

STAGNATION AND THE GROWTH OF THE RAJNEESH MOVEMENT IN NEPAL: THE NEW PARADIGM IN A NON-WESTERN CONTEXT

by

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(Under the Direction of David Smilde)

ABSTRACT

Based on a four month long ethnographic study among followers of Rajneesh in Kathmandu, Nepal, this study explains why Nepal's Rajneesh movement stagnated for about two decades, and why it suddenly started growing rapidly in the 1990s. To explain this phenomenon, I employ theoretical perspectives developed in the United States. First, this study shows that the new paradigm, which is said to be uniquely suited to the socio-historical conditions of the United States, can fruitfully be applied to a non-Western and non-Christian context of Nepal. Second, drawing on the sociology of culture and social movement theories, this study argues that we need a broad and dynamic concept of culture to fully comprehend the phenomenon of new religious movements. Third, this study explores locally-based unique factors, which contributed to the stagnation and the eventual growth of the Rajneesh movement in Nepal.

INDEX WORDS: Nepal, Rajneesh, New Religious Movement, New Paradigm, Guru, Rational Choice Theory, Hinduism

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Debate persists in the sociology of religion over the emergence, growth and decline of new religious movements (NRMs). The “new paradigm” over the past several years has made comprehensive efforts to explain the phenomenon of new religions. In sharp contrast to earlier efforts which postulated that cultural or structural changes create “demands” for new religions, the new paradigm, variously known as “rational choice” theories, the “religious economy” model or the “supply side” model, argues that the “religious demand” has been a “constant” feature of human society. This perspective holds that the “supply side” is the key to understanding religious phenomena. The new paradigm has generated important insights particularly in the context of the United States; and efforts have been made to apply the model to non-U.S. contexts. This study extends the paradigm to the non-Christian and non-Western contexts of Nepal.

Led by Rodney Stark and his collaborators, the new paradigm consists of loose ideas developed at the various levels of society over the past several decades (Warner 1993, 1997; Sherkat and Ellison 1999). It holds that the “supply” side which includes religious “producers” and their “marketing” strategies is the key to specific religious developments (Warner 1993, 1997; Finke and Iannaccone 1993; Finke and Stark 1992; Stark and Bainbridge 1985). In this view, government regulations profoundly affect the behavior of the religious market. So far as new religious movements are concerned, two inter-related models have been advanced: “Three models of cult formation” and a “model of success” for new religious movements (Stark 1987, 1996; Stark and Bainbridge 1985).

Stark and Bainbridge (1985) have proposed three models of “cult formation.” Their models include the psychopathological, the sub-cultural evolution and the entrepreneurial models. According to the psychopathological model, new religions are founded by individuals suffering from psychological distresses. When the leader meets followers suffering from similar problems, a new religion is born. This model is largely discarded in the sociological analysis of new religions. The sub-cultural evolution model, on the other hand, postulates that new religions are created by a group of like minded individuals. According to this model, a number of like-minded individuals come into contact, and in due course of time, they develop a new religion. The third or the entrepreneur model is at the heart of the supply side model. Also, this model is greatly relevant to the present study. In the entrepreneurial model, religious “entrepreneurs” play key roles in specific religious developments. They are the ones who manufacture and market novel otherworldly rewards. Successful religious entrepreneurs need managerial skills to run their religious firms; hence they are usually involved in one or more successful new religions before they establish their own organizations (Stark and Bainbridge 1985). Thus, in the supply side model, entrepreneurship plays an important role in the birth and growth of new religions.

The success or failure of religious movements is addressed by Stark’s (1987) model of success for new religious movements. In this model as well as his numerous publications over the past several decades, Stark has theorized that eight factors are crucial for the success or failure of a new religion: 1.) Cultural continuity, 2.) Medium tension, 3) Effective mobilization, 4) A normal age and sex structure, 5) A favorable ecology, 6) Network ties, 7) Secularization, and 8.) Adequate socialization. He restated these factors into ten formal propositions later in

1996¹. It should be noted that Stark, in lieu of the new paradigm, greatly privileges the supply side; nevertheless his ideas are not entirely antithetical to the traditional “demand” approach. In my study, I draw considerably on Stark’s theory of success.

In trying to explain why Nepal’s Rajneesh movement stagnated during the 1970s and 1980s and started growing rapidly beginning from the early 1990s, I extend the new paradigm to the context of Nepal. Since Nepal’s Rajneesh movement has started growing only recently, I would call this work a study of “growth” rather than “success.” Further, although all eight factors specified in Stark’s model are important, and my study discusses all of them, I chiefly focus on four factors: cultural continuity, favorable ecology, secularization and mobilization. First, these four factors have been the center of the controversy in the new paradigm in general (Sharot 2002, Sherkat 1997; Sherkat and Wilson 1995). Second, the rest of the factors can be explained in terms of these four major factors.

Based on my four month long ethnographic study, I will show that new paradigm can fruitfully be extended to non-U.S. contexts. On the other hand, drawing on advances made in the sociology of culture and social movement theories, I suggest that we need a more robust concept of culture. Hence, I offer a more dynamic nature of religious entrepreneurship than the previous studies have suggested. Second, I draw attention to additional factors which have played crucial roles in Nepal’s context. Particularly, I point out that the Guru-based religious authority and the mass media are crucial in Nepal’s case. Both of these factors remain under-explored or undermined or plainly ignored in previous works.

¹ Stark (1996) regrets that his 1987 model could not stimulate cross-cultural studies and reach to larger audiences because it was published in an edited book rather than an academic journal.

CHAPTER 2

THE INTERNATIONAL RAJNEESH MOVEMENT

The founder of the Rajneesh movement, popularly known as Osho Rajneesh², was born in 1931 in India. At the age of twenty-one, Rajneesh claimed that he became “enlightened.” Eventually, he earned a Master’s degree in philosophy, and spent several years teaching at the University of Jabalpur, India (Gordon 1993). During the 1960s, he traveled extensively throughout India challenging orthodox religious leaders in public debate and questioning traditional beliefs. Many stories circulate regarding Rajneesh’s quest for knowledge and his phenomenal memory retention power. With more than 600 books and thousands of audio and video tapes to his credit, official publications claim that Rajneesh is the world’s “most prolific author.”

Beginning from the early 1970s, Rajneesh began initiating his follower into his “neo-sannyas” movement. His followers subsequently came to be known as sannyasins or neo-sannyasins. Studies show that there was a steady growth of Western followers in the movement beginning from the early 1970s. By the end of the 1970s, while the movement was still based in India, Western followers tended to outnumber local ones (Mann 1993). Sharma (1985:117) notes that about 80% of about 200 commune inmates in Poona, in 1979, were “foreigners.” A few studies point out that Rajneesh’s early Western followers were “socially marginal,” who were “rootless drifters or gypsy types” (Mann 1993, Urban 1986). Surrounded by his Western disciples, Rajneesh came to the United States in 1981, and settled in a 64000 acre commune in

² Rajneesh tried on and threw away a number of spiritual titles before he adored the title “Osho” months before he “left His body” on the 19th January 1990 (Gordon 1993).

Oregon (Carter 1987; Urban 1986, 2000). At its height in the mid-1980s, it is estimated that several thousand sannyasins lived in various communes around the world, mostly in North America and Europe, and that Rajneesh's followers reached more than one hundred thousands by the mid-1980s. The Oregon commune in 1985 became a center of an international controversy, and was closed down by the US government³. Subsequently, Rajneesh returned to Poona, India, where his earlier commune was revamped. The Poona center has been serving as a *de facto* international headquarters ever since.

Academic studies consistently describe the Rajneesh movement as “fleeting,” “post-Fordist,” “inconsistent” and “hard to capture” (Goldman, 2005, Palmer and Sharma 1993, Carter 1987; Urban 1986, 2000, Palmer 1988). This is true to the movement's organizational as well as ideological developments. However, studies also have consistently pointed out “key” controversies in the Rajneesh movement. Commenting on the Oregon commune, Palmer and Sharma (1993:161) state that “for historians in the future, *Rajneeshpuram* perhaps will be remembered as the only utopian commune which practiced “free love” and yet was ruled by women.” Commune, “free sex” and “radical” gender roles have often been projected as the major controversies as well as attractions of the movement. Rajneesh spoke against the institution of marriage and the “production” of children in an already “over burdened” earth. He advocated a “free flow” of love. He saw the future of the humanity in a series of socialist style and self-sufficient spiritual communes. He strongly encouraged “female Buddhas” to take up leadership

³ Debate persists over the fall of the Rajneesh commune in Oregon. Controversies erupted on many counts, with the sannyasins and the U.S. federal and the local government making conflicting claims (see Goldman 2005; Carter 1987; Palmer and Sharma 1993). Rajneesh watchers, however, agree that the heart of the problem lied in the conflict between the commune residents and the local community. The authorities charged, among others, Rajneesh and his followers with tax evasion, unlawful building construction and violation of immigration laws. Later, Rajneesh followers accused the U. S. government of poisoning Rajneesh when he was held in detention

positions. Studies show that “power ladies” and “super moms” virtually monopolized the leadership of the movement (Palmer 1984; 1993).

The Guru did not offer a well-developed theology. During the Oregon commune period (1981-1985), a book called the *Rajneesh Bible* was brought out, which included details of a “Rajneesh religion.” But in the wake of the Oregon crisis in 1985, Rajneesh disowned the book claiming that it was published without his knowledge and consent (Carter 1987, Palmer 1984). Rajneesh asked his followers to jettison their “old attachments” including their religious beliefs. Studies suggest that Rajneesh drew on all major world religions, but espoused a Hindu concept of “enlightenment” as the ultimate goal for his followers (Sharma 1993). He pointed out that meditation was the only way to enlightenment. He is credited by his followers with inventing dozens of meditation techniques suitable for “modern man.” He further believed in the Hindu concept of reincarnation. He often projected his current work as his unfinished project, which he initiated in his past lives.

In the wake of the Oregon crisis in 1985, Rajneesh freed his follower from wearing orange robes and his locket, which had been the public symbols of the movement since the early 1970s. One of the controversial rituals practiced by the group has been “death celebrations” in which the funeral of a dead sannyasin is held in a festive mood. The Guru strongly advocated vegetarianism. His ideas on drugs and alcohol were often ambivalent. Critics point out that this was one of the major attractions of Rajneesh among the “counter-culture generation” in the West (Mann 1993). He repeatedly poked fun at politicians and priests. Rajneesh later characterized his followers as “Zorba the Buddha,” meaning that they were as materialistic as the Greek Zorba and as contemplating as Gautama the Buddha (Gordon 1993; Jina 1993; Urban 1986). He died in

Poona, India, in 1990. The international Rajneesh movement currently is said to be reeling under a “stagnation” phase (Goldman 2005).

CHAPTER 3

THE RAJNEESH MOVEMENT IN NEPAL

The Rajneesh movement came to Nepal in the early 1970s. According to Nepal's movement leaders, Rajneesh himself named his first center in Nepal "Asheesh Rajneesh Meditation Centre," which was established in 1974 in the capital city of Kathmandu. Early 1986 is important in the history of the movement in Nepal. That year Rajneesh came to Nepal and stayed for about one and half month in Kathmandu following his "expulsion" from the United States. Although Nepal had only a nominal independent media in the 1980s and despite the fact that the newspapers were preoccupied with the upcoming elections, I found that the media gave a prominent place to Rajneesh's arrival. Not surprisingly, the newspapers greatly highlighted Rajneesh's wealth and his ideas on sex and gender roles. A couple of them also mentioned that Rajneesh was an "anti-Hindu" Guru.

Newspaper reports stated that ministers, industrialists, high level bureaucrats, doctors and engineers were among the most enthusiastic visitors to the Guru. One newspaper reported that the then Prime Minister of Nepal, Lokendra Bahadur Chand, and one of his senior-most ministers showed keen interest in meeting the Guru⁴. The core followers and movement sympathizers in Nepal until today have been the same well-integrated and highly-regarded people.

⁴ Former Prim Minister Chand, along with another former Prim Minister K. P. Bhattarai, is now an active "Osho lover," who routinely visits Rajneesh centers in Kathmandu.

Table:1 Estimated Growth of Membership in Nepal

Year	1974	1977	1990	2000	2005
Members	1	25	1,500	8,000	20,000

When the international Rajneesh movement was growing rapidly in the 1970s through the mid-1985, Nepal's movement made little headway. One old sannyasin, for example, estimated the number of Nepali sannyasins at about 25 when he took sannyas from Rajneesh in 1977. After more than a decade since the first Rajneesh center was established in Nepal, only two more were added by the end of the 1980s; thus, there were only 3 meditation centers in Nepal in 1990. Based on my interviews, I estimated that the number of Rajneesh followers in 1990 was less than fifteen hundred.

Table: 2 Estimated Growth of Rajneesh Centers in Nepal

Year	1974	1990	1998	2005
Centers	1	3	29	54

Beginning from the early 1990s, the movement started growing rapidly. The number of meditation centers, for example, reached 29 in 1998 (Adhikary 1998). One of Nepal's well known leftist leaders, Mohan Bikram Singh (2000), termed the Rajneesh movement as the "fastest growing religious group" in Nepal. He (2000:21) estimated the total number of sannyasins at eight thousands in 2000. Rajneesh centers in recent years have started penetrating areas far off the traditional hub of Kathmandu. There were 54 meditation centers in Nepal in

2005; and Nepali sannyasins claimed that more than one thousand people joined the movement each year. Currently, I estimate the number of Rajneesh followers well over 20,000⁵.

Before the death of Rajneesh in 1990, Nepal's Rajneesh followers were part of the international movement; hence, they had little new to offer. Moreover, due to Nepal's political environment, survival rather than an aggressive "marketing" was the major goal of the movement. A major local publication in 1985, published bilingually in English and Nepali, included "selected" articles from Rajneesh's published works (Bharti, Satyarthi and Bharti 1985). A major shift in the groups' beliefs, practices and organizational set up took place after 1990. Later in the paper, I argue that these shifts played crucial roles in the rapid growth of the movement beginning from the early 1990s. I highlight how these shifts were interwoven with entrepreneur logics as well as broader structural and cultural conditions.

Although Nepali sannyasins as a whole tend to move away from the larger society, a continuum, rather than a "strict" or "loose" religious group, best represents the actual practices of sannyasins⁶. A few of Rajneesh's followers have abandoned traditional religions completely;

⁵ Independent and systematic data were hard to obtain. I believe that the figures used in this study are reasonably closer to the "reality." During the mid-1980s, Nepal's sannyasins tried to live in a commune style residence, which they abandoned within months. Two communes were established before 1990 outside Kathmandu. Sannyasins are reluctant to furnish the details. It appears that those communes were established by non-Nepali individual sannyasins as private property. One was closed in the late 1980s and the next was recently converted into a resort as a private company. The existing meditation centers do not have a hierarchical structure and a paid clergy; they seem to be coordinating activities in an ad hoc basis. It turned out that most of the Rajneesh centers outside Kathmandu were housed in sannyasins' private homes and rented halls. In December 2005, a Nepali language newspaper quoted one senior sannyasin leader as saying that there were more than 20,000 "mad" people in Nepal. The sannyasin leader was responding to those [occasional media reports, moral guardians of the society and a few radical left groups] who often characterize Rajneesh followers as "mad." Apparently, he was pleased by the growth of the movement.

⁶ The Osho Tapoban, the largest and oldest Rajneesh center in Nepal, officially recognizes four "major festivals:" Rajneesh's birthday on December 11, Rajneesh enlightenment day on March 31, Guru Purnima (the full moon day) in July and Rajneesh's death celebration on January 19. The Guru Purnima is one of the Hindu festivals, which highlights the role of a Guru in the spiritual development of the disciples. None of the major Hindu and Buddhist festivals features on the official list of the movement. However, sannyasins celebrate traditional rituals and festivals in varying degrees, and the movement organization does not officially bar members from participating in and celebrating traditional rituals and festivals.

others have not. For example, I came to know at least five cases of “death celebrations,” which indicate that a few of them are already far removed from the traditional religious practices. Others said that they were practicing traditional rituals because they did not want to offend their relatives and communities. The majority of the sannyasins practice traditional rituals and festivals selectively.

It should be noted, however, that Nepal’s Rajneesh sannyasins strongly differentiate themselves from the larger society primarily on the basis of their practice of meditation. Often sannyasins encouraged me to take part in meditation sessions. They believed that people unaware of the “taste” of mediation could not do justice to their movement. They view the larger society as “passive,” and put a very high premium on active meditative life. “Progress” in meditation means a higher “status” within the community. “Wave,” “energy,” “blissfulness” and so on are part and parcel of the every day sannyasin vocabulary. One old sannyasin told me that there was nothing in their beliefs and practices except meditation. Every sannyasin I interviewed tended to share his view. It might appear that Nepal’s Rajneesh followers are just trying to add meditation to their traditional religious practices; in fact, their belief systems are more complex than this. They believe that once “progress” in meditation is made, the “futility” of traditional religions becomes apparent leading to an enlightened state of mind.

CHAPTER 4

DATA AND METHOD

The bulk of the data employed in this study comes from my four month long ethnographic study among the followers of Rajneesh in Kathmandu, the capital city of Nepal. I carried out my research at the end of 1998 and early 1999. I interviewed forty sannyasins, including movement leaders. I re-interviewed sannyasins, particularly the movement leaders, in 2005, primarily for the purpose of an update. During the course of my ethnographic study, I participated in dozens of “celebrations” and took part in a three day meditation camp as a “seeker.” Second, I also use a number of official Rajneesh publications and media reports as my source of data. Finally, I have benefited from my numerous discussions with movement sympathizers, popularly known as “Osho lovers” in Nepal.

At the time of my research at the end of 1998, there were four Rajneesh centers in Kathmandu. The Osho Tapoban established in 1990 was the largest in Nepal; and it was also, in principle, modeled after Rajneesh’s idea of a “commune.” The Tapoban was led by Swami Ananda Arun. Swami Arun, the first official follower of Rajneesh in Nepal, was one of the oldest and closest disciples of Rajneesh. Swami Arun and the Tapoban have been the focal points of the Rajneesh movement in Nepal for more than a decade now. I carried out a number of intensive interviews with Swami Arun.

An internal power struggle among Kathmandu sannyasins coincided with my research period. This both facilitated and hindered my research. A few sannyasins were distrustful of my “motives.” Others, however, were eager to tell me their stories. Despite all this, on the average, I

found Rajneesh sannyasins quite cooperative. Also due to the internal power struggle, about one third of my respondents did not want to singularly identify with the Osho Tapoban. They were affiliated to the Tapoban until very recently, however.

I met my respondents primarily through accidental encounters at meditation centers, and the rest through a snowball sampling. To minimize a “network bias,” I made conscious efforts *not* to interview more than one sannyasin from a single household. Half of my respondents were those who took sannyas when Rajneesh was still alive and the rest after his death. Thus, my respondents had been in sannyas life ranging from a few months to more than two decades. Although I interviewed a few “silent” sannyasins, I could not locate a single “ex-sannyasin” during my study period. Seven of my respondents were women⁷. I interviewed sannyasins in meditation centers, in their homes, and restaurants. Interviews lasted from one hour to eight hours in a few cases. I repeatedly interviewed a few of them, who wholeheartedly cooperated with me.

My respondents included both “original” Kathmandu residents as well as those who had migrated to the city over the past two decades. In my interviews, an overwhelming majority of my respondents identified themselves with the “middle” and “upper-middle” class backgrounds; only three of the forty respondents identified themselves with a “lower” class background. Thirty of my respondents were either job holders or self-employed in business and industry. Eighteen of

⁷ Although I wanted to interview a few more woman sannyasins, either they rejected or hesitated to give me interviews. Most of them became sannyasins on the “advice” of their husbands. I came to know at least two cases in which female sannyasins were forced to give up their sannyas life by their husbands’ families after they were married to non-sannyasin husbands. The movement until the early 1990s was exclusively male dominated. The reason of the low participation of women, perhaps, is the strong patriarchy prevalent in the Nepali society. Even now, the movement leadership in Nepal, in sharp contrast to the movement’s experience in North America and Europe, is exclusively male-dominated. Due to their low level of participation in the leadership and organizational activities, I also found female sannayasins some how less useful than their male counterparts to address many of my questions.

my forty respondents held a bachelor's degree or higher on the day of initiation⁸. It should be noted that student sannyasins continued their study even after their initiation. Eleven of my respondents had science and technology backgrounds. Similarly, twenty nine of my respondents identified themselves with Hinduism as their family religion. The rest were Buddhists. Twenty two of them were married at the time of their initiation. Of the forty sannyasins I interviewed, twenty nine were below the age of thirty on the day of initiation. Those who took sannyas in the 1990s were younger than the before-1990 group on the day of initiation.

⁸ As a whole, the Rajneesh followers can be termed a highly educated group in Nepal's context.

CHAPTER 5

STATE REGULATIONS AND NEPAL'S RELIGIOUS MARKET

The new paradigm postulates that pluralism is the “natural state” of the religious economy. The liberalization of the “religious economy” is thought to impact the prospect for a NRM positively. Stark (1987: 19) notes that “when a single religious organization has been granted monopoly rights in a religious economy, backed by the coercive power of the state, it will be more difficult for new faiths to flourish.”

When the Rajneesh movement began in Nepal in the early 1970s, Nepal had an autocratic political system. The Nepali state was constitutionally termed a “Hindu Kingdom,” and activities of non-Hindu religions, with a possible exception of Buddhism, were guarded jealously. Religious proselytization was defined as a crime against the state. Hence, in Nepal's religious economy, only those which identified themselves with the traditional Hinduism or Buddhism could do their business without risking the wrath of the authorities. Not surprisingly, a number of traditional Hinduism-affirming new movements like the one led by the Sai Baba and various India-based “conservative” Hindu denominations like *Vaishnava* flourished greatly with an active support of the state. Even a “world-affirming” religion like the Transcendental Meditation was taken as suspect, and its efforts to set up its base in Nepal was thwarted by the government in the early 1980s.

Nepal's Rajneesh followers, under the autocratic regime, despite quite a few sympathizers and followers in the ruling establishment, received threats from the state authorities, and their efforts to register a formal organization were denied by the government. At

times, Rajneesh followers practicing street solicitations were detained and harassed by the authorities. The authorities were particularly concerned with the potential political fall-outs of religious movements. Any organization not aligned to the state, political or otherwise, was deemed politically subversive. The movement leaders told me that “the authorities were often alarmed by words like *revolution* in the titles of a few publications authored by Rajneesh.” Hence, a “black market” was the only option for the movement leaders under the monopoly religious economy before the political change in Nepal in 1990.

A popular movement put an end to the autocratic regime in 1990, which greatly transformed Nepal’s religious economy. Although Nepal’s “democratic” constitution promulgated in 1990 retained the official “Hindu” label, the religious economy, at least, for “Hindu looking” religions was liberalized to a great extent. During the early 1990s, strident voices were heard in Kathmandu streets for a “secular” constitution. This was something people could hardly imagine during the autocratic regime. It is obvious that religious “firms” increased greatly after the political change in 1990. One of Nepal’s widely circulated weekly magazines in 2004 cited about a dozen “new religions” in Kathmandu. Many of them were established after democracy. Among those listed in the magazine were Maharshi Yogi’s Transcendental Meditation and little-known “laptop Gurus” (Wagle and Adhikari 2004).

With democracy came the people’s rights to form an organization of their own choice. Hence, the relationship between the state and the organizational development of the Rajneesh movement is direct and obvious. It was due to the political change in 1990 that the Rajneesh movement leaders became able to register their organization and set up the Osho Tapoban⁹. The

⁹ According to sannyasins, initially they purchased the land for the Tapoban in the name of three individual sannyasins. After the political change in 1990, the ownership of the commune was transferred to a non-profit “trustee.”

importance of organizations and “resources” is well documented in the social movement literature. The Tapoban ultimately proved to be an important base from where the movement was launched in a full scale. My respondents openly appreciated the role of the political change in 1990. They told me that their movement could not have reached the present phase without the political change and the subsequent “liberalization” of the religious economy.

Democracy not only offered the room for the organizational development and prevented the movement followers from state harassment, it also brought with it modern and “free” media, which ultimately proved to be valuable resources for the movement. After democracy, restrictions on the importation of books and newspapers were lifted in Nepal. Books authored by Rajneesh and others got free access to the Nepali market. This period coincided with the explosion of the printing industry in India. Affordable Rajneesh books from India flooded the Nepali market. Moreover, these publications came in plain Hindi or English, which were readily accessible to Nepali readers. My respondents frequently showed their displeasure toward traditional religious books in Sanskrit language, which was hardly accessible to them. Many sannyasins and Osho lovers were first attracted toward Rajneesh through these books. Often these people first read provocatively titled Rajneesh books like “*From Sex to Super Consciousness*” and “*I Teach You Death*.” Swami Arun once complained that people just read the titles of Rajneesh’s books, and unduly made “cheap” comments on him (Singh 2000).

Hence, the autocratic regime before 1990 seems to be one of the important factors, which hindered the growth of the movement for about two decades in Nepal. The Rajneesh movement during this period functioned in a “black market” situation. After democracy was established in 1990, the movement leaders seized upon the opportunity to expand their work. Democracy, in this sense, worked as an important resource for the growth of the movement.

CHAPTER 6

SECULARIZATION AND THE SOCIO-CULTURAL CONTEXT

Stark (1987) in his success model argues that a “favorable ecology” is necessary for the success of a new religious movement. He observes that apart from an “unregulated religious economy,” a condition in which traditional faiths have become “weak” is especially suited for the growth of a new movement. Further, the religious economy model defines “secularization” as a “self-limiting” process (Stark and Bainbridge 1985). As established religions fail to fulfill the people’s demands, they inadvertently make room for new religions either through innovative “cults” or “schismatic” movements. Disruptive social conditions are further thought to be conducive to the success of new religious movements.

In the absence of relevant studies like large scale surveys in Nepal, it is hard to gauge the people’s participation in religious affairs and their religious commitment. But the peculiarity of Hinduism, as it is practiced in Nepal, should be noted (see also Sharot 2002). Nepal’s Hinduism does not have a separate and central authority which legitimately can lay down theological or institutional guidelines to the people. People are born in Hinduism without ever becoming a member in any formal religious organization. Hindu priests, popularly known as the *Bahun*s in Nepal, exert their influence upon their clientele in local settings; and religious rituals are largely held at the family or kinship level. The Nepali state has remained the *de facto* guardian of Hinduism. Hindu organizations that emerged in recent decades, largely under the influence of Hindu fundamentalist politics in India, are religio-political organizations. They serve political rather than religious ends.

Historically, this has led to two contradictory developments in Nepal. On the one hand, because of the localness in their religious practices, the Hindus in Nepal have been “open” to new religious ideas, and are often deft at synchronizing alien traditions (Bista 1990). On the other hand, many “inhuman” traditions like the caste system and “senseless” rituals and food taboos went on unhindered often with the complicity of the state. This condition was not to last long, however. The growth of secular education and Westernization beginning from the 1950s often contradicted people’s deeply held traditional beliefs and practices (Bista 1990; Whelpton 2005; Gellner, Pfaff-Czarnecka and Whelpton 1997). A major and highly controversial publication by a Nepal’s well-known anthropologist in 1990 accused Nepal’s high caste ruling elites of spreading “fatalism” to the people, thus contributing to Nepal’s underdevelopment (Bista 1990). Significantly, the percentage of the people identifying themselves with Hinduism decreased from 89.5 percent in 1981 to 86.5 percent in the 1991 census and further 80.6 percent in 2001 (Nepal Census Report 2003)¹⁰. In this sense, traditional Hinduism had weakened to a great extent by the end of the 1980s.

The Rajneesh movement in Nepal grew in this broad socio-cultural environment. Although my respondents faultlessly believed that their past lives explained their present search for “enlightenment,” they repeatedly showed their displeasure over traditional “conservative” and “ritualistic” beliefs and food taboos. Growing Westernization seems to be one of the

¹⁰ Nepal is a highly diverse country. People are divided on the basis of race, caste, language and religion. Nepal’s ruling elites comprising Nepali language speaking high caste hill Hindus have, historically, held the country as a “natural” Hindu country. After the political change in Nepal in 1990, various ethnic leaders contested the government’s census figures. I believe that the decrease in Hindu population beginning from the 1991 census also has to do with ethnic movements in the post-democracy Nepal as ethnic movement leaders asked people not to identify with Hinduism and other government-sponsored census categories. A strong aversion to the Hindu caste system was evident in the movement as ethnic movement leaders claimed that traditional Hinduism had relegated Nepal’s ethnic people into lower caste groups (see Gellner, Pfaff-Czarnecka and Whelpton 1997).

important factors contributing to the weakening of the traditional religions. Here is one typical high caste Hindu sannyasin on food taboos:

“Before I became a sannyasin [when I was not a vegetarian], I always wondered why my parents allowed me to eat goat meat, but not pork or chicken. How is it possible that those who eat mutton go to heaven and those who eat chicken and pork to hell? I sensed that there was something wrong in our religion. I now practice vegetarianism strictly. I now believe that vegetarianism helps spiritual growth, but for different reasons than what my parents taught me.”

This statement shows how the traditional Hinduism had failed to confront or accommodate the changing worldviews among the educated people. This also shows a growing influence of “scientific” worldviews on religious beliefs. The sannyasin quoted above clarified to me that he viewed different types of meat in terms of their “protein contents.” Sannyasins claimed that vegetarianism did not guarantee a place in heaven as claimed by traditional Hindu and Buddhist religions; rather a vegetarian stood a better chance of progressing in meditation. In their views, traditional religions had lost a “scientific” connection. They often claimed that modern science supported their practices. Here, we see that even though scientific rationality was initially instrumental in creating doubt about traditional religions, it was a short-lived phenomenon. As soon as the sannyasins came across “superior” religious products offered by the Rajneesh movement, they fell back to a religious fold. This underscores the importance of a timely supply of superior religious products. The Rajneesh movement came as a promising supplier in “right place at the right time” (Stark 1987:19).

In the wake of democracy in 1990, Nepal witnessed widespread ethnic, linguistic and regional movements, and the second half of the 1990s saw unprecedented political violence. Nepal's socio-political conditions in many ways in the second-half of the 1990s were comparable to America's "turbulent" 1960s. The rise of the educated middle class, urbanization and the Nepali state's inability to deliver goods rendered everything, from the state to the tradition, suspect. My respondents in their biographical portrayals depicted their moral, ethical and existential dilemmas they faced in the years before they became sannyasins¹¹. These included general displeasure towards religious rituals and beliefs including the caste system, conflict with parents, and a general disbelief towards the political authority. Moreover, the general loss of "meaning" was equally central in their biographical portrayals. One woman sannyasin brought up in a "middle class" family said:

"[Before I became a sannyasin] I didn't have any behavior that society normally terms negative. But I was frustrated with my ways. I was an ambitious girl. Truly speaking, I was running after name and fame. But the world is corrupted. Sannyas really brings about drastic changes in one's life. Had I not come here, I would have been a prostitute. I remember a director of a soap opera who wanted to sexually exploit me. People in the outside world see women nothing more than sex objects. But the number of the predators is very low here...Things have improved now."

¹¹ Although sannyasins often described to me the efficacy of their practices in solving problems like drugs, alcohol, and emotional traumas, consistent with their class backgrounds, they often downplayed a correspondence between their personal problems and new practice. In the end, they believed that their current life was the continuation of the past ones.

This response indicates how the loss of meaning was ubiquitous among sannyasins. “I was frustrated for no reason,” “our society is corrupt,” “our society needs an overall” and so on were frequently expressed themes in my interviews.

Rajneesh followers’ disdain toward Nepal’s political authorities and traditional religion was evident in their every day practices. One of the typical moments I observed was the sannyasins’ reaction toward political leaders and priests during *Satsang* rituals. One of the rituals Nepal’s Rajneesh followers have practiced for long is “*Satsang*” in which sannyasins gather in a large number to watch and listen to Rajneesh’s (audio or video-taped) lectures. Every Saturday – indeed this is not restricted to Saturdays - Rajneesh followers and sympathizers gather in the Osho Tapoban and other meditation centers in a large number. The sannyasins sit in large halls to watch and listen to Rajneesh’s recorded lectures. As the tape unrolls, a pin-drop silence follows. When Rajneesh castigates – he always does in one or the other pretext - traditional priests and politicians, sannyasins burst into laughter and joy. Not surprisingly, in my interviews, sannyasins often depicted priests and politicians as the chief villains of society.

These broader cultural and structural changes were important in that they weakened the hold of traditional religions in people’s lives. Although these changes undoubtedly accelerated in the 1990s, it is possible that many of the socio-cultural factors described above probably were present before 1990. But the Rajneesh movement could not achieve any substantial growth during the 1970s and 1980s. This again underscores the role of state regulations and entrepreneurship in the growth of the movement.

CHAPTER 7

DEFECTION AND THE RISE OF THE LOCAL AUTHORITY

The fact that defection gives rise to new entrepreneurs is not new in the religious economy model. Stark and Bainbridge (1985) predict that schism in religious organizations usually occurs on the basis of “pre-existing” networks. Bromley (2004) notes that the practice of sending individuals on prolonged missions often disrupts the “internal solidarity” of the movement which may eventually lead to “disaffiliation.” This was the situation in Nepal. Swami Arun was asked to stay and initiate local followers in Nepal since 1974. He, thus, remained cut-off from the core group around Rajneesh, and the Western disciples rose to prominence as the movement progressed. By the time Rajneesh died in 1990, Swami Arun had already created a sizable number of Rajneesh followers in Nepal. Ultimately, this paved the way for his defection from the international movement core.

Following the death of Rajneesh in 1990, an intense power struggle ensued between the Rajneesh “headquarters” in Poona, India and the Nepali followers. Nepali sannyasins led by Swami Arun rejected the headquarters’ “control efforts” arguing that Rajneesh never had wanted to create yet “another Vatican.” Ultimately, the Inner Circle, the spiritual body formed by Rajneesh to look after his legacy days before his death, in Poona, India, formally “expelled” Swami Arun in 1996.

Swami Arun on his part showed keen religious entrepreneurship as the conflict between him and the headquarters intensified in the early 1990s. Local cultural resources came in handy to rescue him from the “mess.” He countered Poona’s “control efforts” by proclaiming his own

spiritual charismas. He claimed that he had gained special spiritual powers through meditation. He, frequently, mentioned that he talked to Rajneesh in dreams and meditative states. He also claimed that he had the knowledge of his past lives, and that he visited his one of his homes in far western Nepal, where he was born and raised in his previous life; he further told his followers and the media that he was a “liberated” soul requiring no further birth in flesh and blood (Singh 2000). It should be noted that these claims were consistent with Rajneesh’s teachings.

The claim of Swami Arun made immense sense in the local context as charismatic qualities based on spiritual practices are widely believed in Nepal. Similarly, the idea of reincarnation and past *karma* are part of every day vocabulary in “folk” Hindu-Buddhist tradition. The rise of Swami Arun at the center of the local movement had important consequences for organizational development and mobilization. Shinn (1985:106) in his analysis of the Guru tradition in the Hare Krishna movement observes that:

“unlike the “horizontal *communitas*” of most religious communities that build commitment through peer support and social networks structures, the [Hindu] guru/disciple bonding reflects a “vertical *communitas*” which links the devotee to a transcendent divinity through an ascending succession of saints of whom his Guru is the most immediate.”

This peculiarity of the Guru tradition nicely worked in favor of Swami Arun. Nepal’s sannyasins continued to hold Rajneesh as their “ultimate” Guru, but as the “most immediate” Guru, Swami Arun easily won the loyalties of Rajneesh’s Nepali followers. Nepali sannyasins believed that Swami Arun was an “enlightened” master. Sannyasins told me that he was a *Sad*

Guru (a true guru), a popular term often used by his followers to revere Rajneesh. This Guru-disciple relationship was often consciously reinforced in every day practice. In the main meditation Hall of the Tapoban, a portrait of Swami Arun has been juxtaposed along with Rajneesh and other “enlightened” masters. I observed that many sannyasins first put their heads to the feet of Swami Arun before they did to Rajneesh¹². He, frequently, writes about the “importance” of a living Guru in the spiritual growth of disciples. A sannyasin expressed his views about Swami Arun’s organizational and spiritual role in this way:

“Everybody here including me accepts that Swami Arun has achieved spiritual powers through meditation. He is an enlightened Guru. Sometimes I burst into tears by his mere touch [because of the “energies” passed on to me by him]. He is the center of the commune. You might have seen a pole even in a pond. Nothing is possible without a center.”

Swami Arun thus functioned both as organizational and spiritual centers for the movement in Nepal. Although there had been instances of power struggle within the Tapoban, Swami Arun was never challenged seriously.

The role of the central authority based on the Guru tradition is imperfectly realized in the new paradigm possibly because of its excessive reliance in the American setting. Stark (1987), based on one of the studies among the Hare Krishna followers in the U.S., labels the Hindu Guru system as an example of an inefficient organization. My observation in Nepal shows that the problem in the Hare Krishna movement in the U.S. was not the problem of the Guru authority

¹² Putting one’s head to the feet of the Guru is a common way of showing respect to the Guru among Nepal’s Hindus.

system as such; rather it was the problem of too many Gurus in an alien environment. Far from being an “inefficient” organization, the Guru system is well grounded into the local context, and functions as efficiently as formal religious organizations in the West. Rochford (1989), in sharp contrast to Stark (1987), points out to the lack of the central authority as one of the factors for the “failure” of a splintered group in the Hare Krishna movement in Los Angeles.

The rise of Swami Arun to the leadership contributed greatly to local mobilization efforts. My respondents explicitly expressed satisfaction over the fact that they had severed their relationship with the Rajneesh headquarters in India. They often claimed that the lack and difficulty of communication were “hindering” their work in the pre-defection phase. One sannyasin, referring to the twenty-one members in the Inner Circle in the Rajneesh headquarters in India told me: “There are two dozen self-declared Oshos; whom do you deal with?” Indeed, one of the reasons of the conflict between the India headquarters and the Osho Tapoban was the former’s restrictions on numbers and length of meditation sessions Swami Arun could conduct in Nepal; the headquarters also wanted to restrict the number of sannyasins Swami Arun could initiate in Nepal. One could assume that these restrictions could have put limitations on the growth of the movement in Nepal. Although the claims of sannyasins should be taken cautiously, the physical proximity of a widely accepted central authority was an important factor in the current growth of the movement.

A civil engineer by training, Swami Arun owned and managed one of Nepal’s most successful engineering consultancy firms. His experience in a successful secular business firm came in handy to manage organizational activities in the Tapoban. Inadvertently, he could show to the people – and respond to his critics - how “religion” was not antithetical to science and the secular world. This, indeed, fitted nicely with Rajneesh’s characterization of his followers as

“Zorba the Buddha” (Jina 1993; Urban 1986). His “intellectual” background, further, helped him befriend liberal politicians, bureaucrats, journalists, academicians and businesspersons. My discussion with Rajneesh sympathizers [Osho lovers] also confirmed that the soft-spoken Swami was the key attraction among them. The Osho lovers concurred that “hard work” done by the Tapoban sannyasins, particularly Swami Arun, was one of the reasons for the rapid “growth” of the movement. Freed from restrictions and “guidelines” from the India headquarters, beginning from the early 1990s Swami Arun organized dozens of meditation sessions throughout the country, and confronted movement critics publicly. Moreover, he was the key person to establish the Osho Tapoban and inspired people to set up dozens of Rajneesh centers throughout the country. He has already trained hundreds of volunteers, who are ready to expand the work of Rajneesh. Thus, my study shows that the rise of Swami Arun as a central religious authority worked nicely in Nepal’s context. Nepal’s Rajneesh movement is largely an example of a Guru entrepreneurship.

CHAPTER 8

ENTREPRENEURSHIP AND CULTURAL WORK

Stark (1987, 1996) recognizes the role of a “cultural continuity” in the success of a new religion. But his concept of culture is limited to the “continuity” of theological and belief systems. For example, Stark (1987, 1996) argues that the early Christianity and Islam could develop into major world faiths because they built upon or drew on many existing belief systems or religious imageries. I agree with Stark, but his conceptualization of culture is too narrow to shed light on religious entrepreneurship. He has little to say about how religious movements draw on broader cultural resources. Hence, we need a broader and robust concept of culture to get a nuanced process of religious entrepreneurship. Social movement and sociology of culture theories are particularly helpful in this regard (Snow et al 1986; Swidler 1995, 1986; Sewell 1992). These theories help understand how entrepreneurial and cultural logics are deeply interrelated, and how entrepreneurship is restricted or facilitated by cultural repositories.

Movement frames illustrate nicely cultural works in social movements (Snow et al 1986). However, it should be noted that movement frames are not rigid objects. In my study, for example, only after movement leaders defected from the movement core did certain frames become possible; and changes in the socio-cultural and political environment often facilitated or constrained particular frames. Finally, the meaning of the frames often changed over time as the context changed; thus, these frames carried with them multiple meanings. The fact that a number of sannyasins explicitly recognize these frames as “strategies” hints that the movement leaders use frames quite consciously.

As noted earlier, Rajneesh espoused the Hindu concept of “enlightenment” as the ultimate goal for his followers (Sharma 1993). Hence, Nepal’s Rajneesh followers, who came from Hindu and Buddhist backgrounds, had little to quarrel with the goal of the international Rajneesh movement. Part of the cultural work focused on the most controversial aspects of Rajneesh’s teachings: commune, “free love” and radical gender roles. Finally, cultural work helped the movement gain a distinct identity vis-à-vis the international Rajneesh movement. It is noteworthy that the “inconsistent” and “multi-vocal” nature of Rajneesh’s teachings often facilitated cultural works. Here, I describe an inter-play between religious entrepreneurship and broader cultural resources in terms of movement frames.

The Suitable-to-Soil Frame

The new paradigm postulates that a monopoly religious economy backed by coercive state power gives rise to a religious black market (Stark and Bainbridge 1985). In a black market situation, survival rather than aggressive growth strategies are likely to be followed by movement entrepreneurs. Further, cultural innovations are likely to be important survival strategies. One of the most widely used cultural innovations by Nepal’s Rajneesh movement leaders during the pre-democracy period was the “suitable-to-soil” frame. Put simply, this frame says that Rajneesh’s teachings should be used cautiously and creatively keeping in mind the local sensitivities.

During the repressive regime, this frame was used to shield the movement from the authorities and moral guardians of the larger society. Sannyasins told me that when the authorities questioned them, they often used this frame. They selectively produced Rajneesh’s commentaries on Hinduism and Buddhism as evidence that Rajneesh was not an “anti-Hindu”

Guru or he was not a politician. Evidence also points out that due to this frame, the movement succeeded in lowering the tension with moral guardians of the Nepali society considerably. For example, in 1986, when Rajneesh came to Nepal, a number of newspapers raised the issue of Rajneesh's "anti-Hindu" instances as well as his sex and wealth scandals. By the end of the 1990s, a number of "Hindu" leaders were seen hobnobbing with the Rajneesh followers.

Subsequently, this frame worked well to recruit potential members from the more tradition-oriented strata of society. In line with the suitable-to-soil frame, efforts were made to identify and associate Rajneesh with traditional Hindu Gods and saints. In newspaper articles and interviews, movement leaders frequently contrasted Rajneesh with Buddha, popular Hindu Gods and locally well-known saints like Shivapuri Baba¹³.

Second, the same frame was widely used at the time of the power struggle between Nepal's Rajneesh followers and the movement headquarters in India in the early 1990s. Swami Arun's response to one of my questions summarized nicely the theme and the function of the frame:

"Some people have misunderstood freedom as '*Uchhringkhalata*' [a Nepali word for thoughtless and shameless acts] but I have not allowed it in Nepal...Freedom doesn't mean to break the established norms of the society. This type of freedom can sometimes prove to be fatal. We have freedom here but it's not like the freedom in Poona [among Westerners]. I am against them. We don't allow that kind of freedom. We are more disciplined."

¹³ A major mid-1980s publication (Bharti, Satyarthi and Bharti 1985) by Nepal's Rajneesh followers includes Rajneesh's commentary on Shivapuri Baba, who is a well-known "saint" in Kathmandu.

Here, the key is “we” versus “them.” First, this cultural work was explicitly directed toward gaining a distinct identity vis-à-vis the international Rajneesh movement. Hence, the Rajneesh headquarters was cast as “reckless,” and Nepal’s movement as “thoughtful and disciplined.”

As noted earlier, sex or “free love” was one of the major controversies and attractions in the international Rajneesh movement. Sex, particularly female sexuality, is jealously guarded in Nepali society. Thus, the local leaders interpreted Rajneesh’s ideas on sex as his way of teaching “Westerners” spiritual lessons. Hence, the ideas were not suitable to – or meant for – the Nepali society. One sannyasin claimed that the idea of “free sex” was just a “trick” played by Rajneesh to teach and test the patience of the people:

“Rajneesh called his female sannyasins *Ma* [the mother]. This was his strategy to prevent sexual relations among his disciples. But many male sannyasins maintain sexual relations with female sannyasins while addressing them as the mother. This is a great misunderstanding of Guru’s teachings on the part of the male sannyasins...it is a pathetic practice...in the name of meditation” (cited in Adhikary 1998:31).

This sannyasin illustrates nicely how multi-vocality in Rajneesh’s teachings helped transform his own teachings into the local cultural standards. This sannyasin compares female sannyasins with a biological mother. Similarly, the idea of the commune¹⁴ and women’s leadership¹⁵ were undermined in popular discourses as “suitable only to the West.”

¹⁴ A few viewed the establishment of communes as fundamental to their spiritual growth; others thought that communes should be used as “retirement homes.” The official documents do not present the Osho Tapoban as an exclusive commune. They describe the place as a place for meditation and even recreation. Interestingly, a number

The suitable-to-soil frame contributed greatly to the growth of the movement in the 1990s. As the idea of an exclusive commune was abandoned, the movement could prevent itself from becoming a target of the larger society; and it could have proved too demanding for the potential members. Living in the secular world also helped extend sannyasins' networks into the larger society creating possibilities of continuous recruitment. The efficacy of the frame can be assessed by the fact that a number of aging parents of sannyasins have become sannyasins and that there was a dramatic surge of female sannyasins in the second half of the 1990s. Movement leaders as well as female sannyasins told me that due to their cultural work, their "image" had improved over the years, and particularly, the tendency to look down upon female sannyasins as "shameless" and "immoral" had decreased markedly.

Finally, this frame resonated well with the broader political discourses. Nepal's ruling elites long, particularly during the pre-1990 dictatorial period, have projected India, Nepal's southern neighbor, as a political threat and the "West" a cultural one (Bista 1990). The thirty year long dictatorial regime (1960-1990) in Nepal was justified as a "suitable-to-soil" political system. The "West" is as much admired for its material prosperity as is castigated for its "cultural poverty." Bashing Western cultural "debasement" long has been the favorite past time particularly among the moral guardians of the society. Hence, the dilution of Rajneesh's radical ideas on sex, gender roles and commune in their public discourse proved to be an attractive option for the movement leaders. Instead of "Western" and alien ideas, a suitable-to-soil version of Rajneesh was offered as the "best" option to the people.

of Rajneesh meditation centers or "communes" in Nepal are called "Mandir" (a popular Nepali word for Hindu temples). Few live in the communes as full timers.

¹⁵ Male leaders often claimed that they had not "blocked" women from taking leadership positions. Female sannyasins, however, told me that they were never consciously encouraged to do so. Women and men alike believed that who took leadership positions was not important as far as the "results" were produced. If any thing, I found that the movement leaders and followers did not differ significantly from the larger society.

The Intellectual Frame

The second most widely used frame in Nepal was the intellectual frame. This frame depicted the movement as something endorsed by the educated and “intellectuals.” In contrast to the first frame, this frame was likely to have a universal appeal in the Nepali society. The presence of highly educated movement sympathizers is particularly noteworthy. This has given movement leaders new vocabularies in their recruitment efforts and to face public criticism. The “Osho lovers” include high level bureaucrats, politicians, professors, doctors, engineers, journalists and creative artists. Movement leaders frequently showcase their “intellectual” sympathizers to the larger society. My respondents repeatedly asked me to mull over the question of “why only the educated followed Rajneesh.” The emphasis here is also to differentiate their movement from other competing groups, which presumably recruit the “less educated.”

In 1990, Nepal’s literacy rate was about 40%. Doctors and engineers are the most prestigious professions in Nepal¹⁶. The government invests substantially in science and technology education. Engineers, doctors and those in science and technology professions are considered natural “intellectuals” in society. In everyday political and economic discourse, education is presented as the sole reason for Nepal’s “backwardness.” Hence, the claim of the “religion of intellectuals” make immense sense in Nepal as Wilson (1987) argues, the constituency is vigilant about “what sort of people” are there in the movement.

It should be noted that the use of this frame increased dramatically after the explosion of the print and electronic media after the 1990 political change in Nepal. In his articles and speeches, Swami Arun and other leaders frequently compare Rajneesh with Marx, Fraud and

¹⁶ Sannyasin leaders proudly claimed that about 25% of Nepal’s total engineers were Rajneesh followers.

Einstein (Singh 2000). Discourses on science and technology, the caste system and gender equality, the environment and the importance of meritocracy are all couched in the intellectual frame. Swami Arun's articles frequently claim that Rajneesh explained traditional religions in "scientific" terms. Rajneesh is said to be misunderstood worldwide because only "intellectuals" could grasp him; thus those who did not subscribe to Rajneesh's ideas are relegated to a lesser category.

Nepal has a very strong left movement. In fact, fringe communist groups have been the most vocal critic of the movement. They criticize the movement for its "immoral" practices and potential for diverting "revolutionary consciousness" from the meaningful transformation of society (Singh 2000). In contrast, movement leaders often claimed that Rajneesh was a "true" communist. Swami Arun in a public debate argued that the failure of the Oregon Commune in the United States was due to the conspiracies of "imperialist" America because Rajneesh created a commune in the U.S. "in a model envisioned by Marx" (Singh 2000). Swami Arun, in his articles, frequently reminds his readers how Socrates (also, Einstein and Galileo) was "misunderstood" during his life time. The comparison of Rajneesh with Socrates is particularly striking. Socrates is a well-known figure in Nepal as his biography is widely disseminated through high school text books. Hence, the controversy around Rajneesh is presented as yet another example of the cruelty of the humanity against a would-be-great-person. This meant that only the future humanity would recognize the importance of great persons like Rajneesh. But the message is also the other way round: a few "intellectuals" still can understand Rajneesh. This frame was important both in black market and the overt operation phases. This, on the one hand, was helpful to keep high the moral of the core members during the repressive regime; on the

other hand, the message go out to the potential members as “invitation” to join the circle of the chosen intellectuals who could understand the importance of a great man well ahead of time.

This discussion shows that entrepreneurship is largely cultural work. It is noteworthy that cultural work was hindered greatly before the 1990 political change in Nepal. The cultural work in this phase concentrated on survival strategies; and the movement frames were circulated in a very limited way. A liberal political and religious environment aided by the phenomenal growth of the mass media, which I discuss in a greater length in the following section, was crucial for an effective application of these frames. These conditions were available only during the 1990s in Nepal. Although the concepts of the “cultural continuity” and “religious capital” in the new paradigm try to incorporate culture into the model, they are inadequate in practice. Here, my study shows that we need a more robust concept of cultural if the role of religious entrepreneurship is to be appreciated fully.

CHAPTER 9

MASS MEDIA AND RELIGIOUS ENTREPREURSHIP

Stark (1987 1996), in his model, discusses mobilization in terms of efficient organizations and networks. I agree that organizations and networks play important roles in an individual's "conversion career." It is rather surprising, however, that the role of the mainstream media is neglected in the new paradigm. Perhaps, drawing largely on the U.S. experience, it is taken for granted that all powerful mass media are inimical to new religious movements. Here, I show how religious entrepreneurs consciously use the media, and how movement entrepreneurs view controversies as boons rather than curses.

Before the advent of democracy in 1990, Nepal had a nominal independent media. During this stage, sannyasins were engaged in open street solicitation, characteristic of the Hare Krishna movement and the Unification Church in the 1970s, to a limited extent. My interviews revealed that social networks played a key role in this phase. Swami Arun told me that in the beginning, he even offered lunch to his office co-workers for reading Rajneesh's works. Perhaps, the network continues to play an important role, but at the end of the 1990s, movement leaders told me that they did not go out to "recruit" anybody; they often repeated that the "thirsty come to the sea" rather than the other way round¹⁷. This points out to the phenomenal growth of the mass media in Nepal after the advent of democracy in 1990.

The relationship between the media and religious movements are often complex. Wilson (1987) notes that "modern" charismatic leaders are particularly vulnerable to the media. Indeed,

¹⁷ Street solicitation itself is surprising given the high caste/class backgrounds of the Rajneesh followers in Nepal. High caste/class Hindus in Nepal often despise menial jobs (see Bista 1990).

“destructive” cult has been the persistent theme in the media in the United States from the nineteenth century (Jenkins 2000; Beckford 2003). This comes in sharp contrast to Nepal’s experience. Perhaps, the historical absence of the cult-society conflict in Nepal was crucial to the positive response of the Nepali media in the 1990s. Second, there is a near absence of the psychiatry profession in Nepal, which played an important role in propounding the “brainwashing” thesis in the United States (Robbins 1982, 1988). Surprisingly, Nepali society is rich in cultural references to *Sammohan* [a popular Nepali word for hypnotism]. But this too was rarely deployed to castigate Rajneesh followers. Possibly, due to the largely educated, powerful and professionally successful followers, and the dominance of the intellectual frame, the “destructive cult” and “brainwashing” theses never entered the mainstream media discourse in the 1990s. Finally, it could be the case that the media simply behaves differently in new democracies since journalists often compete with academicians and politicians in showing their “liberal” and “tolerant” faces to the public.

Singh (2000) lamented that the mainstream media did not take the “cult menace” seriously. In the beginning, the movement took advantage of the new media development in the form of advertisement. Rajneesh followers, periodically, advertised their meditation programs in the national newspapers. Later, a number of sannyasins and movement sympathizers started writing articles and regular columns. Swami Arun features in the print and electronics media prominently. In 2005, three TV stations broadcast Swami Arun’s spiritual lectures once a week. Four F.M. radio stations have already broadcast his weekly “lectures.” He writes a weekly column on “spirituality” in a popular Nepali language *Samaya* weekly magazine. Similarly, a number of Nepali language newspapers have published Rajneesh’s teachings as serial columns. Readers, viewers and listeners’ responses often have been positive. One reader, in 2004, for

example, urged the editor of the country's largest circulating English daily newspaper to print more "optimistic" news items and articles. The reader cited Rajneesh as one of the persons in his mind.

Second, the Osho Tapoban has, in recent years, extended its activities to secular affairs. For example, the Tapoban has started hosting annual creative writers and artists' exhibitions and workshops. It hosts an annual prize and honor for the "best" cartoonist affiliated with the local newspapers. The 2004 best cartoonist award went to a cartoonist with Nepal's mass circulating *Kantipur* daily newspaper. The daily newspaper, in return, printed the news of its "award-winning" cartoonist enthusiastically. The Tapoban frequently invites journalists to its programs. In return, journalists not only describe a "peaceful" and "pollution free" Tapoban, but also make references to "energies" felt in the "Buddhafield." The serenity of the Osho Tapoban is usually contrasted with the crowded and polluted Kathmandu.

Efforts to cultivate positive relations with the media on the part of a "firm" is not new, but what surprised me the most was that the movement leaders were using controversies as "resources." At the time of my research one popular family digest published a detail and investigative report on factionalism, "corruption" and "sex scandals" among Nepal's Rajneesh followers (Adhikari 1998). To my surprise, sannyasins looked least perturbed, and I observed that many of them quite enjoyed the controversy. Also, they looked quite happy that the media were reporting the internal power struggle within the Tapoban. My inquiry revealed that sannyasins were deeply convinced that "people one day would know the truth," and newspaper reports would help the movement grow in the long run.

I came across a few instances in which Nepal's Rajneesh followers were purposefully and strategically cultivating controversies. In July 2005, for example, Tapoban leaders submitted

a video tape of a death funeral ceremony to one of Nepal's private TV stations. Although the TV station did not broadcast it for unknown reasons, the sannyasins had tried to persuade the TV station to broadcast the tape. The video tape, which I was able to obtain through a journalist, juxtaposed a sannyasin's "death celebration" function with the traditional death morning ritual. The death celebration showed sannyasins dancing and yelling around the burning funeral pyre. I believe that the broadcast of the tape would have created a huge controversy among the people. Nepal's Rajneesh sannyasins believe that such controversies help the movement grow in the long run as people start trying to investigate the "truth."

Undeniably, Rajneesh reached the thousands of Nepali households through the media in the 1990s. It is worth noting that I observed a marked difference in the process of "seeking" among the pre-and post-1990 followers. While the pre-1990 seekers tended to describe themselves as "in-born" seekers, the young followers, who were initiated in the post-1990 period, were less likely to describe themselves in this way. The younger sannyasins do not readily attribute their journey to sannyashood to an "in-born" thirst; rather they have vague notions of their attraction to the Guru. The Tapoban is located along a major highway which Kathmandu residents use on their weekend excursions. Apart from the usual "Buddhfield" imageries, the Tapoban advertises itself as a serene tourist destination. It has, in recent years, become an important recreation center for sannyasins and the general public alike. It generates a significant amount of revenue by selling visitor tickets to the general public.

I suspect that the media's repeated descriptions of the Tapoban as a remarkable place might have fuelled people's interest in the movement. Here is one sannyasin, who claimed to be a "genuine" seeker, on a typical Saturday scene in the Tapoban:

“Yes, you can observe strange things here. There is a reason behind it. Meditation is not their serious business. For them visiting Tapoban each Saturday is like going to disco. The number of genuine seekers is low. But Bhagawan [Rajneesh] has said that experience is the first thing. So, I don’t blame them....”

As this sannyasin described, one can observe a cacophony on weekend days in the Tapoban. Whatever she claims, there is evidence, however, that often these casual visits lead to sannyashood. A few young sannyasins and most notably “Osho lovers” told me that they first visited the Tapoban for recreational or casual visit purposes. One sannyasin narrated to me how he first went to a Rajneesh center to avoid a police warrant, and later became a “serious” seeker. Here is one young female sannyasin on how one of her weekend excursions ultimately led her to her sannyashood:

“I was traveling along the highway [where the Tapoban is located] on one of the Saturdays some seven years ago. I entered the Tapoban premises out of curiosity. I observed that some thing strange was going on in this beautiful landscape. I saw that people were living here happily...singing and dancing. A dancing religion! I thought that there religion must good.”

This young woman took part in one of the meditation sessions immediately. After about one month, she became a “true” seeker.

These apparently “anomalous” patterns of initiation together with the movement leaders’ sophisticated use of the main stream media hint that the growth of the mass media in the post-

1990 period is one of the crucial factors contributing to the growth of the movement in the 1990s. This discussion suggests that the role of the mainstream mass media should be understood differently in the context of Nepal. It shows that the movement entrepreneurs took controversies as resources rather than hindrances.

CHAPTER 10

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

My study shows that the new paradigm can be fruitfully extended to the non-Western and non-Christian context of Nepal. State regulations largely contributed to the stagnation of the movement during the 1970s and 1980s. The regulated religious economy prevented the movement's growth by stultifying organizational development and individual entrepreneurship. Hence, the movement goal during the "black market" phase was limited to survival strategies. On the other hand, the political change and deregulation of the religious economy in 1990 offered an opportunity for the movement leaders to market their product actively and openly. Nepal's largest and oldest Rajneesh center, the Osho Tapoban, was largely the result of the liberal political environment. Thus, it was only in an "open" environment in the 1990s that organizational dynamic and religious entrepreneurship found their full expressions. This entrepreneurship came at a time when traditional faiths had weakened considerably and the country as a whole was suffering from a variety of "crises." Thus, at the macro-level, the new paradigm sheds important light on Nepal's Rajneesh movement.

On the other hand, I showed that we need a more robust concept of culture at the micro-level. The importance and dynamic of entrepreneurship can not be understood if we limit the concept of culture as a "cultural continuity." Movement entrepreneurs in Nepal continuously drew on varieties of cultural resources including political discourses. These cultural innovations helped the movement survive during the black market phase and in the 1990s, further cultural innovations helped create a positive image of the movement.

Third, I pointed out that we need additional factors to understand the growth of the movement in Nepal in the 1990s. I agree with Stark that organizations and effective networks play important roles, but in Nepal's condition, the defection of Nepal's sannyasins from the international Rajneesh movement and the subsequent rise of the Guru-based religious authority were equally important factors. Defection necessarily may not mean "failure" as is usually assumed in the NRM literature (Rochford 1989). The creative adaptation of Rajneesh's teachings and locally-developed movement frames in Nepal became possible partly because of its organizational decoupling from the movement headquarters, which could have resisted ideological and cultural innovations. The physical presence of the widely respected Guru fits nicely Nepal's cultural context. Swami Arun served this purpose.

Finally, I pointed out that we can not take it for granted that the mass media are inimical to the growth of religious movements. To say the least, movement entrepreneurs not only used the media consciously, but also actively cultivated controversies. The phenomenal growth of the mass media in Nepal in the 1990s and their enthusiastic reception of the Rajneesh movement points out that they contributed to the growth of the movement in the 1990s. During the pre-1990 period, this opportunity was not simply present.

One interesting question will be whether the movement will peter out or sustain the present growth rate in the long run leading to "success." Stark (1987:21) notes that it is necessary for a new religion to achieve a persuasive growth rate within the first generation. Failing this, Stark argues that the movement could deemphasize growth and conversion. Obviously, the present growth rate of Nepal's Rajneesh movement is impressive. I found that many children of sannyasins have followed their parents' paths. In contrast to Rajneesh's teachings, Nepal's

sannyasins continued to marry and produce children. As the children of the sannyasins tend to take on sannyas life, natural fertility alone is fueling the growth of the movement.

Any casual visit to the Osho Tapoban and meditation sessions confirms that the number of young members and particularly young women has increased dramatically beginning from the mid-1990s. By localizing Rajneesh's teachings on controversial subjects like "free sex," commune and gender roles, the movement leaders succeeded in reducing the gap between them and the larger society. On the other hand, Nepal's powerful left groups continue to be critical of the movement. In the meantime, Rajneesh's works on controversial subjects continue to challenge the people's "horizon of expectations"¹⁸.

Perhaps the crucial question is how to maintain a "medium tension" situation or manage the "secularizing" impulses. Stark (1987:23) notes that "to succeed, a new religious movement must not make its peace with this world too rapidly or too fully." This is the dilemma Nepal's Rajneesh movement currently faces. Presenting a "diluted" image of Rajneesh could alienate the younger generations, who favor radical elements, and it is possible that the movement as a whole would succumb to the strong pull of the traditional religions¹⁹. On the other hand, Rajneesh's "radical" image could draw wrath from Nepal's powerful communist groups. The future of the movement perhaps hinges on this fine balance of "medium tension."

¹⁸ One medium-sized book store at the heart of Kathmandu which sold publications on spiritual titles told me that Rajneesh was one of the "best sellers" in his store. Males "aged around 30" were the chief buyers of Rajneesh's works.

¹⁹ The degree of "radicalism" should be understood in the context of Nepal. For example, Rajneesh's ideas on gender roles may not be radical at all in America, but they are in Nepal's context.

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