

## Article

# (Re)viewing Postsecularity Through the Pragmatic Pursuits of New Religious Movements in India

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**Abstract:** In the contemporary postsecular context, where the influence of religion has become increasingly significant, this study explores the substantial influence of New Religious Movements (NRMs) in India. Focusing on Brahma Kumaris (BKs), a prominent NRM, this study examines their role as proponents of social change across various public spheres in modern society. The BKs' deviation from traditional religious doctrines, their emphasis on self-transformation, and their capacity to adapt to contemporary challenges render them particularly relevant in the postsecular context. This study analyzes the pragmatic approach that BKs employ to engage with and assert their influence in contemporary public life. Specifically, it delineates five critical processes that underpin the organization's pragmatic pursuits: detraditionalization, synergism, gender sensitization, agro-spiritualism, and digitalization. By subverting varied normativities and contesting the religious/secular dyad through their pragmatic pursuits, the BKs illuminate the shapeshifting edges and fluid integration of religion and secularity within the contemporary postsecular milieu.

**Keywords:** postsecularity; religion; new religious movements; pragmatism; brahma kumaris; India



Academic Editor: Greg Peters

Received: 11 January 2025

Revised: 26 January 2025

Accepted: 28 January 2025

Published: 30 January 2025

**Citation:** Kapoor, Vikram. 2025. (Re)viewing Postsecularity Through the Pragmatic Pursuits of New Religious Movements in India. *Religions* 16: 157. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel16020157>

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## 1. Introduction

Recent worldwide transformations and intense disputes stemming from religious matters have prompted secularists to regard their religious counterparts as allies (Habermas 2008). Instances such as the political rise of the religious right in the US, the cultural mobilization of Islamism in Turkey, and Hindu nationalism (Hindutva) in India illustrate the “growing public presence of religion—beyond the private sphere” (Ger 2013, p. 499). Other major global events, such as the September 11 attacks, have contributed to the worldwide revival of religion in the political domain (Bellin 2008). More recently, the collaboration between religious organizations and secular entities became particularly apparent in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, which created “a new space to talk authentically and strategically about the role of faith-based care and innovation” (Baker 2023, p. 399; Kapoor et al. 2022).

Religion has continually influenced public life in various ways. At times, this influence of religion in public life manifests in religious festivals that significantly affect public life and politics, acting as catalysts for societal transformation (Kapoor 2025); at other times, it appears in the form of new religious wars (Beaumont et al. 2020) and through new religious movements (NRMs) that offer novel conduits for transformation and growth and by fulfilling social functions, suggesting that it is misleading to claim the secularization of public and political life in most nations (Kyrlezhev 2008). Such evidence contests the contentious secularization thesis, which claims that the social importance of religion has

waned in the present society as economic progress and modernization continue (Norris and Inglehart 2004; Thomas 2005).

The resurgence of religion's power and influence, particularly in the public sphere, along with a shift toward "problematizing and critically interrogating the natural status ascribed to secularity," signifies the postsecular turn (Parmaksiz 2018, p. 106). Although postsecularity can have different meanings in various contexts and even within the same context (Dalferth 2010; Dallmayr 2012), the term vaguely translates into a state or condition where the importance of religion has "persisted and perhaps even become more influential" in different sociopolitical contexts (Metz 2020, p. 43), overturning the essentialist ideology underpinning secularism (Beaumont and Eder 2019). From a postsecular perspective, the world cannot be divided into distinct religious and non-religious categories that are so intertwined that they become indistinguishable (Kyrlezhev 2008). In such a situation, multiple forms of secularism coexist with diverse expressions of religiosity, resulting in a significant departure from traditional religions (Hodkinson and Horstkotte 2020).

The discussion on postsecularity has been enriched by various religious scholars, each offering unique and valuable perspectives that add complexity to the discourse. Casanova (2003), for instance, uses the term "public religions," which engage in the inescapable public sphere of civil society to actively partake in discourse concerning public affairs and the collective welfare. Berger (1999) introduced the concept of desecularization to illustrate the diverse expressions of the global resurgence of religion; he framed it as counter-secularization and provided a new perspective on the resilient nature of religion in relation to global modernity. Joas (2021) also offers a different perspective on the prevalent discussions surrounding disenchantment and secularization—he presents an interpretation that considers modern dynamics of new forms of sacralization in relation to universal morality. Parmaksiz (2018) critiques the simplistic portrayal of the resurgence of religion in the context of post-secularity. Parmaksiz challenges the solidaristic tendencies within prevalent postsecular thoughts by emphasizing that post-secularization entails "a transformation that takes place in the self-understanding of secular societies and groups," creating an awareness of secularity's historicity and destabilizing "secularnormative social and cultural order" (p. 109).

These alternative views reflect a broader cultural change in which religious beliefs are reevaluated and diversified to align with contemporary views (Baker and Dinham 2017), in which faith and reason engage in a mutually supportive relationship, fostering solidarity and embracing openness to differences (Cloke et al. 2019). For this shift to occur, there appears to be a need to dissolve the concept of "secular universal integrity" and to explore new interpretations that recognize the various and deeply diverse expressions of human integrity (Beaumont and Eder 2019, p. 13). Such a change in understanding also necessitates a reflexive engagement with the "antagonistic processes" set in motion by the state's secularization, and the respect for individuals' right to faith (Beaumont et al. 2020, p. 304). In the spirit of honoring diverse lifestyles, Taylor (2007) asserts that belief and unbelief should not be viewed as opposing theories; instead, they represent distinct modalities of experiencing existence, both of which are reflective and situated within specific contexts. Reflexive secularization sidesteps the divide between secular and religious, emphasizing the processes and practices of secularization that unleash both complementary and conflicting tendencies, and confronting diverse 'normativities' that permeate social interactions (Beaumont et al. 2020).

In particular, in a religiously diverse country such as India, the coexistence of deeply rooted religious affiliations and the fundamental right to practice religion is complicated by rising Hindutva nationalist sentiments (Idnani 2021). As India navigates its evolving role in the global economy, conflicting policies and objectives contribute to what Majeed (2010)

calls the “crisis of secularism in India” (p. 665). This crisis is exemplified by intriguing examples. For instance, there is a movement advocating for a “noncommunal civic national identity,” while at the same time, there is a strong presence of Hindu nationalism; there are conflicting views on the protection of minority personal laws versus their abolition; there are opposing attitudes towards religious speech in politics, with some advocating for tolerance and others enforcing exclusion, and this tension also extends to women’s rights and rights to collective religious autonomy (Laborde 2021, p. 4). An instance of a vulnerable minority (within the predominantly Hindu demographic) that endeavored to safeguard its rights is the Sikh community, which subsequently lamented its initial alignment with Nehru’s Congress, which had pledged to create a secular state to protect minority rights (Mandair 2009). Despite the nation’s ambitious goals of secularism, violence stemming from actual or perceived religious affiliations is common in India (Ratti 2012). Under these intricate conditions, which generate heightened tensions around the centrality of religions, the study of postsecular beliefs, ethos, and discourses in public spheres offers a potential field of inquiry (B. J. Wright 2017).

Insights derived from an understanding of postsecularism and postcolonialism may further elucidate the implications of postsecularism for and within postcolonial countries, such as India (Bugyis 2015; Ratti 2015). Postcolonialism, a philosophical search often enacted through literature such as Amitav Ghosh’s *The Shadow Lines*, has played a central role in the construction of religion in India (Ratti 2015). Postcolonialism has enacted laws defining the boundaries of various religious communities and continuing the colonial practice of defining what qualifies as religion in people’s daily lives (Kapur 2020). Since its independence in 1947, India has fluctuated between secular nationalism, commonly linked to national leaders such as Jawaharlal Nehru, and the ascendance of religious nationalism, particularly exemplified by the emergence of Hindutva (Varshney 1993). Nehruvian secularism sought to exclude religion from politics and government as it aligned with the view that even in a state where there is only one religion, “state religion becomes authoritarian and degenerates into a mockery of religion” (Ahmad 2017; Ghose 1978, p. 103). Nevertheless, religion has continually influenced Indian public life in various ways, one being through the NRMs.

NRMs are groups or movements that originate outside the dominant culture of established religious traditions, frequently providing new spiritual avenues and practices (Melton 2000). Scholars have debated the definition of the NRMs. Broadly, NRMs are classified as such if they are in their early stages of development, especially if they show some tension with the surrounding culture or religious communities from which they originated and are perceived by outsiders as alternatives or deviations from traditional beliefs (Zeller 2020). NRMs often combine secular goals with spiritual practices, which is another key aspect of post-secularism. These movements are often the outcome of the waning influence of traditional religious institutions and a growing emphasis on the neoliberalist idea of individualism. Paradoxically, this shift does not diminish faith; but redefines it, albeit in new religious forms and across different public spheres (Izberk-Bilgin and Belk 2024). As Giddens (1990) affirmed, the “modes of life brought into being by modernity have swept us away from all traditional types of social order, in quite unprecedented fashion” (p. 4). Modernization in society, sometimes accompanied by social upheavals, has engendered spiritual chasm, prompting many people to pursue meaningful spiritual experiences that align with contemporary life (Heelas 1996). The conjunction of globalization and transnational migration has further led to the seamless transmission of different religions, alternative societal ideals, and personal identities (Casanova 2007), thus catalyzing the emergence of NRMs.

This paper delves into the profound influence of NRMs in India. Specifically, it considers the case of Brahma Kumaris (BKs), a new religious movement in India (Walliss 1999), which exemplifies ‘reflexive secularization’ (Beaumont et al. 2020) by deprioritizing diverse normativities. The paper analyzes the role of the Brahma Kumaris as influential advocates for social change in various public spheres within contemporary postsecular society. The BKs’ departure from traditional religious doctrines, their emphasis on self-transformation, and adaptability to contemporary challenges and issues render them pertinent in the context of postsecularity. This essay discusses the approach of pragmatism through which BKs engage with and assert their influence on contemporary society’s public spheres. In particular, this paper delineates five critical processes that underpin the pragmatic pursuits of BKs: detraditionalization, synergism, gender sensitization, agrospiritualism, and digitalization.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. New Religious Movements

Described as “congeries of spiritual organizations” by sociologists (Wilson 1999, p. 1), NRMs that emerged around the mid-19th century garnered attention with the realization of the significant insights these movements offered regarding the increasing diversity of religious life, critical ethico-political, and legal issues concerning the role of religion in modern society, and inquiries about religious freedom and privacy amid the rise of terrorism (Urban 2015). Some examples of NRMs include the Children of God, Hare Krishna, the Osho Movement, the Church of Scientology, Rastafari, Druidism, Soka Gakkai, Wicca, Pagans, and Transcendental Meditation.

The unconventional beliefs of early NRMs have often been viewed skeptically through the lens of brainwashing or mind-control theories, suggesting that followers are actively recruited, rather than voluntarily participating to join the movement (Healy 2011; Introvigne 2014; Lofland 1966). It has also been suggested that NRMs are a subgroup of more significant social movements because they are able to recruit and mobilize a significant number of adherents (Bromley and Shupe 1979; Moon 2023; Rochford 1982). Alternatively, it has been noted that several sociologists, aiming to adopt a more neutral stance toward religious movements, began to use the term NRMs to whitewash the negative intents associated with the term “cult,” which is often laden with stereotyped imagery and labels attributed to religious groups (Barker 2014; Beckford 1985; Olson 2006). Initially, NRMs strongly resisted the society; however, contemporary NRMs increasingly adopt secular management, administration, and assembly practices; pursue innovative paradigms for “authentic, individual selfhood;” and address the subjective underpinnings of personal identity within a society characterized by increased cultural and religious diversity and the transformative effects of technology and science (Clarke 2006, p. 454).

In general, NRMs tend to originate from diverse perspectives and typically undergo quicker and more drastic transformations than older, more established faiths (Barker 2014). Barker (2014) asserts that NRMs are defined by adherents who embrace unconventional beliefs and practices instead of traditional religious doctrines; attract an unusual demographic that may experience social, political, or economic marginalization; typically possess a founder or leader who exerts a significant charismatic influence over the lives of followers; and are frequently met with skepticism or hostility from a broader society. Followers can occasionally exhibit skepticism toward NRMs as well. In such circumstances, emotional fatigue stemming from membership and conflict among adherents of various NRMs leads to their disaffiliation with the NRM (Coates 2013).

Particularly in the context of India, which this paper focuses on, organizations such as the Art of Living (established by Sri Sri Ravi Shankar), Isha Foundation (created by

Sadhguru), and Brahma Kumaris (created by Dada Lekhraj) have gained prominence. Guru movements (e.g., the Chinmaya Mission) in India, characterized by a charismatic teacher (re)interpreting traditional texts and asserting a connection between these texts and their practical application, have generated a market for “salvation goods,” alongside a significant online presence and substantial following comprising both physical and virtual adherents (Pandya 2016, p. 205). Contemporary Indian gurus advocate for novel spiritual practices aimed at empowering the modern self, catering to the requirements of a cosmopolitan audience, and using accessible worldwide travel, electronic technology, and open marketplaces to expand their reach (Rudert 2010). Transnationalism, a consequence of globalization, has further enhanced the proliferation and impact of NRMs, such as the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), by offering new resources and a fresh demographic for conversion (Berg and Kniss 2008).

## 2.2. Brahma Kumaris and Its Origin

Brahma Kumaris is an internationally recognized NRM known for its unique blend of spiritual doctrines and community activities. The BKs position themselves as a non-government and non-political organization, attracting individuals from diverse religious and secular backgrounds (BKs UK Annual Report 2023). The organization emphasizes meditation and personal development, aligning with postsecular trends in which people prefer to experience (individual) spirituality rather than strictly adhere to dogma or ritualistic worship. The BK movement predates the New Age movement; however, over time, BKs have adopted elements that connect them to New Age ideologies (Walliss 2003).

Originally referred to as the *Om Mandli* (or the sacred circle), the BKs started as a modest spiritual gathering in the early 1930s in Hyderabad, Sindh (now part of Pakistan), under the leadership of Dada Lekhraj (also called Brahma Baba), a diamond merchant and devout Vaishnavite, a Hindu religious tradition with faith in the deity, Vishnu (Newcombe and Steidinger 2021; Whaling 2012). The group originally had young, middle-class women followers and hence the term “Kumaris” (in Brahma Kumaris), which translates into “daughters” (Newcombe and Steidinger 2021). There is evidence that the BK movement emerged during a challenging time when the domestic and familial roles of Sindhi women were strained because of the commercial pursuits of Sindhi men, who often stayed away from home because of business obligations (Babb 1984). In the late 1930s, the nascent community encountered significant opposition centered around three factors: “the rapidity and unexpectedness of appearance; tension with the Hindu community; and the threats posed by women leaders and celibacy” (Whaling 2012, p. 25).

In 1950, a few years after the India-Pakistan partition, the BKs relocated to Rajasthan in Western India, where they founded a center headquartered in Mount Abu, the site of the Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University (Pandya 2019). Rather than concentrating on religious worship practices per se, the philosophy of BKs has been meditation and chanting, spiritual learning, emphasizing spiritual fulfillment and adopting a pure lifestyle (Ramsay 2024; Ramsay et al. 2012). Instead of adhering to strict orthodoxies, the organization adheres to the orthopraxy of ethical behavior, which encompasses a vegetarian diet, celibacy, and the practice of daily meditation known as “Raja Yoga” (McKendry-Smith 2016). Raja Yoga meditation, fundamental to ancient Indian philosophy, emphasizes the connections between the mind and body to enhance an individual’s overall well-being (Balgopal et al. 2024).

Though some authors have referred to the BKs as a Hindu religious movement (Karapanagiotis 2024) and “neo-Hindu tradition” (see Walliss 2003), some others argue that while BKs share many traditional Hindu beliefs, such as the time cycle and the eternal laws of Karma, immortality of soul, and soul consciousness, they are not considered Hindus insofar as “Hinduism is a birthright, and conversion is not possible;” in contrast,



it is possible to become a BK (Ramsay et al. 2012, p. 54). However, the *BKs UK Annual Report (2023)* states that, in addition to celebrating Indian festivals, the BKs in the UK also organize events for other religions. These include Christmas, the Chinese New Year, and events for the local Muslim communities. In some countries such as Indonesia, BKs have attracted cosmopolitan adherents, including well-educated Muslims, by challenging normative conceptions of *religion* (Howell 2005). Although not free from controversies—such as the undue emphasis on spiritual superiority of women over men referred to as the “reverse sex polarity” (see Howell 1998, p. 454), and issues surrounding celibacy and the valorization of purity (Walliss 1999)—today, the BKs have expanded internationally and gained legitimacy with over 7000 centers (Pandya 2019) in various countries, including the UK, Russia, Australia, and the US (Whaling 2012). The BKs World Spirituality University is officially recognized as a nonprofit organization and operates extensively in the UK.

### 3. BKs Pragmatism: A Key Strategy in the Postsecular Era

Emphasis on pragmatism is a critical strategy employed by BKs to establish visibility and legitimacy in various public spheres. Pragmatism is a philosophical approach that concentrates on real-world problems and practical implications of social reality (Kelly and Cordeiro 2020). Popularized by thinkers such as Rorty (1982), James (1904/2007), Dewey ([1931] 1982), and Putnam (1995), pragmatism evaluates beliefs based on their practical efficacy rather than being constrained by antiquated doctrines and ideologies (Giri 2021). In other words, pragmatism is defined by its practical implications for resolving uncertainties and elucidating how beliefs influence human behavior and inquiries (Peirce 1877, 1878). Dewey (1925) integrates pragmatism with naturalism, asserting that human understanding arises from engagement with the world and is influenced by practical necessities. In his essay, Rorty (1999) linked pragmatism to democratic and liberal political challenges, illustrating its application in social and political discourse. As Romania (2018) suggests, one of the key premises of pragmatism is the view that religion is conceived as an “*antidote to contingency* and as a source of meaning about the meaningless of daily life” and that individual faith and agency are not entirely shaped by normative expectations and homology (98, original italics).

The following sections discuss five key processes that underlie the pragmatic pursuits of BKs: detraditionalization, synergism, gender sensitization, agro-spiritualism, and digitalization (See Figure 1). Notably, pragmatic postsecularity here denotes an empirical and practical approach, as opposed to the esoteric, theological, philosophical, or abstract perspective prevalent in most postsecular scholarship.

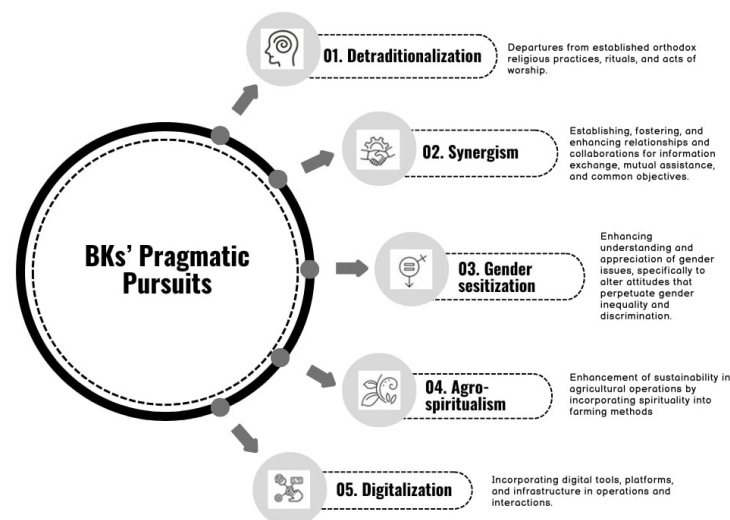


Figure 1. Brahma Kumaris' pragmatic pursuits.

### 3.1. Detraditionalization

Detraditionalization refers to departures from established orthodox religious practices, rituals, and acts of worship. The modernization of society has engendered a pernicious social environment marked by escalating competitiveness, disparities, and social isolation, which contribute to a “depressiogenic milieu” (Hidaka 2012). Many people use spiritual coping mechanisms to respond to stressful situations, which helps them find meaning in their lives and leads to improved adaptive responses (Baldacchino and Draper 2001). Research indicates that people may be drawn to NRMs to fulfill psychological needs, such as the search for meaning or a sense of community (Upal 2005). According to their website, the BKs provide various formal courses on Raja Yoga meditation that emphasize consciousness, self-realization, and a connection with God, as well as courses on personal development, anger management, self-esteem, and stress-free living. These formal courses also cover teachings about Karmic law, the time cycle, the tree of life, and spiritual living.

The practice of Raja Yoga meditation, followed by BKs, has demonstrated various health benefits that are increasingly acknowledged in clinical settings. Raja Yoga is a centuries-old practice designed to promote mental tranquility, inner harmony, and mastery of one’s thoughts and emotions (Nair et al. 2018). The term “Raja” translates to “the Monarch” or “Master,” reflecting the goal of achieving mastery in Raja Yoga. Studies have demonstrated that Rajyoga meditation can yield significant psychological benefits, including increased positive thinking and happiness in life (Ramesh et al. 2013), enhanced well-being (Nair et al. 2018), reduced anxiety, and enhanced emotional control, especially during high-stress surgical procedures (Kiran et al. 2017), enhanced cognitive processing (Savanath et al. 2023), and several other physiological benefits (Mandape et al. 2015; Phatak et al. 2017). Furthermore, the movement’s pragmatic application of spiritual knowledge to assist individuals in coping with trauma and loss, as well as strengthening communal cohesiveness and resilience is demonstrated by its response to catastrophes, such as the aftermath of the September 11 attacks (Ramsay et al. 2009).

Other pragmatist pursuits of BKs involve community outreach and educational initiatives, including participation in education programs on values in schools that foster students’ spiritual and moral development (Arweck et al. 2005). A specific study, which uses ethnographic and documentary data collected at the Warwick Religions and Education Research Unit (WRERU) at the University of Warwick, examines the “Living Values: An Educational Program” and its connection to the Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University (BKWSU), highlighting the implementation of this program in British schools (Arweck and Nesbitt 2004).

### 3.2. Synergism

BKs have fostered international collaborations for information exchange, mutual assistance, and common objectives. Initially indifferent to secular matters, the BKs began to assert their influence in various secular domains by integrating spiritual insights into world affairs and global issues (McKendry-Smith 2016; Ramsay et al. 2012). In the 1980s, BKs were affiliated with the United Nations Department of Public Information and obtained consultative status with the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) (Ramsay et al. 2012). They also hold other status in the UN, including associative status with the Department of Public Information, consultative status with the UN Children’s Fund, and observer status with the UN Environment Assembly of the UNEP (Nv 2023).

From starting conversations at international conferences on climate change, building solar power plants, running health camps in rural India, and planning educational retreats to foster positive thinking, the BKs have created a noteworthy public presence (Ramsay et al. 2012). One recent example of participation in events held in May 2023, includes

*Creating World Peace and Sustainability in the Post-COVID-19 and Post-Ukraine Conflict Era* at the Houses of Parliament, London (BKs UK Annual Report 2023). The organization frequently engages in dialogue series and summits with various stakeholders, including academics and business leaders, to address individual and community development issues. Two notable series mentioned on their official website are the *Call-of-the-Time Dialogue Series (COTT)* and *The Future of Power*. The COTT series is co-facilitated by BK Jayanti Kirpalani, the Director of the Brahma Kumaris in the UK, and Peter Senge, a Senior Lecturer at MIT in the US. The Future of Power series is hosted by Dadi Janki, the BKs' Administrative Head, along with Nizar Juma, a Nairobi-based businessman and industrialist. In these series, they discuss "power shifts" and their impact on leadership in the 21st century.

Through their vows and appeals, BKs improve their public presence. On their website, they cite *The Million Minutes of Peace Appeal* committed to the UN International Year of Peace. People were urged via this program to commit time to pray for peace, positive thinking, or meditation. Reportedly, the appeal gained traction in 88 countries and collectively amassed an impressive total of 1,231,975,713 min devoted to peace, equating to approximately 2344 years (Whaling 2012). In recognition of their efforts, the UN Secretary-General honored Brahma Kumaris with seven national Peace Messenger Awards and one international Peace Messenger Award for their contributions to the Year of Peace (<https://www.brahmakumaris.org>, accessed on 22 December 2024). There are many other collaborations in which Brahma Kumaris participates, all of which are founded on shared principles and objectives (See Table 1).

**Table 1.** Illustrative examples of BK's partnerships and global initiatives (Adapted from the BKs official website—<https://www.brahmakumaris.org>).

Partnerships	Website Details	Shared Goals and Principles
The World Renewal Spiritual Trust (WRST)	<a href="https://www.wrst.in/">https://www.wrst.in/</a>	Foster peace and harmony through the dissemination of moral, social, and spiritual principles. Since the 1990s, WRST have emerged as a prominent entity in the development and advancement of renewable energy sources in India.
The Pachamama Alliance	<a href="https://pachamama.org/">https://pachamama.org/</a>	Advocate a transformed future that prioritizes spiritual development, environmentally sustainable practices, and equitable societies as fundamental pillars. The Brahma Kumaris (BKs) and the Pachamama Alliance have collaboratively developed the Awakening the Dreamer Workshop. This program provides the general public with the opportunity to examine and address the most critical and pressing challenges of our contemporary era.
Global Hospital and Research Centre	<a href="https://www.ghrc-abu.com/">https://www.ghrc-abu.com/</a>	The initiative sought to establish an exemplary hospital that focused on comprehensive healthcare. Khuba and Gulab Watumull, originating from Mumbai and Hawaii (USA), respectively, adopted the project, which was subsequently designated as the J Watumull Global Hospital & Research Center.
Janki Foundation for Global Health Care (A UK charity)	<a href="https://www.jankifoundation.org/">https://www.jankifoundation.org/</a>	Provide support to medical professionals through structured dialogue and evidence-based education while promoting overall wellness through scholarly publications, audio recordings, and formal presentations.
The Point of Life Foundation (A US non-profit organization)	<a href="https://www.pointoflife.info/">https://www.pointoflife.info/</a>	Implement regional educational initiatives for healthcare professionals and community members while concurrently providing international support to the J Watumull Global Hospital and Research Centre situated in Mount Abu, India.



### 3.3. Gender Sensitization

Palmer (1993) notes that “many NRMs that appear to foster “traditional” roles deviate widely from the mainstream . . . in their interpretations of women’s domestic role” (p. 345). Through initiatives on gender sensitization, BKs aim to enhance the understanding of gender issues and awareness of the significance of women’s participation in public spheres beyond the domestic environment, thereby modifying attitudes that perpetuate gender inequality and discrimination. The organization advocates for the recognition of women’s inherent dignity and potential, challenging traditional patriarchal gender roles that frequently limit women’s opportunities for personal and professional development (Shooshtari et al. 2018), particularly exerting a positive influence on the health, quality of life, and well-being of elderly rural women in India (Singh et al. 2020). Historically, the organization has predominantly attracted female adherents, many of whom have assumed leadership positions within the community (Babb 1984). Although women have significantly outnumbered men in the BKs’ Indian branches, in some countries, such as Australia, males actually exceeded females during the movement’s initial expansion overseas (Howell 1998).

Flexibility in gender roles potentially facilitates a more inclusive environment, accommodating individuals who experience marginalization in traditional religious contexts. By challenging conventional gender norms, the organization positions itself as a progressive spiritual alternative, potentially appealing to individuals seeking a more contemporary and adaptable approach to faith and community engagement. BKs promote empowerment and agency by encouraging women to actively engage in their personal lives, participate in community service, and embrace their spiritual identities (McKendry-Smith 2016). They are involved in the coordinating committee of the Religions of Peace UK Women of Peace Network, which organized a conference in June 2023 focused on “Gender Equality”: Empowerment for All (BKs UK Annual Report 2023). The organization’s progressive nature is demonstrated by its emphasis on gender dynamics in leadership; since the movement’s inception, it has predominantly featured women (Kumaris), representing a significant departure from traditional patriarchal religious structures (Katuwal 2020; Lourenço 2012).

### 3.4. Agro-Spiritualism

Agro-spiritualism refers to the enhancement of sustainability in agricultural operations through the incorporation of spirituality into farming methods. The Brahma Kumaris (BKs) have successfully revitalized and propagated the concept of yogic agriculture by integrating the principles of Indian Raja Yoga and meditation, utilizing the concept of vibrational energies to improve soil and water quality, seed germination, and plant growth (Pandey et al. 2015). Yogic farming extends beyond organic farming in that it involves engaging in diverse agricultural methods, while in a state of yoga or personal empowerment, channeling metaphysical energy manifests as pure and positive thoughts into farming practices (Pandey et al. 2015). The BKs’ pioneering efforts in sustainable yogic farming and agriculture, which combine spirituality with contemporary technology for organic farming and promote sustainable development in agro-ecosystems, have garnered support from the Scientific Research of India, the Indian Council for Agricultural Research (ICAR), and the Union Agricultural Ministry (Girme et al. 2019; Sain et al. 2020). These efforts acknowledge the presence of spirit, awareness, and non-human entities, along with their unseen connections to agriculture and farming. They highlight the subtle forces at play, akin to indigenous, non-materialist perspectives (J. Wright 2021).

The convergence of quantum physics and spirituality has garnered considerable academic interest (Dennis 2010; Walton 2017). Walton (2017) posits that “developments in quantum physics and studies of consciousness” challenge established scientific paradigms,

potentially benefiting those investigating spirituality from both academic and experiential perspectives (22). Drawing on research in quantum physics, which postulates humans as electromagnetic entities whose thoughts emit electromagnetic signals, as well as the influence of consciousness on matter (Idris et al. 2021), BK programs such as Mindful Kitchen focus on conscious consumption. They emphasize the nutritious ingredients and purported therapeutic properties of herbs and spices. Their website presents novel recipes that support this philosophy alongside the “yogi” diet, which advocates a spiritual approach to nutrition by incorporating fruits, vegetables, grains, and nuts in their unprocessed forms (<https://www.brahmakumaris.org>, accessed on 22 December 2024).

In light of the current environmental crisis and imperative for a sustainable society, BKs have emerged as significant advocates for renewable energy in India, designing and implementing extensive solar systems for various applications, including cooking, washing, and sterilization. A notable project is “India One,” a 1 MW solar thermal power plant that was inaugurated in 2017 near the Brahma Kumaris Shantivan campus on Abu Road (<https://www.brahmakumaris.org>, accessed on 22 December 2024). According to the statistics presented on their website, they distributed over 20,000 solar lanterns, 500 residential light systems, and 400 solar-cooking cases.

### 3.5. Digitalization

Digitalization refers to the incorporation of digital tools, platforms, and infrastructure into operations and interactions. BKs effectively integrated technology and social media into their practices and outreach strategies. This includes offering online courses and webinars that enable individuals from diverse geographical locations to participate in Rajayoga meditation and spiritual education without necessitating physical presence at their centers. The BKs UK Annual report for 2023 states that the Raja Yoga meditation course is available in e-learning format on their UK website and YouTube and in various languages, including Portuguese, Japanese, and Spanish. The report also mentions that Inner Space Cambridge launched a new online Raja Yoga meditation course on its website in 2023, and that its two meditation applications, Bee Zone and Meditation Lounge, collectively amassed 220,000 users (BKs UK Annual Report 2023). The organization actively engages with adherents and the general public through platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube, disseminating spiritual teaching, motivational content, and information about forthcoming events. As of December 2023, BKs had 321,517 followers, subscribers, and members across all its UK social media platforms and channels (BKs UK Annual Report 2023).

The organization’s strategic utilization of social media contributes to a dynamic online presence, which is essential for attracting younger demographics who are more inclined to engage with digital information (Ramsay 2017). On their official website, they implemented Virtuescope, an interactive tool offering predictions for weeks and months regarding various attributes such as faith, wisdom, patience, and tolerance. This initiative leveraged technological advancements to introduce ludic elements into spiritual teaching. In addition, BKs have developed mobile applications that support spiritual activities and meditation, frequently incorporating guided meditation, regular practice reminders, and educational resources. The integration of technology modernizes their approach and aligns with the contemporary lifestyles of many individuals, rendering spiritual practices more accessible. Digitalization has been demonstrated by incorporating various ideologies, including scientific advancements and quantum physics. The pragmatism exhibited by BKs’ utilization of technology, digital platforms, and social media to provide effective solutions for the complex spiritual and emotional needs of contemporary times has contributed to their wide global presence and reputation.

## 4. Concluding Thoughts

Recent global transformations and religious conflicts have precipitated a resurgence of religion's influence in the public sphere, challenging the secularization thesis and indicating a postsecular turn. This essay examines the role of new religious movements (NRMs), particularly Brahma Kumaris (BKs) subverting diverse normativities and contesting religious/secular dyads through their pragmatic pursuits. NRMs such as BKs have emerged as significant actors in addressing contemporary spiritual and social needs, often synthesizing traditional beliefs with modern practices. This study has explored how the Brahma Kumaris (BKs) have pragmatically adapted to the postsecular context through five key processes: detraditionalization, synergism, gender sensitization, agro-spiritualism, and digitalization. These pragmatic pursuits have enabled BKs to adapt to contemporary challenges, attract diverse stakeholders, and contribute to various social and environmental initiatives. By deemphasizing diverse normative positionalities and through their pragmatic pursuits, the BKs demonstrate 'reflexive secularization' (Beaumont et al. 2020).

The BKs' ability to synthesize traditional beliefs with modern practices demonstrates the potential for religious organizations to remain influential in the public sphere, challenging the notion of a purely secular society. As the world continues to grapple with the interplay between religion, secularism, and modernity, further research on the evolving role of spirituality in public life is essential to understand the nuances of our postsecular era. Further research could explore how other new religious movements (NRMs) employ pragmatic strategies in postsecular contexts. This could lead to a more comprehensive theory of "postsecular pragmatism" in religious organizations. The BKs' focus on women's leadership and empowerment merits deeper investigation into gender roles within NRMs compared to traditional structures. Additional inquiries could examine how caste, class, and ethnicity intersect with the BKs' strategies, particularly in gender sensitization and agro-spiritualism, and investigate age cohort perceptions of the movement's evolution. The concept of agro-spiritualism invites exploration of the intersection between spiritual practices, environmental conservation, and sustainable development, contributing to discussions on religion's role in addressing global ecological challenges. The BKs' integration of spiritual practices with scientific concepts (e.g., quantum physics) suggests potential for interdisciplinary research that bridges religious studies, natural sciences, and social sciences.

Considering that the results presented in this study derive from a process of documentary research, it may be beneficial to extend this research through extensive phenomenological interviews focused on 'lived religion'. BKs' global presence and international collaborations also underscore the need for research on how NRMs operate across national boundaries and engage with global governance. Future studies could compare NRMs in India and globally to identify similarities and differences in their postsecular approaches. A longitudinal assessment could investigate the long-term effects of NRMs' (pragmatic) pursuits on adherents, local communities, and broader society, as well as analyze their influence on policy-making and governance in India and internationally. As digital platforms become central to spiritual practices and community-building, future research could examine how digitalization affects religious experience, authority structures, and the dissemination of spiritual knowledge. In conclusion, Brahma Kumaris presents a compelling case study demonstrating how new religious movements can adapt and thrive in postsecular contexts through pragmatic engagement with contemporary issues and innovative practices.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Data Availability Statement:** No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflicts of interest.

## Abbreviation

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

BK Brahma Kumaris

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