

Exploring the Socio-Legal Dimensions of Godmen Phenomena in India: A Gendered Analysis

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Abstract

This research paper delves into the complex and multifaceted phenomenon of Godmen in India and examines it through a gender lens. Godmen, also known as spiritual leaders or gurus, wield significant influence over their followers, often with implications for gender dynamics in society. This study aims to shed light on the socio-legal aspects of this phenomenon from a gender perspective, analyzing the role of these new religious formations in reinforcing or challenging gender norms and the legal challenges and implications of their actions. It also looks through the obligation of the state in contemporary times to provide safeguard to its citizens from the debilitating effects of these new religious movements.

Keywords: Godmen, Gender, Ethnography, Celibacy, Religious Socialization

I. Introduction

Religion as a social institution has adapted to the forces of modernity. It has metamorphosed into newer religious formations in tune with modern sensibilities. The rise and growth of new religious movements (NRMs) is attributed to structural and cultural change in society like rapid social change, moral ambiguity, value confusion, and communal dislocations. The emergence of new religious movements has gained significant traction, coinciding with a resurgence in societal interest in religion as a whole. New expressions of spirituality, religious institutions, and discussions infused with religious themes appear to be sprouting worldwide. These new religious movements have become a recognizable and established component of the religious landscape.

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These NRMs addressed the lacunae in the traditional religion. Historically, in traditional religions, men have predominantly occupied key leadership positions and have been responsible for performing religious rites and rituals. In contrast, women have typically been assigned lesser roles and have been excluded from positions of authority. Feminist writer Mary Daly has highlighted religion's central role in perpetuating patriarchy. Consequently, it is argued that religion exhibits androcentric tendencies, relegating women to passive roles within this institution. However, new religious movements offer women more empowering roles, avenues for self-transformation, and opportunities for constructing their identities. They provide an alternative source of authority and influence through unique beliefs, rituals, and symbols³. The inclusion of women in the religious sphere prompts fresh inquiries into gender roles. To explore this phenomenon, the researcher has opted to study the Brahma Kumaris movement, which stands as one of the most prominent movements in contemporary society. The choice of Brahma Kumaris for an in-depth analysis of gender dynamics in new religious movements is because the founder of BKs was a male: Dada Lekhraj. But subsequently, it has been led and managed mainly by females. Further, the Brahma Kumari is a new Hindu religious movement, showcasing a case of 'indigenous feminism'⁴. Brahma Kumaris aims to empower females not only through their preachings but also with their practices. New religious formations acquire significance as it provides a conduit to look at specific forms of human social behaviour and an expression of religious, social, and cultural dynamism⁵.

Further, through an ethnographic study of religious socialization in NRMs like Brahma Kumaris, this paper examines how they promote the adoption of white or saffron uniforms for colourful clothing; life of celibate to married life; regimented and rigid schedules for their preferred food for satvic bhojan, and liberal individualized routines? Looking through the narratives of devotees, this paper seeks to highlight the impact of these bodily practices on the concerned individual

³STEPHEN J. HUNT, *ALTERNATIVE RELIGIONS: A SOCIOLOGICAL INTRODUCTION* 99-100 (Ashgate Publishing Ltd, Hampshire, U.K. 2003).

⁴ LAWRENCE A. BABB, *REDEPTIVE ENCOUNTERS: THREE MODERN STYLES IN THE HINDU TRADITION* (Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1987).

⁵ GEORGE D. CHRYSIDES, *EXPLORING NEW RELIGIONS*, 1 (London and New York, Cassell, 1st ed. 1999).

and the socio-legal impact of these practices on the life and rights of spouse and other family members.

II. Methodology

This ethnographic research is heavily rooted in fieldwork conducted over a span of two and a half years, focusing on the study of the Brahma Kumaris. Ethnography, as defined, is a dynamic practice that evolves in design as the study progresses. It involves prolonged, direct engagement with individuals within the context of their everyday lives utilizing a variety of methods including participant observation and conversation. It seeks to respect the intricate nature of the social world and aims to convey nuanced, sensitive, and credible narratives⁶.

The choice of ethnography in this research is both a deliberate decision and a necessity. It is chosen with the belief that ethnography is ideally suited to capture the lived experiences and perspectives of devotees. Simultaneously, ethnography is a requirement because building meaningful relationships with devotees is essential to eliciting genuine information. Ethnographic methods are particularly advantageous when the objective is to understand the devotees' perspectives, as they firmly believe that their practice can only be comprehended through experience rather than mere intellectual understanding.

Throughout the research project, the researcher made three visits to the international headquarters of the Brahma Kumaris in Mt. Abu, Rajasthan. The initial visit lasted approximately 15 days the second about a month, and the final visit in 2017 extended for two months. These stays were made possible with the permission of the movement's leaders. On each occasion, the researcher required a recommendation letter from the local center to visit Mt. Abu, as staying at the headquarters without such a recommendation is not permitted. Given the necessity of participating in Brahma Kumaris Center activities, the researcher attended evening murli classes at their Agartala center, known as the Light House, over a period of two and a half years. The researcher also participated in the Shiv Chaturdashi Mela on the eve of Shiva Batri and a seven-day course at the Brahma Kumaris Center Light House Agartala Throughout the fieldwork spanning over, two and a half years, the researcher diligently maintained a daily field diary, recorded interviews, and took photographs. To preserve confidentiality, the term

⁶ K. O'REILLY, *ETHNOGRAPHIC METHODS* 11 (London, Routledge, 2nd ed. 2011).

devotee' is used in this research article instead of individual names or organizational titles

The ethnography was conducted with a theoretical orientation rooted in symbolic interactionism and the social construction of reality. By actively participating observing, and engaging in discussions with movement members the researcher gained a deeper understanding of the faithful intentions of the Brahma Kumaris⁷. However, while engaging with New Religious Movements (NRMs), the researcher had to be mindful of what Wilson termed Sympathetic detachment⁸ as a methodological challenge. This concept expects the researcher to maintain a safe and neutral distance from the movement, even if they may personally adhere to another faith. Achieving complete empathy and objectivity, although desirable, is often practically impossible⁹ due to the researcher's social background and beliefs. One of the methodological challenges faced in this study aligns with those encountered by other scholars¹⁰¹¹¹², which involve navigating hagiographical literature predominantly written from a devotional rather than academic perspective presenting a unique set of complexities.

III. Gendered Analysis of New Religious Formations

This section analyzes the roles and positions of women within new religious formations, exploring how gender norms and stereotypes are perpetuated or challenged within these contexts. The paradoxical experience of empowerment on the one hand and exploitation on the other hand is evident. Through an ethnographic study of Brahma Kumaris, it is revealed that there is a paradoxical situation. On the one hand, scholars point out that the indigenous feminism¹³ of Brahma Kumaris empowers women; on the other hand, the spouse or other family

⁷ FRANK WHALING, UNDERSTANDING THE BRAHMA KUMARIS (Pentagon Press, New Delhi 2013).

⁸ BRYAN WILSON, RELIGION IN SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE 13 (Oxford University Press, London 1981).

⁹ FRANK WHALING, UNDERSTANDING THE BRAHMA KUMARIS 12 (Pentagon Press, New Delhi 2013).

¹⁰ *Id.*

¹¹ JOHN WALLISS, THE BRAHMA KUMARIS AS A 'REFLEXIVE TRADITION': RESPONDING TO LATE MODERNITY (Motilal Banarsidas, New Delhi, 2007).

¹² BAAB, *supra* note 4.

¹³ *Id.*

members suffer due to stringent life practices like celibacy, regimented and rigid schedules, etc. adopted by the members of Brahma Kumaris.

Researchers argue that the definition of feminism is not universally applicable to all women at all times because feminism is shaped by historical and cultural contexts. The paper emphasizes that religious worldviews and practices are influenced by cultural factors and are learned through religious socialization. Gender roles, appearance, and preferences within these religious movements are not sudden developments but result from ongoing socialization processes. Devotees are prepared for participation in these new religious groups through consistent practice of codes of conduct and behavioral norms, which serve as a form of role-training.

Brahma Kumaris, according to Babb Lawrence has a distinct place in new religious movements because of its 'distinctly feminist colouring.'¹⁴ It would be erroneous to assume that there is singular feminism. Kamla Bhasin and Nighat Said Khan argue that "There is, therefore, no specific abstract definition of feminism applicable to all women at all times. The definition does change because feminism is based on historically and culturally concrete reality and levels of consciousness, perceptions, and actions. Feminism can be different from one situation to another."¹⁵

Toeing the line further, Puttick writes, 'Female leadership in secular life is still relatively rare and contentious, despite the advances of feminism. Women have barely been acknowledged as possessing souls and capacity for spiritual growth, let alone allowed to achieve rank and status in religion'¹⁶. Besides, Brahma Kumaris, Mata Amritanandamayi, and Ananadamayi Ma are other movements which as Hunt mentions, 'provide women with more liberating roles, pathways to self-transformation and image construction, and furnish an alternative source of authority and power through distinctive beliefs, rituals, and symbols.'¹⁷

¹⁴ *Id.* at 8.

¹⁵ KAMALA BHASIN & NIGHAT SAID KHAN, SOME QUESTIONS ON FEMINISM AND ITS RELEVANCE IN SOUTH ASIA (Kali for Women, New Delhi 1993).

¹⁶ INGA BÅRDSSEN TØLLEFSEN & CHRISTIAN GIUDICE, FEMALE LEADERS IN NEW RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS 15 (Palgrave, Switzerland 2017).

¹⁷ HUNT, *supra* note 3, at 99-100.

IV. Embodiment of Faith

Commonly, society values the grihastha ashram (the householder stage) and views sexual activity as a fundamental human need. However, when New Religious Movements (NRMs) like the Brahma Kumaris advocate celibacy for the general population, it often encounter opposition. It is intriguing to observe how these newly emerging religious groups justify specific sets of rules and behaviors. These rules and behaviors become apparent through the physical practices of individuals within a particular religious community. Elias's seminal work is quite illustrative of the linkage of the code of conduct and behaviour on bodily practices and bodily habit. Through regular practice of code of conduct and behavior in new religious groups socialization takes place.

As per the worldview of the BKs, sexuality and power have a crucial connection. To be unfree is to be powerless; therefore, the secret of freedom is power.¹⁸ The

¹⁸For more details refer Richard Musselwhite.2009. Possessing Knowledge: Organizational Boundaries Among the Brahma Kumaris. Unpublished PhD Thesis. University of North Carolina. Musselwhite.2009 outlines that as per BKs cosmology, 'The world creates itself a new approximately every 5,000 years after having deconstructed the previous world cycle' (2009: 4). Further, 'It moves through four stages of approximately 1250 years each, beginning with the Golden Age and proceeding through the Silver Age, Bronze Age, and Iron Age. There is also a fifth age. Between the end of the Iron Age and the start of a new Golden Age is a special transitional time called the Diamond Age. The Diamond Age is the time when God speaks and tells the children the truth about who God is, who they are as souls, and how the world works. During the Diamond Age, souls make efforts to purify themselves and earn their places in the Golden Age of the next world order' (ibid.:5). According to the Brahma Kumaris, 'when our current world cycle created itself approximately 5,000 years ago, the population of Earth stood at 900,000 human beings. These persons did not evolve over billions of years from more primitive life forms. At the beginning of each Golden Age, they descend from the spiritual world and are incarnated on the Earth as its inhabitants' (ibid.:9). The Brahma Kumaris' teachings about the world cycle, outlines Musselwhite, 'are important for understanding the organization's objectives. During the first quarter of each world cycle, only nine hundred thousand souls are incarnated on earth, including sixteen thousand who serve as leaders, and one hundred and eight who serve as royalty. These nine hundred thousand souls are the same souls who served in the same capacities during every previous world cycle, and who will serve in the same capacities during every future world cycle. These are the most royal, pure, and elite souls in existence. These nine hundred thousand souls are the only souls who reincarnate on earth throughout the cycle, and these are the only souls who—during these critical years just prior to the end of the world—are now remembering God, their true nature as deity souls, and the truth of the world cycle. The Brahma Kumaris are dedicated to identifying these original souls and helping them to

setback for women in this era is that they are powerless within the unjust social institutions. – ‘worldly’ families in which they are but the ‘heel of the left foot’ of man¹⁹. Sexuality binds both men and women to the world. Sexual intercourse also involves the expenditure and waste of vital power.

The BKs held that sexual intercourse is the root cause of women’s inequality since the subordination of women began in history when sexual intercourse became a factor of human existence. For women, without the option of sanyas are trapped in worldly marriage. Thus women are not merely house-bound but they are bound absolutely to the world.

The BKs felt that sexual intercourse has nothing to do with love, since love for them is to love what the person is, i.e., a soul. Individuals are normally deceived by their indiscriminating physical eyes, instead of souls we see male and female body forms when we look at other persons. In the daily discourses, frequent reference is made to women being tortured by demands for sex, and in one of the movement’s booklets it is asserted that people who look at each other with lust ‘do not make love, but actually commit criminal assault on each other.’²⁰

It's intriguing to examine the contrasting perceptions that emerge regarding dietary choices and the imposition of specific restrictions. Equally noteworthy is the process by which devotees rationalize substituting their preferred foods for those prescribed by New Religious Movements (NRMs). Within NRMs, daily routines encompass embodied practices, including dietary habits, clothing choices, and celibacy, among others, which devotees tend to internalize through socialization. Human biological drives naturally incline individuals toward certain desires, yet these NRMs do not address these biological urges directly. Instead, they channelise these impulses in specific ways through various mechanisms of socialization, establishing distinct parameters and restrictions that guide how individuals can think and act to channelise these biological urges effectively.

remember their highest purpose in life, which is to guide humanity through the coming transformation and to lead them virtuously in the Golden Age to come’(ibid.:9).

¹⁹ BABB, *supra* note 4, at 144.

²⁰ PRAJAPITA BRAMHA KUMARIS ISHWARIY VISHWA-VIDALAYA, PURITY AND BRAHMACHARYA AS SOLUTION OF OUR PROBLEMS 14 (Mount Abu, Rajasthan, 1976).

In Hinduism, food has always held a significant role in concepts of purity and pollution. Within the Brahma Kumaris, there is a prevalent belief that food serves as a vital source of spiritual vibration. One of the Brahma Kumaris devotees shared that, he does not have food cooked by others and doesn't lead a lavish lifestyle, and hardly attends any parties even if he does he does not take anything.²¹ Yet another BKs devotee shared that, slowly she is trying to follow strictly the BKs philosophies and used to play songs while cooking as the teaching is that food should be prepared in remembrance of God. If the person who prepared the food does not follow this rule the people who have it will be influenced by his/her negative vibrations. That is why the BKs don't eat food prepared by other non-BKs.²² A longstanding and surrendered devotee in BKs shared about the importance of 'food' and the three-dimensional approach – for a healthy heart, happy mind, and healthy body. So the three-dimension means – mental care, spiritual care, and physical care – all are integrated in this approach. We can heal the mind, body, and heart and every cell of the body can be healed through this approach of Raja Yoga meditation, and pure vegetarian diet, and pure sattvic exercise of staying soul-conscious throughout the day.²³ The practice of celibacy and food are also intricately linked to each other. A surrendered devotee at Shantivan, Mount Abu BKs center for over decades shared his views regarding the importance of pure food in the practice of celibacy. He said, 'On this earth, celibacy is very important in the life of a Raja Yogi. The foundation of new creation is purity – pure food, pure thoughts, pure actions – the more we have purity within us our mind is elevated – we have peace and content, and we can easily connect with the Supreme soul through meditation, and experience his power/energy. The main foundation of this Brahma Kumaris Ishvariya Vishvidyalay is celibacy. Celibacy can be explained in BKs terms in four ways – one to wake up at the pure time, to keep celibacy, to listen to the murlis which come through the mouth of Brahma and last have Brahma Bhoyan – to have clean and pure food prepared here; listen the great teaching of Shiva Baba through Brahma Baba; to meditate in Brahma time; and obey the disciplines then only we are fit to be called a BKs. if anyone follows these four things then their lives become happy and better. Because happiness and joy come from leading a pure

²¹ Personal interview on 26.5.2016.

²² Personal interview on 28.03.2017.

²³ Personal interview on 30.5.2016.

life or celibacy, the more we stay celibate love, humbleness, purity, and no attachment come but feel that all are our family. We become more loving and caring like our own family.²⁴

V. Gendered Analysis of Socio-Legal Impact Brahma Kumaris Practices

Brahma Kumaris radical practices like the adoption of white uniforms for colourful clothing; life of celibate to a married life; regimented and rigid schedules for their preferred food for satvic bhojan, and liberal individualized routines.

As Babb's has written about the daughter of a recently converted elderly couple who bluntly expressed her feelings saying that 'I am afraid of them' she expressed what seems to be a widespread feeling. He also noted in his study that most of the non-movement middle-class informants with whom he interacted about the BKs had negative attitudes²⁵. Dada Lekhraj proclaimed the current human predicament as an urgent crisis. He asserted that the end was imminent, emphasizing that every remaining moment held tremendous significance, necessitating extreme measures for extraordinary times. In this brief timeframe, the only path to secure a place in heaven was through thorough self-purification of an exceptional nature. As a result, celibacy, once reserved exclusively for male ascetics or renunciants, became mandatory for both men and women in pursuit of true salvation. Many viewed this shift as eccentric or even worse. However, the Brahma Kumaris maintained that celibacy stood as the sole means for the transformation of the world. To quote one devotee's perspective, "if we really understand our heart and also purity which we sacrifice as a helping hand to god and whatever work we do is done through the firm mind or with pure mind. Look at any founder of a religion, they make purity as their foundation, for e.g., Gautama Buddha, though he was married when he left everything and accepted celibacy then only he was able to carry forward the religion. So if some huge transformation is to take place then there is a demand of purity. God is asking our help, asking us to remain pure in one birth to give us happiness for the next 21 births. To get something great we need to remain pure in this birth, it is like depositing money in a bank account. Previously, women were forced to marry but now in 2017, marriage is not given much importance or women can choose whether to marry or remain single.

²⁴ Personal interview on 31.5.2016.

²⁵ BABB, *supra* note 4, at 95.

Everyone is trying to make their destiny and career and remain content by themselves which can be said that the thought of purity is coming into the mind of many people. We are making our destiny and helping god by remaining pure and also living our life”²⁶ The Brahma Kumaris incorporated Hindu practices such as celibacy, abstinence from alcohol, and vegetarianism in a unique manner that often led to bewilderment and suspicion directed at them. Criticism of these practices emerged early in the history of the Brahma Kumaris. In the Sindhi community, where Dada Lekhraj initiated the Brahma Kumaris, instances occurred where husbands returned from business trips to discover that their wives had taken vows of chastity and were determined to transform their homes into places of worship. They expressed a desire to live with their husbands in a celibate manner, mirroring the asexual love attributed to deities like Lakshmi and Narayan. In such situations, opposition to the Brahma Kumaris often arose from the family members of their followers, as they perceived these changes as a departure from traditional norms. For example, one of the family member's predicament is reflected in his narrative while seeking help at the legal help website, “Sir, I have been married to my wife (almost 27 years). She started going to Brahmakumari's Ashram in 2014, I didn't then realise it's a cult organisation. I did not oppose initially and thought that it may be good for her to spend some time in religious activities/ social work. After she started going to Ashram, she started following and imposing those cult rules(a few given below) in the family. She was flexible initially but slowly has become very rigid in following these things and not ready to listen to any logic or apply her mind Started off with 'Not to eat food cooked by others' and then * Not to use onions and garlic in the food * Always take bath after you come from the toilet, no matter how many times you use toilet * Not to allow others touch food cooked by her or she will not eat that food(she prefers throwing it or giving it to someone) * Celibacy-No physical relationships, No romance, No physical contacts or whatsoever leading to romance * Always talking and preaching about Bhrahmakumari(BK) principles. * sitting for hours in dhyan and listening loud music related and given by them * Only watching peace of mind channel related to BK * Not reading Newspaper and other (other than BK literature) etc and not socializing with relatives *Strictly following schedule and work given by them * Visiting villages and even outstation centers and villages (spending days together without bothering for

²⁶ Personal interview on 2.4.2017.

family and home) * No hesitation in taking money and spending on all these activities * Not bothered about children / family *Always approaching all the relatives to convince them about BK and their philosophy *People eating non veg are Atyachari and Rakshas *She is very normal and happy, if somebody listens to her or she is with BK persons * She is not mad and beyond any psychiatric treatment * She has started preaching the same to anyone coming near her/ in contact. * Now, she has started saying we husband and wife are actually brother & sister by BK's principle * She will become Devi/Devta in next birth * She has surrendered completely and blindly following them/ 'BABA' and so on... I am frustrated due to this kind of life. I am not able to come out of this unimaginable situation. I have two grown-up children not yet married studying. They know everything and do not like this situation but are helpless and do care about their mother due to her health and emotional attachment. We are living separately in the same house. She is neither ready to compromise nor willing to leave the place. I am worried about my son's future and about my daughter's marriage. Why they should suffer, who have made no mistake? I must say that she is ready to do her duties partially as a mother and as a wife, i.e. to cook and maintain the house. This is what BK asks to follow. Is this the correct approach way to live in a family? I am doing my job and trying to maintain calm. Sometimes it becomes very difficult to manage as I cannot even share my feelings with other persons as I do not know, what to say and what others can do/advise in such a complicated matter not seeing any direct solution. Want to get out of it as soon as possible as it may affect my mental status and health. I don't know what to do. Is divorce a way out? Can I rope in Brahma Kumari Sanstha in a court case as they are the main culprit, although there is little to directly blame them since they got control over her mind and she is doing all this nonsense willingly and will confess it?"²⁷

Article 25 of the Constitution of India guarantees the freedom of conscience, and the freedom to profess, practice, and propagate religion to all citizens. So, a person is entitled to follow the religious order of Bramha Kumari and follow the dictates of the religion. If a particular way of life has been prescribed by a religious order the followers are entitled to follow the way of life. It is apt to point out that the religious order proscribes sexual intercourse for the followers of this religious order. However sexual intercourse is considered necessary to preserve a marital tie. Thus a partner in the marriage has a right to restitution of conjugal rights

²⁷ (Sep. 22, 2023, 8:39 AM), <https://www.kaanoon.com/legal-questions/63997/>.

against the partner who has withdrawn from cohabitation without any justification for doing so. If we look at the penal law, Section 375 of the Indian Penal Code defines rape but provides an exemption to sexual intercourse or sexual acts by a man with his wife against her consent. So marital rape is not an offense. The feminists do not accept this position on marital rape and have challenged this legal position. Though there is no authoritative pronouncement declaring marital rape to be an offense the wind of change has started blowing to criminalise marital rape. From the traditional viewpoint, conjugal rights are seen as the adhesive that strengthens the marriage. But from the feminist perspective, conjugal rights are intrusive, unconstitutional, and in violation of basic human rights. Thus, the enforcement of the spouse's right to restore conjugal rights is considered a sort of personal liberty violation, and hence a violation of the partner's right to life and personal liberty under Article 21 of the Constitution of India. A husband aggrieved by the wife's refusal to cohabit with the husband for the reason of her having faith in a religious order can seek a matrimonial relief under the Hindu Marriage Act 1955. The Hindu Marriage Act 1955 under section 13(1)(vi) considers renouncing the world by entering into a religious order by a party to the Hindu Marriage a ground of divorce.

VI. Conclusion

Religion is a way of life intrinsically linked to the dignity of an individual. Every individual has freedom of religion under the constitution of India. Within the ambit of freedom of religion, a person has all incidental entitlements contemplated by the dictates of religion. A woman following the religious order of Bramhakumari is entitled to lead a way of life as prescribed by the religious order. She can eat and choose the attire she pleases or as it has been prescribed by the religious order. She cannot be compelled to cohabit with her husband against her wishes in the name of Law. Thus, the exclusion of the rights of the wife in favour of the husband in the name of the Right to Restitution of conjugal rights under the Hindu Marriage Act 1955 should not be allowed, as it infringes upon the fundamental freedom to practice and profess the wife's religion. The law should keep pace with the needs of the society. Section 375 of the Indian Penal Code should be amended and sexual intercourse with a wife against her consent should be criminalised. A woman entering the Bramhakumari faith and strictly following the religious order prescribed for the followers of Bramhakumari can be validly freed from a marital tie under the Hindu Marriage Act 1955 on the

ground that she has renounced the world. Female leadership in religious institutions like Bramhakumari and Mata Anandmayi will go a long way in women's liberation, empowerment, and their fullest enjoyment of freedom of religion and faith.