

Summary

The Power of Silence. Gender and Religious Conversion. The Case of a New Religious Movement, the Brahma Kumaris, in Poland

This book is based on ethnographic fieldwork among members of a millenarian new religious movement, the Brahma Kumaris. The World Spiritual University Brahma Kumaris is a transnational organisation which aims to transform the world. The founder of the organisation, wealthy diamond merchant Lekhraj Khubchand Kirpalani, who lived in Hyderabad, Sind province (now part of Pakistan), received a powerful vision of Shiva in 1936. As a result of this experience he ended his engagement with worldly matters, took the name Brahma Baba and organised the spiritual school. Lekhraj reformulated the Hindu circle of time. According to his teachings, we are currently living in the Confluence Age, the period of transition between the Iron and Golden Age, i.e. between the end of the circle, the time of a downfall of humanity and a period of a restored paradise. In other words, we are living just before the end of the world, and the Brahma Baba's followers are the ones who will lead humankind toward the new world. Lekhraj promoted women as leaders of the community and encouraged young girls who followed him to take care of the movement. Gradually those women have become leaders in both spiritual and administrative terms. Now they are called *Dadis* – older sisters. After Lekhraj's death the movement expanded to the West.

In this book I focus on the activities of this group in Poland. The movement has been present in the Western world since the 1960s and in Poland since the mid 1980s. The Brahma Kumaris community in Poland was established by sister Halina, a Pole who as a teenager immigrated to Canada in 1970. There, she met the Brahma Kumaris and became a member. At the beginning of the 1980s, she came back to Poland with a mission to promote the Brahma Kumaris. During the next two decades, she managed to organise the movement, which is now based in the main Polish cities. Most of the Brahma Kumaris members and sympathisers in Poland are converts from Roman Catholicism, and are primarily middle class urban women.

The most important practice of the Brahma Kumaris movement is Raja Yoga. Raja Yoga is considered to be more of a lifestyle than a simple meditation technique. Within the Raja Yoga „lifestyle,” early morning meditation sessions are accompanied by strict vegetarianism, ritualised

cooking procedures, bodily discipline, celibacy, silent meditation and silent way of behaviour and an engagement with a number of activities that are focused around the transformation of the world. At the same time ideas and practices rooted in the Hindu culture are transformed and negotiated to fit into the local context, for example Hindu feminine power of shakty is shown in a way that reflects the Polish concept of motherhood.

In this book I focus on gender and religious conversion. My approach to gender is inspired by social construction theory. I show how identity and agency of Brahma Kumaris converts are redefined within the conversion process, and how a woman's new identity, performance and agency, based on silence, meditation, purity and spirituality, influences her family kin networks and work place, and engenders new forms of social life. Moreover, I analyse the case of the Brahma Kumaris in relation to the development of feminism in Poland. I show that for my informants, conversion to the Brahma Kumaris and conforming to the strict ascetic discipline are ways of dealing with gender related discontent. I argue that religion is an important element of women's identities in Poland. My inquiry suggests that lack of spirituality within Polish feminist milieus and feminist emphasis on the liberal agency are main obstacles to the further development of feminism in the country.