

# NEW RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS IN POST-INDEPENDENT INDIA

## A Sociological Study of Vishwa Nirmala Dharma

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### ABSTRACT

This thesis explores a significant development in post-independent India – the growth of popular new religious movements led by charismatic gurus. While some of these organisations address a primarily Indian following, others attract a more diverse following, cutting across national, cultural, even religious boundaries. At the macro level, this thesis provides a framework for understanding NRMs in post-independent India. At the micro level, through a case study of Vishwa Nirmala Dharma -known as Sahaja Yoga, founded by Shri Mata Nirmala Devi in 1970- it develops an interpretative understanding of the construction of a spiritual leader's charisma and devotee's motivation for joining.



### RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- What are the socio-cultural circumstances which necessitate and facilitate the growth of New Religious Movements (NRMs) in Post-Independent India?
- Who joins Sahaja Yoga and why? In other words how do people become interested in Sahaja Yoga?
- How is the spiritual leader's Charisma established, re-affirmed and protected?

### METHODOLOGY

Multi-sited ethnography among Sahaja Yoga's primarily urban, educated 'middle-class' devotees in a metropolitan region -Delhi National Capital Region- conducted over a period of ten months. Participant observation was conducted in three stages as proposed by Eileen Barker: passive, interactive and active.

### SOCIO-CULTURAL FRAMEWORK FACILITATING GROWTH OF NRMs

- 1) 1947 - 1961 as 'The Age of Hope and Achievements'
- 2) 1962 - 1990 as 'The End of Innocence'
- 3) 1990 onwards as 'Run-up to the New Millennium & After'



### FRAMEWORK OF NRMs IN POST-INDEPENDENT INDIA

	Pre-Independence	Post-Independence
I	Brahmo Samaj	
II	Arya Samaj	Hindu Mahasabha, Anand Marg
III	Ramakrishna Mission	Hare Krishna Movement, Divine Light Mission, Transcendental Meditation, Sai Baba Movement, Rajneesh Movement, Vishwa Nirmala Dharma

### JOINING SAHAJA YOGA

The primary data explaining the process of joining Sahaja Yoga is in tune with John Lofland & Rodney Stark's (1965) model of conversion.

- 1) People approaching Sahaja Yoga experience acute needs or tension in their lives - mainly unresolved enduring physiological and psychological suffering;
- 2) They attempt to fulfill these needs or resolve these tensions within a spiritual or religious problem solving perspective;
- 3) While they are inclined to look for solutions within a spiritual or religious perspective, they encounter Sahaja Yoga as an option;
- 4) Motivated through the initial encounters they increase the frequency of collective meditation and develop affective bonds with other fellow Sahaja Yogis
- 5) As a result of Shri Mata Nirmala Devi's teachings regarding ill or defiling effects of other Yoga forms advocated by different spiritual gurus, Sahaja Yogis reduce or eliminate attachments with other groups;
- 6) Gradually Sahaja Yogis are exposed to intensive socialization about Yoga practices and ways of life. They become committed Sahaja Yogis.

### WHO JOINS SAHAJA YOGA AND WHY ?

- Quest to get rid of enduring physiological or psychological ailments
- Spiritual seekers
- Quest to resolve problems of maturation
- Overcome challenges associated with the modern work culture



### HOW DO THEY JOIN ?

- Mostly newcomers join through social networks: work colleagues, acquaintances, friends and family; some are personally invited by a Sahaja Yogi to 'get their realisation'.
- Sometimes people join owing to diverse advertisements: colorful posters, leaflets, newspaper, journals and campaigns across different parts of the country or presentations/demonstrations by Sahaja Yogis at particular venues.



### CHARISMA OF THE GURU

- Charisma of the Guru is **absorbed** over a period of time. It gets **established** with regular performance of rituals, arti, bhajans and prayers; watching videos, listening to CDs and reading literature
- Charisma further gets **reaffirmed** through miraculous stories surrounding the Guru; public acknowledgement of divinity by influential personalities; widespread print and electronic media coverage
- Charisma is **protected** on a continuous basis due to the image of mahāmāyā (great illusion), inconsistent behavior and unverifiable claims of the Guru further reinforce this concept. Furthermore, guilt is employed to ensure unconditional surrender of the devotees.