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WHO JOINS A CULT AND WHY? AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF SAHAJA YOGA

The changing nature of religion is considered to be an important part of the structural transformation in post-Independent India and needs a thorough analysis. In sociological parlance, theorists of modernity had written off religion in the 1950's and 1960's (Lerner, 1962; Eisenstaedt, 1966; Inkle and Smith, 1974). It was based on the premise that with progressive march of modernisation, religion will have a very limited role to play. But the global resurgence of cults in the 1950s and thereafter has proved otherwise (Beckford 1986; Chryssides 1999, Clarke 1988; Dawson 2004; Nelson, 1987; Wilson 1976). As our society is undergoing transformation and a new middle class with new aspirations is emerging, we witness the steady growth of religious channels on television, phenomenal growth of new gurus and cults, and new preoccupation with yoga, ayurveda, health and alternative life practices (Bharati 1970; Brent 1972; Copeman and Ikegame 2012; Flood 1996; Klostermaier 2000; Larson 1995; Mehta 1993; Singh 2009; Smith 2009). These cults generate specific forms of social currents, attract specific categories of people, and inject certain values and practices, whose role require careful sociological examination.

In the first decade of this century, on the one hand we witnessed steady growth of religious television channels, new gurus and cults. On the other hand, newspapers were replete with news of Swamis and Scandals. What followed these scandals was analysis and discussion in print and electronic media on How do people come to join such a group in the first place? What do we understand about the mysterious leader of these new religious groups? The answers received to these questions were largely devoid of specifics and speculative in nature. Journalists often face considerable constraints of time and space; they face a stiff-competition in fashioning their stories at the earliest as and when time demands. They are necessarily guided by the commercial demand to attract readers and often lack expertise in the subject. We can notice in media selective portrayal of events as per the mood of the masses. Recently when Satya Sai Baba died, electronic and print media gathered all favourable facts – from the list of his high profile clients to construct about his

miracles. But had it been the negative environment, media would have gathered and highlighted the facts accordingly- recent case of Asaram Bapu and Nithyananda are a case in point. The gurus are betrayed by the very same technologies that had hitherto enabled the global circulation of their image and teachings, proliferating their influence and 'presence'. Listening, watching and reading to these media visuals and report I could not help wondering whether viewers, no matter how uninformed, still would be satisfied with such media reporting. By drawing upon multi-sited fieldwork among Sahaja Yoga's primarily urban, educated 'middle-class' Indian devotees, this paper intends to provide crucial insights into new trends in popular Hinduism in a post-Independent and rapidly modernizing urban Indian setting. Rooted into an interpretative framework it addresses issues like Who Joins Sahaja Yoga and Why? In other words how do people, otherwise modern, in a metropolitan city like Delhi become interested in cults?

Methodology

There are two views regarding academic-cults relationship. One group lead by Margaret Singer argues that 'academics should have no prolonged contact with cult for fear of undue influence' (Fox 2005:332). Another group comprises of those who disagreed with Singer and her supporters, they point out that, cult are often 'distrustful of outsiders' (ibid: 332). For this reason, they believe, 'participant observation is the best- and sometimes the only-way of gaining access'.

Through the experience I¹ gained during my field visits to Sahaja Yoga Centres, I personally believe that the former approach by Margaret Singer is not only difficult but also 'methodologically inappropriate' for the kind of research that is needed for studying a cult like Sahaja Yoga. The theoretical perspective underlying this study is an 'interpretative' approach where the researcher attempts to understand the social reality from Sahaja Yogis point of view, to uncover meanings which, they attach to life and religious practices, and to understand their bases of giving meaning. This study attempts to penetrate the life-worlds of the Sahaja Yogis- who really are these people and how do they rationalize their practice? Answers to such questions from the stand point of the Sahaja Yogis themselves should add significant insight to the knowledge of how, when, and in what conditions people become ready to participate and persist in their participation in Sahaja Yoga.

In order to fulfill the aforesaid objective I resorted to intensive, field-based and qualitative study of Sahaja Yogis through 'participant observation' over a period of nine months. The method used for field work and data collection included intensive interview sessions with Sahaja Yogis. These were conducted in an informal style, where Sahaja Yogis described their experiences of the Mata, explained their extent and nature of involvement in Sahaja Yoga and commented on its various aspects. Participant observation was carried out in

New Delhi centre of Sahaja Yog (Sahaj Mandir, C-17 Qutab Institutional Area, South Delhi), apart from this, I attended different festivals celebrated in Sahaja Yoga in Delhi NCR, Vishwa Nirmala Prem Ashram in Greater Noida and Sahaja Yoga Health and Research Centre in Greater Noida. Participant observation has advantage of studying people and their religious beliefs and practices directly without any intermediaries. By establishing relationship with those individuals who are being studied, the researcher has better opportunities of learning about their feelings, experiences and motivations. Bryan Wilson has rightly described participant observation as the core method of enquiry into sects and key to understanding them.

Having discussed the reasons for choosing participant observation, it is imperative to describe the process I followed while carrying out participant observation. The participant observation was planned on the lines described by Eileen Barker (1987)². She described three stages in the role of 'professional strangers' that fieldworkers play: passive, in which there is limited involvement with the group under study, interactive, where they act as one of the group, and active, in which they can explore, test and provoke their subjects (1987: 144-146). This progression comes with increasing competence and understanding of, subject's worldviews (ibid.:146). These stages happened at a frequent pace and on a regular interval but the second and third stage got stretched over some period. The first stage that is passive stage as noted by Barker involves a process of familiarisation of beliefs and practices of the group. During this stage I followed the course of a new entrant in Sahaja Yoga. The passive stage aimed at carefully observing, listening and participating in the Sahaja Yoga sessions. In the second stage- interactive stage of the field work, in addition to maintaining relationship with local followers and especially with key informants. I began to attend International and national Pujas, interacting with local Sahaja Yogis. The interaction focused on information about members and issues within the group, and interaction often took the form of informal, unstructured interviews. In the third stage-active stage, according to Barker, the researcher tests the scope and limitation of a movement by "questioning the unquestionable" (ibid.: 146). Some of the deepest insights for this study were obtained in third phase. In this stage I confronted my understanding with the biographical account of Sahaja Yogis. But it is important to mention that looking from the practical angle any sociological research in this domain is difficult since it involves the domain of faith. They demand 'prayerful listening' and not 'intellectual listening'. Mehta has rightly pointed out that in these cults, 'critical appraisal or objective perusal of the teachings of their *gurus* are not only frowned upon, but viewed as an offence by most of the disciples. In all these cults, blind surrender to the *guru* is the first pre-requisite for acceptance as a devotee' (Mehta 1993: vii). So it was quite difficult to engage Sahaja Yogis in the active stage of field work during critical appraisal of Sahaja Yoga.

Initiating Newcomers in Sahaja Yoga

Newcomers learn about Sahaja Yoga at least as much by watching and doing, as through dialogue and listening. In this understanding of reality the non-linguistic/non-verbal modes of acquiring social information are very significant. Further, the experiences and understanding produced by newcomers are quite widely varied. It varies according to the mode and venue of initiation into Sahaja Yoga, who is initiating and how s/he is initiating newcomer to Sahaja Yoga, and the individual profile of the newcomers.

In sociology of religion there are broadly two approaches to analyse the socialisation process of an individual in a particular cult. This dichotomy can be located in the broader debate of structure and agency. On one hand there is a group of researchers who view devotees or seekers of these Cults as passive and guided by the charismatic authority of their leader or religious organisation. Devotees follow the instructions and are constrained by them (Samways 1994). Such a viewpoint later generated 'brainwashing' controversy and explained the radical behavioural changes in the new converts. On the other hand there are researchers who view devotees or seekers as an active agent and advocate that members are at least partially responsible for their own conversion and subsequent commitment. They challenge the stereotypical view that people in Cults are automatons, stripped of their personalities and content to mouth the words of their leaders (Barker 1984; Coney 1999; Wallis 1982). They emphasise that majority of decisions like the choice of religious group, level of commitment, duration of participation etc rests with the seeker to a large extent. The high turnover in Cults reflects that the entry and exit in these groups are left to individual discretion. In this study based on sustained 'participant observation', I found that the later view point is more appropriate to explain the socialisation process in Sahaja Yoga.

People are driven to join Sahaja Yoga out of some personal need, and these are rooted in some, identifiable social conditions. This analysis of the process of joining Sahaja Yoga is based the primary data I got through the interviews with Sahaja Yogis, it indicated a broad pattern³ through which majority of Sahaja Yogis pass through before becoming a committed member. Firstly, people who approached Sahaja Yoga had over a period of time experienced an acute and enduring need or tension in their lives- in majority of cases it is unresolved longstanding physiological or psychological sufferings; Secondly, they attempted to fulfill these needs or resolve these tensions within a spiritual or religious problem solving perspective; Thirdly, it is while they are inclined to look for spiritual or religious solution that they encountered Sahaja Yoga, which they joined at a definite point in their lives- some felt the cool vibrations instantly whereas others felt it late, but the first experience of rising *Kundalini* and associated cool vibrations turned out to be a turning point in their lives; Fourthly, motivated with these experiences they increased the frequency of collective meditation, they develop an affective bond with

other fellow Sahaja Yogi brothers and sisters; Fifthly, as a result of teachings of Shri Mata Nirmala Devi regarding ill or defiling effects of other forms of yoga advocated by different spiritual gurus, Sahaja Yogis reduce or eliminate attachments with other groups; Sixthly, gradually Sahaja Yogis are exposed to intensive socialisation about Sahaja Yoga practices and ways of life. They become a committed Sahaja Yogi. It is important to note that in this whole chain of events, each single step is necessary but only the whole process is sufficient condition for making a Sahaja Yogi.

In my interaction with the committed Sahaja Yogis and also the newcomers I found that they have been reading religious or philosophical literature and gave thought to the existential and experiential questions like- What is meaning of life? Is there a God? Is there life after death?. This doesn't mean that these people have completely adopted a religious problem solving perspective. It is only to suggest that before joining Sahaja Yoga majority of these people were either actively practicing a religion or previously they had been members of one or more other non-traditional religious groups. Therefore when faced with challenges in life- whether physiological, psychological, social etc. there religious inclination motivated them to look for solution in that sphere. With this initial predisposition it is imperative to analyse the entire process of joining Sahaja Yoga.

Who Joins Sahaja Yoga and Why?

The answers to, who Joins Sahaja Yoga and why?, is based on first hand narratives of Sahaja Yogis. Before venturing into this exercise it is important to mention two things at the outset. Firstly, it will be erroneous and too simplistic to assume that there is a mono causal factor responsible for joining Sahaja Yoga. It can be one of the dominant reasons but not 'the' only reason. On the basis of main motivating factor, I have clubbed narratives in different groups e.g. a person may primarily be inclined to join Sahaja Yoga out of spiritual quest but his secondary interest could also be to get rid of some physiological or psychological ailments. Secondly, against each motivating factor of joining Sahaja Yoga few narratives of Sahaja Yogis have been mentioned. These are not the exhaustive one. Some narratives have been identified out of many to depict the experiential aspect. From the accounts of devotees, it appears that most of them first seek out a guru when they come up against major crises in their lives such as severe health problems, family discord, financial trouble, physically and emotionally crippling accidents, alcoholism and drug addiction. At such times, the first channels of help are the systems of expertise intrinsic to modern society such as the medical and legal establishments. These systems, while they do offer rational, professional and standardised means of support, are, however, unable to provide the personalised support and assistance that most individuals crave. This is where a guru like the Shri Mataji holds out the promise of relief and reassurance.

Persons in distress come to hear of her through well-meaning friends and neighbors who urge them to seek Shri Mataji's blessings and alleviate their distress.

One group of people into which many, perhaps the majority, fall is those who are suffering from some or other physiological or psychological ailments. There is a strong correlation between health and spirituality. It is the hope of a cure, often when conventional medicine seem to have failed or have maintained a status quo in terms of gravity of disease. Story of miraculous cures of incurable disease from Sahaja Yogis attract or motivates people with one or more longstanding illness to try Sahaja Yoga. Interestingly it challenges our commonsensical understanding that main motivation for joining new religious groups by the newcomers is religious or spiritual. A Sahaja Yogi shared his tribulations in following words:

In the year 2000, I was very disturbed due to my physical health. Due to some reaction of medicine and other reasons I had developed many complications. I was fed up visiting hospital, because for long I was a regular visitor to one or the other hospital, first to show my ailing father and then to show my ailing wife. This time I decided I will not go to hospital at least not for myself. Meanwhile there was no improvement in my swollen leg but I refused to go to Doctors. In this between my sister introduced me to Sahaja Yoga. I could feel the vibrations and started practicing Sahaja Yoga. I use to ask and pray to Shri Mataji why all this is happening to me? Once I was sitting in my house in a room and at nearly 11.30am I realised Shri Mataji touched my swollen leg. Miraculously all my problems vanished

Similar is the tale of a lady school teacher from R.K. Puram said:

I have been suffering from the problem of arthritis for long. My condition was miserable. My husband used to take me to one or the other doctor every time. One day my sister in law asked me to accompany her to Sahaja Yoga meditation centre. I got realisation there and was suggested to do foot soaking daily. While meditating I felt coolness on hand and top of the head. Now my condition is much better, earlier I used to take many pills in a day, now only one.

Apart from physiological ailments there are many Sahaja Yogis who got relief in psychological ailments as well. When I interacted with Sahaja Yogis it is replete with such stories of miraculous cure or hope of miraculous cure. These stories of miraculous cure when shared among the Sahaja Yogis and sometimes spoken from the public platform, it reinforces the faith in charisma of Shri Mataji and encourages others with similar fate to join Sahaja Yoga.

Second category comprises of group of individuals who are looking for something, in other words 'spiritual seekers' are the one inclined to join Sahaja Yoga. Although none of those whom I interviewed said they were looking for Goddess at the beginning of their journey. Nevertheless, some described the quest as overtly spiritual. A young scholar living in Maidangarhi area of New Delhi narrated:

I have inclination towards spirituality. But with growing commercialisation I was disillusioned. Everywhere I saw it has become a profitable business. I had a yearning to get involved in fruitful meditation. I saw a poster depicting chakras and the lines of energy on it- no picture of Shri Mataji was displayed. It suddenly attracted me as I was not looking for any guru, rather just wanted a means to meditate and I thought this is the one I should try.

In a similar vein a Sahaja Yogi in his fifties narrating his frantic search of a genuine guru said:

I visited different places to meet different gurus. I visited in Allahabad in 1989 to meet Maharshi Mahesh yogi but his plan got cancelled, I visited Devrahavha Baba. But I was not satisfied; question use to arise in my mind what is that they charge for? If they have spiritual power why they need gun man around? Why this expensive advertising business? I remember in Feb.2000 there was a Sahaja Yoga Kundalini jagran being organised near Sangam cinema hall. I visited there and found that it was for one and all free of cost. I meditated there and had intense vibrations.

The search for genuine Guru is shared in the narratives of many Sahaja Yogis.

Thirdly, there is a group of service class which faces the challenge of stress, anxiety and tension due to frequent interference of their professional life in personal life, job pressure, highly technical and impersonal work culture. One decidedly new aspect of the present turn to spiritual practice is the desire explicitly stated by many for a solution to workplace related problems especially related to the private sector. The deeper insertion of India into the fiercely competitive global market has brought particular challenges. Companies are trying to resolve some of these problems by attempting to transform employees (over whom they have leeway) as against seeking changes in the work environment (something shaped by the market, and given our weaker bargaining power in the International market). An echo of this is found in the narratives of Sahaja Yogi. A Sahaja Yogi working in a private firm said he has to meet deadline and deliver accordingly. He said that, 'though target based job profile and work culture has no doubt increased the efficiency and profit but in turn leaves the employees in stress and anxiety'. He described his visit to Sahaja Mandir as 'soothing', 'It provides me some silent moments of contemplation'.

When asked about problem one faces in day to day life, a legal consultant in Bengali market said that he faces sleep disturbances. This is a problem he has been facing from many years. When asked the reason for this. He said it's basically because of interference of his professional life, job pressure etc. He said:

Our job is too demanding. There is no certainty. This uncertainty and fear of an uncertain tomorrow kills. I am a guy from middle class background with not much support from the family. Everything I have done on my own and have to do on my own in future.

Most of the Sahaja Yogis I met often seemed to be idealistic people, coming from fairly happy, conventional and respectable families that placed a higher

value on public service and doing one's duty than simply making money. They had grown up in sheltered environment in which they were encouraged to be over achievers in schools and in other activities. It seems that many of them experienced 'disappointments, hurt and disillusionment' when they ventured into the professional world. In some cases they found the transition to life at University or on the job and away from home more difficult and frustrating than expected. Contemporary world is an unsettling place. It gives rise to existential dilemmas which confront us all. Underlying all the existential dilemmas and suffering of self is the threat of meaninglessness produced by a technically strong but morally weak social environment. At a physical level modern technology and facilities have actually increased workloads and decreased relaxation. In contemporary times the emphasis on highly rational and scientific world view privileges mind over body, technology over nature, innovation over tradition, knowledge over experience. People gradually develop insecurities, in part because of the uncertainties of, and lack control over, contemporary life, in realms ranging from professional relations to intimate relations.

The social conditions of contemporary time leads to 'stress' of various kinds- physical, emotional and intellectual and it is characterised by feeling of being burdened; of being unable to cope. It is manifested and reported in the form of – anxiety, worry, sleeplessness, emotional disturbances, aggression, tension etc. There is suffering and anguish of the soul. The story of present times is not simply the story of well fed, well clothed men, it is also the story of intense agony- loss of self and communication and relatedness. Then at this moment of crisis they come in contact with Sahaja Yoga- either through close relative or acquaintance; demonstration and presentation by Sahaja Yogis; or advertisement, they offer to resolve their existential and experiential problems in a harmonious way. The implication is that they joined Sahaja Yoga to at least temporarily reestablish themselves in a more satisfying set of circumstances (i.e. more structured and idealistically motivated environment).

In present competitive time there is a shift from ascription to achievement (not who you are, but what you can do) as the basis for selection into adult occupational roles. Status and a sense of worth thus come to rest on the level of achievement which has been attained in the course of one's life. But where achievement is viewed as an end in itself, such a sense of worth and of status is inevitably precarious since there are no clear guides as to when enough has been achieved, and the chances are that comparisons with others will lead the individual always to feel a relative failure. In the midst of their dilemma and frustration they come in contact of these spiritual groups, which provides the opportunity to explore their own nature, while remaining surrounded by a supportive and serene atmosphere.

A surrounding which some sociologists say acts like a 'surrogate family' in the otherwise impersonal and anonymous modern life. In an urbanised

metropolitan city like Delhi we increasingly find attenuation of community bond. This attenuation of community is experienced as a lack of close ties with a group of persons outside the family with whom the individual has a relationship of more than a role oriented kind; of a group of person with whom he can 'be himself', who will accept him as, and for what, he is rather than as the producer of the particular performance. The cults like Sahaja Yoga have in substantial measure developed in response to, and as attempt to grapple with the consequence of rationalisation. They provide a surrogate family, an opportunity to discover 'who you are, and not remain confined to what you produce?', it attempts to provide a warm community to share one's feeling. It is quite interesting to see the community feeling in the Sahaja Yogis which results out of collective meditation; collective celebration of *pujas*, which in Durkheimian sense reinforces the collective solidarity.

Fourthly, some people joined Sahaja Yoga in the quest to resolve certain common and yet difficult problems of maturation. With the process of maturation people are unable to figure out who they are or what the future holds for them. Sahaja Yoga provided them a 'surrogate family' in the otherwise impersonal and anonymous modern life. A student who was introduced in Sahaja Yoga by his teacher said:

I was a little disturbed and confused. A lot of pessimism and negativity was creeping in. Career related anxiety. I had many unresolved family problems which haunted me. There was no financial support from the family. All these created a lot of anxiety and stress in me. After coming into Sahaja Yoga I am much more focused and calm. I know Shri Mataji will take care of me.

There were other Sahaja Yogis who related their concern of ethical dilemma what to do and what not to do; problem of loneliness; issue of losing self-identity by continuous sacrifice for the family etc. All these issues drive them to Sahaja Yoga for a possible moral solution.

Fifth important factor that has motivated people positively to join Sahaja Yoga is the major cultural shift of which we all have some experience. It is a turn away from life lived in terms of external or 'objective' roles, duties and obligation, and a turn towards life lived by references to one's subjective experience. While to Sahaja Yogis specially women who were homemakers I found that their joining of Sahaja Yoga was in search for their lost self. In fact some reflected from an optimistic note a housewives said:

In all these years I didn't get time for myself. I was so engrossed in my household duties that I hardly got time for myself. Now my son is well settled, I want to give time to myself. I always had a spiritual inclination. Sahaja Yoga has provided me that opportunity. Shri Mataji has always and will always guide our path.

Another lady depicting her anxiety resulting from role conflict stated that, 'Earlier I tried my best to fit into the society's stereotypes and resulting expectation from family members. Despite all this I didn't get due respect I

deserved. Then I realised there is no end to it.' She decided to heed to her subjective states what they are telling her and to act on their prompting by altering her life in ways that better suit her own unique needs, desires, capabilities and relational ties. The above illustration is a reflection of a broader trend of subjective turn in contemporary society where subjectives of individual become important. Life is no longer lived in terms of 'order' and meaning imposed from outside rather life is lived in deep connection with the unique experience of one's self. So, the contemporary landscape where the subjectives of each individual become "a", if not "the" unique source of significance of meaning and authority creates an experience of as an enduring and acutely felt *tensions* in their lives. Being religiously and spiritually inclined they look for solution within a *religious problem-solving perspective*. It is at this '*turning point*' they come in contact of Sahaja Yogis. They are spiritually inclined and predisposed; once they get an opportunity they give it a sincere try. Apart from the above micro-structural account of why people are driven towards Sahaja Yoga I am in favour of Wilson's (1982) proposition, 'that, in some measure, movements may *awaken* needs in particular individuals, giving them increased speciality in the terms of the movement's own ideology, and so defining the situations for prospective adherents, supplying both the sense of needs and the means of fulfilment'. Cults, like many new commercial enterprises, are in the business of 'consciousness raising' about needs and their satisfaction.

In terms of social profile of the Sahaja Yogis it is not surprising that the majority of them come primarily from urban educated middleclass backgrounds. The desire to be 'modern' and to keep pace with the rapid transformations in the objective conditions of their existence is a central concern in the lives of these individuals. These devotees routinely engage with a world of science and rationality which they see as an indispensable part of their lives. They represent what Babb (1987: 177) describes as a 'living and extremely influential subculture' of urban Indian in which the scientific outlook is 'well understood and held in high esteem'. The urban educated middleclass class has both the resources and inclination to participate in religious and spiritual practices. Resources, because participation in these Cults is not always for free. In terms of age group, majority of Sahaja Yogi are in middle age group of 30-50yrs and from middle class stable families. In fact most of them appear to have been quite active and accomplished. Interestingly studies of Cults in west reveals that membership of most of the Cults is disproportionately young. Barker found that fifty percent of membership of the Unification Church in Britain was between 21 and 26yrs old. Rochford (1985) reported fifty six percent of membership of ISKON was between 20-25 yrs old. In terms of education level, Sahaja Yogis on an average are markedly better educated than the general public. Majority of them had at least a college degree. The cosmology of Sahaja Yoga highlighting Kundalini, Chakras, vibrations etc. requires a certain degree of abstract thinking. Only those with

such capacity are attracted and most of all sustain as a Sahaja Yogi, else in wake of unfamiliar concepts and language they are either not attracted or drop from the movement once join it.

It is noteworthy that apart from different social profile of the Sahaja Yogis there is also variation in their level of commitment. Warrier provides a useful framework to categorise the Cults seeker on the basis of their commitment and refer to these here as the 'exclusivist' and 'inclusivist' orientations (2005:78). Exclusivists see their attachment to the Shri Mataji as precluding the possibility of simultaneous attachments to other gurus. They find it contemptible to owe allegiance to more than one guru at the same time, or to drift from guru to guru in the hope of tangible rewards. To be a 'tourist of gurus' (ibid.: 78), in their views, is to take an altogether frivolous approach to spirituality. It is like 'digging for water' in not one but several places at the same time. According to this logic, if you dig shallow holes in the ground at several places, you will not find water, whereas if you dig deep in one place, you must, sooner or later, find it. Exclusivists therefore try and remain loyal to their chosen guru. Unlike exclusivist, inclusivists attach themselves simultaneously to several gurus. Each individual selects his or her cluster of chosen gurus on the basis of personal preferences and the cluster composition keep changing over time, with older attachments yielding place to newer and more attractive ones.

Paul Heelas (1996) provides yet another useful framework to categories' the Cults seeker on the basis of their commitment. While analysing the types of people who join Cults, he distinguishes three levels of commitment. The most deeply committed are those he calls "fully engaged", people who have given over their lives to the spiritual quest. Some of them have abandoned conventional lifestyles in favour of the spiritual pursuit. They are often practitioners providing services to clients, or organizers of New Age events.

A lesser degree of commitment is found among the 'serious part timers.' Their new age spirituality is compartmentalized as a part of their life. It does not prevent them from living conventional careers. Generally in Sahaja Yoga I found that majority comprised of 'serious part timers' who balanced their professional, personal and spiritual life. They have resources and inclination but are not ready to be full time spiritual seekers. The number of Sahaja Yogis who are 'fully engaged' is less. They mainly comprised of retired government servant who had one source of income through pension. They also wielded influential position in Sahaja Yoga. The lowest level of commitment is found among the 'causal part-timers'. These are the consumers. They are interested in exotic and esoteric things, but are worry of getting deeply involved. It also includes those who were forced to come to Sahaja Yoga by near and dear ones.

Conclusion

The above analysis reveals how cults like Sahaja Yoga generate specific forms of social currents, attract specific categories of people, and inject certain values and practices. It challenges the usually applied 'brain washing theory' to explain the process of joining cults. The ethnographic details reveal people are driven to join Sahaja Yoga out of some personal need, and these are rooted in some, identifiable social conditions. Cults like Sahaja Yoga simply offer another way of life for the self-selected few rather than an alternative culture for the mankind. They add nothing substantial towards the culture by which a society might live or to perspective reintegration of society. Their members live in their own enclosed, encapsulated life worlds. It is ironical that while they preach love towards humanity, they have nothing kind to say about other cults. They talk as rivals in the god business: what they propagate is genuine stuff, what their rivals does is spurious. Spirituality apart from pertaining to inner being and true self; is also about community, and it can be nourished by the resources humanity shares. More than ever before people now have access to the variety of global spiritual heritage preserved by different faith and cultures. We are not only in ethnically, culturally and religiously plural world, but also in a spiritually plural world where we can learn much from our differences and share some of the treasures of our different spiritual traditions.

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NOTES

1. This use of first person 'I' instead of established term 'Researcher' is borne out of belief that act of research is also biographical and 'self' plays a very important role in the whole process: issues of interpretation and reflexivity. I am not reducing researcher into an anonymous, dispassionate, impersonal being
2. Organisation of participant observation along the lines of Barker's three stage in the study of Cults can be found in the works of Matthew R.Wood (1999) and Judith Coney (1999).
3. The primary data I got through the interviews with Sahaja Yogis is in tune to the theoretical premise of John Lofland and Rodney Stark (1965) influential model to explain conversion. This model grew out of their field research into the Moonies. Gathering the accounts of converts to this cult, and observing the attempts made at recruitment, Lofland and Stark formulated a seven step model of the process of conversion (Dawson 1996: 141-61).

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