TWO

OM MANDLI

The Brahma Kumaris, now a global organisation with well over one million members in over 130 countries, began as a small community of a few families in 1930s Sindh. Whilst it may have been of trifling interest at the time, the community was radical in its effect.

The founder, Lekhraj Moolchand Kripalani, was born on December 15 1884[22] in Hyderabad, in pre-Partition India (now Pakistan). Lekhraj—known as *Bhai*[23] Lekhraj was a follower of Advaita Vedanta[24] and of the Bhaiband caste. He was married with five children, the son of a schoolteacher and made a good living as a respected jeweller. Although he was at the height of his career, in his late 40s, Lekhraj began having esoteric experiences that confounded him and drew him away from his profession. His experiences included visions of paradise and deities and being absorbed in a state of complete harmony and peace. He encountered complete bliss like he had never experienced in his life. Following this he had an immersive vision, where he witnessed a huge global conflagration and destruction of the world. There was civil war, immense sorrow, and bloodshed without cause on every continent, and nowhere to run to escape. This experience shook him to his core. He then had a vision of the four-

[22] Earlier texts cite the birthdate of Lekhraj Moolchand Kirpalani, however with the benefit of his birth certificate and newspaper cuttings from the foundation years of Om Mandli it is factually determined that he was born in 1884.

[23] Bhāī means brother in Hindi. It was the practice of the time to use it as a prefix. Now in contemporary India it is used as a suffix for men and boys.

[24] Advaita Vedanta is a non-dualistic school of Hindu philosophy that posits the idea that the self/ soul (*ātman*) and the ultimate reality (Brahman) are one and the same. It emphasises the importance of self-realisation through knowledge, meditation, and ethical living, leading to liberation from the cycle of birth and rebirth (*saṁsāra*). Advaita teaches that the world of multiplicity is an illusion (*māyā*), and true understanding comes from transcending these illusions to experience the oneness of all existence.

armed god of Vishnu,[25] along with an inner voice, that was not his own, saying *tat tvam asi* "you are this". It was these three visions that convinced him there must be a great and benevolent power responsible for giving him these experiences. Lekhraj was also compelled by the belief that it would be young girls and women, not sages or holy men, who would bring about this new world.

Coming from a pious Hindu Sindh background, Lekhraj was aware of the significance of these experiences but was confused about their meaning. Seeking explanations, Lekhraj consulted many gurus, but none could satisfy his curiosity about what was happening and what it could mean. Eventually, he sought the help of a *Sādhu*[26] in the marketplace, reportedly paying him a good sum of rupees for assistance in resolving his conundrum.[27]

Following this meeting, Lekhraj turned to reading the Bhagawad Gita[28] at home every morning to help clarify his experiences. The Gita played a significant role in the spiritual and cultural life of the Bhaiband community, and Lekhraj's earliest teachings were based on his interpretations of that scripture. Lekhraj received new inspirations through visions and other mystical experiences. such as the focus on purity, putting women in front, and creating a spiritual study that sought to transcend traditional religious boundaries. His dedication to daily readings led to a diminished interest in his jewellery business, which he began dismissing as a

[25] Vishnu holds a pivotal role in the Hindu pantheon as part of the Trimurti, consisting of Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva, representing the creator, the preserver, and the destroyer respectively. Vishnu's primary responsibility within this trinity is the preservation of the universe, upholding the order of things (*dharma*) and protecting it from chaos and destruction.

[26] A Sādhu is a religious ascetic, mendicant, or holy person in Hinduism and Jainism who has renounced the worldly life to focus on spiritual practices. Sādhus are often recognisable by their distinctive clothing (or lack thereof), ash smeared on their bodies, and their lifestyle, which is dedicated to achieving *mokṣa* (liberation), practicing yoga, and meditating. They live a life of celibacy, simplicity, and detachment from material possessions, often residing in ashrams, temples, or caves. Their presence is especially noted at religious festivals and pilgrimages across India, where they are respected for their commitment to spiritual and ascetic discipline.

[27] Doulatatram Bulchand, *Om Mandli: a True Authenticated Story About Its Activities Being a Reply to* "*Is This Justice*". Anti Om Mandli Committee (Hyderabad, Sindh, June 15 1940).

[28] The Bhagawad Gita forms part of the Mahabharata and is a revered 700-verse scripture within The Hindu Tradition.

"donkeyship."[29] He sold his part of the business to his junior partner so he could dedicate his life to this new life direction that was pulling him. As he delved deeper into spiritual matters, his family and other community members started to gather at his home to listen to him. Such spiritual gatherings or *satsaṅga*[30] were deemed beneficial for upholding social values. Being traders and merchants, Bhaiband men frequently embarked on extended trips. Consequently, it was often their wives and children who attended the satsaṅga, reflecting Lekhraj's trusted status as a community leader.

Within the Bhaiband community, adherence to strong traditional values meant that although women's spiritual roles were respected, they were largely limited to the confines of domestic and community life. In parts of Sindh, the practice of *purdah*[31] was still mandated in Muslim households, a reflection of widespread cultural norms regarding the lack of women's visibility in public spaces. Similarly, many respected Hindu families imposed social restrictions on women, leading them to live secluded lives under the vigilant supervision of male relatives. Despite the era being marked by significant political and social reforms,[32] Sindhi Hindu cultural norms persistently delineated women's roles to domestic spheres and service to their husbands, fathers, and families. It was against this backdrop of traditionalism and burgeoning social change that Om Mandli, the precursor to the Brahma Kumaris, emerged.

After Lekhraj read passages from the Bhagawad Gita to the small group, he would chant "om (aum)", considered the most sacred spoken syllable in Eastern religions. His chanting would have a spellbinding effect on everyone, sending the attendees into deep experiences of being beyond time and place, where they would have visions of themselves and others as divine beings in a paradisiacal world. The women and children also began chanting "om" after the readings and thus the little group became known

[29] Sakar Baba, *Murli*, (Mount Abu: Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University, July 14 2005).

[30] A satsaṅga is a gathering of people who listen to scripture or discuss spiritual or religious discourse. It literally means a gathering of truth.

[31] Anant Sadashiv Altekar, *The Position of Women in Hindu Civilization, from Prehistoric Times to the Present Day* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1956).

[32] Such reform movements included the Arya Samaj, which championed women's education and opposed caste discrimination; the Theosophical Society, which advocated for universal brotherhood and the upliftment of women; and the Sadhu Vaswani Mission, established to liberate and educate girls and women, later expanding into broader spiritual and humanitarian activities.

by the wider populace as “Om Mandli” (the group that chants om). Under the guidance of Lekhraj's servant leadership,[33] the stature of young women was elevated, enhancing their visibility, and galvanising their agency as prominent spiritual leaders.

Fig. 2.1 Om Mandli sisters dressed as deities during the period of extended trance experiences and visions c. 1940s.

Everything was dandy until husbands and father began returning from their sojourns abroad. Bhai Lekhraj remained convinced that women were the true spiritual guides for the world and the ones who would ultimately restore humanity to its original dignity. Therefore, rather than coming home to obedient and compliant women and girls, the returning husbands and fathers found that the most subservient members of their societies were now deciding to be *brahmacharya,*[34] shun the institution of marriage

[33] Robert K Greenleaf, *The Power of Servant-Leadership* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 1998).

[34] Brahmacharya is traditionally a lifestyle dedicated to celibacy and spiritual discipline. This concept is rooted in various Indian spiritual traditions, including Hinduism and Jainism. The practice of brahmacharya involves abstaining from sexual activity to focus ones’ energy on spiritual growth and personal development. Although it usually refers to a young person before marriage, the term can also apply to adults who choose to live a life of celibacy and spiritual focus. The tenets of a life of brahmacharya are celibacy, restraints from sensual indulgences, regular

and become spiritual teachers. The Sindh families were outraged that Lekhraj, their trusted clan brother, had interfered so utterly with their familial relationships in their absence. This spiritual liberation of women, which in many cases meant they were leaving their family homes,[35] was destroying the very nucleus of their society.

In an attempt to restore social order, families of the women and children would punish and confine them. Some were kidnapped and beaten. Caste vegetarians were forced to consume animal flesh, and others were shackled or confined in locked rooms for months at a time.[36] This period involved severe punitive measures taken against women and children in a bid to maintain social order.

Bhai Lekhraj's peers were also perplexed by the conviction these women held. What power was convincing these young women and girls to stand so strongly against the traditions of paternalism and patriarchy? Widely accepting of the inherent frailty of women, the family leaders were convinced that Lekhraj must be solely responsible. Lekhraj repeatedly referenced the great power he felt working through him. But, without any clear evidence of such, the husbands and fathers of the growing community accused Lekhraj of sorcery and hypnotism.

In 1937, three years after he began the readings, Lekhraj put all his wealth into a trust, to be administered by eight young women. Although he kept asserting that he was not responsible, and that it was the Infinite Divine Light who was doing everything, his claim was roundly ignored. Husbands of the women who were declaring their spiritual agency accused

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study of spiritual teachings and good company. Brahmacharya as celibacy is a foundational *dharna* (restraint or virtuous inculcation) for BKs.

[35] Communities within India have strong and complex kinship rules that dictate the proper behaviour of different members of the family (Biswarup Das, *Orissa: Social, Cultural, and Religious Aspects* (Sundeep Prakashan, 1985).; S.A. Freed and R.S. Freed, "Spirit possession as illness is a north Indian village," *Ethnology* 3, no. 2 (1964); Lakshman Kumar Mahapatra, *People and Cultural Traditions of India: Civilisation, Society and Worldview* (Cuttack: New Age Publications, 2005); Cornelia Mallebrein, "Ruler, Protector and Healer: The Clan Gods Sulia, Patkhanda and Sikerpat of the Kondh Tribe," *Journal of Social Sciences* 8, no. 2 (2004).) These traditions are adapted in the BK community, but they are honoured within the tradition of family relationships.

[36] Om Radhe, *Is This Justice? Being an Account of the Founding of the Om Mandli & the Om Nivas and Their Suppression by Application of the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1908* (The Pharmacy Printing Press, Bunder Road, Karachi: Trikamji N. Suchede [printer], 1939).

him: “with his drishti thrown from his magic laden eyes (he) hypnotises youthful women.”[37] The power was not limited to Lekhraj. As Om Mandli strengthened and grew in confidence, people would visit the group and remark on the women and the “peculiar lustre in their eyes.”[38]

Facing persecution, legal challenges, and violent opposition from family members—including at least one attempt to burn down his house—Lekhraj and his community were compelled to leave their homeland of Hyderabad for Karachi. There, they settled and embraced a highly disciplined and structured lifestyle. Despite their relocation, the community’s extended families formed the Bhaiband Anti-Om Mandli Committee[39] and followed them to their new location. Subsequent court cases and ongoing political tensions ensued. It was conveyed to Lekhraj that unless he disbanded the community and ceased its activities, his life would remain in serious jeopardy. Consequently, the community began to unravel.

Amidst mounting pressure from Hindu leaders in the Legislative Assembly, the government mandated the closure and evacuation of the Om Mandli premises, forcing the community into isolation which would become a fourteen-year period of intense and illuminating spiritual practice. During this time, a young woman named Radhe Pokardas Rajwani (1921-1965) emerged as a prominent figure. Despite being in her teens, Radhe's intellectual clarity and maturity earned her the respectful title of “Mama.” Under Mama’s guidance, the secluded community deepened their spiritual practices, entering prolonged trance[40] meditations, some lasting for several days. Later, Mama would be instrumental in formalising BK spiritual practices and disciplines.

These fourteen years between 1937 and 1950 when they moved to the new

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[37] (Bulchand, *Om Mandli: a True Authenticated Story About Its Activities Being a Reply to “Is This Justice”,* 4)
[38] (Radhe, *Is This Justice?,* 55)
[39] (Bulchand, *Om Mandli: a True Authenticated Story About Its Activities Being a Reply to “Is This Justice”*)
[40] Members of the Om Mandli, primarily women, would collectively have experiences of being beyond the physical world and in a celestial world of deities. They experienced this world as real and tangible and would come back with detailed descriptions and entertaining stories of their trance. Original members recall that these trance experiences would last for many hours or days, with members eating, drinking, and bathing without leaving their trance states. Sakar Baba, *Murli*, (Mount Abu: Brahma Kumaris, 24 December 1995).

India, were characterised by great belonging, profound discipline, and endless curiosity about what they were learning. Together, they sought to interpret their experiences, relying on the esoteric abilities of the women and girls to go into trance and the scriptural wisdom and life experience of Lekhraj and other senior members. Although they were a community predicated on purity, their mystical trance experiences and the associated potentiality was considered highly risky.[41] This tension between the known boundaries of brahmacharya and the social disorder of feminine mysticism was a societal threat. The shared mystical experiences of the women demonstrated that they held a special power which opened a doorway to the Divine. This was a great danger to the predictable and hierarchical social order in Sindh.

Fig. 2.2 Young Dadi Prakashmani (L) and Mama (n2nd from R) with other sisters travelling on the train to the new India, 1950

The Yagya

The community's collective endeavours laid the groundwork for what the Brahma Kumaris would become. That significant period was a time of ardent transformation, with many members adopting new names to reflect

[41] Mary Douglas, "Powers and Dangers," in *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge, 2002), 117-140.