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 Vidyalaya’. It is significant that the movement included a ‘world’ focus in its name, even though active overseas expansion did not begin until 1971.

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 Middle 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 coordinators 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-governmetal 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 in 79 countries (Europe, the Middle 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 coordinators 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
New Religious Movements

in 128 countries, territories and islands including Africa and the Middle East. Of the countries where BKWSU has centres, a number have undergone significant political change. There are centres in Lebanon, Kuwait, Israel, Jordan, Iran, Pakistan, China and Egypt (BKWSU 2006). In many of these places the political context is one of constant change with fantastically and spiritual ideas in a way which is compatible with the ideas accepted within that culture. This has been true of the propagation process of the major religions today. Buddhism and Christianity for instance, when they themselves were NRMs. Since its early days of settlement, BK has established new centres on the invitation of someone from the local community (Nagel 1995). So, while the BKs believe that the world will become perfected, they do not consider change or habit, 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, BKWSU is a Servant Leadership: humility, leadership by example, nurturing, empowering and a refusal to be treated as gurus or objects of devotion (Laszlo 2002). These were 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 ‘numberliness’ 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 anamuch support for the choice of leaders and conflict over positions of authority is rarely seen.

History

BKWSU’s founder, Lekhraj Kripalani, was the son of a schoolteacher, a follower of the Vallabhacharya 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 Lekhraj (Dada is a term of respect for an older gentleman. We will continue to refer to him as BK or Dada Lekhraj), had a series of striking visions and ecstatic spiritual experiences, some of which were blissful and others disturbing. His first vision was of Vishnu in the Perennial of the Universe, and 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 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 Bhagavad Gita. Many of his local Bhai Bund community attended the readings, so 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 princesses and princesses in a paradisiacal world. In October 1957 Dada Lekhraj, 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 fourteen 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 husbands and families respecti- vely. The BK movement was particularly revolutionary at the time, as women chose to live celibate lives, which in Hindu soci- ety was not an option for them. In the Indian culture of the 1950s only men were considered worthy of the life of a spiritual community, of between 300 and 700, devoting their time to intense spiritual study, meditation and self-transformation. This involves practices such as early morning meditation and lifestyle, discipline 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 and lifestyle, discipline 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 discipline, as well as abstaining from alcohol, tobacco, sexual activity and drugs. BKs attribute considerable importance to food and according to 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 major- ity 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: BKWSU has moved from a clear understanding of the date of world destruction, to a social commitment 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 disci- plines and cohesion of its members. The remarkable status of women in the BKWSU organisation is reflected in the centre in the United Kingdom, suggests that the organisation has undergone a transfor- mation. BKWSU has moved from a clear understanding of the date of world destruction, to a social commitment 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 disci- plines and cohesion of its members. The remarkable status of women in the BKWSU organisation is reflected in the centre in the United Kingdom, suggests that the organisation has undergone a transformation. 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 ‘numberliness’ 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 anamuch support for the choice of leaders and conflict over positions of authority is rarely seen.

History

BKWSU’s founder, Lekhraj Kripalani, was the son of a schoolteacher, a follower of the Vallabhacharya 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 Lekhraj (Dada is a term of respect for an older gentleman. We will continue to refer to him as BK or Dada Lekhraj), had a series of striking visions and ecstatic spiritual experiences, some of which were blissful and others disturbing. His first vision was of V...
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**

**Louisa Mattunawa**

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, and relationship between an NRM and an MNC in a context where both are seeking to reinforce by annual pilgrimages to the Mtn Babha, through a trance messenger, and meetings with the Supreme Soul, Shiv Baba, through a trance messenger, and through regular meditation and the effort to attain a state of soul conscious-ness which transcends gender, social status and other culturally determined roles and relationship.

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.

Before officially becoming a religious organisation in 1941, 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 Bhagavad Gita is evident. At the same time, notions of the Positive Thinking movement is evident. At the same time, notions based on the principles 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 training induction 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 training based on the principles of Seicho-No-Ie. In particular, the idea of expressing gratitude to customers through ‘serv-ice’ – that is, hard work in the store, was stressed. This use of Seicho-No-Ie teachings caused a crisis when a Yaohan employee reported a Yaohan employee 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, and, unusually in the Japanese corporate context, chose to give Seicho-No-Ie a central role in the development of Yaohan.

I n 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 (Nakakuri 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).

Wendy Smith, and Tamásin Ramsay, have argued that there is a multinational Japanese company, the (now bankrupt) supermarket chain Yaohan, which was closely and actively 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 Asso-ciation’, 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 greengrocer with a single store in Kanagawa prefecture to become a multin-trial 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 training 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 henceforth 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 compli-eced. 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...