SAHAJA YOGA

Socializing Processes in a South Asian New Religious Movement
SAHAJA YOGA
Socializing Processes in a South Asian New Religious Movement

Judith Coney
For
Siobhan and Alexandra
Reality is not what it is. It consists of the many realities which it can be made into.

Wallace Stevens
# CONTENTS

**Figures and Tables**  xi  
**Acknowledgements**  xiii  
**Glossary**  xv  

**Introduction**  1  

**Chapter One**  SAHAJA YOGA AND SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION  7  
Passivity and activity in New Religious Movements  8  
Socialization and the transmission of values  10  
The construction of social worlds  12  
The social body  16  
Social construction and authority  18  
Re-including sectarian organisations  19  
The dynamic and pragmatic construction of reality  21  
Conclusion  23  

**Chapter Two**  INTRODUCING SAHAJA YOGA  24  
Sri Mataji and Sahaja Yoga  24  
Sri Mataji’s teachings  30  
Good and evil in Sahaja Yoga  33  
Purity  34  
Crusadership  36  
Negativity  38  
Malevolence  39

---

www.ebook3000.com
### Sahaja Yoga

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter Number</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Pages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Three</td>
<td>MAKING CONTACT WITH MOTHER</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Attracting people to Sahaja Yoga</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Getting self-realisation</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cool breezes</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Additional motivations</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Social aspects of realisation</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Four</td>
<td>PRACTISING SAHAJA YOGA</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Defining ritual</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The aims and effects of Sahaja Yoga ritual</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ritual stages</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Stage One: Purification</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Stage Two: Protection</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Stage Three: Worship</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>International rituals</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The adoption of South Asian ritual forms</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Embodied practice</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Social ritual</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A relaxed approach to ritual</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Five</td>
<td>LEARNING TO LOVE MOTHER</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The characteristics of charisma</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The foundations of charismatic authority</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Different types of charismatic attraction</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The charisma of Sri Mataji</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Understanding ‘who she really is’</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reaffirming charisma</td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Protecting charisma</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Different constructions of charisma</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Six</td>
<td>A WOMAN'S ROLE IN SAHAJA YOGA</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------</td>
<td>-----</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ideal and actuality</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Gender ideals</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female images in Sahaja Yoga</td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Goddess and Lakshmi</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Gender socialization</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Social modelling</td>
<td>128</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Gender and ritual</td>
<td>132</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Women and social conformity</td>
<td>134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reactions to the female role</td>
<td>135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Variety in the group</td>
<td>138</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Differing locations</td>
<td>138</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Competing socializations</td>
<td>140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Informal authority</td>
<td>140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>142</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter Seven</th>
<th>SOCIALIZING A SECOND GENERATION</th>
<th>145</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Belonging to a family</td>
<td>145</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The advice of Sri Mataji</td>
<td>148</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>‘Who Sri Mataji really is’ through children’s eyes</td>
<td>153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Variations in socialization</td>
<td>154</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sahaja Yoga children in Britain</td>
<td>155</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Children in Sahaja Yoga schools</td>
<td>159</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Criticisms of socialization</td>
<td>161</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Parental misgivings</td>
<td>163</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Differences in worldview</td>
<td>164</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>166</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter Eight</th>
<th>LEAVING MOTHER</th>
<th>168</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Forestalling departure</td>
<td>168</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Modes of exit</td>
<td>171</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Choosing to leave</td>
<td>172</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Stay or leave</td>
<td>176</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Expulsion</td>
<td>176</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
FIGURES AND TABLES

Figure 1  The image of the body in Sahaja Yoga  31
Figure 2  Putting on a bandhan  73

Table 1  Children and adults in Sahaja Yoga in Britain  146
Table 2  Participant observation with Sahaja Yoga  201
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The completion of this book would not have been possible without the help and guidance of numerous individuals. Given the constraints of space, only a few of the many people who assisted the project are mentioned below. My thanks, and deep appreciation, however, go to all.

Firstly, I am immensely indebted to my teacher and research supervisor, Professor Eileen Barker, of the London School of Economics and Political Science, University of London. Having encouraged me initially to work on a doctoral dissertation on Sahaja Yoga, she has never wavered in her commitment and steadfast support, and commands my enduring respect and love. Her outstanding specialist knowledge and sensitivity to issues in the study of New Religious Movements have proved invaluable over the course of the project. I hope she will like this book.

Next, I would like to express my gratitude to all the Sahaja Yogis who gave me assistance during my research, and to everyone who spoke to me about their experiences of Sahaja Yoga. I trust that you will find something on these pages which repays your involvement in the project.

Thanks go to Jonathan Titter for his unflagging support and his constructive comments on a wealth of draft material. Thanks, too, to Dr Bryan Wilson and Professor Paul Rock for their sound advice. I am also greatly in debt to the postgraduate community in the Study of Religions Department at the School of Oriental Studies in the University of London, for challenging me intellectually, and in particular to Richard Fox for his incisive critiques.
Finally, I am especially grateful to Michael Skipworth, without whose healing skills this book might not have seen the light of day. I am, as always, also beholden to my patient and wonderful children, Siobhan and Alexandra, for their humour and their love.
##GLOSSARY

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adi Shakti</td>
<td>The primordial creatrix of the universe.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amrit</td>
<td>Nectar. In Sahaja Yoga, the vibrated mixture created by pouring five elements over the feet of Sri Mataji during puja which is then drunk by those present.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ashram</td>
<td>Spiritual community. In Sahaja Yoga, ashrams are typically small groups living together communally.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Badha</td>
<td>Negativity, pollution.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bandhan</td>
<td>A shield against impurity, or a means of making something pure, assembled through characteristic ritual gestures. Always ‘put on’ by Sahaja Yogis as a precursor to meditation, or to ‘working on someone’.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bhajan</td>
<td>Devotional song.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bhut</td>
<td>Restless soul of the dead who inhabits the earth; impure disincarnate being.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chakra</td>
<td>One of seven spiritual centres located up the middle nadi (see below) which runs up the spine. They are, in order from lowest to highest, the mooladharga chakra, the swadhistan chakra, the nabhi chakra, the anahata chakra, the vishuddi chakra, the ajnya chakra and the sahasrara chakra. Each is governed by different deities and is associated with different qualities. For their locations, see Fig. 1.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gana</td>
<td>A lesser deity who protects and works for the benefit of the high gods.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Havan</td>
<td>Purifying ritual involving fire.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kundalini</td>
<td>A spiritual energy which lies dormant at the base of the spine but which can be induced to rise. The rising of kundalini leads to self-realisation. It is understood by Sahaja Yogis to be the shakti (see Adi Shakti above) energy associated with the Goddess, and the creative force of the universe.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nadi</td>
<td>One of three channels in the body through which the</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
spiritual energy of an individual ascends, according to the degree to which they are balanced.

**Namaste**  A Hindu greeting, with the two hands held palms together in front of the face. In translation it means roughly: "I bow to the God in you."

**Puja** Literally, 'worship'.

**Sadhana** A spiritual discipline or path to liberation.

**Shakti** Feminine creative energy.
INTRODUCTION

One spring afternoon in 1992, a Norwegian friend who was living in my village for a year whilst he completed a Master of Business Administration at Bath University dropped over for coffee. After exchanging the usual set of pleasantries about the weather and a few comments about the local primary school, he introduced a new topic into the conversation. Knowing my interest in new religions, he said, was I aware that some people in the next village were ‘giving cool breezes’? I confessed my ignorance and pressed him for details. One, a woman called Jane,\(^1\) he continued, had given him a sort of massage and as a result he had felt a cool breeze on the top of his head. “I really did, you know!” he went on, looking slightly uncomfortable, as if he did not quite believe it himself. “What’s it all about?”

This book is my attempt, as a sociologist of religion, to answer the question raised by my friend that day. It is about Sahaja Yoga, the new religious movement (NRM) whose member was responsible for the ‘cool breezes’ which he felt. The book is an investigation into the socialization of members of Sahaja Yoga. It examines how it is that people feel cool breezes as a result of their contact with Sahaja Yoga and how, gradually, at least some come to accept the spiritual claims of the leader, Sri Mataji Nirmala Devi and become utterly committed members. It looks at how newcomers adopt the social conventions of the movement, which are quite different from those operating in mainstream Western society, and how the understandings that are learnt in the movement continue to affect those who leave. It is an endeavour to comprehend how
individuals experience and believe things in certain situations which they might have rejected out of hand in other circumstances. This book explores how new ways of seeing the world are constructed and sustained.

In the book, I challenge the stereotypical view that people in NRMs are automatons, stripped of their personalities and content to mouth the words of their leader. Instead, I argue that members of Sahaja Yoga hold different views about the beliefs, practices and history of the movement, and about the guru, Sri Mataji Nirmala Devi. Of course, the idea that individuals can hold dissimilar views about the same thing is hardly new. Reality constructions differ, we know, according to the structural position of the viewer. Indeed, a number of scholars have already observed that there are a variety of standpoints about NRMs which exhibit patterned variation (Beckford 1985b; Barker 1993b). For any given NRM, a sociologist of religion may view it as a group with a dominant ‘world-rejecting’, ‘world-accommodating’ or ‘world-affirming’ orientation (Wallis 1984); the tabloid press are likely to portray it as a ‘mind-bending cult’; the anti-cult movement will characterise it as a soul or psyche-destroying organisation practising ‘mental coercion’ and causing heartbreak to thousands of families; an ex-member may see it as a group which fails to live entirely up to its precepts; peripheral members may see it as an organisation which has had a beneficial influence in their lives but one which they feel no need to devote themselves to wholeheartedly; and the more committed member is likely to see it as the epicentre of spiritual transformation in the world. Each view is formulated on the basis of different considerations which have implications in the selection of the information considered relevant to that standpoint (Barker 1993b). In turn, this selection process reinforces the position held, whether it is the ‘objectivity’ of the academic, the ‘faith’ of the devotee or the ‘grave concerns’ of the anti-cult movement.

What is less commonly accepted is the notion that there is also a variety of views within the organisations themselves. NRMs are presented typically as having a single, centrally-
defined and imposed world view. Instead, and despite the exclusiveness of the group, it is the variety of viewpoints held by members within Sahaja Yoga that is emphasized on these pages. This diversity exists, I argue, because our lives are social and interactive, even for those of us living within sectarian settings. Furthermore, I contend that by examining such processes within Sahaja Yoga we can learn more about processes of socialization in general, and the plural viewpoints they evoke.

There are those who might query the suggestion that an examination of socializing processes found in NRMs can tell us much about such processes outside these, admittedly, unusual organisations. There are instances in which it is possible to see clearly the ways in which NRMs are influenced by, and have an influential role to play, within society. The events at Waco in 1993, for example, precipitated by the activities of US law enforcement agencies, provide us with a case in point: the shock waves from that siege are still reverberating on Capitol Hill, within the US gun lobby, amongst American right-wing fundamentalist Christian groups and elsewhere (Wright 1995). However, the proposition that a study of socialization processes within and around a single NRM can tell us about general processes of socialization, even when this case study is used in conjunction with material on other NRMs, may require some defence.

A case can be made in the affirmative, however, on a number of grounds. To begin with, it is easy to find evidence in other NRMs of a similar variety of views. Despite the accumulation of rules and regulations and the authoritarian regime within Rajneeshism during the early 1980s, for example, different interpretations of the path were readily discernible (Thompson and Heelas 1986, 111–112). Neitz has described how members of the Charismatic Renewal group which she studied shared a basic set of beliefs but how there was a wider variation of beliefs among general members than amongst the leadership (1987, 57). Generally speaking, the increase in complexity associated with the development of a new religion results in increases in membership, the evolution of structures and distinct categories
of members, global expansion and a lessening of ‘face to face’ interaction (Barker 1995, 168). This has implications for the amount of variety there is between the world views of members, as such complexity can often support the ability of a member to select and adapt knowledge on the basis of personal choice. Thus, Sahaja Yoga is not alone in the degree of variety it evinces. Instead, diverse viewpoints are to be found in other NRMs, and the movement is not unique in this respect.

Broadening the argument now, rather than being content to exclude NRMs on the basis of their marginality, I side with those who take the opposite view, that ‘cult is culture writ small’ (Bainbridge 1997, 24). Seen in this light, first generation exclusivist NRMs like Sahaja Yoga provide perfect conditions for the study of larger social processes because their boundaries, entry and exit points are unusually well defined (Bainbridge 1985; Barker 1995, 167). Consequently, such movements are easy to locate and scrutinise. Indeed, Sahaja Yoga provides a particularly good example, since the rate at which individuals become socialized into the movement is comparatively slow and, therefore, accessible to study. Furthermore, although marginal, the organisation of Sahaja Yoga is not so unlike the rest of society as to prevent some extrapolations about that wider society being made (Coney and Tritter 1996), because the deviance of the group rests on content rather than process. The content of members’ world views may be very different from most others, but many of the processes of the social construction of reality remain the same. Most basically, as NRMs are peopled by individuals who share fundamental characteristics with others outside the group, they provide grounds for comparison. In short, both Sahaja Yoga and other NRMs have much to tell the rest of us about ourselves.

Turning the spotlight now onto the subject of the study itself, two main points should be made. The first is it that, in line with the assumption that individuals interpret the world differently on the basis of particular interests and agendas which runs through the text, the present work makes no claim to stand outside this tendency in neutral and impersonal fashion. Instead,
Introduction

I readily admit that I, as a sociologist of religion, have my own interests and considerations which I bring to the research. These influenced the ways in which I went about trying to understand Sahaja Yoga, and are also apparent in its presentation on these pages. Like all other perspectives, my writing reflects my engagements with social life. In this respect, my understandings have been influenced first and foremost by scholarly work in the study of religion, and the sociology of religion in particular. These influences have been imparted to me through literature, contact with other scholars, and field experience which has given me a more integrated and critical appreciation of many of the theories which organise the discipline.

As a sociologist, I tend to focus on aspects of religion which other viewpoints, including those of members, tend not to regard as central. I ask questions about the size, membership, development, organisation and significance of movements, and about their structural position within society, and cross-check replies wherever possible. I use comparative material where available in order to make general statements about larger social processes. I aim to uncover fact over opinion and conjecture through the meticulous assembling of data, so as to produce as accurate an account as possible. However, importantly, I also value opinion and conjecture highly insofar as both afford insights into other world views. The conventions guiding the perspective of the sociologist of religion mean that I do not ‘invoke God as an independent variable’ (Barker 1993b, 196) during my intellectual musings on the nature of social processes inside and outside NRMIs. Neither do I see it as part of my task to evaluate the doctrinal claims made by any religious organisation under my gaze, although I undoubtedly hold personal views which I attempt, privately, to be as aware of as possible. Instead, I try to record as many understandings of ‘what is going on’ as I can, without privileging one over another. Similarly, although my interest as a sociologist is in processes of social construction, this is not meant to denigrate the experiences of members who interpret their experiences otherwise. In my eyes, it is processes of social construction that make
the life of all human beings qualitatively real, but I do not put forward social construction as an ultimate explanation for reality.

Finally, my focus on the plurality of opinions and perspectives within this NRM leads to the question so often asked in connection with these movements. If there is more than one view about them, which one is ‘true’? Is a group benign or destructive, spiritually uplifting or degenerate? The answer I offer in response is that there is no one ‘truth’ to be discovered about any movement, however small. Any organisation is likely to be of variable benefit to its members. Different views depend on the situations of the narrators in question, including their personal histories, where they live, their personalities, gender, the amount of time they spend with the group, their status within it, and the nature of the company they are keeping when they express that view. My contact with Sahaja Yoga has managed to remind me, as other new religions have in the past, that no group of people, however small, speaks with a single voice, and that to engage in a quest to find the ‘right’ voice to listen to is a fruitless task, and one that detracts from understanding. I am grateful for the reminder.
There is a story in Sahaja Yoga of a man, living in the middle of an African desert, who was initiated by a travelling Sahaja Yogi. The travelling Yogi then continued on his way. Months later, however, he thought of this man alone in the desert and decided to write to him. To his surprise, the man replied and described ‘Sahaja Yoga-like’ experiences and insights, about both the guru and himself, gained solely through meditation and not through any contact with other members of the religion. The moral of this story, for those who tell it, is that the truths of Sahaja Yoga which are told to most newcomers when joining can be validated through self-discovery by anyone who has received their ‘realisation’. For Sahaja Yogis, the tale is evidence that the physical experiences and spiritual insights to which their religious affiliation and practices give rise are entirely independent of cultural context or society.

Notwithstanding this story, I pay particular attention to exploring the significance of social interaction in Sahaja Yoga in the pages which follow. Specifically, I investigate those interactions involved in the construction and maintenance of membership of this movement. These, I argue, lead to the creation of a sense of a common identity, through contact with other members of a particular social ‘world’, but also allow for a variety of viewpoints to emerge. A Sahaja Yogi, in other words, will always recognise common ground with another devotee from the movement. However, their understandings of ‘what is going on’ will differ. One factor contributing to the variations between the ‘world views’ of different members of
any NRM is differences in the social contexts in which these 'world views' are produced. Another is the predispositions of different members, their personal histories, and previous socializations (Barker 1984). Additionally, "...creative skepticism and limits to the socialization process itself may act to limit or reverse entry... The possibility of resistance, misunderstanding, nihilation or alternation always exists" (Wentworth 1980, 85). My approach, therefore, is one in which social interaction plays a formative role in the construction of world views (Blumer 1969).

**Passivity and activity in NRMs**

Researchers who have studied groups from a distance have tended to see members as passive victims, overwhelmed by forces beyond their control (Balch in Robbins 1988, 15). In contrast, those studies of NRMs which have emphasised that members act as active agents are most likely to be those based on qualitative methods such as participant observation (ibid., 15). As Robbins has correctly observed: "Underlying these peccadillos is the reality that many controversial 'issues' are essentially interpretive and evaluative rather than factual" (ibid., 14).

The literature on NRMs, therefore, can be divided into that which construes individuals as largely malleable, and that which supports the reverse position (Saliba 1995). On the one hand, members of NRMs have been conceived of as being overwhelmingly dominated by authoritarian structures associated with the charismatic authority of their leader. These members are portrayed as passive, not in the sense that they do nothing but in the sense that what they do, they do because of what has been done to them.\(^2\) Through intensive social pressure they have lost the ability for independent thought and action (see, for example Conway and Seigelman 1978; Langone 1993; Tobias and Lalich 1994; Samways 1994: Singer and Lalich 1995). As a result of underhand and deliberate indoctrination, or coercive environmental factors,\(^3\) according to this model, recruits employ
a new vocabulary with which they mouth the beliefs of the group; they lose interest in former friends and family and in all save the cult. In short, they become clones through socialization.

The early adherents of this deterministic paradigm linked, emotively and explicitly, the proselytising activities of NRM s with brainwashing ‘psychotechnology’ used in the Russian purge trials of the 1930s, Chinese communism and in the Korean War of the 1950s (Sergeant 1958; Lifton 1961; Schein 1961). Once established as a theory, belief in brainwashing gained public prominence because of its attraction for a variety of critics of the cults. It was seen an emotionally acceptable explanation for parents as to why their children have chosen to join minority, exotic movements; it explained the sometimes radical behavioural changes apparent in new converts; and it provided a potent justification for the ‘deprogramming’ industry (Wallis 1984, 43). Further, just witchcraft and possession have been invoked in previous centuries in the West, accusations of brainwashing have offered a means of labelling structurally marginal groups as deviant (Cox 1978).

Conversely, scholars using qualitative methods, involving close and sustained contact with individuals, have leaned to the other side of the debate. Those studies using these methods have tended to stress that members are, at least partially, responsible for their own conversion and subsequent commitment (Downton 1979; Straus 1979; Barker 1984). A number of departure studies using these methods have also emphasised that the majority of those who leave new religions do so voluntarily (Shupe and Bromley 1980, 108; Wright 1987) and have pointed to high turnovers in membership, lending further credence to the idea of members as active participants (Ofshe 1976; Bird and Reimer 1982; Barker 1984; Galanter 1989). In addition, they have noted that modes of exiting give rise to a variety of perspectives about the period spent in an NRM (Beckford 1985; Galanter 1989; Lewis 1989). In line with the general trend towards attributing individuals with agency in the social sciences, therefore, an increasing body of evidence has been accumulated which has challenged the depiction of members of
NRMs as acquiescent and non-creative. Van Zandt expressed the position of all such scholars nicely in his own study of the Children of God:

Living in the Children of God is not the utter submission to a strange and oppressive ideology; it is a constant and continuing activity in which members confront and attempt to solve the pragmatic problems of daily life using the resources they have at hand.


Although Van Zandt’s words could be applied equally well to the lives of Sahaja Yogis, in this book, in contrast, neither the individual nor society is conceptualised as forces which seek expression over and against each other. Instead, the self is seen as social, and no hard and fast line is drawn between the two. Consequently, the issue of whether human beings are passive or active loses something of its theoretical *raison d’être*. This does not mean that issues of agency are ignored entirely, especially when they are invoked in the discourse of Sahaja Yogis. It means, however, that I am attempting to take one step back, and to highlight the effects of this discourse rather than operate within its confines without comment.

**Socialization and the transmission of values**

Similarly, the stance I have adopted necessitates a re-evaluation of the manner in which socialization has been previously construed. On account of an implicit separation posited between ‘society’ and ‘individual’, the majority of scholars, when discussing socialization, have spoken of the transmission of values from one to the other, and attempted to distinguish that transmission from others which they have identified. The present work, however, seeks to avoid the idea of ‘transmission’ at the heart of most other analyses, although it affirms the idea of socialization as an interactive process through which people are oriented in relation to, and learn to interact with, each other.
If, as is being argued, these two ‘entities’ cannot be easily distinguished, the notion of something being transmitted between them no longer makes much sense. Furthermore, transmission implies that something, a value, is being passed from group to individual.7 No such transaction can take place, since the configuration of a value lies in its relationship with other values, rather than in any actual essence (Derne 1994). Rather than using the idea of transmission and reception, therefore, this book uses a model of value construction. The reasoning for this is not just a philosophical one (Reddy 1979). Simply, it seems to fit the material under scrutiny better than the model it replaces. Thus, the process of socialization that emerges in the chapters which follow is one in which internal values are seen to be produced in social relationship with other, clustered, values, leading to a kaleidoscopic and constructed social network which is identifiably that of the group ‘Sahaja Yoga’.

As we shall see, however, this does not mean that each member simply builds up a static internal construction of ‘the way the world is’. Dynamism is inherent in this process, and understandings are interpreted and modified according to the patterned predispositions of the person and the networked context within which they are produced. This ensures that there is always reconstruction-in-relationship taking place. Not only is it the case, therefore, that “the retrospective accounts of converts ... are influenced by the respondents present situations, particularly with respect to involvement in an ideological group in which members learn a new interpretive framework and ‘vocabulary of motive’ which patterns their accounts” (Robbins 1988, 14. italics in original). All accounts are produced in this fashion. This does not mean that we start from scratch every time we articulate an understanding. It means, however, that we construct from the building blocks available to us – our past memories and our present context – an understanding which fits the requirements of the moment.

Although I strain to avoid the tendency to speak in terms of what is either passed or received, it still seems fruitful to use a
definition of socialization which admits both aspects of the interactive process, since understandings are produced in relationship. Towards this end, firstly, socialization is associated with induction into an identified 'social reality'. This induction involves two aspects, these being (1) the organisational recognition of individuals' affiliations and (2) the person's own identification of themselves as members, manifested in corresponding adjustments in perspective and behaviour. Once these two criteria have been met, socialization can be said to be completed. Secondly, socialization and social construction are not synonymous terms. Socialization can be seen as an establishing of new associative relationships which stops at a given point, this being when induction is complete and the person is no longer regarded as a novice by either themselves or by others in the organisation. Social construction, however, as conceived of here, also involves both maintenance and partial reconstruction in the moment. This reconstruction is understood as a recurrent feature of life, because of the pragmatic ways in which members relate to their 'social worlds'.

This understanding of socialization owes a debt to the work of Tonkin, who has defined it as “a constitutive process, through which we build ourselves as conscious human beings” (1992, 103). The constructions of new social worlds which are produced through socialization are selective, according to the existing dispositions of the individual and their situation, and emerge out of a social context. Socialization, furthermore, is limited to the type of behaviour which surrounds the entry of non-members into an organisation, who learn by watching, doing, and establishing mutual definitions of situations with fully fledged members. Socialization is a crucial component in social construction, but this latter process extends beyond the induction of members.

**The construction of social worlds**

Having established the parameters of what is meant by the term 'socialization' for our purposes, it is time to explore the
ways in which sociologists of religion have so far sought to explain the construction of social worlds.\textsuperscript{9} By far the most influential model in the field of the social construction of reality, and one on which many of their analyses have often explicitly rested, is that of Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1966). For this reason, I have outlined this framework in some detail below, and it is used as a stepping off point for the model of social construction employed in this book. It should be noted at the outset that their model rests, as does others, on the elevation of a distinct subjective self to a central role in the processes of social construction (ibid., 149). Thus, the question of the extent to which people are active or passive members of social worlds is never far away from either theirs or their critics' analyses.

Influenced primarily by the phenomenological work of Alfred Schutz on knowledge and experience, as well as the symbolic interactionism of Mead and Blumer, Berger and Luckmann proposed that human beings socially construct symbolic universes through a three-fold, dialectical mechanism. Firstly, through a process of externalization, human interaction produces an outward social order, giving rise to institutions such as kinship systems and the family. Then, as such institutions endure over time, these take on an objective reality. Primarily through language-based socialization,\textsuperscript{10} what is perceived as ‘chosen’ by the first generation is viewed increasingly as a ‘given’: “The objectivity of the institutional world ‘thickens’ and ‘hardens’, not only for the children, but (by a mirror effect) for the parents as well. The ‘There we go again’ now becomes ‘This is how things are done’” (Berger and Luckmann 1966, 76–77). Through this objectivation, institutions appear as “...unalterable and self-evident” (ibid., 77), independent of any single human being and common to all who belong to that world. Lastly, through internalisation, human beings incorporate a subjective understanding of the objectified social world. In short, Berger and Luckmann say, “Society is a human product. Society is an objective reality. Man is a social product” (ibid., 79. italics in original).
We live, then, in meaningful worlds which, Berger and Luckmann argue, avoid stasis through "...the concrete actions of human beings" (ibid., 134). These universes derive their plausibility from objectivation, but also from 'meta-narratives', such as mythology, theology, science and philosophy. Social worlds are maintained by mechanisms which either legitimate the core values of the socially constructed world view and work to integrate deviants within the system, or which negate any interpretations or phenomena which do not fit, and therefore threaten, the symbolic universe in question.

According to this theory, socialization provides the bridge between the objective and subjective worlds. Primary socialization during childhood leads to the internalisation of a 'base-world' within each individual, which is emotionally as well as cognitively 'fixed' (ibid., 151). Secondary socialization is characteristically necessitated by increasing role specialisation (ibid., 158) and is superimposed upon primary socialization (ibid., 160). Secondary socialization commonly aims to augment and refine rather than to replace one reality with another and, for that reason, it is not required to possess the affectivity and completeness of primary socialization. Religious organisations, however, particularly those which offer members a radically new interpretation of the world, represent a special case in this respect, according to Berger and Luckmann. To effect the transformation required, they provide a secondary socialization which is often as affective as primary socialization (ibid., 176–181).

Berger and Luckmann allow for some complexity and variation within their model. One possibility of variation 'within' worlds emerges out of their concept of secondary socialization through 'role specialisation'. Because individuals have to undergo additional socialization to fulfil specialist social functions, they argue, their world views become differentiated. They put much the same point forward in their discussion of relevance and values, relevance being portrayed as a commodity which provides cohesion between world views. There they comment that "...some relevances will be common to all members of a collectivity. On the other hand, many areas of
conduct will be relevant only to certain types. The latter involves an incipient differentiation” (Berger and Luckmann 1966, 81).

Variation ‘within’ worlds is further built into Berger and Luckmann’s model through their contention that no socialization is ever completely successful. Each person has a slightly different view of the world by virtue of having an individual biography, either because of biology or through contact with alternate social worlds. Each social world also has a notion of deviancy, relating to the extent to which some members fail to be successfully socialized. Such failure ultimately results in the phenomenon of variation ‘between’ different worlds, for, when enough like-minded deviants meet together, a new ‘sub-world’ is formed. Finally, variation is also implicit in their notion that human beings classify others in patterned and habitual ways. This tendency, which they termed ‘typification’, increases, they said, if face-to-face interaction is reduced and there is increasing anonymity. Logically, then, we can assume that, since different individuals engage in less or more face-to-face interaction with each other in a social world, their perspectives will vary on this basis.

Berger and Luckmann’s model of the social construction of realities in a pluralistic world has provided sociologists of religion with a valuable conceptual framework with which to analyse the manner in which members of NRMs forge and maintain new identities and plausibility structures. The model answers the question of why it is that the socializing processes associated with NRMs can give rise to quite different secondary interpretations. Furthermore, through the notion of internalization, it offers a conceptual basis from which to examine the construction of the experiential dimension of these movements.

Thirty years after it was first formulated, however, and especially when applied to the material on Sahaja Yoga, some limitations of the model can be seen. Four are especially relevant to the present task of investigating processes of social construction in Sahaja Yoga. The first is the absence of sufficient reference to the role of the body in the internalization and production of social norms. Second, no mention is made directly
of the ways in which power and authority impact upon the construction of social realities. Third, perhaps partly because of their assumed separation between individuals and society, Berger and Luckmann separated out sectarian organisations as a special case. Instead, I argue that such groups, including NRM's, can be integrated into a general model of social construction. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, they did not give sufficient emphasis to the pragmatic and situated aspects of social construction. These points will be dealt with briefly in turn below.

The social body

Although I have said that Berger and Luckmann do not emphasise sufficiently the role of the body in socialization, this is by no means to say that they ignore the body entirely. Instead, they stress that "From the moment of birth, man's organic development, and indeed a large part of his biological being as such, are subjected to continually socially determined interference" (ibid., 66). However, there are tensions between this statement and others that they make, in which they emphasise the cognitive apprehension and construction of reality. Language, they argue repeatedly, is "the most important item in socialization" (ibid., 77). Affective components are secondary, and largely confined to primary socialization and to processes intended to create new and alternate worlds, in which comprehensive re-socialization occurs. That language is an important aspect in the socializing processes of NRM's is undoubtedly true. Most NRM's have a distinctive shared vocabulary that enhances feelings of identity and belonging. However, in stating, as they do, that "...subjective reality is never totally socialized" because "at the very least the transformed individual will have the same body and live in the same physical universe" (ibid., 176), Berger and Luckmann provide a model which does not do full justice to the part played by the body in Sahaja Yoga.

Generally speaking, the boundaries that we draw around our bodies are reflections of the boundaries of our social world.
Sahaja Yoga and Social Construction

(Douglas 1970). The ways in which we classify the one is mirrored in the other. Our understandings of our bodies, and how we experience our worlds through the medium of the body, are social understandings. In experiencing the metaphors of the body, those of the social world in which that body is situated are also experienced (Foucault 1977). From this perspective, the body is more than an undersocialized aspect of life. Instead, it works, as Comaroff has suggested, as “…the medium for the internalisation and reproduction of social values and for the simultaneous constitution of both the self and the world of social relations” (1985, 74). Rather than existing on the margins of socializing processes, the body plays a key role in the articulation and expression of social understandings.

Bodily experiences form a crucial component of the understandings of Sahaja Yogis. Religious experiences that take a physical form are commonplace in new as well as old religions, whether they involve healing or a legitimation of the beliefs of the movement. At the School of Economic Science, a British-based movement, a participant may hear the music of the planets; glossolalia and being ‘slain in the Spirit’ are common in the Charismatic churches; and the ‘Knowledge’ in the Divine Light Mission is imparted through the senses. In Sahaja Yoga, as we shall see, participants report feeling warm or cool breezes on the palms of their hands and at the top of their heads, and experience a number of other sensations and understandings through this medium which are associated with their membership of the group.

Furthermore, membership in this movement involves a reconstitution of the individual’s understandings about his or her body. The re-fashioning which occurs involves an internal reconstruction, and literal embodiment, of Sahaja Yoga norms. Thus, socialization has somatic as well as cognitive aspects, leading to religious experiences which are both utterly real to the experiencing person, and situated. In fact, established Sahaja Yogis will occasionally not talk about particular spiritual truths until newcomers have felt these truths physically. Berger and Luckmann propose that through socialization “…language
appears to the child as inherent in the nature of things, and he cannot grasp the notion of its conventionality” (1966, 77). Similarly, I am suggesting that a physical experience quickly acquires the status of a ‘given’ within a particular social milieu. The position I am adopting here, then, both encompasses Flew’s comment that it would be astounding “...to hear of the vision of Bernadette Soubirois occurring not to a Roman Catholic at Lourdes but to a Hindu in Benares, or of Apollo manifest not in classical Delphi but in Kyoto under the Shoguns” (cited in Franks Davis 1989, 156), and goes beyond it. The body and its experiences cannot be separated from the social. To advocate such a position, however, does not take us back to a view of individuals who are so much at the mercy of socializing forces that even their bodies have been completely taken over. Instead, somatic experiences are produced in social relationship, just as are more cerebral understandings and, likewise, are non-identical. People experience things slightly differently, as a result of their interactive and productive capacities. Visions are rarely exactly the same, even if they take place simultaneously; the degree to which members of Sahaja Yoga feel coolness and heat at different points on the body varies; and the music of the planets differs according to the specific inner ear. To sum up, it is impossible to identify precisely which is the first to provide us with systems of meaning, the ‘body’ or ‘society’, because they are too closely connected for such analysis.13 Because of the close connection, and the interplay between the two, however, it is important not to inevitably privilege linguistic over somatic aspects of socialization.

Social construction and authority

I have contended that the body is a more influential vehicle of socialization than Berger and Luckmann acknowledged. The next aspect of their model which requires additional comment is that of the relationship between knowledge and authority. Authority, as legitimised power, impacts both on what is known and how that knowledge is diffused, to a much greater extent
than they outlined (Weber 1968; Lukes 1974). In Sahaja Yoga, the power of the leadership legitimates and constrains, ensuring that the contexts within which new understandings arise largely agree. Members, furthermore, are socialized into the power structures of the group, and their place in it, and this provides additional cohesion. On the other hand, authority has an impact on the degree of variation between members’ perspectives as well. Berger and Luckmann touch indirectly on one way in which authority can introduce such variation in their discussion of ‘typifications’. Status is an important factor in who gets to have face-to-face interaction with ‘power-holders’, and who does not. Authority, therefore, because of its inbuilt inequalities, leads to an unequal distribution of knowledge. This fact clearly has implications for social construction, in that what can be constructed is dependent logically on the materials to hand.

Authority, therefore, constrains the individual and subjective dimension of socialization and world-maintenance, and paradoxically increases both the tendency towards cohesion and the propensity towards heterogeneity. Foucault summed up both sides of the relationship in the following manner: “...power and knowledge directly imply one another... there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations” (1977, 27). The result is that knowledge is always, to a greater or lesser extent, fragmented and incomplete, and that authority and access to information have a significant influence on the constructions and experiences of members of all groups. In Sahaja Yoga, as we shall see, the social construction of reality is always mediated by power relations.

Re-including sectarian organisations

The third area in which I modify Berger and Luckmann’s model relates to their conception of the particularly persuasive nature of plausibility structures associated with sectarian organisations. For them, this placed such organisations outside their
general model of socialization, since the influence they exerted was enough to allow a comprehensive re-fashioning of the world to take place. The term which they gave such social re-fashioning was ‘alternation’:

Alternation requires processes of re-socialization. These processes resemble primary socialization, because they have to re-assign reality accents and, consequently, must replicate to a considerable degree the strongly affective identification with the socializing personnel that was characteristic of childhood.

(Berger and Luckmann, 1966, 176–7)

Continuing on, they characterise the re-socialization which accompanies induction into a religious sect as overwhelming, and go so far as to say that:

It is not difficult ... to propose a specific “prescription” for alternation into any conceivable reality, however implausible from the standpoint of the outsider. It is possible to prescribe specific procedures for, say, convincing individuals that they can communicate with beings from outer space provided that and as long as they stay on a steady diet of raw fish ... If these procedures are followed carefully, there will be a high probability of success once an individual has been lured or kidnapped into [the sect].

(ibid., 181)

In other words, the idea of individuals as active agents which Berger and Luckmann allowed for elsewhere, albeit that this activity was based on prior sets of socialized values and structural positions, was entirely absent from their depiction of sectarian socialization. For the most part, their model was sympathetic to a view of human beings as being able to sort out the various alternatives which are presented to them “in the light of their dispositions and accumulated experiences” (Barker 1984, 136). In the case of religious re-socialization into minority groups, however, they lurched away from their more interactive stance. Thus, they argued that the group – the person having
been relegated to a relationship of emotional dependency – dominates in a sectarian environment.

The argument in this book, however, is that at least some, and perhaps all, sectarian organisations fit better into a general model. Whereas there may be occasions in which the network of possible interpretations is pretty limited, the constructions of Sahaja Yogis, for instance, as we have already seen, are never identical to each other. Thus, both variation and choice are much more commonplace than Berger and Luckmann’s work on ‘alternations’ suggest, and this can be said of most other sectarian groups.

The dynamic and pragmatic construction of reality

The last adjustment I make to Berger and Luckmann’s model has already been mentioned in passing. Earlier in this chapter it was noted that they argued their model avoided stasis by building in change as a result of interaction with a number of social worlds. Even so, they often gave the impression that each individual was in possession of complete and coherent world views. When these world views collided, each was modified. On an everyday basis, however, these worlds were intact and stable. Having made this assumption, they could remark:

Individuals perform discrete institutionalised actions within the context of their biography. This biography is a reflected-upon whole in which the discrete actions are thought of, not as isolated events, but as related parts in a subjectively meaningful universe whose meanings are not specific to the individual, but socially articulated and shared.

(Berger and Luckmann 1966, 82)

Perhaps they hold this view of a whole, inner universe residing in each individual owing to their commitment to language as the primary force in reality construction. For it is a comparatively short step from this position to one which affirms tacitly that, since, words represent things, our words represent, and can
transmit, our inner reality. However, I would argue, as Shotter does, that the understandings which are constructed by an individual are neither static nor monolithic:

Words do not primarily stand for things... they do so only from within a form of social life already constituted by ways of talking in which these words are used... This approach implies that we cannot take our 'lived' experience as in any way basic. Indeed, from this point of view it becomes a problem as to why, at this moment of history, we account for our experience of ourselves as we do - as if we all existed from birth as separate individuals, containing wholly within ourselves 'minds' or 'mentalities'

(Shotter 1990, 121).

There are problems in banishing the subject entirely from processes of social construction, especially since it is clear that people do modify and interpret stimuli. Nevertheless, it is useful to question the stability of the self. Having engaged in such questioning, processes of social construction illumined in this book are seen as involving human beings in the production of views of their world as specific responses to stimuli, as befits the occasion and on an ad hoc basis. Understandings undergo continual social reconstitution, and are by no means always coherent. As Barth observed recently:

...we must realise that the bottom line for people when attending to their interests is not principles but pragmatics... all we need so as to operate as individuals is knowledge in handy bits, to use to interpret events as they occur, to make sense of them and to be able to act in a way that looks after our concerns.

(Barth 1993, 320).

The selective re-production of our understanding in relationship to events as they occur allows for the continual possibility of the compromise, re-evaluation, modification and pragmatic expression of world views, although consistency is also assured through interactive and public definition of a given situation. To sum up, using Luhrmann's words, it is not the case "that people
have an ordered set of beliefs about a particular endeavour which forms a consistent set with other beliefs which together describe the totality of thought and action. People are much fuzzier and more complex than that" (1994, 337).

**Conclusion**

In the foregoing examination, the model provided by Berger and Luckmann has been adjusted in places. In its original form it already provides a helpful foundation for the exploration of primary and secondary social realities relating to NRM$s$. It usefully emphasises aspects of world views as being constructed rather than given. It allows for a variety of constructions within NRM$s$, if they are seen as examples of the general model as has been suggested. Moreover, the model which Berger and Luckmann articulated permits an examination both of socializing and maintenance processes and of interpretations by members. However, I have extended their theorising to include the significance of the body and the influence of power and authority, and by affirming that many NRM$s$ fall into a general model of secondary socialization. Most significantly, I have challenged the view of social construction as leading to coherent and whole social worlds by stressing its dynamic and fragmented qualities. The end result, I hope, provides a useful framework with which to proceed with an exploration of social processes and the changing nature of an individual's orientation within Sahaja Yoga and the larger context of NRM$s$.

In the chapters which follow, this framework is used to investigate particular social features of Sahaja Yoga. These features illuminate the processes involved in the building up of 'Sahaja Yoga-like' understandings by newcomers, and beyond. Sahaja Yoga, it will be seen, has a highly distinctive cosmology which has been articulated by Sri Mataji, as well as an exclusive orientation. However, notwithstanding the high boundaries of the group, and the pressure for cohesion within its walls, it is the variation in the understandings of her teachings by members in the group that is highlighted in the pages ahead.
CHAPTER TWO

Introducing Sahaja Yoga

Sahaja Yoga is a movement with teachings and practices which often sound very unfamiliar, and even alien, to most Western ears. It is necessary, therefore, before examining the socializing processes of this NRM, to give preliminary details of what it is that socialization, at least in part, conveys and, to some degree, contextualise the movement in a broader setting. Consequently, I give a brief history of Sahaja Yoga and its teachings, starting with an account of the life of the guru, Sri Mataji Nirmala Devi.

It is important to point out that much of what will be said about her history, and about the organisation created around her, is hagiographical in flavour. The first section of this chapter is not set out as a definitive version of events, and should not be treated as such. Instead, it is a meshing together of various commentaries and perspectives. The account draws, in particular, from a book written by a longstanding follower, de Kalbermatten, and from one written by two devoted but not so experienced followers, Rajasekharan and Venkatesan. It also, of course, draws heavily on the commentaries of Sri Mataji herself.

Sri Mataji and Sahaja Yoga

Sri Mataji Nirmala Devi, the founder of Sahaja Yoga, was born on 21st March 1923 in Chindwara, India. The second of six children and the eldest daughter of a leading Indian barrister, Nirmala seems to have enjoyed an affluent childhood in a Christian household. A number of stories are told of various miraculous events surrounding the birth of Nirmala which seem
Introducing Sahaja Yoga
to indicate that she was no ordinary baby. She was born spotless, as if bathed in scented water, and emerged entirely unscathed from a serious accident involving the coach which was returning her from her baptism (de Kalbermatten 1979, 261). It is said, moreover, that Mahatma Gandhi recognised her advanced spiritual qualities when her father, his close associate, took Nirmala, then aged seven, to visit his ashram. Gandhi was so taken by the child that he instructed her father to let her live at his ashram whenever she could. Thus: "she spent many happy childhood days enjoying his company and life in the Ashram. He would discuss various matters with her and often took her help in organising the rhymes for his prayers" (Rajasekharan and Venkatesan 1992, 66).

However, the peacefulness of this childhood was shattered by the Indian struggle for political independence, in which her family was actively involved. Her father, said Sri Mataji, "burned all his suits. They were stitched in England. My mother burnt all her saris... We lived in beautiful houses and then we shifted to huts and lived there" (Sahaja Yoga 1985b, 6). Sri Mataji has said she was also deeply involved in the struggle, so much so that she had to curtail her medical college education:

I was, of course, very much in the thick of it. I was never frightened. I was just an eighteen year old girl... The police used to torture me, used to give me shocks and make my life very miserable, beat me and all that.

(Sahaja Yoga 1985b, 11)

After Independence, Nirmala was married to Mr Chandika Prasad Srivastava, who subsequently became a highly successful administrator and diplomat. They had two daughters. Over the years her husband was, first, the Managing Director of the Shipping Corporation of India and then the Secretary General of the United Nations International Maritime Organisation. In 1990, he was awarded a British knighthood and has received numerous other awards from grateful governments and organisations around the world (Rajasekharan and Venkatesan 1992, 68).
Although the reports of her family and her devotees emphasize her attention to her wifely duties, we are told that by the 1960s Nirmala apparently began to feel troubled by the teachings and practices of ‘fake gurus’. Accordingly, she spent some time with a number of them, Rajneesh in particular, in order to find out how destructive they were (ibid.). Rajneesh, for whom she reserves her most vitriolic condemnation, perhaps unsurprisingly recounted a somewhat different version of events:

She was once travelling with me in a car, and I passed by Muktananda’s ashram. The people staying in Muktananda’s ashram invited me to be there for a five-minute stay, just to take a cup of tea. And it was a long journey so I said “There is no harm in it.” Anyway, I love a cup of tea! So I stayed for five minutes.

Nirmala saw Muktananda. She could not believe that this stupid-looking man ... had become a great spiritual leader. After the tea, when we re-entered the car she said “If this man can become a great spiritual leader, then why can’t I?” I said “You can.” And she has become one.6

He continued,  

I know her perfectly well — for ten years she was my student. There is nothing in it, no spirituality, no meditativeness ... but she got the idea from Muktananda. (Rajneesh 1982, 164)7

Few devotees, however, have heard this tale and were they to do so they would undoubtedly treat it as falsehood. Instead, they are likely to say that her visits to other gurus persuaded her that “something must be done” (Rajasekharan and Venkatesan 1992, 69) and convinced her to embark on her own spiritual work. Subsequently, on May 5th, 1970 at Nargol,8 Nirmala became ‘fully realised’:

I saw the kundalini, which is the primordial force within us, which is the Holy Ghost within us, rising like a
Introducing Sahaja Yoga

telescope opening out. And then I saw the whole thing open and a big torrential rain of beams started flowing through my head all over. I felt, I am lost, I am no more. There is only the grace. I saw it completely happening to me. (ibid., 69)

She began her mission of salvation in earnest, establishing a reputation as a faith healer (Kakar 1984, 191). Then, on December 2nd 1979, in London, she unequivocally declared her divinity to her followers:

[Today] is the day ‘I’ declare that ‘I’ am the One who has to save the humanity. ‘I’ declare’, ‘I’ am the one who is Adi Shakti, who is the Mother of all the mothers, who is the Primordial Mother, the Shakti, the purest desire of God, who has incarnated on this Earth to give meaning to itself, to this creation, to human beings; and ‘I’ am sure that through ‘My’ Love and patience and through ‘My’ powers ‘I’ am going to achieve it.9 (Sahaja Yoga 1988, 8)

Since then, she is most often understood by her followers to be the Devi, the Goddess of Indian mythology, returned to save the world.10

Shortly after the time of Sri Mataji’s ‘realisation’, she moved with her husband to England because of his job with the United Nations Maritime Organisation, and it was there that the organisation of Sahaja Yoga began to grow. By the latter half of the 1970s, Sri Mataji had, by personal visits to their homes, assembled a band of devotees, and had begun public meetings, first in London and then throughout the country. Many of these early followers were attracted by her promises to cure terminal diseases and addictions, and by the stories of miracles which were circulating.11 Others came from other NRMs, and particularly from Transcendental Meditation.12

By 1987 there were five small ashrams, households where followers lived collectively, throughout England and, in addition, a large house in the village of Shudy Camps, Cambridge-
shire had been purchased. The intention was to establish: “a permanent International Sahaja Yoga Centre, an International School for our children, and the first International Sahaja Yoga Clinic for the benefit not only of England but for the whole world” (Sahaja Yoga, 1986a). This building was bought, at least partly, with money which the English Sahaja Yogis were encouraged to raise and was also extensively refurbished using their volunteered labours. Although the school and the clinic were never established on the site, it has served until the present day as a national centre where Sahaja Yogis gather to celebrate festivals and other events. It is also where Sri Mataji and her family often stay when in England. By 1987, there were around 220 committed adult Sahaja Yogis in Britain, and the organisational structure of the movement was firmly in place. Sri Mataji had appointed a British leader to oversee things, and a number of co-ordinators were also appointed locally who were responsible for running the ashrams and transmitting information from Sri Mataji ‘down the line’ to other followers in their designated area.

Meanwhile, Sri Mataji had begun to travel internationally, articulating her vision of Sahaja Yoga as a ‘global religion’. The movement, she said, had a universal appeal and emphasized the values of non-racism, harmony and equality between peoples:

For Sri Mataji the whole world is her family and realisation is available to anyone who wants it, regardless of race, caste, creed or financial status. The divine has no knowledge of ... the colour of one’s skin and the kundalini remains the same in all, regardless.

(Rajasekharan and Venkatesan 1992, 70)

Devotees who had met her in Britain, but who were from other parts of the world, were encouraged to return to their homelands and establish Sahaja Yoga by setting up centres there. As a result of these efforts, by 1994 the movement claimed a presence in over thirty nations, a committed following of around ten thousand world-wide, predominantly in India and
Introducing Sahaja Yoga

Eastern Europe, and some one hundred thousand other individuals with some loose association with the group. Two Sahaja Yoga boarding schools had been set up for the children of devotees, one outside Rome in Italy and the other near Dharamsala in India. A castle at Cabella in Italy had been purchased for Sri Mataji, and a sumptuous palace had been built for her outside Poona, India. Even her own husband, now retired from office, had declared himself "an apprentice Sahaja Yogi" (Sahaja Yoga 1994a).

In Britain, Sahaja Yoga has attracted a predominantly middle-class following from a wide range of ages and with a gender ratio of about 3:2 in favour of women. By 1993, there were over three hundred fully committed adult members in the UK and perhaps just over the same number of people who followed some of the practices but who only occasionally made contact with other followers and did not fully believe in all the claims made by Sri Mataji. There were twelve ashrams in London and twenty other local centres, excluding Shudy Camps, throughout England. Followers outside these centres lived with their own families or alone, but came together regularly at public meetings and Sahaja Yoga events.

Consistent with the vision offered by Sri Mataji, most followers will say, as do Rajasekharan and Venkatesan here, that "the Universal Religion recognised by Sahaja Yogis integrates all the religions by unifying the principles of all religions together" (Rajasekharan and Venkatesan 1992, 149). Notwithstanding the Christian background of the guru, the teachings and practices of the religion – or perhaps more accurately the sadhana – seem inspired largely by Tantra, especially in terms of the understanding of the body. Hindu practice, and local customs from the Maharasthra region represent major influences as well. Rituals and songs from other traditions, including Islam, are also incorporated, though to a much lesser extent. Thus, the movement shares the eclectic flavour of many other NRM s.
Sahaja Yoga

Sri Mataji’s teachings

One Tantric idea found in Sri Mataji’s teachings is that the body is the primary vehicle of the divine (see Klostermaier 1994, 288). Sahaja Yogis learn that each individual is composed of four bodies. These are the physical body, the subtle body (which is made up of vibrations and energy) the causal body and the supercausal, the last being the divine, eternal and universal self (Sharma 1993, 1). Briefly put, these bodies are linked by three channels called nadiś. The Ida nadi, which runs up the body on the left-hand side, controls the emotional life and past experiences. The Pingala nadi runs up the right side of the body and controls the intellect and the future. In the centre runs the Sushumna nadi whose location corresponds to the spinal cord. Along this central channel are placed, in ascending order, seven chakras, or spiritual centres. Each is associated with particular qualities and also with different deities. Thus, the first chakra, the Mooladhara, is associated by Sahaja Yogis with innocence and with the Hindu god Ganesha and the sixth, the Agya or ajna chakra, has the quality of forgiveness and is the abode of, among others, Jesus.

However, although the nadiś and chakras link the four bodies of an individual, and thus connect the microcosm of the physical body to the macrocosm of the universe, this connection is usually incomplete. The energies of individuals are normally stuck in either the left or right nadiś, leading to imbalance and ego. A balance between the left and right sides of the body is achieved only with the help of a third component, which is activated through the central channel. This is the kundalini force which is said to have propelled Sri Mataji towards her own ‘realisation’.

The spiritual energy of kundalini, according to Sri Mataji, lies in a dormant state in the sacrum bone:

The Kundalini is like a connecting cord as in every piece of electrical machinery, which connects the machinery to the
Introducing Sahaja Yoga

Nādis Chakras and their Deities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chakra</th>
<th>Deity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Moolādha Chakra</td>
<td>Sri Ganesha</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1A Moolādhaa (Mother Gauri)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Swadīśthāna</td>
<td>Sri Brahmadeva, Saraswati</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Nābhi or Manipur</td>
<td>Sri Lakshmi, Vishnu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3A Void (Ocean of Illusion)</td>
<td>Sri Adi Guru Dattātreya</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Anāhata</td>
<td>Left: Sri Shiva, Pārvati Centre: Sri Jagadāmba Right: Sri Sitārāma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Vishuddhi</td>
<td>Left: Sri Vishnumāya Centre: Sri Rādha, Krishna Right: Sri Yeshoda (Rukmini Vittala)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Ajna</td>
<td>Centre: Lord Jesus, Mother: Mary Right: Sri Buddha</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Sahasrāra</td>
<td>Sri Kalki</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Iḍā Nādi (Moon Line)</td>
<td>Sri Mahākāli Bhatravā (Archangel Michael)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II Pingala Nādi (Sun Line)</td>
<td>Sri Mahāsaraswati, Hanumāna (Archangel Gabriel)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III Sushunma Nādi</td>
<td>Sri Mahalakṣmi</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Rajasekharan and Venkatesan 1992, 103)

Figure 1. The Image of the Body in Sahaja Yoga

main source of electricity. In the same way when this energy of Kundalini is awakened, threads (some of them) rise and ultimately connect the human being to the all-pervading power (Paramachaitanya).

(Sri Mataji, quoted in Sharma 1993, 2)

Sri Mataji claims to be able to fully awaken the kundalini of others almost instantly. The process traditionally involves strenuous efforts, is difficult and is only achieved after many years of practice (Krishna, 1971). The speed she offers is
possible, she says, because she is the Adi Shakti (Sahaja Yoga 1988, 8). Once awakened, either by Sri Mataji or her followers, the kundalini rises through the chakras until it pierces the topmost chakra, the Saharastra, and emerges at the fontanel area at the top of the head. During its ascent, the individual may feel tremendous heat. This, says Sri Mataji, is due to the kundalini burning off impurities in the chakras as it rises. However, once it has fully ascended, participants feel a cool breeze on the palms of their hands or above their heads, and sometimes more generally:

This happening of Kundalini Awakening and ultimate union with a higher consciousness are described by a Sanskrit word ‘Sahaja’. This means literally born with or spontaneous... This cool breeze is the one which is manifested by the all-pervading power of Divine Love.

(Sharma 1993, 5)

If group practices are continued, followers say, the deities and qualities associated with each of the chakras are awakened. The purifying power of kundalini also enables the development of a new somatic faculty: ‘vibratory awareness’. Through this faculty, by feeling heat and coolness on different parts of their hands and in their chakras, followers can differentiate between truth and falsity. With ‘vibratory awareness’, they can determine their own states of purity or negativity and those of other individuals, be these members or non-members. Moreover, through being connected by the power of kundalini, they can feel the vibrations of the Sahaja Yoga ‘collective’, comprising of all the members of the movement.

The benefits of an activated kundalini are said to include increasing good health and relief from stress (Sharma 1993, 57; Rai 1993, 46; Spiro 1993), a feeling of well-being, a more balanced outlook on life, the adoption of a more moderate lifestyle and the spontaneous abandonment of bad habits, such as swearing, fits of temper and addiction. A tract which is attributed to ‘the Sahaja Yogis of the world’ describes other qualities which are characteristically associated with devotees of Sri Mataji as a result of ‘realisation’:
Before marriage we lead a very chaste life. We don’t even like to listen to talk of sex... There is very deep love between husband and wife, but there is no public display of romance as it upsets our modesty and privacy... We spontaneously enjoy all the arts, but only those works which are beautiful and soothing, that give joy. Works that are traditional or classical, enduring works of great masters of art, music and literature. We do not enjoy things which are not respectable, that are vulgar, jarring on the nerves... We enjoy our virtue, faith and sense of security. We enjoy our peace, calm and forthright attitudes.

(Sahaja Yoga A Declaration, 1–3)

Followers, in short, say that they are increasingly purified by the energy of kundalini. Furthermore, once it is set in motion, the individual spontaneously discards those aspects of his or her behaviour which are ‘negative’, because:

Animals can lie in a stinking mud without being in the least disturbed... evil is not repulsive to human beings for they do not have the awareness of the realised state. After realisation you become aware of evil and the body shows the revulsion.

(Sri Mataji, quoted in de Kalbermatten 1979, 183)

**Good and evil in Sahaja Yoga**

Having sketched briefly some of the consequences of ‘realisation’, including the newly awakened ability to discriminate between good and evil which is claimed, it is time to focus more attention on how Sahaja Yogis understand these terms. This is because, firstly, the themes of good and evil are recurrent and important elements in the teachings of Sri Mataji. Secondly, they provide a useful framework for a very basic elaboration of these teachings. Third, they illuminate the ways in which members classify themselves in relation to the rest of the world.

Devotees, for the most part, tend in casual conversation to confine themselves to relatively uncontroversial statements,
such as “Mother [Sri Mataji] is 100% good” or “Hitler was evil”. On closer inspection, however, these concepts usefully highlight the wide range of meaning and association within the movement, and the context-dependent nature of even basic understandings. As Parkin (1985, 1) has noted, both good and evil can be invoked in more than one way, and all the associations listed below can be found in Sahaja Yoga. Evil can be seen as disorder or pollution (Douglas 1966), as imperfection, or as a malicious and malevolent force. Other notions of evil are apocalyptic in orientation. Goodness, on the other hand, can be associated with innocence and purity, or conceived of as an oppositional and active force which does battle with evil. Whilst all committed Sahaja Yogis are familiar with the range of interpretations of good and evil which are held in the movement, some stress one more than the other.30

Purity

In the way in which the term is most generally used, good is usually equated with a state of purity in the movement. As has already been mentioned briefly, through the activation of kundalini, Sahaja Yogis progressively purify themselves internally as negativity is ‘burnt’ out of the chakras. But, for them, being pure is not simply the absence of impurity. It is a positive state, in which an individual gradually begins to emit ‘good vibrations’. Furthermore, for Sahaja Yogis, purity is not simply a theoretical concept but is also physically experienced in the form of cool vibrations: “Perfection emits perfect vibrations: we feel it as a cool breeze entering through the fingers, overflowing into the complete palm of the hand” (de Kalbermatten 1979, 185). Sahaja Yogis use the faculty of ‘vibratory awareness’, described earlier in the chapter, to assess the purity of individuals or things. Because purity and ‘self-realisation’ are linked inextricably, individuals who are most pure are those who are realised; similarly, objects which are identified as pure by Sahaja Yogis are so by virtue of the purity of their creators or
Introducing Sahaja Yoga

owners. Thus, the works of great artists who are understood to be 'self-realised', such as Mozart or Blake, emit cooling vibrations.

The most pure individual in the universe is Sri Mataji herself. This is not only because in her behaviour she is seen as wholly good and the personification of purity. It is also because her body is both charged with, and emits, powerful cool vibrations. In particular, her feet and each of her hairs are felt to be especially full of vibrations. Whatever she touches is also charged with her vibrations. Consequently, her hairs are often carefully retrieved from the combs that she uses and buried in the gardens of Sahaja Yogis or outside ashrams to purify the surroundings. Water which has been used to wash Sri Mataji’s feet is a commonly used source of purifying vibrations. Sometimes this water is charged by direct contact with Sri Mataji’s feet as they are being washed ritually. More usually, through force of circumstance, the water is vibrated by being used to wash a photograph of her feet. This has much the same effect, however, because photographs of the guru are considered to emanate her vibrations. The vibrated water created through such contact with Sri Mataji is believed both to have healing properties, and to promote plant growth.

Objects which have been handled by her become similarly charged. Marian, a follower, told me the story of how she was given some roses by Sri Mataji after an international event and how, because the guru had handled them, the flowers were ‘vibrated’. When she was on the plane on the way home, she said, Marian decided to transfer the roses from her lap to the overhead locker. On doing so, she found that her lap was icy cool with the vibrations coming from the flowers (Diary, 3.9.93).

Other objects in Sahaja Yoga which are considered auspicious and particularly pure are those traditionally connected with the Goddess in the Maharashtra region of India (Crook 1926, 410). Coconuts, for instance, which are associated with her in this way, are often used as offerings in Sahaja Yoga rituals and afterwards are buried near a Sahaja

35
Sahaja Yoga

Yoga dwelling to promote pure vibrations. Devotees have attested to how they can sense the vibrations given off by this fruit. One, Rose, described how she was taken when she was a newcomer to Sahaja Yoga to the local market by a more experienced follower, in order to buy a coconut for ritual purposes. She enquired why coconuts were used and was told ‘Don’t ask, just feel’. When she held out her hands, she said, she could definitely feel the cool vibrations of the fruit. But, she went on, she also noticed that some seemed to have stronger vibrations than others. The explanation she was given was that this was because some of the fruit were fresher than the others (Diary, 20.11.92).

Crusadership

Purity, then, is a manifestation of goodness on a generalised vibrational level. However, goodness also has a more specific and active form, in which it is liable to be associated with a task involving the saving of all that is pure in the world. Sri Mataji is presented as a saviour who provides the ark of Sahaja Yoga for all those who would escape the evils of the world, and even its destruction. In Indian mythology, it is the god Vishnu who incarnates for the tenth time as Sri Kalki and destroys the wicked in the *Kali Yuga*. A new age will then commence “with men of purity and brightness, over whom Vishnu will reign forever” (Walker, 1968: 512). In the Sahaja Yoga cosmology, however, Sri Mataji has taken over this role:

He (Vishnu) has already awakened ... [and] has come in the form of HH Mataji. Hence, in all truth and for all practical purposes, HH Mataji is Sri Kalki. She is our hope. She is the Deliverer. She is salvation. She is the destination. No one else should be hoped for.

(de Kalbermatten 1979, 173).

Sahaja Yoga is presented as a final “salvaging operation before the last sorting out” (ibid., 239). Thus Sri Mataji’s mission is to save as many souls as she can. This she is said to do on an
Introducing Sahaja Yoga

individual basis by giving ‘realisation’, and by freeing those under the influence of possession. Furthermore, on a collective scale, Sri Mataji, is felt able to transform the negativity of whole countries at a time by ‘working it out on a subtle level’ (Diary, 15.10.92).

Sri Mataji is joined in her work by others. Especially early on in the movement’s history, it was believed that Sahaja Yogis are chosen people who will go on to form a new and pure community after evil has been scourged from the earth.39 Today, many still believe they have a task of actively redeeming others:

‘The redeemers’ are made out of the community of the realised souls belonging to all nations, tongues, castes, etc. They have been redeemed by the Grace of their kundalini and are now actively working at raising the kundalini of their fellow human beings so that they can also be redeemed by their own kundalini.

(de Kalbermatten 1979, 172)

They are engaged in the business of recruiting as many genuine seekers as possible to their cause. In addition, and both collectively and individually, Sahaja Yogis work actively on a ‘subtle’ level, like their guru: “Every realised soul is an emitter of ... divine vibrations and he is day and night fighting the negative vibrations in his environment” (ibid., 173).

As well as her devotees, Sri Mataji is assisted by a pantheon of higher beings. Sometimes these are described as angels, watching over the Sahaja Yogis and helping them in their struggle against evil.40 Sahaja Yogis are also reminded that, because Sri Mataji is the Goddess, beings from Hindu mythology accompany her and assist her in her work as well. Sometimes it is the fact that divine beings are understood to provide protection and aid to Sahaja Yogis, because of their love for Sri Mataji herself, which is stressed. Thus, for instance, at a meeting with followers in France on 29th June 1985, she said:

You must know that there are Deities and Ganas and everyone is sitting here. They came forward before me to
France. Twenty-four hours they are working, you know that very well. You ‘know’ it, it’s not a story, you ‘know’ that. They are working for you in every way, solving all your problems, don’t they?

(Sahaja Yoga 1988, 107 italics mine)

At other times, it is their role in administering retribution to wrongdoers which is emphasised, as seen in this comment she made about Shri Krishna:

Shri Krishna did not believe in forgiveness at all because it was important that there should be someone with a very stern mind, with such a stern understanding that a devil is a devil and must be killed... Once we forgive, we transfer all our anger, all our attitude of taking revenge to Shri Krishna. He takes over... and if it is justifiable, if it is necessary, He will punish the people who are torturing saints, who are destroying the dharma.

(Sahaja Yoga 1993, 1)

**Negativity**

But what kind of negativity requires such a response? Just as purity is primarily associated with Sri Mataji as the Goddess and her image, with ‘self-realisation’ and with belonging to the Sahaja Yoga collective, so negativity is derived from, and can be transmitted by, everything outside this association. Negativity can be described as a lack of purity that permeates on a broad scale, a defilement of the vibrations of the universe. It is not, in its most generalised form, intentionally transmitted but is spread from one individual to another through association. Thus, Sahaja Yogis believe that individuals can be affected by the involuntary seepage of the negativity of others.\(^{41}\) Sri Mataji, for instance, has advised Sahaja Yogis not to look directly at others in the street, in case they inadvertently are contaminated by them. Neither should they associate with people who are ‘negative’, in case of defilement.\(^{42}\)
Introducing Sahaja Yoga

In this form of evil, both people and objects are liable to be laced with ‘bad vibrations’, accumulated from past and present negative influences, from wrong-doing and through contact with ‘negative’ individuals. Such ‘bad vibrations’ typically particularly defile the chakras in the body and may become deeply embedded, causing illness and possession. Sahaja Yogis themselves, notwithstanding the activation of their kundalini, are not immune to this type of pollution, although they can ritually protect and cleanse themselves. Moreover, just as they can feel purity in the form of cool vibrations, so negativity is felt as hot vibrations. Indeed, when ritually protected, both Sri Mataji and her followers are consciously able to take on the impurities of those to whom they give ‘realisation’, in order assist the process of raising their kundalini. The following extract, which outlines one follower’s initial encounter with her, describes this ability thus:

The first day I was with HH (Her Holiness) Mataji Nirmala Devi in Hurst Gree, she had to excuse Herself a couple of times and go to the “bathroom”. There I could hear she was vomiting. She was taking my vibrations upon Her chakras to ease mine and the bathroom was the direct result.

(de Kalbermatten 1979, 129. capitals in original)

Because of the inadvertent nature of much of this defilement, purification is an important theme in Sahaja Yoga, and most devotees cleanse themselves of contamination from negativity and its accumulation on a daily basis.

Malevolence

In contrast to this general notion of negativity, and paralleling the understanding of a state of active goodness, active evil is conceived of as a malign and malevolent force. It is this form of negativity which requires the strenuous efforts of both Sahaja Yogis and deities to counter-balance its effects. Because we are in the Kali Yuga, it is said that evil entities have incarnated in particularly large numbers. We are living in the last days before
the apocalypse, and “never have demonic forces been closer to their ultimate success or their ultimate failure” (de Kalbermatten 1979, 357). Sahaja Yoga, therefore, is a force which must fight against a “coalition between the forces of the dead, the fornicators and the sorcerers” (ibid., 225). In Hindu folklore, demons are not necessarily seen as evil.44 However, here demons are clearly defined as diabolical as well:

There is, in this present time, in the earth’s biosphere, a collection of perfectly satanic personalities. They are challenging God... To this effect, they are now spreading on this earth as many sins, blasphemies and abominations as possible. (de Kalbermatten 1979, 239)

Their purpose is to damn all mankind, and they seek to do this by whatever means at their disposal. The ‘satanic forces’ attack everything they consider to be good, especially by possessing vulnerable individuals, and through deception:

They penetrate the world of newspapers, show business, media, arts and publicity. They can be movie makers, actresses, writers... Modern media technology directly helps them to spread their demonic vibrations all over the world. (ibid., 222)

Another favourite guise is to incarnate as a false guru, preaching salvation but leading their followers into evil ways.45 These gurus are said to particularly relish enticing non-incarnate demons and other negative spirits to possess their followers. Those who, by such means, are led astray from the path of righteousness are also considered dangerous, and inhabit this category as well: “The hosts of the Antichrist” are made out of the innumerable people whose psyche is overpowered by and identified with the forces of Evil” (ibid., 172. italics in original).

Anomalous beings

Before leaving the discussion of aspects of good and evil as they are understood in Sahaja Yoga, mention should be made of two
Introducing Sahaja Yoga

other groups of beings who are, in a sense, anomalous in that they do not fit neatly into one or other of the aspects outlined above. The first group is composed of those individuals who are 'born-realised'. In the past, this list has included great artists, such as Mozart and William Blake, as well as others who are perhaps less obvious candidates, such as Lenin. However, because we are nearing the final days, Sahaja Yogis believe, many more people are actually being born 'realised' than before. Most spiritual healers, for instance, are understood to be 'born-realised', even if they themselves do not appreciate the fact. Many 'born-realised' people are also 'seekers' who are actively searching for spiritual truth. Given their 'realised' state, it might logically be expected that these people would be viewed both as pure and as allied to the Sahaja Yoga community. This is not, however, the case because, until they have accepted Sahaja Yoga and the divinity of Sri Mataji, they are not technically 'saved'. Rather, they are only potentially among the blessed. However, they are also potentially prey to satanic forces.

The other class of being is the bhut, which is anomalous because it combines both inadvertent and active connotations of negativity. In the Maharashtra region, bhuts are considered to be spirits of the dead which "come into being either as the result of inadequate or incomplete funeral rites or through the untimely death of a person who dies with intense unfulfilled desires" (Bernstein and Zellnot 1988, 28), although they can also be malign. One who becomes possessed by bhuts "feels himself to be a vessel defiled; he feels as if evil, defilement, chaos, wrongness, disorder have taken him over" (ibid., 1988, 54). Bhuts are also known to thrive in impurity. Thus, they "frequent latrines and other filthy places, and care must be taken on entering such rooms... They eat filthy food and as they are always thirsty they are ever in search of water, no matter how impure it may be" (Crooke 1926, 220–1).

In Sahaja Yoga, similarly, bhuts are seen as dangerous when they are the ghosts of evil people, or disincarnate demonic spirits. More often, though, the Sahaja Yogis say that these are souls who hang about the earth with no especially malicious
Sahaja Yoga

intent. Furthermore, devotees often use the terms ‘negativity’ and bhut interchangeably and appear to consider them to be the same. Thus, bhuts are manifestations of both general negativity and malevolence. Consequently, the types of objects which are ritually used by Sahaja Yogis to ward them off not only have the power to emanate good vibrations, but are also traditionally used in some parts of India to draw out negativity actively, such as lemons and chillies.48

Beliefs and sectarianism

It is time to move from an exploration of the intricacies of Sahaja Yoga belief to one which is more explicitly sociological in tenor. This begins with the observation that the teachings that have so far been set out are not usually told to outsiders. Instead, as we shall see in the next chapter that examines conversion and induction into the movement, it is benefits in health and happiness which are offered as an initial inducement to join Sahaja Yoga. Thus, few newcomers would recognise many of the beliefs outlined here, with the exception of the description of the Sahaja Yoga body, chakras and kundalini.

The movement is, to an extent, then, reticent about revealing its teachings fully, albeit for mostly explicable and unalarming reasons which will be discussed in later chapters. Moreover, amongst the beliefs that have been outlined above are those which are millenial and which focus explicitly on the negative state of the outside world. On this basis, it is possible to locate Sahaja Yoga, as it has been until the present day, within the wide spectrum of NRMs using the typology founded on ‘world-orientation’ set out by Wallis (1984). In terms of this typology, the movement falls between the ‘world-affirming’ and ‘world-rejecting’ categories, for the very reason put forward by Wallis here:

World-affirming movements may develop a world-rejecting, sectarian inner core on the strength of the conviction
that, although designed initially to improve the members’ benefits from the world, the movement is, in fact, vastly superior in what it can offer, thus closing off any desire to return to the world. (Wallis 1984, 130)

It is ‘world-affirming’ to the extent that it offers newcomers tangible improvements in terms of health and well-being. It is increasingly ‘world-rejecting’ in orientation, however, once newcomers have progressed beyond a certain point within the movement. This, in turn, has implications for the variations in the world views of Sahaja Yogis.

Although most of what has been set out would be accepted by the vast majority of self-defined Sahaja Yogis, members emphasize some parts and de-emphasize others for a variety of reasons. These include when and where they joined the movement, their previous lifestyles and orientations, and, indeed, who they are talking to when they produce their particular understandings of the Sahaja Yoga cosmology. On the last point, in keeping with the categorisation of the movement as outwardly ‘world-affirming’ but inwardly ‘world-rejecting’ in orientation, and because established devotees are usually prepared to discuss their more ‘advanced’ beliefs only with people who have followed the practices laid out by Sri Mataji for some time, Sahaja Yogis at different stages of membership have recourse to different amounts of information, which leads to differences in their perceptions of the movement.

It is perhaps worth saying that the variety between the world views of Sahaja Yogis which has been emphasised in this discussion so far does not lead to the disintegration of the movement because it is offset by other factors which work to maintain social unity. These counterweights, including group pressure to conform and the desire to learn as much as possible about a practice which is experienced as beneficial, enable the movement to preserve cohesion. Group notions of purity and pollution delineate the boundaries between Sahaja Yogis and the outside world and so increase a sense of internal identity. Another unifying factor is the authority of the guru, which is
sustained by faith that her claim to be the Goddess is legitimate. As we shall see later, moreover, followers characteristically express their beliefs vaguely, even to each other. This behaviour allows the existence of a variety of views, since what is not stated explicitly is not open to refutation or analysis. Thus, even doubt, so long as it is not voiced explicitly, can be tolerated, and group solidarity can be maintained.

Sahaja Yoga, then, can be seen, like all groups, to exist in a state of tension between the variety discernible in the beliefs of members and the cohesion necessary for the group to stay united, the latter being generated by socialization, peer pressure and the willingness of individuals to commit themselves to the world view of the leadership. In the case of this particular movement, the variety has not been sufficient to generate schism. However, as in many NRMs, there is sufficient diversity for there to be a relatively high turnover in terms of membership, and for there to be a category of members who choose actively to be peripheral rather than fully committed.

**Conclusion**

In the space available it has not been possible for me to provide more than a skeletal outline of some of the teachings of Sri Mataji. For instance, miracles, which are extremely important in Sahaja Yoga, have only been mentioned briefly. Nevertheless, I have given an outline, however abbreviated, of the history of the establishment of the organisation, and of some of the aspects of the teachings which almost everybody associated with Sahaja Yoga knows. In later chapters, I elaborate on many of the issues only mentioned here. Enough has been said at this stage, however, to prepare the reader for the examination which is about to begin of socialization and Sahaja Yoga.
CHAPTER THREE

Making Contact with Mother

Becoming familiar with a social world produces the sense of a common and shared experience between individual members. In the case of Sahaja Yoga, I have just outlined some of the understandings that would be regarded as basic by any member. I have also argued that these understandings are constructed dynamically, are context-dependent, and are open to continual reconstruction on that basis. Moreover, socialization is a multifaceted phenomenon and is by no means restricted to learning a language. Continuing on with these themes, my focus in this chapter is on the first contact individuals have with Sahaja Yoga. Two points are especially noteworthy at this stage of the proceedings. The first is the significance of non-linguistic modes of acquiring social information. People, we will see, learn about the truths of Sahaja Yoga at least as much by watching and doing, as through dialogue and listening. Secondly, the data indicate that the experiences and understandings produced by newcomers are quite widely varied.

To begin with, however, it is important that I make several distinctions, to avoid later confusion. The first is between joining a movement and the process of conversion. There has been a tendency on the part of those studying religion to confuse acts of conversion with the decision to join a movement (Robbins 1988, 64). Yet there are differences. Joining a new religious movement can appear almost instantaneous, as if an individual has somehow ‘snapped’ into a different mode (Conway and Seigelman 1978). Thus, as a Rajneesh sannyasin once characteristically observed: “I went to Poona just for a
change of scenery. I didn’t go to find a Master or anything like that. But I saw Bhagwan and took sannyas. I only went for a three day holiday” (Thompson and Heelas 1986, 77). Conversion, however, typically involves a number of months, or even years (Balch 1980; Downton 1980).1 Certainly in Sahaja Yoga, albeit no two experiences are exactly the same, conversion is usually a gradual process, involving the kinds of changes described by Machalek and Snow as:2

... a transformation of consciousness, especially of self and identity. Clearly, this conception of conversion implies a momentous change that is unlikely to be produced by simple affiliation with an organisation. Viewing conversion as a transformation of consciousness implies that one has undergone something akin to a paradigm shift.

(Machalek and Snow 1993, 56)

It is a process of inner revolution, involving changes in the beliefs and outlooks of a person. This further distinguishes it both from joining, which is an act of organisational affiliation, and commitment, which implies some degree of continuing fidelity to an organisation or a way of life. Having made this preliminary demarcation, it can now be said that this chapter examines both joining and conversion in Sahaja Yoga, especially in relation to the socializing processes of the movement.

**Attracting people to Sahaja Yoga**

In a letter to the *Bath and Bristol Advertiser* (19.2.87), signed by thirteen leading British Sahaja Yogis including the national leader, it was stated that “There is no recruitment in Sahaja Yoga”. Nevertheless, as we have already seen, Sahaja Yogis have reason to be keen to attract new members into the group. Most radically, those who believe most strongly that the Last Days are approaching are motivated by the belief that it is the duty of Sahaja Yogis to find all spiritually inclined individuals and to attempt to save them rather than let them either drift aimlessly
Making Contact with Mother

or fall into the hands of 'fake gurus' and end up in hell. More pragmatically, Sahaja Yogis say that the practices of the movement can cure all manner of physical and psychological diseases. Further to this, as one national leader described it, their aim is to 'put millions of people in touch with their Spirit' (Diary 1.2.94).

In fact, although all members would, not unnaturally, like to see far more people coming to Sahaja Yoga, not all of them share the ideals of the earliest members, who believed that the group would attract millions throughout the world because of its "universal appeal" (Coney 1995, 117–118). Experience has shown them that, although the movement is growing steadily, such expectations have had to be revised. It has also taught them to be circumspect in their meetings with newcomers, for fear of losing them by appearing too strange, as has happened on occasion in the past. Thus, members are normally reticent about revealing 'too much, too soon', before a newcomer has convinced them that he or she ready for a deeper understanding. This approach fits in with the advice given to them by Sri Mataji on how to present themselves to newcomers, based on her own experience:

First you don't show them that you are a real hard task master. Never. First use all your sweet qualities. The more they are difficult the more I'm gentle with them. Then they come inside, then you put them to the mill and you can cure them. First prepare them. First of all sometimes they are so frightened, they are so nervous, they are so upset, sometimes too much of ego. So be gentle. Gradually they'll strengthen themselves also in your company and, then, even if you hit them they are alright. That's how it has to be done, very cleverly. (Sahaja Yoga 1988, 75)

For such reasons, Sahaja Yogis tend to approach only those whom they believe will be the most interested in what the movement has to offer. One category of individuals approached is that of 'spiritual seeker'. As we have seen, such a person, in Sahaja Yoga terms, may be someone who was 'born realised'
and who often also has a history of affiliation to a variety of spiritual groups. Because we are entering the Last Days, it is believed, many more are being born than before. In terms of social background, these seekers are also likely to be middle-class. Another category into which many, perhaps the majority, fall is of those who are ill, a typical explanation given being that this is because illness forces people to look at their lives and to make changes (Diary 20.2.93). In the early years, longer-term Sahaja Yogis say, the group also attracted a lot of alcoholics and addicts. More recently, however, established members have commented that far more ‘normal’ people have joined Sahaja Yoga (Diary 29.1.93). Certainly, insofar as this can be ascertained through observation, addicts do not seem to be represented significantly amongst current newcomers to Sahaja Yoga in Britain.

There are three main routes by which people come into contact with the group in the UK. The first is through a private invitation to ‘get their realisation’, either in their own home or that of the Sahaja Yogi concerned. The second method is through local advertisements for small public meetings. These may be put up in shops, health food stores and colleges or placed in the local paper. Advertisements will sometimes stress that ‘you cannot pay for your spirit’ and typically invite those interested to ‘find the meaning of your life through self realisation’. Meetings may simply also be described, rather more vaguely, as opportunities to learn a beneficial form of Yoga. Lastly, colourful posters and leafleting campaigns across London herald Sri Mataji’s annual one or two nights at the Royal Albert Hall, where she ‘gives realisation’ en masse.

Sahaja Yoga attracts people who are looking for something, although none of those whom I interviewed said that they were looking for the Goddess, or even for a female guru, at the beginning of their journey. Nevertheless, some described the quest as overtly spiritual. Rose said, for instance:

I came across Sahaja Yoga in A. in 1980. There was a poster up in a cafe. I felt I was at a point in my life when I
Making Contact with Mother

needed some more boundaries, I needed somebody who knew more about meditation and about the spiritual life than I did to guide me. So I was actually on the look out. There was a sea of posters about different meditations, because it was a very alternative lifestyle type cafe, and this one had a picture of Sri Mataji on it and as far as I could see it just jumped out of the wall at me. I took that to be a very clear indication that it was the one which was meant for me.9

Similarly, Brady was also looking for something, in his case, an effective meditation technique:

I had a yearning to get involved in some serious meditation. I came back from India where I had been on holiday and I saw a diagram of the chakras – no picture of Sri Mataji on it – with a contact number and I thought ‘that’s the one’. I phoned the number, they said ‘there’s a meeting tomorrow’, so I went along. I wasn’t looking for a guru. I just wanted a means to meditate. But what attracted me was the diagram and the lines of energy and I thought ‘this is for real’.10

Consonant with the promises made by Sahaja Yoga, many others, perhaps the majority, are initially attracted by the hope of a cure, often when conventional medicine seems to provide little cause for optimism.11 Cancer sufferers, AIDS patients and arthritics have been amongst their number. Margaret, for example, said that she was suffering from excruciating pains in her joints and was hospitalised. When she was discharged she went to see a Sahaja Yogi doctor and he ‘worked on her’ intensively. She got better and, at least initially, continued her connection with the movement to ensure her health remained good (Diary 20.2.93).

Others are attracted by the idea of learning a relaxing new technique. One member, Joshua, said that he was told by an astrologer to meditate in order to reduce his level of stress and he then saw the advert for Sahaja Yoga in Time Out. He went
along because “it was the only place that didn’t charge money” but never thought that he would last very long. The second time he went, however he had “a strong experience” and “loved it”. Unusually, he knew nothing about religion before his contact with Sahaja Yoga and so bought books such as the *Analects of Confucius* and the *Tao Te Ching* to “find out what it was all about” (Diary 2.2.93).

Induction into new religions often occurs through the use of members’ existing social networks of friends and family, especially in those groups which are relatively open to the rest of the world and do not require members to cut off from former ties. More exclusive groups, such as the Unification Church during the 1970s and early 1980s, tend to enlist strangers who are often socially isolated (Robbins 1988, 85-6). Sahaja Yoga combines these avenues. Some newcomers hear of the group through social networks of work colleagues, acquaintances, friends and family. Partners or relatives are sometimes persuaded to join, and there are several cases in which all the siblings in one family have joined. More typically though, members find it less easy to convince those close to them of the virtues of Sahaja Yoga. Andrew, for example, joined abroad and returned home, enthusiastic about his spiritual discovery:

> When we came back to Britain we wanted to bring all our old friends into Sahaja Yoga. We felt they were seekers, we tried to give them ‘self realisation’. We tried to bring them into Sahaja Yoga, but none of them came.

There are also those who are already estranged from their families, especially parents, and see little point in trying to reverse that situation. A further few change so radically after joining that they inspire non-family members about them to try it for themselves.

To sum up, the initial contact of individuals with Sahaja Yoga occurs for a variety of reasons, as is the case in the majority of new religions in the UK. Most often, the newcomer is ‘looking for something’, and this search may well be linked to a crisis in health or personal relationships, but he or she is not at the
outset consciously selecting Sahaja Yoga in preference to other forms of healing or other spiritual paths.\textsuperscript{14}

**Getting self-realisation**

As Wilson and Dobbelaere (1994, 49) have observed: “There is no one pattern by which people first encounter, are then attracted by and eventually convert to a new religious movement but there is always a sequence in which exposure occurs, interest is evoked and commitment elicited”. In Sahaja Yoga, initial exposure almost invariably hinges on the promise of ‘realisation’, and its benefits. It has already been noted that ‘realisation’ typically takes place at three types of location in the UK: in the homes of individuals, at small public meetings and at the Royal Albert Hall. Clearly, there are differences between the types of contact engendered by these different settings.\textsuperscript{15} Such differences might, in themselves, influence the types of experiences newcomers have. For this reason, each of the settings is examined in turn below, beginning with the largest venue, The Royal Albert Hall.

On her annual visit to Britain, Sri Mataji has, since 1991, made at least one night’s visit to the Royal Albert Hall in order to deliver mass ‘realisation’ at a public meeting.\textsuperscript{16} The events, which last for about three hours and which are free,\textsuperscript{17} have been attended by between fifteen hundred and five thousand people.\textsuperscript{18} Some are brought along by Sahaja Yogis. They may be friends, family or colleagues who know little about the movement. Perhaps, however, they have been in contact with Sahaja Yoga locally for some time, are already ‘realised’ and this is their first opportunity to find out about Sri Mataji herself. Others turn up out of curiosity, lured by the promises of the poster campaign.

The description which follows of ‘getting realisation’ at a typical Sahaja Yoga event at the Royal Albert Hall is based on attending three annual meetings.\textsuperscript{19} In each, the format was very similar. The audience appears predominantly middle-class and white. A sprinkling of South Asians also attend, most probably to pay their respects. The majority of these leave just before
‘realisation’ is given. The programme usually starts slightly late, with an unscheduled musical performance by devotees. Sri Mataji arrives between half an hour and one hour later, to applause, usually as the musicians are finishing, and sits in a chair, centre stage. On a small table next to her is drinking water and flowers. There are two enormous bouquets in stands on either side. To one side, there is also a large diagram detailing the chakra system. In the next part of the evening, a leading devotee gives a talk outlining the basic principles of Sahaja Yoga, such as kundalini, the chakra system and the need to lead a balanced life.\(^20\) Then Sri Mataji herself gives a short talk. This normally includes her teachings that ‘fake gurus’ are only interested in the money of their followers; that ‘self realisation’ cures physical problems such as cancer and alcoholism; that this is ‘the judgement time’ and you have to decide whether you want to go to Heaven or Hell; and that you cannot force ‘realisation’ – you have to ask for it.

During her talk, the trickle of those leaving the Hall usually increases, perhaps because the expectation of impending ‘realisation’ also heightens. “Let them go. Anyone who does not want it should go because they will spoil it for the others”, she said in 1993. “You will all feel a cool breeze tonight” (Diary 25.6.93). The content of the evening has already not only included an explanation of the different chakras but also a description of the emotional state that individuals should be in and the physical experience they can expect to have. Anyone, the participants will be told, can have their ‘realisation’ if they are genuine seekers who really want to discover the truth and if they have three qualities. The first is faith in their ability to be ‘self-realised’, the second is freedom from guilt and the third is the ability to forgive everybody. All these, she affirms, work to open up the chakras and make them susceptible to the rise of the kundalini.

Sri Mataji then goes on to point to each of the chakras in the body and describe them in turn. She requests that those present take off their shoes, close their eyes, to touch their own chakras and to strengthen the particular qualities associated with each
Making Contact with Mother

by using affirmations. For instance, ‘I forgive everybody’ is an affirmation associated with the Ajnya chakra. She sometimes also blows repeatedly through the microphone at this point, as if to emulate the breath of the Holy Spirit. Afterwards, she will ask people to raise their hands if they can feel either a warm or cool breeze on their heads or hands. The vast majority of the audience respond positively, to her evident delight. “God bless you all”, she has told them. “Now you have your realisation. But you must now contact a Sahaja Yoga centre where they can tell you more about Sahaja Yoga and you can strengthen your experience” (ibid.).

Devotees at Sahaja Yoga centres, details of which are usually on the reverse side of leaflets advertising the event, will then usually direct those interested to smaller local meetings. In 1993, the British leader told me, about 4,000 attended the evening at the Royal Albert Hall, and about 100 people attended follow-up meetings subsequently (Diary 9.7.93). Local meetings are usually held on a weekly basis around Britain, though in London there are sufficient numbers of Sahaja Yogis for meetings to be held at different locations every night of the week. The majority attending such meetings will be Sahaja Yogis but, in addition to those attracted after an event at the Royal Albert Hall, most also attract at least a few new faces periodically.

As with public occasions at which Sri Mataji gives realisation en masse, the format of a local meeting will be very much the same, whenever and wherever it takes place. Newcomers are warmly welcomed and invited to take off their shoes and go into a room with others. In the room there will be at least one picture of Sri Mataji with a candle in front of it, flowers, and a large diagram representing the different chakras and channels in the body. Incense may be burnt and Indian or classical music played. The meeting usually starts with a tape recording of an introductory talk given by Sri Mataji, or a video recording of the same. As either begins, the Sahaja Yogis present will often namaste towards the image of the guru, or prostrate themselves, and will hold their hands out towards the video image or tape
Sahaja Yoga

recorder. Sometimes the newcomer will be invited to do the same, with the explanation that the ‘vibrations’ of Mother are beneficial and that this is a way of feeling them.

Afterwards, the chakras are customarily explained to the newcomer, usually by reference to the diagram, and a local follower may give a talk on an aspect of the teaching or of their experiences in Sahaja Yoga. Next, the newcomer is ready to be ‘worked on’ and will be asked to sit comfortably in front of one or two Sahaja Yogs, to close their eyes and to not think about anything in particular. The Sahaja Yogs will then attempt to raise their kundalini whilst standing or sitting behind them. While this is happening, the Sahaja Yogs will often ask the newcomer how they are feeling. They may ask them to repeat a particular affirmation, or the followers may massage a particular point on the person’s body at which they feel the kundalini has become blocked. When the kundalini is judged to have reached the fontanel area, the top of the head is often also massaged. The person will then be requested to hold their hand a few inches above the top of their head and asked to say whether he or she can feel anything or not. Once it has been established that a person’s kundalini has indeed risen, he or she is usually left to meditate quietly for five or ten minutes. Tea and cake or biscuits then follow and people chat together in a friendly and relaxed fashion. The whole event lasts for between two and three hours.

As might be anticipated, being given your ‘realisation’ in a domestic environment or in the meditation room of an ashram, perhaps with only one or two Yogs present, is a less formal affair. The video of Sri Mataji is usually absent and newcomers may not be shown a diagram of the chakras either. However, they are very likely to be told about the chakras and about kundalini and they will be told that when they get their ‘realisation’ they will feel a cool or warm breeze on their head and hands. Having already taken off their shoes in readiness, newcomers will be asked to sit in front of a picture of Sri Mataji which has one or two candles and perhaps some flowers around it:
I remember walking into the meditation room and there was a very strong feeling of holiness and devotion. Straight away I could really empathise with that. I was asked to sit down and put my hands out in front of a photo of Sri Mataji and just be quiet and enjoy the experience. They will then be ‘worked on’ by the Sahaja Yogis present in order to raise their kundalini, following a very similar procedure to that which takes place during local meetings. Additionally, however, perhaps because more resources are to hand, icepacks may be applied to draw off heat from a particular area, or a flame may be moved back and forth close to a particular chakra to free it. Burning camphor may also be waved in front of a chakra which is blocked in order to clear it, and an individual may be asked to put their feet in a bowl of warm salty water to remove negativity. Sometimes soothing Indian or classical music is played whilst this takes place. Afterwards, they may also be offered tea and biscuits and have a chat before leaving.

There are, then, some procedural differences between the locations in which newcomers have their initial contact with the movement. These differences, however, do not appear to be so extreme that they constitute markedly different presentations of Sahaja Yoga, since the basics are covered in every case. It might be expected that the large numbers of people at the Royal Albert Hall would generate a revivalist or ecstatic atmosphere, making the experience a much more highly charged and emotionally aroused one in comparison to that generated by a local meeting or in a private house. Instead, the atmosphere at all three venues is relatively low key. Thus, despite the variation noted, there is, in fact, a significant degree of similarity between the meetings in terms of content and the presentation of information.

Cool breezes

The result, in all three settings, is that many people do feel a cool breeze. The coolness which is felt is usually associated with other sensations, as well. Typically, the pupils of the eyes can be
observed to dilate and the person will feel very relaxed and ‘centred’. However, it is notable that, despite the very similar ways in which individuals ‘get their realisation’ – and even in the same setting – not everybody feels exactly the same thing. Sri Mataji teaches that the vibrations of *kundalini* can be felt as a cool breeze on the palm of the hands and above the head. Sometimes breezes, in line with the teachings, are felt on the hands and head specifically. For others, the experience is more generalised:

The experience was extremely timeless, because I felt that it only lasted for about five minutes but somebody came behind me and said “would you like a cup of tea” and I thought, “this is silly, what’s all this about tea?” But it turned out that it was about three quarters of an hour later. And I felt a strong cool breeze. I was actually told “you will probably feel some coolness or some nice feelings inside” but I felt coolness not just in my hands, where I was told it would be, but all over and I felt incredibly peaceful.

Generally, the feeling of coolness on ‘realisation’ seems to be discernible, but relatively weak. As with Kakar’s description of his own ‘realisation’, many newcomers are left with the feeling that they felt something but they are not sure what:

Mataji grandly announced, “He is realised” ... “Sit in meditation for some time” she told me as I sat up. “Do you feel a cool breeze on the top of you head and on your palms?” Indeed I did, though I could not distinguish the coolness due to *kundalini* from the gusty breeze coming in from the sea. I felt well, though, calm and deeply relaxed.

(Kakar 1984, 195–6)

A few, however, have an extremely strong experience. One such incident was described by one of the participating Sahaja Yogis:

He felt really cool, not just on his hands but all over. He said: ‘This isn’t a breeze, it’s a wind’. We all felt it really
Making Contact with Mother

strongly too. Then we picked up Mother’s photograph and held it in front of him and he felt loads of vibrations coming from that. But I think the whole thing was so strong that it frightened him. He was very high and positive for two days, he brought us some flowers, and then he became very wary and never came to [the ashram] again.29

Others still, in contrast, do not feel much, if anything, on their first session. This lack of feeling on their part, however, may not be shared by the Sahaja Yogis ‘working on them’, who may remark enthusiastically about how cool the individual feels, and may also be at odds with the view of Sri Mataji herself. Here is the description of his initial contact with Sahaja Yoga by one such follower. He first went to a meeting at which Sri Mataji gave ‘realisation’ en masse, but felt nothing. Nevertheless, he was persuaded to go to a smaller workshop a few days later:

I really didn’t feel anything there at all either but I was told by Mataji herself – she said “Who hasn’t felt it yet?” and I put my hand up with a few others. Mataji said “Come forward” and then she said to me “You’ve got it, you know”, and I said “Have I?” and she said “Yes, go through to that room and ask some Sahaja Yogis to work on you”. So that was my introduction to Sahaja Yoga.30

It was only with repeated sessions that he developed the ability to feel a cool breeze. There are also those, a few, who may feel more calm, possibly as a result of sitting quietly for some time, but otherwise feel no different and never feel any sort of breeze. This is often explained by Sahaja Yogis as being because the chakras have been too badly damaged by negativity in the past (Rajasekharan and Venkatesan 1992, 98).

Kakar (1984, 208), a trained Freudian psychologist, having witnessed Sri Mataji’s delivery of ‘realisation’ both en masse and on a one-to-one basis, concluded that much of the experience is built on suggestion and “hypnotic induction”:31
Sahaja Yoga

Needless to add, because of the emotional pressures created in a group setting, the tendency to identify with the experience of other group members and the intense desire to please the leader, only a handful of people hold out against this mass suggestion. (ibid., 209)

Such a conclusion would undoubtedly be rejected by a Sahaja Yogi, convinced that they have experienced their Spirit through the grace of Sri Mataji. It is not within the remit of my present enquiry, however, to seek to establish the 'real cause' of a cool breeze felt by an individual, but to try to chart the social dynamics involved. Just as Goodman commented, in relation to religious experience:

The religious practitioners argue for it, either because it is part of their dogma, or because, as they affirm, they have "been there", they have experienced it. The hard scientists take the opposite position, again as a matter of conviction... As social scientists, our situation is a happier one: at least we can state that, without any doubt, the alternate reality is a social one. (Goodman 1988, 43)

Examining these social dynamics more closely, we can see that individuals produce a range of responses to a mixture of verbal and non-verbal social cues when affirming, interpreting and articulating a bodily experience. As far as verbal interaction is concerned, newcomers to Sahaja Yoga are told about having different chakras in the body and about kundalini, and that they may feel cool or warm. They are invited to place themselves in particular emotional states of mind. They are informed that they will feel a warm or cool breeze on their heads and hands, and that they will feel better. They are requested to do certain things in order to free blocks in their chakras. Whilst they are being 'worked on' by Sahaja Yogis they will be asked, 'How do you feel?' or, 'Did you feel anything?'. If nothing is felt, the person is usually reassured that the Sahaja Yogis present can feel a breeze, told that not everyone feels it the first time and encouraged to come back and
Making Contact with Mother

keep being ‘worked on’. This, it is emphasised, will result in the breeze being experienced. If they do feel a cool breeze, it is proof that they have become ‘realised’. Such interaction focuses the attention of the newcomer onto particular aspects of their experience like feeling heat or coolness, and not on, for instance, what they can or cannot hear. Furthermore, their experiences, whether positive or negative, are verbally validated and accommodated according to the social expectations of established members.

But non-verbal cues are just as important in learning about the movement. Sri Mataji or her followers will touch the individual who is being ‘worked on’ in ritualistic ways. Information about the location of the different chakras and about how long kundalini takes to rise is, therefore, conveyed implicitly through touch and behaviour. Sri Mataji will position her own hand above her head to indicate to the newcomer where it is they are supposed to feel something. As Kakar noted, she also blows ‘breezily’ through the microphone. Moreover, just seeing others holding their palms upwards to feel vibrations can, in itself, make the invisible realm of vibrations tangible to the newcomer.

The construction of a sacred space – whether it be with flowers, devotional singing and Sri Mataji’s position centre stage in the Royal Albert Hall or, as in the description below, in a domestic setting – is also important in focusing the attention of the newcomer on the process of ‘realisation’:

I walked in there and thought “This is a place of worship”. It was beautiful. It was very clean, there were fresh flowers, there were a lot of photos of Sri Mataji around and incense. But everything had a very worshipful feeling about it and that really went home to me. 32

In all these ways, then, Sahaja Yoga provides contexts for individuals to feel cool breezes, and to recognise them as divine vibrations.
**Additional motivations**

Considerable time has been spent so far on exploring the experience of cool breezes in Sahaja Yoga. However, this is not necessarily because it is assumed that feeling a cool breeze is crucial to the decision to join Sahaja Yoga. In fact, as we have seen, comparatively few people who feel something actually do join, apparently unconvinced by the assurance of devotees that “if you can feel it, it must be true”. Given the small number of people in 1994 who went to follow-up meetings after the Royal Albert Hall,33 it seems that even those who have fairly standard experiences of cool breeze are far more likely not to want to take the experience further than to join.

Furthermore, even the most committed followers will give reasons for membership other than feeling a cool breeze. They may say, for instance, that people ‘stick’ to Sahaja Yoga because their *kundalini* ‘knows’ the truth (Diary 16.4.93). They may express the belief that Sri Mataji chooses her disciples, even if they themselves are unaware of it. As one follower succinctly put it: “A Mother knows her own children” (ibid.). Such comments, in themselves, suggest that the experience of ‘realisation’ is not the only factor in joining. This impression is reinforced by the following comment made by an informant: “I have met a few people in Sahaja Yoga who will admit that they never felt a thing. I remember a chap like that and I asked him why he came. ‘I like the people’, he said”.34 In contrast, as I have already noted, those who feel the experience too strongly may be deterred from joining.35

Instead, observations over an extended period suggest that those who join do so for reasons additional to feeling a cool breeze. In many cases, followers say that supplementary evidence indicated to them that Sahaja Yoga was the right path. When Rose encountered Sahaja Yoga, for example, she had a dream about being in a place where there was an earthquake.36 Sri Mataji was suddenly there in the dream. She was laughing and gestured to Rose to go up a hill. Rose did so and she went into a little hut on the hill. There were lots of
Making Contact with Mother

people sitting there, dressed in Indian clothes with bright shining faces, meditating. In real life, a few days later, she went to her first collective ritual, and the first three people she saw were people who had been in the dream. So, Rose said, she knew she had 'come home' (Diary 6.10.93).

Other reasons given by Sahaja YogiS for joining include being impressed by the fact that money was not asked for in exchange for 'realisation'. This convinced them that the organisation was trustworthy, sincere and not a cult. They also cited the fact that they felt the followers they met had 'something special' about them which was immediately attractive, if not always easy to specify.37 The apparent normality of Sahaja YogiS, in contrast to members of some other spiritual groups, was another appeal for some. One who felt attracted for this reason characteristically summed his feelings up here:

I think what pulled me in more than anything else was the people involved. I was really impressed by them. They seemed to be all different ages and stages in life. There were families involved and everyone seemed pretty normal, leading a normal life. You didn't have to wear strange clothes and you could integrate Sahaja Yoga into your ordinary life.38

Despite the fact that the pre-eminent role of Sri Mataji is underplayed by established followers to newcomers, some are also attracted by Sri Mataji herself, both in terms of their initial impression of her and because of her gender:

When I went to the meeting I remember seeing a picture of Sri Mataji off to one side but I didn't think much of it. Then the organisers said, "before we start, we are going to watch a tape. The leader of our organisation is an Indian holy lady". Immediately that put me at ease, because my experience had always been Indian holy men. What she was saying just seemed [to make] incredible common sense.39

The spontaneous relinquishing of addiction, improvements in relaxation and health, and sometimes apparently miraculous
cures from cancer and other devastating illnesses, are also often commonly attested to as important reasons for becoming Sahaja Yogis. In the latter instance, Sri Mataji has said that individuals who have been cured of cancer by being ‘worked on’ should meditate at least twice a day to remain free (Diary 20.10.93). Freedom from the damage and suffering created by ‘fake gurus’ in cults previously joined by the newcomer is another reason given occasionally for choosing Sahaja Yoga.

Social aspects of realisation

Cool breezes, then, are a central and prominent feature of most members’ first encounter with Sahaja Yoga but do not, by themselves, usually precipitate the decision to join. However, this is not to say that ‘getting your realisation’ has little significance in the movement. On the contrary, I would argue that ‘realisation’ is of significance in the group, but in terms of conversion rather than as a motive for joining. Conversion was described at the beginning of this chapter as involving a transformation of personal identity at a deep level. This new personal identity is produced through interaction and is “shaped by group norms specifying what is appropriate behaviour” (Downton 1980, 388). It becomes manifest through social interchange and in association, and is therefore never complete in itself. It begins to be assembled, nevertheless, from the first contact a newcomer has with Sahaja Yoga, and especially through ‘realisation’. As we have seen, the experience of ‘realisation’ plies the newcomer with a plethora of information which is made sense of in a social context. So far, I have examined information in terms of the messages it gives to individuals about ‘what to feel’ and ‘how to interpret the feeling’. However, it is evident that other information is also being learnt. This information enables the newcomer to begin to have an understanding of what ‘being a Sahaja Yogi’ entails.

Much of this information is contained within the Sahaja Yoga image of the body, with its right and left sides, its central channel through which kundalini rises and its chakras which
Making Contact with Mother
demarcate this channel. This image is explicitly verbally and visually outlined prior to ‘realisation’ being given, and also implicitly communicated during the ritual through behavioural and verbal clues. Through this communication, the newcomer begins to build up their own interpretive framework, not simply of ‘what to feel’, or even ‘how to interpret the feeling’, but of how to begin to understand the way things are organised in Sahaja Yoga.

One example of this is in the embodiment of Sahaja Yoga teachings relating to the gender roles of men and women. Each side of the Sahaja Yoga body image is assigned a gender. The right ego-dominated side, which is ‘active’ and ‘assertive’, is designated as ‘male’. The left emotion-dominated side, which is ‘passive’ and ‘artistic’, is ‘female’. As we shall see later, these categories are repeated in the social domain and in the prescribed roles of the men and women themselves: “a woman has to behave like a woman and a man has to be like a man” (de Kalbermatten 1979, 123). Thus, ideally, the men work to support their families and the women look after the home and fulfil the domestic roles of mother and hostess in the group.

The image of the body acts like a template for the social in Sahaja Yoga in other ways as well. The rising *chakras* reflect the hierarchical nature of the group, and the association of Sri Mataji with the topmost *chakra* – both figuratively and literally – places her above all other spiritual figures. The spiritual balancing of the individual, which is the result of *kundalini* rising through the central channel, also reflects values articulated by Sri Mataji as being associated with Sahaja Yoga. In terms of gender, Sahaja Yoga says, the ‘natural’ person emerges through this balancing, with the men taking on the positive qualities of the right side and the women those of the left. More generally, Sahaja Yogis refer to and see themselves as balanced people, and their lifestyle mirrors the emphasis they give to ‘the middle way’. The diet of British members is usually moderate but varied and their dress – outside a private religious setting – conventional. Once they have had their ‘realisation’ for a few
weeks or so, new members also quickly become accustomed to using the Sahaja Yoga body image as a blueprint for their social interactions with others, both inside and outside Sahaja Yoga. A description of another individual which might be made by a newcomer prior to ‘realisation’ as ‘guilt-ridden’ is quickly translated by the fledging member into a judgement which is more likely to be couched along the lines of ‘he really catches on his vishuddhi chakra’. It is the latter mode of interpretation which rapidly becomes part and parcel of the everyday life of an ordinary Sahaja Yogi.

This interpretive mode is enhanced by the physical experiences to which the newcomer is also introduced by the group. As already noted, ‘realisation’ is said to stimulate the awakening of ‘vibratory awareness’, a faculty which has further implications in the social sphere. One follower described his experience thus:

When I got my ‘realisation’ and when the vibrations started flowing from my being She [Sri Mataji] taught me how to use this new vibratory awareness.

“Ask any absolute question” She suggested. The first question “Is there a God” was answered, to my great surprise, by a tremendous flow of vibrations coming in my fingers and palms. I asked many such questions and was blessed by clear answers; the answer “yes” comes as an increase in vibrations. I asked “Is such and such a guru a realised soul?” The answer “No” came as a burning on the finger tips. Sometimes the whole hand felt very hot and heavy. (de Kalbermatten 1979, 249–250)

The discrimination supplied by ‘vibratory awareness’ enables Sahaja Yogis, they say, to confirm the validity of the path. It also plays a crucial social role in re-aligning the individual to the group in two other main ways. Firstly, in creating the dualities of ‘self’ and ‘other’, ‘negative’ and ‘positive’, ‘possessed’ and ‘redeemed’, the boundaries between the group and the outside world are established and sustained. Followers feel disinclined to associate any longer with those to whom they now attribute
Making Contact with Mother

the ability to make them feel physically uncomfortable, or even ill. Secondly, vibratory awareness gives new members the experience of being intimately connected to each other through ‘collective consciousness’. This connection assists in their progressive re-alignment towards a Sahaja Yoga identity:

When we are together the intensity of our awareness deepens... We are bathing in that communion of love that we frantically sought for so long! It is overwhelming! No more talks of brotherly love! It has become a truth, a part and parcel of our consciousness. (ibid., 92)

This association echoes the family system of sisters and brothers in Sahaja Yoga to which all followers belong. The experience of ‘collective consciousness’, one which surely would have intrigued Durkheim, also marks the beginning of an understanding of the real status of Sri Mataji. Through the network of ‘collective consciousness’, new members come to realise that she knows what is in their hearts and minds and that there are no boundaries between themselves and their guru.

Thus, the structured experience of ‘realisation’, positioned as it is at the gateway to the group, can be seen as constituting a condenséd cosmology of Sahaja Yoga waiting to be reconstituted by the newcomer. Bourdieu has stated that all societies “entrust to bodily automatisms” those principles which are most basic to the organisation and maintenance of the group, making the body “the locus of co-ordination of all levels of bodily, social and cosmological experience” (Bell 1992, 97). Sahaja Yoga, I argue, provides a striking example of this process. This is not to say that all the information described is consciously taken in by all newcomers who attend a meeting. However, through the process of ‘realisation’, many of the understandings of Sahaja Yoga are introduced to newcomers at a deep level. These, if they resonate with the expectations and prior experiences of newcomers, facilitate the production of new definitions in them, beginning their transformation into recognised and recognisable members of the group.
Conclusion

In an earlier chapter, the influence of the discourse concerning free will was noted in both public perceptions and scholarship relating to NRMs. Reverberations of the debate are also found in the framing of conversion accounts of Sahaja yogis. As with most members of other NRMs, the theme of individuals being active in their own conversion is stressed, both by current members and even by the most disgruntled ex-members of Sahaja Yoga. They have said that they did not feel compelled join, nor do they believe that they were 'brainwashed'. Ex-members may feel that they were not in the full possession of facts about the group, or that the group changed from the one they joined. They may even feel that they were at times persuaded, because of the beliefs they held as members, to do things that otherwise they would not have done. However, this observation by one ex-member is typical of the view of the majority: "It was my choice to join, my choice to accept as much of it as I did".

The idea that newcomers are not beguiled by underhand means is borne out by the evidence that most who come into contact with the movement feel a cool breeze but take their participation no further. Many others are attracted and stay on for diverse reasons, including improvements in health and because of the lifestyle offered by the NRM. The picture is of newcomers building up an initial understanding of Sahaja Yoga, through the meditation practice and through personal interaction with its members. Their new understanding is configured interactively and produced on the basis of information they glean from Sahaja yogis, their predispositions and previous understandings. What has also been highlighted is the way in which ‘realisation’ plays a crucial part in the inner transformation of an individual from newcomer to member. In the next chapter, I explore this transformation through practice and social interaction further.
CHAPTER FOUR

Practising Sahaja Yoga

Practice is a vital element of life in Sahaja Yoga, as it is in most NRM\text{\textregistered}s, for Sri Mataji maintains that ritual action is highly potent. Accordingly, the daily lives of followers include at least one, and often more, extended ritual practices. In this chapter, I present these rituals as gateways into an experiential world imprinted with the symbolic social structures of Sahaja Yoga, and it is on this basis that I analyse the links between rituals, socialization and social construction. The aim of my analysis is to shed light on the relationships between the individual’s physical and emotional states and the social dimensions of Sahaja Yoga, as well as revealing the social significance of such practices.

I have already stressed the importance of incorporating the experiential realm into an understanding of socialization and social construction in Sahaja Yoga.\textsuperscript{1} Ritual activity is never merely ‘symbolic’ to members of this particular religious group. It is performed to produce vibration and is felt rather than followed. The power of Sahaja Yoga ritual is confirmed by the vibrations that are felt by followers as a result of its performance. Rites induce experience (Tipton 1982, 237), in this case triggering altered somatic, emotional and cognitive states. Thus, in Sahaja Yoga gesture is far more than metaphor, unless we understand metaphor as Johnson has explained it:

[Metaphor can be] conceived as a pervasive mode of understanding by which we project patterns from one
domain of experience in order to structure another domain of a different kind ... it is one of the chief cognitive structures by which we are able to have coherent, ordered experiences that we can reason about and make sense of. Through metaphor, we make use of the patterns that obtain in our physical experience to organise our more abstract understanding. (Johnson 1987, xv)

**Defining ritual**

Before proceeding with an examination of ritual in Sahaja Yoga, what is meant by the term requires exposition briefly. It is usually defined on the basis of two criteria, these being its salient characteristics, and its social and psychological functions. But there is wide disagreement amongst scholars as to how the word ritual is to be understood. Often, as Lewis has noted," ... we find we have to use it and in many circumstances we do not doubt that we use it rightly, even though it is hard to say exactly what it rightly means" (1980, 9). I use the self-definition of participants, the aims, settings and enactments of the Sahaja Yoga rites to distinguish ritual activity from other types of behaviour.

Most importantly, the practices identified as ritual in this chapter would also be designated as such by Sahaja Yogis themselves. Having said this, there are other observable features distinguishing these practices from others forms of behaviour. One is the aims of the rituals. Ritual activity in the group is directed towards a number of specific ends that it alone can bring about. As we shall see, the rituals also involve repetitive types of activity which are highly standardised, brimming with symbolic imagery, and markedly different from those usually followed by members. Finally, they normally, though not invariably, take place in environments specifically configured for the particular purpose which, along with ritual actions, delineate a boundary between sacred and profane (Durkheim 1965).
The aims and effects of Sahaja Yoga ritual

One of the reasons why an explanation of what is meant by the term ‘ritual’ in any particular context is necessary, is that the term is used in the literature to cover a huge variety of human activity. Even amongst the new religions there is enormous diversity of meaning attributed to superficially similar forms of ritual activity. The chanting of the Soka Gakkai Buddhists, for example, is most often performed for ‘this-worldly’ benefits (Wilson and Dobbelare 1994). The chanting of ISKCON devotees is done because “to invoke Krishna’s holy names is to directly invoke Krishna himself, to chant is to become enlightened with all spiritual wisdom” (Gelberg 1989, 152). The chanting of Yogi Bhajan followers is believed to encourage the direct raising of consciousness through its effects on the central nervous system (Tobey 1976). A short outline of the aims and effects of Sahaja Yoga ritual is therefore required in order to provide a conceptual framework for the material which follows.

In Sahaja Yoga, the specified aims of the rituals are those of purification, the banishment of negativity, protection, and devotional worship. These aims are believed to be brought about by changes which occur at a ‘subtle level’ of reality and all Sahaja Yoga rites seek to effect such change, reflected in the generation of appropriate vibrations. These vibrations are sensed through the medium of the ritual Sahaja Yoga body, complete with chakras, kundalini and left and right sides. Being performed through the medium of the body, they are experienced directly and intimately and this intimacy accords them a high degree of legitimacy. Moreover, the experience of engaging in such ritual is usually pleasurable. Performing the rituals of Sahaja Yoga rarely leaves the practitioner unaffected and most report feelings ranging from increased mental clarity to being ‘blasted’, ‘blissed out’ or filled with overwhelming love. In addition, positive changes in health such as relief from pain or tiredness are also often noted.
Ritual stages

Despite such benefits, because most of the rituals appear strange to those who have not accepted Sri Mataji’s teachings, members tend not to discuss their practices any more than they do the more esoteric claims of Sri Mataji with outsiders. Moreover, Sahaja Yogis are discouraged by their leaders from overtly performing their rituals in public places, in order to minimise the opportunity for conflict between the movement and mainstream society (Coney and Tritter 1996). Both for this reason, and through a desire not to discourage them from joining, followers tell newcomers comparatively little about Sahaja Yoga activities at the outset. Thus, new members are introduced only gradually to the different rituals of the movement, the timing of their introduction being based on their apparent readiness to move to the next stage.

The order in which new members are introduced to the rituals in the movement is set out in the following pages as a three-stage progression. Individuals begin by learning rituals which are focused on their own purification, such as meditation. These take place in the home and therefore represent natural first steps. This first stage also includes the initial ritual with which newcomers come into contact, that of ‘self-realisation’, which has already been described in the previous chapter.

Those who display interest in the teachings of Sri Mataji and who have begun to meditate regularly are then gradually introduced to the second stage of ritual activity. This stage extends the aims of ritual to include influencing an individual’s relationship with external forces, whether these be the negativity of others or malevolent spirits. The third stage broadens the focus of ritual activity yet further, this time to embrace the devotional worship of Sri Mataji. These stages of ritual activity closely correspond to the building up of a member’s understanding of Sahaja Yoga, and the progressive introduction to new rituals is associated with subsequent changes in the value attached by participants to their affiliation.
Practising Sahaja Yoga

There are too many rituals practised by Sahaja Yogis to describe all of them in detail. The examples that have been provided have been chosen because they are in common usage in the movement and because they exemplify the characteristics of each stage.

Stage One: Purification

The first rituals to which new members are introduced after 'getting their realisation' are all associated with the daily meditation which Sahaja Yogis observe. This meditation usually follows much the same ritual format as that of 'self-realisation', in that members will 'work' on each other to raise the kundalini. Thus newcomers are, to a degree, already accustomed to the presence of the picture of Sri Mataji, candles, incense and camphor which accompany the ritual. Typically, the meditation is introduced as a means of sustaining the experience of 'realisation' and as a way of clearing their chakras progressively. It is explained that, with regular daily practice, newcomers will gradually start to feel better – physically, emotionally and spiritually – as a result. The initial learning of ritual, therefore, is motivated by specific, positive and pragmatic ends such as healing, stress relief and, perhaps less tangibly, spiritual advancement. These material benefits provide newcomers with an inducement to adopt their regular performance.

Depending on their circumstances, of course, it may not always be possible for a member to meditate with others. If individuals are on their own, they may simply sit in front of a photograph of Sri Mataji and take in her pure vibrations. Philippa Pullar, an ex-member, describes one early experience of this thus:

We must sit with our hands extended towards the photograph of Her Holiness Mataji Nirmala Devi – the guru. Gradually, but only very gradually, the tension and unease flowed out of me and I felt traces of peace seeping through... An energy began to course through me, coming
up through the hands and the arms, the air began to feel like waves of electricity rushing up my fingers and arms while outside it pulsated round the body like soft feather cushions (Pullar 1984, 188).

Before so doing, however, they will be taught to do two rituals which are always performed both before and after either meditation or ‘giving realisation’. Indeed, newcomers may well notice established members doing them even before they are properly explained. Both define the ritual body, and the space in which it dwells. The first of these is called ‘tying up the kundalini’. A booklet entitled First Steps in Sahaja Yoga which is given free to newcomers to public meetings in the UK outlines the procedure:

This exercise helps to strengthen, steady and establish the attention in the highest energy centre, the Sahasrara chakra... Begin with the left hand at the front at the level of the waist, palm facing towards the body. While rotating the right hand around the left hand, move the left hand up the front of the body and over the head. Using both hands, tie the Kundalini in a knot above the head. Use this movement three times and on the third time tie three knots over the top of your head.

The second, performed after ‘tying up the kundalini’, is ‘putting on a bandhan’. ‘Putting on a bandhan’, they will be told, is enacted to protect the kundalini once it is raised, balance the vibrations of the meditator and preserve a meditative state. In the basic form of this ritual, the individual places his or her right hand level with their left hip and then slowly draws the hand in an arc over the head to rest on the right hip and back again to its original position. The gesture is then repeated six more times. The entire process takes no longer than twenty seconds.

Newcomers will also soon be introduced to a third ritual commonly practised by Sahaja Yogis on a daily basis. This is ‘foot-soaking’, to remove accumulated negativity, which is
Practising Sahaja Yoga

Figure 2. Putting on a bandhan (extended version)

usually performed either during or after a meditation. The practitioner sits facing an image of Sri Mataji, which has a candle burning in front of it, with their feet in a bucket of warm salted water for ten to fifteen minutes. With the passing of time their negativity is believed to be transferred, through the feet, from the body to the water, and, as a result, the individual feels increasingly purified. The water is then usually thrown in the toilet, underlining its polluted state, and care is taken so that it does not inadvertently spill and transmit its impurity.7

**Stage Two: Protection**

Whilst the rituals associated with the first stage of entry centre on the purification of the individual, those of the second stage can be differentiated on the following basis. Although purification is still an important aspect of the rituals, the emphasis shifts to include protection and the banishment of negative forces.

In this stage, having learnt how to ‘put on a bandhan’ to protect their *kundalini* during meditation, newcomers are introduced to the idea that *bandhans* can also be used discretely in a variety of situations with the intention of purifying, or transmitting beneficial vibrations, or for protection. Food, for
instance, can be vibrationally purified by putting on a *bandhan* before eating. *Bandhans* can also be invoked when followers feel they are in danger of coming into contact with negativity, or even possession. In such circumstances, the ritual is seen to act as an armour against both accidental and malicious pollution. If Sahaja Yogis want to influence another person or situation positively, they can also ‘put a *bandhan*’ on that individual, even at a distance.

Typically, and especially when Sahaja Yogis are in the company of others and discretion is demanded, or when the aim is to send good vibrations to another, the *bandhan* is performed in the following, shorthand form. The palm of the left hand is held open but slightly cupped and the right hand is moved in rapid clockwise movements above it. While so doing, the Sahaja Yogis ‘put their attention’ onto the object, person or circumstances they wish to transform.

By the time a newcomer has accepted the protective effects of *bandhans*, he or she will have begun to put together social understandings incorporating notions of purity and negativity, both as a result of the rituals which emphasise these categories, and through conversations with established members. At this stage, they are likely to be introduced to three other rituals which are more specifically oriented towards combating negativity. Again, however, these are liable to be introduced under the rubric that they will make the individual feel ‘clearer’, and Sahaja Yogis have attested to the positive differences they themselves have felt as a result of their performance.

The first, which involves the ritual paraphernalia of seven lemons and seven chillies, is used particularly for the treatment of possession by *bhuts*. Any specific health or emotional problems which can afflict an individual may be explained as possession by Sahaja Yogis. An established member gives the following instructions for the ritual:

Take the lemons and cut a little the skin, where the stem was. Put the lemons and the chillies in a plastic bag inside a
clay pot. Add little vibrated water and close the bag and keep the pot in front of Sri Mataji’s photo. The clay will load up with vibrations. Before going to bed, open the bag and place the pot near your head. Now the vibrated lemons and chillies will absorb the negativity and the clay pot will give you vibrations. In the morning, close the bag without looking inside, and put it in front of the photo to be loaded up again. Repeat for seven nights. When treatment is finished, offer the whole pot to the river or bury. (Sharma 1993, 76)

The second, ‘shoe-beating’, is performed with the aim of banishing more general negativity, both from the practitioner, other people, groups and countries. Sometimes followers are contacted by their leaders and advised that Sri Mataji has asked them to ‘shoe-beat’ for a particular purpose. For instance, they were asked to ‘shoe-beat’ certain individuals who were opposing her in Russia so that these enemies would be defeated (Diary, 10.3.94). Members also take it upon themselves to ‘shoe-beat’, some on a daily basis – usually before a morning meditation – some only when they feel that it would be particularly beneficial.

‘Shoe-beating’ is not experienced as cathartic, in the sense that it does not lead to a release of emotional tension as the name might suggest. Instead, the beating is performed lightly and is usually experienced as purifying and meditative by practitioners. A typical session begins by going out of the house, finding a quiet place to sit on the ground and asking Mother Earth to remove all negativity. Here is a formal description of what follows:

Draw with your right index finger your name, then write the problem and with right hand give seven (abbreviated) bandhans to the writing. Very important, put your attention on the Sahasrara and keep it there, attention should not be on the problem. With open eyes, look either on Mother Earth in the green or in the sky. Take your left shoe and with the right hand beat the problem with the
heel of the shoe 108 times. After ending the beating, rub the heel of the shoe on the earth, put it aside, give seven (abbreviated) bandhans to the written matter and to the heel and with both hands pick up the negativity and with your attention on the spirit, blow over your hands.

It is possible that 108 times is not enough, so you keep on beating, with your attention on the spirit, until vibrations start flowing on your Sahasrara. Never allow this technique to be a technique only. Remember always to be humble and do it with all your heart’s desire. After finishing ... wash your hands. (ibid., 77)

The most elaborate of the rituals used to banish negativity is the havan, or fire ceremony. Most commonly, it is performed collectively. A decision may be made to hold the ritual because the timing is understood to be particularly auspicious, because participants feel that a havan is necessary, or simply because some time has elapsed since one was held. A fire is prepared and a swastika is drawn on a tile in front of it. Fruit and a bowl of rice mixed with tumeric, poppy seeds and other spices are put close by. Then the fire is lit and incense and camphor may also be burned. After chanting of the names of the one hundred and eight names of the Goddess, handfuls of rice are taken by each participant and thrown into the fire to symbolise badha, understood in Sahaja Yoga as negativity, being destroyed. The negativity, as in ‘shoe-beating’, must be named specifically with each throw. However, there is no set order to the throwing of the rice. It is done, more or less spontaneously, as particular negativity is recalled by the participants. The badha which is articulated is usually external, and can be personal or impersonal, local, national or international. Here are some examples as illustrations:

- The badha of Judith Coney (individuals usually do not name themselves, but are named, if considered to have negativity, by someone else)
- The badha of violence
Practising Sahaja Yoga

- The *badha* of computer games and addictions
- The *badha* of Transcendental Meditation
- The *badha* against the 'collective' in Sahaja Yoga
- The *badha* of Northern Ireland

The participants, as in the other rituals which have been outlined, believe that the *havan* produces actual desired changes in those persons or circumstances towards which it is directed. These are not always to the detriment of the recipient. One follower told me, for instance, that a fellow Sahaja Yogi who was staying had slipped outside, unbeknownst to her, to 'shoe-beat' the negativity he felt was coming from her. Suddenly, she felt lifted in spirits and much 'clearer' than before. Her friend then returned and told her that he had 'shoe-beat' her. When recounting the event afterwards, the message that she felt cared for rather than threatened by his actions was clearly conveyed. However, both *havans* and 'shoe-beating' can also be directed to thwart an individual who is considered hostile. Figures such as Saddam Hussein and Rajneesh, as well as a leading member of the movement who left abruptly at the end of the 1980s, have all been named during *havans* by Sri Mataji.

**Stage Three: Worship**

The final stage of ritual activity to which an incoming member is introduced incorporates an increasing focus on the devotional worship of Sri Mataji and on the 'collective'. This focus is exemplified in the ritual of *puja*, meaning worship, to which newcomers are usually invited after some months on the grounds that 'vibrations are stronger in the collective'. Thus, like *havans*, these rituals are rarely conducted individually and are more usually occasions on which a group of followers will meet. They are sometimes performed on an *ad hoc* basis, to celebrate moving to a new home for instance, but particular days, which are either significant in the Indian calendar or which have been associated with Sri Mataji, are also allotted for
Sahaja Yoga

the ceremony. On such occasions, pujas are performed at dozens of sites throughout the world.

Sahaja Yoga pujas have diverse aims. These include the purification of both individual and ritual space through the process of receiving vibrations; the celebration of days traditionally associated with different Hindu deities; and the cleansing of the specific chakras with which each god or goddess is associated in Sahaja Yoga. Most significantly, however, pujas serve to exemplify and increase bhakti, or devotion, to the guru.

More than any other ritual, pujas are also often cited by followers as times at which they feel highly sensitised to being collectively united ‘on a subtle level’. When performed ‘collectively’, pujas are conducted nationally in the UK about ten times a year, attracting members from all over Britain. International pujas are also attended once or twice a year on average by most followers, often on the basis that they have felt a particularly strong ‘pull’ to go, or because they feel a need to ‘clear out’ negativity. In addition, pujas are performed on the Sahaja Yoga Tours of Russia and India, which are held on an annual basis and attract followers from all over the world.

Whilst pujas differ in character according to location and the deity being worshipped,\textsuperscript{12} all share some common elements and the same fundamental structure, though the order of aspects of the ritual may vary. A simple puja in the household to Sri Mataji, for instance, is less formal than those which take place in larger meetings but still contains many of the same features. Commonly, the utensils to be used for a puja are washed and polished, candles and incense are lit, fresh flowers are put in front of a picture of Sri Mataji’s feet and a coconut with a swastika on it, fruit or other food offerings are placed near by.\textsuperscript{13} A large bowl is brought in with a jug of water and a towel. The participants ‘tie up their kundalini’, ‘put on a bandhan’ and sit in meditation for a while with their hands outstretched towards the photograph.

As a preliminary measure, forgiveness for any mistake in performing the ritual is requested, and mantras to Sri Ganesha, the elephant-headed god of the Hindu tradition, are chanted.\textsuperscript{14}
Then a ritual washing of Sri Mataji’s feet takes place. In her absence, a photograph of her feet is used for the ceremony. One by one, participants go up to the image, prostrate themselves and are handed a jug of water. The photograph is held up over the large bowl and the participant gently pours the water over the feet in the picture and makes reverential circular movements with the right hand on its surface, as if cleaning. The water which has touched the feet, even those in the photograph, is considered to be ‘vibrated’, that is charged with Sri Mataji’s purifying vibrations. The participant then namastes or prostrates himself or herself again before the image, and the next person comes up for his or her turn. Whilst this is taking place, devotional songs or mantras to Sri Mataji are often chanted by other members. When the process is complete, the feet usually have swastikas painted on them with a red dye, and may also have Sri Mataji’s favourite perfume sprinkled on them.

The ceremony ends with a candle being moved in a clockwise fashion in front of the image of Sri Mataji, and a conch shell may be blown. Afterwards the food, which is also considered to have been ‘vibrated’ during the ritual, is handed out to be eaten. Similarly held to be ‘vibrated’, the coconut is usually buried outside the house to give protection by emitting pure vibrations, and the flowers are left for a few days in front of the shrine and then used as compost or thrown in a river. The water may be used to water plants, in order to increase their growth and yield.

When pujas are performed in the context of larger meetings, their enactment becomes more formalised. Whilst there is little gender differentiation in household pujas, for instance, there is a clearer demarcation in larger pujas. At such times, the men sit to the right and the women to the left, so symbolising the right and left sides of the body, and men and women take on separate roles in ritual preparation and performance. Indian dress is more likely to be worn. These pujas are also more elaborate. Often, a liquid called amrit is ritually prepared by pouring milk, yoghurt, ghee, honey and sugar in turn over a photograph of Sri Mataji’s feet after these have been washed by the children present. This mixture is combined with a little ‘vibrated’ water
and then drunk by members, usually from their right hands. It is considered a particularly potent form of prasad and also very filling because of the vibrations it holds.

If Sri Mataji is present in person, there will be other additions to the puja as well. She usually gives a talk about the meaning behind the ritual and is adorned in clothes symbolising her identification with the deity to whom puja is being made. Rings are put on her feet as part of her decoration, and gifts of sweets and other small items may be given out to the followers from her. She is then given gifts herself, from national groups of followers and individuals, and particular individual followers are introduced to her for her blessing.

Whether Sri Mataji is there or not, however, the central experience of the ritual for Sahaja Yogis is the imbibing of her purifying vibrations. Pullar describes her experience of this process of absorption in the following manner:

Instead of the energy coursing upwards and outwards, it was flowing in, my body was sucking in the vibrations, down to all the chakras, round and into pains, aches and restrictions, soothing, stroking, pressing, until they flowed away into the river that rushed through me... Everything apart from that energy flowing through me felt absolutely unreal.

(Pullar 1984, 227)

Receptivity is understood by members to be crucial to this process. Followers typically comment that when they ‘open their hearts’ during a puja they feel the vibrations more. When they feel the vibrations more, then they ‘open’ further, and so it goes on. The result, Sahaja Yogis say, is that their sensitivity to vibrations, both those of Sri Mataji and the ‘collective’, becomes increasingly pronounced, and they can remain for some time in the heightened and pleasurable state of ‘thoughtless awareness’ which is induced.

**International rituals**

The vibrations which are generated by ritual are usually considered to be most potent at, firstly, the international
Practising Sahaja Yoga

celebrations of festivals which are celebrated with Sri Mataji over a period of four days and, secondly, the Tours of India and Russia which last for several weeks. Unsurprisingly, after attending either type of event, devotion typically becomes a more prominent feature of household worship for the members concerned. The Tours, in particular, are seen as opportunities for being close to Sri Mataji, learning more about Sahaja Yoga, coming together as an international ‘collective’ and undergoing a deep cleansing of chakras. At such events, pujas, havans, bhajans,\textsuperscript{21} meditations and marriages succeed each other and produce a sense of a yet more heightened state of vibrational sensitivity and purity.\textsuperscript{22} At such events, an even greater and more intense communality is generated than at national pujas.

One reason for the feeling of intense communality is the excitement which is felt about being at such an event. Pullar testified that “certainly, it was elating: being in the presence of hundreds of exhilarated people is a powerful experience” (ibid., 213). In accommodating being in the company of hundreds of others, most of whom may be strangers, participants modify their usual patterns of behaviour. New, communal routines of sleeping, eating and washing are adopted, and social differentiation between individuals becomes submerged, displaced by a common identity.

The intense feeling of unity which temporarily supplants individual diversity during a Tour is reminiscent of traditional pilgrimages. However, these events do not share in the anarchistic and uncontrolled elements typical of the pilgrimage. Instead, the Tours are highly organised and the internalisation of the collective bonds which are generated through ritual ensures that social control is maintained throughout. As such, they are powerful vehicles for the generation of ‘communitas’, described by Victor Turner as:

a ‘moment in and out of time’, and in and out of secular social structure, which reveals, however fleetingly, some recognition (in symbol if not always in language) of a
generalised social bond that has ceased to be and has simultaneously yet to be fragmented into a multiplicity of social ties. (Turner 1969, 96)

The sense of collectivity generated is externally reinforced as Sahaja Yogis mingle with others from across the world, swap news and information and meet up in a way that is not normally possible.

**The adoption of South Asian ritual forms**

I have described the way in which new members of Sahaja Yoga are introduced over a period of months, or even years, to a devotional relationship with Sri Mataji, and how Sahaja Yoga understandings of the kind outlined in Chapter Two are only gradually put into place. It is pertinent to ask at this point about how newcomers accept the transformation in their social understandings catalysed through ritual. For, despite incorporating elements from all the major traditions, the rituals are overwhelmingly South Asian in flavour and, thus, quite unfamiliar to the typical novice Sahaja Yogi in the West.

It should be stressed that the question of how it is that members adopt strikingly unfamiliar ritual forms does not seem to occur to followers themselves. The leader of the movement in Britain disagreed with me emphatically when I described the movement as Hindu during one of our conversations, seeing its ritual practice instead as simply ‘Sahaj’. Nevertheless, most of the rituals I have outlined in this chapter will seem at least partly familiar to readers from South Asia, and the fusion of new elements with traditional ones is in itself in accordance with Hindu custom (Brockington 1981, 209).

Furthermore, a number of aspects of the Sahaja Yoga rituals place them within the tradition. The prescriptions for the ritual worship of the Goddess for example, found both in the Tantric tradition and in the Puranic scriptures of Saktism, have had a discernible effect on Sahaja Yoga rites. Here, for instance, is an abbreviated Puranic list of items to be used in the worship of the
Goddess which are also associated with the worship of Sri Mataji: “water for washing the feet ... honey, ghee, milk and curd ... jewels ... flowers ... incense ... light ... food” (Pushpendra 1974, 181). Sahaja Yoga rituals are also influenced by Hindu village rituals from the Maharasthran region of India for banishing bhuts, or evil spirits, and honouring female deities (Bernstein and Zellnot 1988). The movement celebrates traditional Hindu festivals such as Diwali, follows a Hindu marriage ceremony and performs the Hindu ceremonies of puja and havan, albeit with modification.

The settings of the rituals followed reveal their Hindu orientation still further, in that many take place in the domestic sphere: “In almost every religious Hindu’s home there is a shrine for puja or at least sacred drawings or pictures to evoke an atmosphere. A cupboard, recess, or even a room, may be set aside for images or pictures of the deity” (Lipner 1994, 282). Likewise, all Sahaja Yogis have a particular place in the home set aside as a shrine, whether it be a room of a simple altar, containing pictures of Sri Mataji or her feet which are often surrounded by flowers, incense sticks and candles. It is here that they meditate daily and perform other rituals such as pujas and havans, and more occasionally that they meet elsewhere in large numbers in a public setting to do so.

Given this South Asian orientation, how is it accepted by the Western novice? Firstly, because of the gradual acclimatisation they undergo, most followers give little real thought to whether they want to express themselves through the symbols and practices of an alien tradition. There is no point at which they decide consciously to adopt a Hindu approach to ritual, or even an exotic ritual form. Instead, the decision is made implicitly in their initial recognition and acceptance of the presentation of the ritual as ‘a means towards an end’. Thus, when a number of members were prompted during the study to comment on how they felt about the Hindu character of the rituals, they said that they did not perform them because of an attraction to Hinduism per se, but because they felt better in a variety of ways as a result. Experiential value takes precedence over ritual form.
newcomers appear resistant to the chanting of mantras, they are likely to be told not to focus on the externals of the ritual but on the vibrational effect it generates.

Just as no overt decision to embrace Hindu ritual forms is made by Western followers, so is there no explicit rejection of former creeds entailed in their adoption either, despite the exclusivity of the group. Sahaja Yoga, as we have seen, has been described by Sri Mataji as ‘a global religion’. She and many of her followers say that the movement embraces all true faiths, and the latter have pointed to the use of ritual from other authentic spiritual paths such as Christianity and Islam as proof. Condemnation of other faiths becomes explicit in Sahaja Yoga only in relation to those groups classified as satanic by Sri Mataji, such as Transcendental Meditation and Rajneeshism. The syncretic appearance of Sahaja Yoga’s rites which results demonstrates to Sahaja Yogis that their path is superior to others, since they tend to construe this as proof that it encompasses all authentic religions and, thereby, transcends them. More importantly, the encompassing of culturally diverse religious symbols within a lattice of Hindu practice means that Sahaja Yogis who have been faithful members of other religions prior to joining feel that they do not have to relinquish any of their previous spiritual affiliations – so long as they are recognised as authentic by Sri Mataji. This contributes to their acceptance of the Hindu elements in the Sahaja Yoga rituals they perform.

The fact that Sri Mataji herself has advised them to follow these practices is, of course, further encouragement to her followers, especially once they have got past the novice stage. She has said that daily practice is important, regularity counting for more than the duration of a single session, and her advice in this respect is usually followed conscientiously. Because she herself is Indian, though admittedly from a Christian family, and because she has declared that she is the Goddess of Hindu mythology, her espousal of the merits of Hindu practice is seen as a natural position for her to maintain, and one about which she has far more authority than her Western followers. They are happy, therefore, to follow her lead.
Practising Sahaja Yoga

Sahaja Yogis, then, tend to place little emphasis on the fact that most of their rituals are Hindu, or are happy to accept them anyway. It should also be noted that established followers tend to believe many of the rites prescribed by Sri Mataji derive from Hindu rituals of antiquity, and are of especial effectiveness as a result. Hinduism is generally understood by all committed Sahaja Yogis to provide particularly potent rituals. Sri Mataji has observed that, when offered the choice of being married according to Indian or Christian tradition, Sahaja Yogis invariably opt for the former.26 Hinduism, in such instances, is being identified as ‘Sahaja Yoga’, and followers are aware of Sahaja Yoga’s alignment with the tradition. Counterbalancing this, on one occasion at least, Sahaja Yogis have been challenged by outsiders with some knowledge of Hindu religious practice on the basis that they were performing rituals ‘wrongly’. One of the Sahaja Yogis involved recalled during the study that he answered along the lines of ‘Who cares, so long as it works?’ (Diary, 15.11.93). In this instance, the vibrational efficacy of the ritual clearly accorded it its own legitimation, regardless of its Hindu orthopraxy.

The gradual process of the adoption of Hindu ritual, its integrative aspects and its support by Sri Mataji, added to the positive effects for the individual, ensure that it is taken on by followers with a minimum of conflict, despite its initial strangeness. While ritual practice ultimately leads to what can be considered to be a profound shift in the religious understandings of participants, as such a shift does not occur at a single stroke it does not have a deterrent effect. Instead, learning and participating in the rituals of Sahaja Yoga produces a progressive realignment from novice to member on a practical, step-by-step basis.

Embodied practice

The time has come to explore how this progressive realignment takes place. To do so, it is posited that the physical and social worlds of human beings interpenetrate each other to the extent
that they cannot be seen as any more separate than is the 'self' in relation to 'society'. This assumption of a dynamic interplay means that it is not necessary to decide whether basic categories are grounded in the social world (Douglas 1967; Hertz 1973), or whether they originate in biological structures (Johnson 1987; Turner 1969). We need only say that the social and the physical intertwine in religious practice. The ritual process is one in which somatic experience is socially interpreted, validated by and validating of the understandings of members.

Participants feel vibrations in different parts of their bodies, and deny simply 'believing' in them. From these experiences they derive understandings about themselves, Sri Mataji, other Sahaja Yogis and the rest of the world. On this basis, it can be said that ritual actualises, far more than symbolises, their religion. Thus, when Geertz says that: “in a ritual, the world as lived and the world as imagined, fused under the agency of a single set of symbolic norms, turn out to be the same world” (Geertz 1973, 112), it may be that we must go one step further. Rather it is that the 'world as lived' and the 'world as internally experienced', when ritually fused, turn out to be the same world for each devotee.

In this sense, I regard ritual as a means of building up and expressing somatic understandings of a religious world. The physical experiences felt through practice are socially interpreted, and the social understandings incorporated in these experiences are played back into the social domain, intensified by this intimate interchange. Moreover, as members become increasingly accustomed to regular practice, their ability to construct and embody social understandings becomes easier. This interplay brings vibration into the outer world of a Sahaja Yogi and social structure to their inner one.

**Social ritual**

As Bell has observed, “... by abstracting the act from its temporal situation and reducing its convoluted strategies ... theoretical analysis misses the real dynamics of practice” (1992,
27. Furthermore, practice, as we have seen, often comes before belief for novices.

In the first stage of ritual activity I have outlined, ritual experience enables the construction of a somatic identity consonant with membership, which then becomes part of everyday life for a devotee. Through regular meditation it becomes easier to construct, as novices become socially predisposed to experience in certain ways. As we have seen, Sri Mataji urges individuals who have ‘got their realisation’ to strengthen this experience by making contact with local Sahaja Yogis and by meditating daily. Such practice, increasingly, reconstitutes internal experiences towards alignment with Sri Mataji’s teachings.

In this stage, certain elements of ritual also foreshadow elements in later stages. The focus of individual purification, for example, once it is accepted as legitimate because ‘it works’, leads the participant towards accepting the cosmological implications of such purification. These implications are that there is negativity in the world – they know this because have begun to feel it – and that it has to be held at bay. Thus, newcomers are a step further towards accepting impurity, and
Sahaja Yoga

even malevolence, in the world, as well as good. Despite the reluctance of followers to outline Sri Mataji’s status explicitly at this stage, novices are also made aware of it implicitly, through visual cues. These include the way in which her photograph is treated in a ritual setting. By learning to hold out their hands towards her image for ‘vibrations’, novices realise – without the need for words – that she is more powerful and potent than they.

During the second stage, by learning to ‘put on bandhans’ as a protective measure, to ‘shoe-beat’, clear themselves of possession and to participate in havans, Sahaja Yogis increase their ability to discriminate the social boundaries of the group. The bifurcations between ‘pure’ and ‘impure’, ‘positive’ and ‘negative’, ‘friendly’ and ‘hostile’, introduced initially through ‘realisation’, are solidified. The ability to discriminate between pure and impure vibrations learnt in the first stage is built upon through the ritual enactment of the warding off of negativity, leading to a further coalescing of social boundaries for the individual concerned. ‘Shoe-beating’ and havans, in particular, strengthen the formation of these delimiters between Sahaja Yogis and others through the transformation or banishment of perceived negativity or hostility.

In the third stage, the worship of Sri Mataji reinforces acknowledgement of her status, because:

The orchestrated construction of power and authority in ritual, which is deeply evocative of the basic divisions of the social order, engage the social body in the objectification of oppositions and the deployment of schemes that effectively reproduce the divisions of the social order.

(Bell 1992, 215)

Equally as important, the sense of group identity which is essential to its perpetuation is reinforced in pujas and during Tours. This reinforcement occurs in two main ways, the first being external. When Sahaja Yogis come together collectively in ritual settings, social cohesion is being affirmed by the ‘communitas’ which has already been noted, by the social
interaction before and after rituals, and by the practices themselves. The notion that a major function of ritual, like religion, is to promote social cohesion has been challenged in some quarters. Nevertheless, for small minority groups who have to sustain a distinctive identity alongside mainstream society, the analysis arguably holds good, and the heightened feelings which are produced in such settings appear consonant with the Durkheimian view that: “for a society to become conscious of itself and to maintain its sentiments at the necessary degree of intensity, it must periodically assemble and concentrate itself” (Evans-Pritchard 1965, 62).

Group solidarity is reinforced, secondly, by the internal experiences generated during ritual. These validate the unity of the movement in the most intimate way possible, a sense of social cohesion being literally felt through the physical bodies of its individuals. An example of such inner collectivity can be seen in the report of an Austrian follower, after an international puja in Sri Mataji’s presence, that: “we noticed afterwards how Sri Mataji was using our subtle systems to work out collective problems. Some of us went through emotional depression, felt intense clearing or had strange dreams” (Sahaja Yoga 1993, 16). Such experiences, as the next example illustrates, are extremely likely to be shared. This is taken from a conversation with an English follower whilst I was in Moscow for Diwali in 1993. I had commented to her that, although I thought that the atmosphere was lovely, I had felt sleepy and developed a headache during the puja. So had she, she replied, adding that individuals become very receptive to the ‘vibrations’ of the ‘collective’ during pujas, especially when Sri Mataji is present. That day, she said, it was because there were a lot of new Russian members present whose vibrations had to be purified. This was achieved by the ‘collective’ taking on their impurities, which accounted for the discomfort I had felt (Diary, 15.11.93).

The tendency to interpret similar feelings in other members as evidence that any ‘heaviness’ experienced is because of negativity which has been introduced into the ‘collective’, is
common. Many attest to the fact that they feel particularly sensitive to picking up on collective vibrations in the setting of the puja. When the vibrations are 'light', leading to feelings of renewed clarity and purity in participants, this too is interpreted as taking place on a 'collective' level. Discrepancies between external stimuli and internal sensations, such as the atmosphere being pleasant but the feelings not being uplifting, serve to deepen the trust of members in the validity of their internal perceptions. These become interpreted as evidence that sensations are not simply the result of 'feeling good together'. Spickard's observation that communal rituals offer participants the opportunity to experience things simultaneously within a structured environment may provide part of the explanation.29 He states:

rituals, in this view, help people 'tune-in' to one another, to share an inner state of consciousness. Seen in this light, the experiences people have in religious settings are profoundly social – and in quite a basic way.

(Spickard 1991, 197)

Mostly significantly for the present argument is the fact that such experiences, firstly, prove to members the authenticity of the path and of Sri Mataji herself and, secondly, contribute to a sense of social solidarity.

A relaxed approach to ritual

The importance of ritual in the lives of committed Sahaja Yogis cannot be stressed too strongly. It is important to note, nevertheless, that few Sahaja Yogis maintain that a rigid attention to the structure and detail of ritual is required for them to be effective. The few that seem to feel this is the case are likely to have been members for less than three years.

Longer-term Sahaja Yogis are more likely to state that the correct following of a procedure is important, not as an end in itself, but because this focuses the attention of the participant in such a way as to increase the effects of the ritual practice. They
say that many people are overactive and ‘right-sided’ when they first come into Sahaja Yoga and that such individuals are overly concerned with ‘getting the ritual right’.

Once balanced by the progressive clearing of their chakras, members are able to take a more relaxed approach. This is because the effects of ritual, muted when enacted by someone who is not centred, are subsequently enhanced. Thus, Sahaja Yogis are encouraged to ‘naturally’ follow ritual as each deems it appropriate, rather than slavishly adhering to it and, all too often, falling into the trap of judging their brothers and sisters harshly on the basis of non-conformity. If they are balanced, so mature Sahaja Yogis say, they will spontaneously behave in an appropriate way.

Those likely to practice ritual the most diligently fall into the category of either those members of less than three years standing, who see themselves to be in the process of ‘clearing out’ negativity, or those who live collectively in Sahaja Yoga ashrams. In contrast, older committed members will typically meditate regularly and engage in ritual activity, but will feel less motivated to attend formal collective rituals unswervingly. They tend to perform some of the more esoteric rituals infrequently. Nor are they so likely to join the more fervently committed younger members in getting up at four o’clock each morning in order to ‘clear out’ when the Earth’s vibrations are believed to be at their most pure and potent.

When queried as to why this is so, these long-term members are likely to reply that routine adherence to ritual can become empty of authenticity, and that such performance can be more detrimental than effective. However, another explanation for why formal observance of ritual can drop off after a few years in the group has also been put forward. This is that an individual, once he or she has practised the rituals of the group over a period of time, is increasingly able to feel vibrations outside the formal context of ritual, and move spontaneously into meditation. From a sociological perspective, we can say that the person has reconstituted their embodied selves in terms of the social configuration of Sahaja Yoga, to the extent that rigid adherence to its rituals becomes increasingly unnecessary.
Conclusion

In many ways, I see ritual as a prime agent of socialization in Sahaja Yoga, enabling the construction of social understandings at an intimate level. Without ritual and the physical experiences it engenders, the identity of the movement would be utterly different, since so much of that identity is constructed at an embodied level. With regular practice, members feel increasingly comfortable about thinking about themselves, as well as experiencing themselves, in terms of their kundalini and chakras. However, despite devotee accounts of having a literal sense of being a ‘collective’ as a result of engagement in ritual, it should not be construed that Sahaja Yogis all feel the same thing. I have emphasised previously that there is variation in the personal constructions of members, and that the socialization which occurs through such practice is interactive.

Finally, not all who learn the rituals associated with the first stage go through to the third, or even the second. Instead, some remain on the periphery, unwilling to commit themselves and content to use the techniques they have been taught to increase their sense of well-being. Thus, it is possible to meet practitioners of the meditation who have still not been invited to a havan or puja after a year or so, who have never heard of bhuts, and who are content to practise quietly at home. Ritual, in short, is a highly potent arena for the construction of an experiential understanding of Sri Mataji’s teachings. Long term devotees have said, however, that the decision of whether or not to participate, and to accept the explanation of the experiences which are generated as a result given by established Sahaja Yogis, remains with the novice member.
CHAPTER FIVE

Learning to Love Mother

By their very nature, new religious movements and charismatic leadership go together, and Sahaja Yoga is typical in this respect. Sri Mataji has claimed to be the Adi Shakti, and the Goddess of Indian mythology returned to save the world once more from demonic influences. She is also believed to be Sri Kalki who is the final avatar of Vishnu, and the Virgin Mary, and we have seen that she is worshipped as a divine being by committed followers. This chapter is an analysis of how it is that these various claims have been accepted and interpreted by members, and how they are sustained over time. But firstly, in preparation for this analysis, I offer a preliminary account of the ways in which ‘charisma’ and ‘charismatic authority’ have been understood by scholars.

Although most scholars have agreed on the characteristics of charisma, there is disagreement over how this type of authority develops in religious groups. In response to this lack of agreement, I suggest there to be at least two distinct types of charismatic attraction, each with its own social configuration, and that their dynamics are more understandable when differentiated from one another. Only then is a description given of the ways in which Sri Mataji’s charismatic authority is established and maintained. The argument I put forward in the chapter is that social interaction has a key part to play in the growing understanding on the part of a devotee of the ‘real nature’ of the founder of Sahaja Yoga. Once more, however, members’ understandings are not always the same, and I explore the differences between them.
The characteristics of charisma

Charismatic leaders stand out from the crowd. They are people who are believed to be especially authoritative because they are in possession of "superordinate competences" (Wilson 1975, 96). Because of these – perhaps the ability to work miracles, heal the sick, or simply a singular capability to articulate the will of the divine – they possess a charismatic allure for their followers. But it is not simply these abilities which make them charismatic. At least some of these leaders also seem to radiate magnetism and embody grace for their followers.

The authority of a religious charismatic leader is legitimated through his or her intimate association with divinity. It is also absolute as far as a devoted follower is concerned, because of a leader's divinely inspired status and perceived ability to reveal a unique message to the world or, in some instances, because they are actually acknowledged to be God incarnate. However, this authority embodies elements of unpredictability as well. Charismatic leaders are often capricious in behaviour and contradictory in teaching. They break rules and defy conventions more often than they observe them. They are inclined, as it suits their purpose, to say one thing at one moment and its opposite at the next. Their word is final, in other words, but not necessarily consistent. Consequently,

The charismatic leader may be accorded the right to decide whom you may marry, with whom you may sleep, by whom you may have children, how you may cut your hair, what clothes you should wear, what work you do, where, under what conditions, and perhaps even whether, you can live. And all this may be changed at a moment's notice – without even a moment's notice.

(Barker 1993c, 182–3)

This tendency to be inconsistent, however, adds to their attractiveness in many instances, and the relationship between charismatic leader and follower is an intimate one. The guru asks for complete faith and obedience, whilst the follower seeks
Learning to Love Mother

continual confirmation of that faith through the guru. As Wilson (1975, 6) observed, “The relation is one of supreme personal trust”, this trust being in the power of the guru to deliver the promised spiritual prize. As a result of the intimacy devotees feel they enjoy, and whether or not they are in close proximity to the leader, each experiences him or herself as having a one-to-one relationship with that leader (Weber 1968, 254). Spontaneity is the order of the day, and rules, regulations, hierarchies and institutional systems are absent in the ideal charismatic community, as is the concept of ownership. Illustrating this point, a leader in ISKCON noted, when reminiscing about the early years of the movement:

We were so communal that when I moved into the temple nobody had their own clothes ... and of course nobody’s socks matched and nothing fit (sic)! [You had to sort through] one pile of washing - it was crazy ... the way ISKCON was structured none of the devotees got any wages or salary. If you needed a pair of shoes you went to the Treasurer and said “I need a pair of shoes”, you got approved by the Temple President and they gave you some money and you went back and bought a pair of shoes and gave them a receipt and the change. And that’s how you got shoes. (Interview 18.1.96)

But charisma is a short-lived force because, sooner rather than later, ‘routinisation’ occurs and spontaneity recedes as social differentiation and established rules emerge over time. Furthermore, the charismatic appeal is precarious, resting as it does on the ability of the leader to prove his or her continuing worthiness. It can dissipate if the leader fails to meet the expectations of followers or to adjust their message to fit changing conditions.

The foundations of charismatic authority

Although there is a good deal of agreement on the characteristics of charisma, there is somewhat less in the explanations of
scholars of how it arises and where it is located. Some see it as a personal attribute of a leader. Others maintain that a leader without a following cannot be charismatic. Charisma requires followers as well as leaders and, indeed, charismatic authority cannot be located solely in the charismatic individuals themselves, since it can be won and lost and its appeal is never universal. Some following this latter line of thought have attempted to understand the phenomenon in psychological terms – that is, by asking why individual followers feel the need to unreservedly devote themselves to another as they do (Downton 1973; Glock 1976; Hexham and Poewe 1986; Lindholm 1990). Amongst others who, instead, have affirmed the sociological dimension of charismatic authority, Barker (1993c) and to a lesser extent Wallis (1982a 1982b 1993), have suggested that charismatic leadership can be understood by reference to internal processes within groups which establish and maintain charisma.

Barker, focusing on the social building blocks of charisma, has argued that a model needs to be able to explain why it is that only some people perceive the charismatic appeal of a leader, whilst others, those she contended who have not been influenced by an internal process of 'charismatisation', are often left singularly unmoved. Wallis (1982a), on the other hand, proposed that the charismatic status of a leader is established and maintained because it offers advantages to both the leader and to their followers. He argued that it is located in the interactive relationship between the two, rather than solely in the activities of either party. In his later work (1993), he developed this argument further still. Contrary to the idea that charisma does not relate "... to the power of one man to cause events to move in a particular direction" (Wilson 1973, 499), he said, "... charisma has a greater role as an explanation of a leader's actions and their consequences than – as it is usually employed – as an attempted explanation of the behaviour of his followers" (Wallis, 1993, 177). Thus, he brought the debate full circle and restored the leader as the locus of charisma, albeit on account of his or her strategic rather than supernatural abilities.
Different types of charismatic attraction

Just as we have seen in other scholarly understandings relevant to our present enquiry, the literature on charisma is likewise peppered with references to passivity and activity. This is because one of the assumptions which can be seen in most of the previous accounts of charismatic authority is that the locus of charisma must be either in individuals – in followers or leaders – or in social processes. In this book, the distinctions between these components are seen as cultural rather than absolute, and all three are understood to require exploration for a sensitive understanding to emerge.

Another assumption which also crops up frequently in the literature, and which needs examining, is that all charisma operates in the same way. Notwithstanding this assumption, evidence from new religious movements attests to variations in the ways in which the charisma of a leader is recognised. These variations, I argue, are significant and should be taken into account when attempting to understand the dynamics of charisma. What follows is an attempt to illuminate these variations by introducing two types of charismatic attraction, these being offered as a means of classifying the initial recognition by a follower of a charismatic leader. The first is associated with groups like the Sathya Sai Baba movement or Rajneeshism, where recognition of the charismatic qualities of the leader is the major factor in conversion, as this relatively typical comment by one of Rajneesh’s followers illustrates: “I never made a conscious decision to ‘take sannyas’. I went to darshan and that was it. It never felt anything but okay; everything he said seemed as if I had always known it but not consciously” (Thompson and Heelas 1986, 75).

Such charisma can be termed affective. Expressed through the guru’s gift for oratory or on their power to radiate an extraordinary personal presence, its recognition is immediate on the part of the disciple and the intensity of this recognition compels their love and commitment. With affective charisma, the recipient of the charismatic appeal will feel they have little
choice but to follow the Beloved, and the attraction of the spiritual figure plays a major part in conversion. In other groups, in contrast, such recognition is usually gradual rather than sudden, and reverent rather than overwhelming. It is absorbed over time, and other factors play a greater role in the conversion decision.\(^3\) Thus,

people do not join the Unification Church because they have perceived Moon as the possessor of charisma. It is not altogether surprising, therefore, that the emotions that these converts felt towards Moon were not those typical of the followers of a charismatic leader. There were feelings of gratitude and of respect, but if recent converts expressed their love, this was love of an abstract nature, not of a kind that focused on Moon’s personal qualities so much as on a leader who filled a messianic position.

(Barker 1993c, 189–90)

These two forms of charisma, affective and absorbed, are presented as ideal types (Weber 1986, 21) which can provide a means of assessing the dominant charismatic mode of a group. They usually pertain to the majority rather than the entirety of a given membership, and co-exist together to some degree. Thus, in those groups where charisma is commonly absorbed there will always be a few who speak of an initial arousal of affection. Conversely, there have been a few followers of both Sathya Sai Baba and Rajneesh who did not feel ‘blown away’ on first contact.

It might be supposed that affective responses are founded on personal contact and absorbed ones on information about a particular guru, but this is not necessarily the case. Affective charisma can be recognised by individuals who have not apparently even heard of the guru but whom, perhaps on seeing a photograph or through hearing a voice, or by meeting them in a dream, immediately recognise them as their spiritual leader. It can be sustained without the devotee ever meeting the object of their love. Absorbed charisma, on the other hand, is commonly derived from secondary sources, but does not
preclude actual contact. This contact, however, does not - at least initially - lead to the same response as that of affective charisma.

The charisma of Sri Mataji

Having set the scene, it is time to turn to the charisma of Sri Mataji and to identify this immediately as belonging to the second of the two categories outlined above. Much like the Reverend Moon of the Unification Church, Sri Mataji does not commonly appear to outsiders as someone possessing divine authority or an extraordinarily compelling personality. “She rambles on just like my grandmother does” is a remark that has been made in my hearing more than once by individuals who have listened to Sri Mataji but who remain unmoved by her oratory. Even those who join, as we have seen, rarely say that it was Sri Mataji herself who was the key attraction for their becoming a member, for few know much of her at the outset. Neither does she proclaim her divine status openly. Partly this is because of the fear of being misunderstood and misrepresented, and partly because of the risk of provoking hostility. Sri Mataji has often hinted that she does not want to meet the same fate as Christ. Consequently, as one of her closest followers stated:

H H Mataji did once say, in a very deep meditative mood, “To grant you salvation, my children, I have come with all of my powers.” Later on She said that this should not be told to people who doubt Sahaja Yoga, and that we should bear this in mind when telling people. Even if she is confronted with the question of her true nature in a direct way by someone hostile or doubting, She very intelligently avoids. (de Kalbermatten, 1979, 279)

Moreover, he continued:

As far as the true nature of Sri Mataji is concerned, no one is entitled to expect to be introduced to the heart of this sacred mystery at once. (ibid., 282)
Sahaja Yoga

Accordingly, *Hinduism Today* has described her as “a popular teacher of yoga” (1990, 1), and to those who briefly meet with Sahaja Yoga she is usually presented simply as an insightful person who has developed an extraordinarily successful meditation technique and who has tremendous powers of healing. To her established followers she has, as we have already seen, a much more elevated identity. Commonly, though, Sahaja Yogis only gradually come to the recognition and acceptance of her charismatic authority. A time lag of some months occurs before they move from their initial grasp of her status in the group to an *absorbed* perception of her which engenders both their reverence and worship.

This time lag exists partly because of the caution of existing members in revealing too much too soon, and their fear of scaring away potential newcomers or inviting unwelcome criticism. Indeed, even when they refer to Sri Mataji’s divine status they will talk about it indirectly: instead of calling her the Goddess, they will simply say ‘who she really is’, in order not to give away too much too soon. The gradual recognition of the true status of Sri Mataji on the part of a novice is born out of an extended process of socialization which involves learning to recognise her charisma. Little by little, newcomers come to attribute powers to the guru which only a few months before they might well have balked at. More than a few, after all, are simultaneously attracted and reassured at the outset by Sahaja Yoga’s message that self-realisation means that ‘you become your own Guru’. It is only later that they discover that Sri Mataji also says: “once you become a Guru, then I become your Deity” (Sahaja Yoga 1988, 81). The first few months in Sahaja Yoga, therefore, mark a preparatory period for the initiate. During this time, at least some will move from a state of ‘thoughtless awareness’, engendered by the *kundalini* meditation, to one of ‘doubtless awareness’, denoting a recognition of the true identity of Sri Mataji.
Learning to Love Mother

Understanding ‘who she really is’

The reorientation of new members during this period appears to come about as a result of a variety of influences, of which perhaps the most important is Sri Mataji’s central position in the rituals of the group. As we have already seen, these increasingly emphasise a devotional relationship with Sri Mataji. Even at the outset, however, a newcomer cannot fail to notice the reverence accorded to her. One of the first things a newcomer is commonly given by established followers, for instance, is their own picture of Sri Mataji to meditate in front of at home, ensuring more exposure to her presence on the part of the new member. The way in which members hold out their hands towards videos or photographs of her also underlines her special significance.

Introductory rituals prepare the ground by pointing to Sri Mataji’s extraordinary powers and status as well. During some public meetings, for instance, newcomers are encouraged to follow a method of raising their kundalini in which they place their right hands on different chakras whilst repeating the following questions, affirmations and entreaties to Sri Mataji:

Mother, am I the Spirit?
Mother, am I my own Guru?
Mother, please give me pure knowledge.
Mother, I am my own Guru.
Mother, I am the Spirit.
Mother, I am not guilty.
Mother, I have forgiven everyone, including myself.
Mother, please give me my realisation.

(Rai 1993, 57)

After ‘getting their realisation’, neophytes will usually soon be invited to a bhajan, a musical occasion when devotees sing songs together. Some songs, sung in English, explicitly extol her singular attributes, associate her with other divine beings, or point to the way in which she can be recognised by newcomers. Here is an extract from a typical example:
Sahaja Yoga

Ah.........Sri Mataji we love you
Sitting in the heart of the universe
We know your love is flowing through us
You are Mahakali, Mahalaxmi
You are Mother Adi Shakti
The power within us when we feel it
Our hearts rejoicing in bhakti
When we surrender we are in paradise
You are the supreme creator
Playing the game of creation
You have given us Sri Ganesha
For us to have realisation

Other songs are sung in Hindi, Sanskrit or Marathi. Their contents may not be recognised as familiar by new members; even so, they reinforce the impression that Sri Mataji is part and parcel of the Indian tradition, and thereby serve to authenticate her legitimacy in that context. After each song, followers will namaste with eyes closed and heads bowed to her picture, as if to offer each song up to her in worship.

Through such means, new members receive a lot of information about the status of Sri Mataji without the subject ever being explicitly broached. Once they are deemed to have reached the stage of starting to understand more about the hidden nature of the guru, however, followers will become somewhat more direct on the subject, at least to the extent of talking about their own faith in her. They make it clear, however, that each new member has to come to their own understanding of this truth and continue to refer to her status as ‘who she really is’ rather than calling her the Goddess openly.

The link is often made, nevertheless, by pointing newcomers to sacred Hindu texts, which attest to the powers of the Goddess. New members are then encouraged to associate these attributes with Sri Mataji as confirmation of her status. In common with the majority of new religions, in other words, the
movement seeks legitimation by linking itself to another tradition which is already accorded legitimacy. In such situations, as one writer notes, symbols become charged with power because of the fact that they are appropriated from other established traditions, and are then “owned and operated” to enhance the appeal of the emergent group (Chidester 1988, 139).

There are several other more explicit influences which also combine to persuade followers to make this association. Firstly, during this stage newcomers are often given several books by established devotees to read, one of which, in particular, discusses her true role directly. This is The Advent, written by a leading disciple and generally considered by insiders to be the most authoritative book so far on Sahaja Yoga. Here, her divinity is passionately and prosaically proclaimed:

The time has come to name Thee … Thou art verily the Power beyond all powers, the power of God the Almighty. Oh supremest One! Thou art the great Incarnation. Let it be announced. Because Thou granted us the knowledge through which we can utter these sacred words, the Age which opens is the one of thy revelation. Almighty Sacred Mother I prostrate myself at Thy Feet. From these Feet spread the cosmic rays that generated the whole Universe. This is the greatest of all times because we can behold Thee in the human flesh. Glory to Thee. Aum. Amen.

(de Kalbermatten 1979, 298)

and the full extent of her power is revealed:

The Adi Shakti is the great Mother. .. She also incarnates, either in her own right (as Sri Durga 1000 years ago) or in one of her many aspects... She has incarnated, for instance, in her Mother aspect as the Mother of Christ (Mary); in her wife aspect as Sri Sita in the case of Sri Rama; and Sri Radha, the wife of Sri Krishna. She was the sister (Nanaki) of the ... Guru Nanak... Today her most complete incarnation is living on the earth to start the
Golden Age; in this incarnation her name is Sri Mataji Nirmala Devi. (ibid.)

*The Advent* also elaborates on the different ways in which Sri Mataji embodies all the aspects of the Goddess, starting with ancient Hindu scripture. Thus in the *Sri Lalita Sahasranama*, a liturgy to the Thousand Names of the Goddess, the 153rd name is *Nishkalanka*. This, the author notes, is the full form of the name *Kalki* – who, it is believed, will come in the end days to oversee the destruction of evil and the creation of a new cycle of ages – and a reference to Sri Mataji’s claim to be *Kalki* herself. In the same text, he goes on, her 110th name is *kundalini*, a reference to Sri Mataji’s power to raise *kundalini* for self-realisation.

In addition to equating Sri Mataji with the Goddess through scriptural references, de Kalbermatten tells stories of how followers have had visions in which they have seen her as a goddess. In other visions, he says, some see her in the form of a god as well, for Sri Mataji, as the *shakti* or power of all the deities, integrates all their qualities, both female and male:

I look at Sri Mataji. And I see the figure of a man or rather, of a God, a face of unsurpassable greatness, light blue in complexion, radiating with a beauty and majesty for which there is no name. I am bewildered, adoring, subjugated… When I look at Her again, everything is normal. I tell her what happened. She says simply “It was Sri Krishna” (ibid., 258).

In her behaviour too, he writes, she emulates all aspects of the Goddess. One of the most important of these aspects for her charismatic identity is *Mahamaya*, the Great Illusion. As she is the mistress of illusion, his readership learns that they cannot expect to understand the behaviour of Sri Mataji, and that they must simply have faith in her instead. Moreover, because of her aspect of *Mahamaya*, she does not appear in ordinary life as ‘who she really is’. Thus, the secrecy surrounding her true status and mission is used in this way to substantiate her claims. Sri Mataji also appears in the text as the perfect Mother, both to her
own daughters whom she saw happily installed in arranged marriages before she would begin her spiritual work, and to her followers.\textsuperscript{8} She is, the writer reveals, the embodiment of Lakshmi, the consort of Vishnu. Appropriate to that role, as a wife she is described as being invariably “extremely respectful and obedient to her husband” (ibid., 262). Furthermore,

\[\ldots\text{ though she is from an aristocratic and rich family and her husband is a very highly placed officer, she is extremely mild, humble and kind. She gets up early every morning and quietly does the household work by herself… She is a charming housewife and a superb cook. (ibid., 265–6)}\]

and she shines with virtue in her dealings with the others:

\textit{With elderly men she is respectful but with much younger boys and girls she laughs and jokes; \ldots with men she maintains a proper, dignified distance. She is affectionate with ladies and extremely free with little girls… She can be said to be the embodiment of correctness and modesty. (ibid., 267)}

Her good health and vigour at her advanced age, coupled with her constant travelling around the world, are also used to legitimate her claim to be the \textit{Adi Shakti}, and of her mastery of \textit{kundalini}. In short, Sri Mataji is presented in \textit{The Advent} as an individual who exemplifies the virtues of cited sacred precedents, thus sanctioning her claims to be the key to salvation and to be the Goddess herself.

A second vehicle through which followers are persuaded of Sri Mataji’s divinity is through her miracles. These are attested to both by miracle photographs and miracle stories.\textsuperscript{9} Miracle photographs, which are shown to newcomers by established followers, commonly display Sri Mataji either emitting light or apparently being accompanied by various deities – again underlining her own divinity, her possession of extraordinary attributes, and her association with other divine forces.\textsuperscript{10}

Like the appropriation of symbols from established traditions, miracle stories are a common means by which the status
of a leader is legitimated in many new religious movements. It is, after all, natural for any follower to want to share in talk about his or her guru and spiritual path and to pass information along to those construed as receptive. In Sahaja Yoga, some miracle stories are founded on the actual experiences of members in relation to Sri Mataji. These include stories of dreams about Sri Mataji which often begin with the observation that she herself has said that she is really making contact with a follower in a dream, thus making their content significant. Some are devoted to her ability to heal terminal illnesses, and even AIDS. Many others testify to miraculous ‘happenings’ around her.

An example is the story of how a Sahaja Yogi lady was cleaning the woodwork in Sri Mataji’s living quarters when Sri Mataji herself appeared and praised her polishing. The follower had been worried that she had little polish left but when she turned to the bottle after Sri Mataji had gone she noticed it was again half full. She continued her work, Sri Mataji re-entered the room and again praised her polishing. The follower saw that the bottle was entirely full of polish. Sri Mataji then returned a third time and again praised her polishing. This time the follower turned to the bottle, saw that it was now overflowing with polish and commented on this to Sri Mataji, who replied “Oh, I must have praised it too much”, and departed (Diary 26.4.93).

Other stories include reports of events in which Sri Mataji’s spiritual status is recognised by others. The legitimation which has followed, for instance, from her international diplomat husband’s public acknowledgement of her divinity to her followers is considerable within the movement, and his support is often recounted, along with favourable meetings with spiritual teachers. Newspaper coverage is also cited as proof of Sri Mataji’s authenticity. In one British newspaper, for instance, a boy was reported as having been knocked off his bicycle. As he lay injured on the roadside, he saw a beautiful unknown lady who came to him and healed him. A few days later he noticed a poster of Sri Mataji and cried out that this was
the lady who had come to his aid. However, she had been at a meeting some distance away.\textsuperscript{13}

A third way of realising ‘who Sri Mataji really is’, that of vibratory awareness, makes her association with divinity entirely explicit. With this faculty, new members are encouraged, by established members or even by the guru herself, to ask questions like ‘Is Sri Mataji the Maitreya?’, or ‘Is Sri Mataji the Adi Shakti?’. When this is verified by feelings of coolness above their heads or on the palms of their hands, it is naturally interpreted as assurance of the authenticity of her claims.

As a result of such processes, the tendency is for newcomers comparatively quickly to begin to ascribe responsibility for the successes or luck in their lives to ‘Mother’. Every achievement comes to have her benevolent goodwill behind it. Every problem is eased by faith in her. They begin to feel under her protection. She is given responsibility for each positive event in their lives and, thus, each event becomes open to being interpreted as daily reconfirmation of her divinity.

\textbf{Reaffirming charisma}

Once the connection is made, however, the association between Sri Mataji and divinity still needs to be sustained. For, as intimated earlier, the precariousness of charisma is such that, as Wallis (1982a, 35) pointed out: “Becoming charismatic is not a once and for always thing... It must be constantly reinforced and reaffirmed or it no longer exists”.\textsuperscript{14} As in the case of other gurus with sizeable followings, this reaffirmation, like the initial understanding of Sri Mataji’s true status, has to take into account that ordinary followers only see her at \textit{pujas}, at airports or during brief personal exchanges. Such forms of contact, it is true, can give powerful verification of her divine status. Followers have remarked, for instance, on the fact that they feel both her vibrations and those of the collective much more intensely during \textit{pujas}. At such times, one told me, Sri Mataji sometimes appears to be dwarfed by the stage at one moment and enormous at the next, depending on which divine aspect she
Sahaja Yoga

is manifesting and on the vibrations of the puja. Meetings, too, are given a transcendent interpretation in which they may often appear to happen by chance but are interpreted as examples of Mother's 'games' as Mahamaya. One such instance is the case of two English followers who, to their consternation, missed their flight to an international puja in Holland because they did not hear it being called. One was particularly anxious to meet Sri Mataji and feared they had ruined their chances of doing so. However, they boarded the next plane and as they were walking through Customs saw none other than Sri Mataji herself, who talked to them both. Significantly, they would not have had such an opportunity had they caught the earlier flight (Diary 20.10.93).

But aside from such examples of relatively close contact with Sri Mataji for inspiration, for the most part ordinary Sahaja Yogis sustain the experience that she is divine from some physical distance away. This is accomplished by the way in which they maintain a feeling of her presence in their lives despite her physical absence. By displaying her image, reading transcripts of her talks at pujas in which she often elaborates on her claims, watching videos and listening to tapes, performing rituals and meeting together, Sahaja Yogis manage to remain feeling connected to her in an intimate way.

Another important way in which faith is sustained is through their own experiences of miracles associated with their guru. For instance, followers are often asked to carry shopping on their return trips from international pujas for Sri Mataji, between her homes in various countries. The fact that they are seldom asked to pay excess, and go through Customs unchallenged, is seen as additional confirmation of her powers. The following story is typical:

I got to customs with her shopping crammed in my van and put a bandhan on it. I remember, there was a brand new colour TV for her brother the judge. The customs official stopped me and I thought 'this is it'. I wound down the window. The customs man stuck his head through the
Learning to Love Mother

window and asked if I had anything to declare. He saw the big box with the picture of the TV on it and he said, 'well, I think we had better just have a ...'. It was obvious he had seen all the gear and was going to make me pay tax on it. Then he pulled his head out and it was as if a thought suddenly entered his head from somewhere else. His eyes changed, he stopped midway through his sentence, took a breath and then said 'Oh, go on then, off you go'.

(Interview, 9.7.95)

Both listening to or retelling such miracle stories reaffirms commitment. New tales about recent extraordinary events associated with Sri Mataji regularly circulate, implicitly underlining that she is still in possession of all her powers and that her claim to be 'who she really is' is capable of being authenticated by up-to-date experiences. Bringing new people into Sahaja Yoga acts in a similar way, for if newcomers recognise her divinity this deepens the belief of established followers that she must really be who she says she is (see Festinger et al, 1956). Followers also continue to use vibrations to reconfirm Sri Mataji's claims.

For those devotees who reach the point of worshipping her in pujas, the authority of Sri Mataji is almost exclusively charismatic, and no other evidence is necessary for them to have faith in her. Rationality is also invoked, however, as an argument for her legitimacy for those who are not fully committed devotees. Thus, Sri Mataji looks to science, and medical science in particular, to vouch for the efficacy of the techniques she advocates. The movement makes much, for example, of the fact that she has been elected to membership of the Petrovskaya Russian Academy of Science and Arts, the only foreign woman to be honoured in this way. In this pursuit of scientific as well as charismatic authorisation, Sahaja Yoga fits into the category of new religious movements described by Wilson as "sects of a newer style", in which charisma becomes 'adulterated' by additional reference to other, more widely respected authorities in today's world in order that the message of the group has a broader appeal (1975, 115).
Protecting charisma

Notwithstanding her appeal to science, the charisma of Sri Mataji is still of sufficient importance in the legitimation of her authority to require not only continual reaffirmation but also protection from doubt. Doubt in her claim to be the only incarnation of the Goddess could be inspired, for example, by the discovery on the part of a follower that many female spiritual teachers and healers in the Hindu tradition associate themselves with the Goddess, some claiming possession by her or to be one of her incarnations (Erndl 1993). An example of the latter is Mother Meera who has, inadvertently, undermined Sri Mataji’s exclusivity by saying that: “In turbulent times such as these, several incarnations of the Divine Mother move among us, each with her particular task of healing, or protection, or transformation” (1991, 9).

Doubt might also come from the realisation that many Hindus say that there are still almost 427,000 years to go before Vishnu is due to incarnate as Sri Kalki and that, therefore, Sri Mataji’s claim to this title does not accord with the tradition (Walker 1968). It could also be precipitated by the discovery that while Sri Mataji says that dormant kundalini resides in the sacrum bone, it is more usually located in the Mooladhara chakra itself, or by the realisation that Sri Mataji has incorporated a number of tantric elements into her teachings. In other words, Sahaja Yogis could conceivably be shaken by finding that the Hindu tradition, normally used to legitimate the supreme charismatic authority of their guru and which they regard as authentic, contains teachings which run counter to hers in a number of arguably important respects.

In practice, however, such a scenario is an improbable one, for Sri Mataji’s status is protected by selective verification. Few English Sahaja Yogis know much of India or of other religions, and they tend to accept what they are told about source material. Many other gurus are denounced as fakes by Sri Mataji, and devotees are likely to avoid contact with them for this reason. The sacred texts which followers are advised to read
and the passages on which they dwell are those which accord with her claims. Thus, such incongruities are rarely made manifest. Furthermore, since Sahaja Yogis tend to cut off from family and former friends, and tend not to speak freely about the group to non-members, they have access to few dissenting voices on a daily basis.

Her illusion-making divine aspect of Mahamaya also protects her charisma by reminding followers that nothing is ever as it seems and, thus, that they are not qualified to assess a situation competently. This aspect ensures that apparent mistakes are interpreted usually as Mother providing illusory games within which Sahaja Yogis can learn about themselves and their ego attachments. Consequently, instead of being undermined by setbacks, her charisma is reaffirmed by them. In Moscow in 1993, for instance, followers from a particular country put on a play for Sri Mataji which was performed uninspiringly and had a muted reception. Rather than this being interpreted, however, as evidence that Sahaja Yoga does not make people more artistic and gifted, and as a mistake which reflected badly on Sri Mataji, it was seen as Mother’s way of exposing the egos and blocks of the actors.

Another example of Sri Mataji’s game-playing happened in Australia, where the Sahaja Yogis decided to stage a puja at Ayers Rock. Sri Mataji appeared to give her blessing and preparations went ahead. Because of the location, hotel rooms had to be booked in advance and a glossy programme was put together to attract followers from around the world. But disaster followed. Most Sahaja Yogis from abroad, dependent on limited financial resources, preferred to go on the India Tour with Sri Mataji instead of going to Australia for a single puja, however breath-taking and vibrationally intense the location. The Australians were unable to recover the substantial deposits they had put down for the hotel rooms which could not be filled, and she herself pulled out at the last moment. Again, this was seen as Sri Mataji’s way of exposing the arrogance of the Australian followers and, again, a potentially damaging fiasco was turned into reaffirmation of her charisma.
Sahaja Yoga

A third way in which Sri Mataji’s charisma is protected is that the claims that she makes are rarely of the type which can be conclusively verified or challenged. Thus, while she has said that she is Sri Kalki and that she is preparing the world for a Golden Age, the date is not dwelt upon and, indeed, the impending apocalypse is rarely mentioned at all these days as the year 2000 actually approaches. Without an explicit deadline, the problems inherent in the failure of prophecy (Festinger et al., 1956), despite not being insuperable as other groups have shown, need not be addressed at all.

Ordinary Sahaja Yogis, then, at some distance from Sri Mataji, normally either do not see, do not choose to see or do not have to see any inconsistencies which might challenge their ability to reaffirm her claims. Moreover, the fact that they do not refer to her divinity outright, preferring to allude to ‘who she really is’, confers yet more protection, for it means that some degree of ambiguity is retained. Those followers who are still not entirely sure of her true status do not have to associate explicitly their continuing membership with her more elevated assertions. Neither do they have to state unambiguously their belief in her to those outside Sahaja Yoga with whom they come into contact, so minimising the direct challenge to her claims by non-believers.

Finally, however, Sri Mataji also maintains the loyalty of her followers and sustains their belief in her powers, on occasion, in much more direct ways than those already described, these fitting in well with Wallis’ model of strategic activity on the part of the guru (1993). A good example was her behaviour during a puja held in France, when the Sahaja Yogis did not go in droves to meet her at the airport as usual. A few excerpts from her furious response, taken from an internal publication, gives a flavour of the way in which she successfully reasserted her divine authority. Firstly she threatened withdrawal:

All the Deities refused ... to allow you to have this puja – absolutely, nothing doing – because they love me, they respect me... With all these Guru Pujas if you have
achieved this kind of surrendering, its better you do not have any more Guru Pujas at all! Don’t deserve it!
(Sahaja Yoga 1988, 105)

Next, Sri Mataji rewarded the good and punished the bad, so that conformity to her demands was seen as an eminently desirable state:

I would like to know how many wanted to go to the airport and asked for it. Raise your hands. Honestly... honestly... These are the only people who love me... May God bless you.

Only those who protested and wanted to go to the airport should come forward to do my puja... All the rest should go to the back, just go at the back... I had to promise this to the Deities... As I’m angry with you, also I’m pleased with some people, those who love me. And as a symbol of that I want to give this ring to Guiseppe.
(1988, 106-7)

Thirdly, she employed guilt as a way of encouraging followers to redouble their efforts to please her:

You should be ashamed of yourself. You have insulted your Mother, who has given you Realisation, who has done so much. Selflessly I’ve been working day in and day out, neglecting my own children, my own family, my own grandchildren – for you!
(1988, 106)

You must learn how to respect. You’ve had no good training. Very bad breeding – that’s what God is going to say about you. I’ve done my level best to tell you how to behave. No protocol – sense of protocol, even. Its like beggars.
(1988, 107)

Lastly, she used the threat of supernatural retaliation to reinforce obedience to her desires:

You have seen what has happened with people who have tried to trouble me. Aren’t you afraid of that... You know

113
I have all the powers to correct you. Don’t take liberties with me any more, I’m telling you and warning you. Try to understand, you are facing someone who has all the powers. You know that... I’m warning you! Mahamaya – the other side of it, is horrible. Be careful. (1988, 108)

**Different constructions of charisma**

Having examined how devotees learn to construct an understanding of Sri Mataji’s charisma, and the ways in which her authority is renewed and protected, it is time to explore briefly the variations which exist between their constructions. I have already indicated that not all Sahaja Yogis accept the claims of Sri Mataji in the same way. Beliefs about her real identity range from the faith of some members in her as the Adi Shakti or the Goddess, to the understanding of other, usually more peripheral, followers that she is someone who manifests the Divine and who is very powerful but who is not necessarily the creatrix of the universe. This variation, it has also been noted, is often shrouded by the all-encompassing tag of ‘who she really is’.

What differences exist can be accounted for partly by the distance she maintains from the majority of her followers. Various writers have suggested that distance often enhances belief in a spiritual leader’s charismatic reputation. However, it can also often lead to the emergence of different understandings of the guru. Barker (1993c, 21), commenting on the Unification Church, said that it gave followers a degree of flexibility in constructing an image of Moon, allowing them to choose the picture which they presumably felt best able to support and which resonated with their personal predispositions. Coinciding with this finding, my own research on Rajneesh (Coney, 1982; Thompson & Heelas 1986) suggested that his physical withdrawal combined with the flexibility of his teachings allowed quite different images of him to be held by his followers – those of master, teacher and/or friend.
Learning to Love Mother

The extent of the variation in the understandings of British followers about 'who Sri Mataji really is' is less than was the case with Rajneesh. This can be explained by the fact that he never came to the UK, unlike Sri Mataji, who lived in Britain for some years. Thus, the separation between him and his sannyasins, despite their trips to Poona or Oregon, was greater.18 Nevertheless, with Sri Mataji, as well, in the absence of regular personal contact these days, ordinary followers compensate by falling back on previous understandings for material. Thus one ex-member who had read widely about the Indian spiritual tradition prior to contact with Sahaja Yoga, and who knew Sri Mataji's claim to be the Adi Shakti to be unusual, said "I never thought Sri Mataji was the Adi Shakti or the Mother of God. She would say 'I am God'. What I believed she meant was that she has aspects of the divine within her and she has the power to tap that" (Interview 9.7.95). Others, whose personal histories did not provide them with the experience to assess Sri Mataji's spiritual claims, were more likely to accept her elevated status unreservedly, but in terms they could understand. Thus, two devoted followers of Sri Mataji reported in separate interviews that they did not really think of Sri Mataji as the Adi Shakti, because they did not really know what that term meant. Instead, they focused on her identity as the Goddess. This was because it resonated more appropriately with their Western backgrounds, both of which had been influenced by the New Age.19

If distance is a factor in the variation between the perceptions of ordinary followers, it is all the more noticeable as a factor in differentiating between the ordinary followers and the leaders. Because of the face-to-face interaction with Sri Mataji which the leaders enjoy as a result of the authority they are given, and because of the additional information they have about her and the workings of the organisation, their social constructions of Sahaja Yoga are markedly different from those of most members.

This last point was illustrated graphically for me on my return from a Sahaja Yoga international festival in Moscow,
during a conversation I had with the British leader and his wife over afternoon tea. Recalling the conditions in the stadium in which the festival had been held had been cramped and unsanitary, I told the leader that this had been interpreted by some of the members as a device of Sri Mataji to force them to open their hearts by making them live in close quarters. The leader replied that he found it ‘amazing’ the interpretations people gave to things. As far as he knew, he said, someone just offered more money at the last moment for the stadium which had been originally booked, leaving the Sahaja Yogis without a venue. This left no time for the Russian followers to find a replacement which was large enough for the participants (Diary 8.12.93).20

Wallis, writing about The Children of God, saw Berg’s distance from his followers as a means of avoiding the “... danger of familiarity incompatible with his sacred status” (1982a, 38), since few were intimate enough to be able to take note of any inconsistencies between his image and his everyday behaviour. The threat to Sri Mataji’s charisma resulting from leaders knowing her on a daily basis is relatively small, for she appears to rule over them with substantial authority. There are eye witness reports of some leaders breaking down in tears and pleading for forgiveness after being reprimanded in France. She manages from the centre and has stressed that none of the leaders must act independently of her will: “Leaders should be very careful. They should become free of all arrogance. They are only a communication link like I have put a letter in the envelope and post it” (Sahaja Yoga 1993, 11). Thus, she does not allow the difference between their status and hers to diminish as a result of increased contact.

A cynic might suggest at this point that, should her charismatic allure be diminished through increased contact, she is further protected from any dissonance discerned by leaders between her claims and her actual behaviour through the investment they have in the status and power which Sri Mataji gives them.21 At least one leader, however, is still clearly devoted to her as the Adi Shakti and appears to attribute those
things which he finds out about the organisation, and which are incompatible with his expectations, to the workings of Mahamaya. He, moreover, is unlikely to be alone, since an unswerving love for Sri Mataji is an essential component of successful national leadership within the movement.

**Conclusion**

Sri Mataji is recognised as ‘who she really is’ by her followers based on her extraordinary power to raise *kundalini* and heal others, and on the association of that power with the figure of the Goddess in Hindu mythology. She is not, however, outwardly charismatic in terms of personality and appearance, and Sahaja Yogis rarely join the group because they are attracted by her claims. Instead, these are discovered over a series of months and even years by learning about her charisma through such means as ritual, the telling of miracle stories, and reading appropriate Hindu texts. Sahaja Yoga’s exemplification of the category of *absorbed* charisma, I suggest, is unambiguous.

The type of charisma exemplified by Sri Mataji weakens the arguments of those who seek to locate charisma solely in the leader. For whilst *affective* charisma appears to demand from the outset that the bearer be extraordinary in manner or oratory and that they are the focus for commitment, *absorbed* charisma requires additional social reinforcement. On the other hand, although followers clearly play a part in the construction of Sri Mataji’s charisma, given the fact that most Sahaja Yogis discover their guru’s divinity only after some time, it is hard to see how their unfulfilled needs play more than a peripheral part in the recognition of ‘who Sri Mataji really is’.

A review of the evidence, both in this case and in others where charisma is *absorbed*, points to its being dynamically established through social interaction, and that this process is one in which followers, leaders and social factors play their part. Followers learn of Sri Mataji’s charisma by engaging in a social process of unfolding charismatic revelation, within which their particular constructions arise. They build up their under-
standings of her status based on the materials they have to hand, which include memories of prior experiences and dispositions. However, the variety which exists between their understandings is rarely made explicit because of their use of the ubiquitous phrase 'who she really is'. A sense of commonality is generated, instead, by interactive processes of 'charismatisation', of the kind outlined by Barker. Social and environmental signals are woven into personal constructions, promoting a feeling of shared private understanding and forming a major component of the building blocks of charisma. Another component, however, which cannot be overlooked, is the reinforcement of Sri Mataji's charismatic status by her personal and dominating engagement in the kind of strategic guru behaviour postulated by Wallis. All the agents involved in the construction of Sri Mataji's charismatic identity, then, play an active role in its creation.
CHAPTER SIX

A Woman's Role in Sahaja Yoga

Having examined the elevated position accorded to Sri Mataji in Sahaja Yoga, it is illuminating to then turn to an examination of the gender role allotted to her female followers. Notwithstanding the sex of Sri Mataji herself, and despite the fact that Sahaja Yoga has attracted a disproportionate number of women – perhaps sixty-five percent of the total membership, or even more – Sahaja Yoga is not an organisation with a matriarchal emphasis throughout. Gender roles for women and men within Sahaja Yoga are clearly specified and highly segregated, and positions of authority in the group are held almost exclusively by the men. Women in Sahaja Yoga are portrayed as fulfilling a supportive function. In short, the idealised role of Sahaja Yoga women is not obviously modelled on the most prominent role model, Sri Mataji herself. In this chapter, I examine why this should be, and how it is that women understand their role in the movement.

Ideal and actuality

The issue of gender is rarely ignored by leaders of NRM. Almost without exception, such figures will articulate the ways in which they believe men and women should ideally behave, either in the context of the 'new social order' envisaged by the movement in question, or when discussing the gendered behaviour deemed appropriate to the orientation of the NRM. The gender ideals laid out by the leader, moreover, provide members with a clear model for social relations, as they
typically affirm only one role set for their members and potential converts.

Because of the clear-cut stance NRM s adopt on the issue of gender, academic interest in NRM gender roles has so far concentrated largely on a view of these movements as havens from moral ambiguity (Anthony and Robbins 1982; Bird 1979) and from the proliferation of masculine and feminine roles available in contemporary Western living. Indeed, part of the ‘product appeal’ of NRMs in the ‘divine supermarket’ (Ruthven 1989) has been claimed to be their ability to offer men and women unambiguous social templates in the gender arena (Aidela 1985). Similarly, in her examination of women’s roles in seven NRMs, Susan Palmer underscored “the clarity and simplicity” (Palmer 1994a, 1) of gender roles within these movements. This clarity, she said, “is often achieved by emphasising one role and de-emphasising, or rejecting, other roles” (ibid.).

The elevation of one set of gender roles over others is also apparent in Sahaja Yoga. In contrast to Palmer’s overall findings, though, I found that, whilst the female followers are both aware of, and influenced by, this idealised set, there are also degrees in conformity amongst the women in Sahaja Yoga. This is apparent in terms of how the women see themselves, both in their feelings towards the roles offered to them by the group, and in the ways in which others treat them. Moreover, the range of role interpretation, in some areas, is increasing amongst the women.

**Gender ideals**

As Jacobs has observed, “feminist scholarship must be careful not to universalise the experience of all female devotees, a tendency that is prevalent among the sociologists who study sex roles within religious communities” (Jacobs 1991, 349). Nevertheless, the significance of an ideal gender role should not be underestimated either in an examination of the social constructions of gender in a group. Clearly, exemplary motifs play an
important role in aligning the expectations of followers within distinctive parameters. Moreover, these templates provide social indicators of whom to imitate in order to learn a social role, as well as how. Thus, it is necessary to examine the idealised version of womanhood advocated in Sahaja Yoga before investigating the processes of gender construction practised by newcomers and long-term members.

**Female images in Sahaja Yoga**

Sri Mataji, as we have seen, is understood to manifest the qualities of all of the deities. These include the virtues of the goddess Lakshmi, the perfect consort of the god Vishnu in the Hindu scriptures. As a model of wifely devotion and constancy, Lakshmi has an infinite capacity to bear suffering through her successive incarnations as his consort. She is sweet, innocent, self-effacing, dutiful, loyal, uncomplaining and docile, and always attentive to the needs of her consort. Whilst Sri Mataji incorporates the role of Lakshmi amongst a number of others, she advises her followers to identify with Lakshmi far less selectively as a model for their own behaviour.

Sri Mataji draws upon wider Hindu attitudes as well for the image of womanhood she proposes for her female followers. Such views are summed up by the *Code of Manu*, written about 200 CE, which accorded women a tripartite identity. Firstly, said the *Code*, women are to be honoured and adorned, for any family in which the females are unhappy will not prosper. Secondly, however, they are to be kept entirely dependent on the males in the family. Thirdly, women are described both as being dangerous and needing to be guarded from temptation.

Amongst others, Ralston (1991) has noted that the deeply-held patriarchal attitudes in India articulated in this *Code* still exist. This is despite the pronouncements of modern leaders such as Gandhi, and even within the context of religious *ashrams*, which appear to affirm equality between the sexes and introduce powerful new ideologies to support this equality. Certainly, within the secular framework of society in India, and:
... According to virtually all traditional Hindu authorities, a woman is a minor at law, who has rights of maintenance and residence, but normally no rights in her patrilineal family's immovable property. Hindu women, in the past and the present, are plainly inferior in status to men and subordinate to their power and authority.

(Fuller 1992, 20)

The ideal woman, in brief, is she who makes an ideal wife. Marriage makes a Hindu woman auspicious and a married woman epitomises goodness, prosperity, well-being, health, happiness and creativity (ibid., 22). She is expected to perform her duties towards her husband faithfully, whether or not her efforts are appreciated. The perfect woman, once more, is the embodiment of Lakshmi. Indeed, the goddess "always resides in women who are devoted to the truth, obey their husbands, and behave with the appropriate decorum" (Leslie 1991, 111).

Using both the image of Lakshmi and the role historically accorded to women in South Asian society for support, Sri Mataji has put forward her views on the appropriate behaviour for women within her movement. She does not, however, display consistency on this topic, and a number of messages about the status of women come through her pronouncements. On the one hand, for instance, she does not describe a woman as actually inferior to a man. Instead, she has ideally described the sexes as complementary, as in the following advice given to a group of female followers:

Man is the person who is the head of the family, as you say. Now he has to be the head, man has to be the head for certain reasons... So you are the heart as a woman and he is the head of the family. Let him have that feeling that he is the head; it is a feeling, just a feeling. Like the head always feels he decides, but the brain always knows that it is the heart one has to cater (sic), it is the heart which is all-pervading, it is the real source of everything.

(Sahaja Yoga 1980a)
A Woman’s Role in Sahaja Yoga

Indeed, she bemoans what she perceives as a gradual loss of respect for women, in both the East and the West. She has attributed this loss of regard to the increasing decadence of the age of Kali Yuga and to the machinations of demons who are intent on dragging human beings to hell. However, she views the Western feminist tradition as another route to damnation, on the grounds that it has meant that women try to behave like men rather than being true to their own gender:

If you are a man and you are a dominating man, it’s alright. But if you are a woman and you are dominating, then it’s a difficult thing for Sahaja Yoga to cure you. Because you have lost your quality of being a woman.

(Sahaja Yoga 1982)

If men do not pay proper attention and respect to women and their egos are hurt, women also begin to display unbalanced behaviour which is antithetical to their natural state as a result, according to Sri Mataji. When this happens, a woman:

... [abandons] catering to the needs of loving care, emotional balance and existence and she becomes ego-oriented. She takes up arms against men ... a woman becomes a careerist, activist, feminist etc.; or she starts enticing one man after another and this satisfies her ego as men do... In the process she might well win the battle of the sexes but she destroys everybody and easily mutates into a master of domination.

(ibid.)

One of Sri Mataji’s tasks, then, is to restore the proper balance between men and women so that they can thrive together and complement one another:

If women are not respected and respectable, the Gods cannot reside in that country. So we have to understand that women should have their own dignity and they should not yield to the pressures of men where they try to debase them. At the same time, they must respect their husbands... and they have to be extremely loving and compassionate. (Sahaja Yoga 1993)
She has equated the quality of being a woman with dharmic or righteous behaviour, which arises naturally in a woman when she is properly balanced by *kundalini*. Within the parameters of such righteous behaviour, the proper role of a woman is as a wife and a mother, and it is through these roles that women are satisfied. Thus, Sri Mataji has elevated domesticity to the highest level as the arena in which women can best use their talents to balance and nourish others.

On the other hand, to Western eyes at least, the nurturing role which she offers to women seems to fall outside the category of ‘equal but different’ to that of men. India has often been extolled as an exemplar of the social relations Sri Mataji would like to see operating in Sahaja Yoga, and the issue of gender is no exception. The ideal form of feminine behaviour she has put forward is that of Indian women, whom she has held up as epitomising proper womanhood. In the following passage, for example, she describes them in stoically cheerful and hardworking terms to Western female devotees:

You should go and see the women of India who are smiling and laughing... They have ten, eleven, twelve children to look after. They have no money. Early in the morning, at 4 o’clock, they have to get up and take their bath because of conditions in India. They cannot laze out like you do. And then they go to the well, fill the water and bring it home ... they come home, put the food down there, slowly wake up their husbands, put things for his bath, look after the children, clean their house ... and you will not know they are working ... absolutely silent.  

(ibid.)

This theme, that women are satisfied in the type of traditional role assigned to them in India, is one which runs through her words, at least as much as that of the respectfulness due to women. In India, she has said:

Men and women know their roles. A man is not expected to cook, clean and care for his children. Nor is a woman
A Woman's Role in Sahaja Yoga

expected to go outside her home and find work. And it
seems to be a perfect formula for marriage.
(The Sun – Australia, 1.4.81)11

and this formula is carried over into her advice to Sahaja Yoga
women:

Towards any calamity an Indian woman will stand up... Otherwise she will not show. She is not on the scene. Nobody will know that there is a woman working. She is not the one who will talk first... When your husband is talking, you just keep quiet. (Sahaja Yoga 1982)

Whilst Sri Mataji, then, as we have seen, has adopted the mantle of the Goddess, her female followers are offered the nurturing and supportive ideal model of Lakshmi. They are valued as mothers and wives but are limited to these roles and are not encouraged to be active or powerful, except within the domestic sphere and behind the scenes. It is said that on one occasion Sri Mataji went so far as to reprimand her female followers for excessive manifestations of passivity and obedience (Diary 26.4.93). This she apparently accomplished by congratulating them on their sweetness and then saying the following day that some of the ladies in Sahaja Yoga were so sweet it made her sick. However, this single reference only partially counterbalances the otherwise seamless vision of feminine domesticity and compliance she has extended to women in her movement.

The Goddess and Lakshmi

Sahaja Yoga women might be encouraged to be powerful, as was suggested, by the role model of their leader, a woman. Another reason is that in Hinduism all women are seen to be bearers of shakti, the primordial and active power. However, as we have also seen, Sri Mataji, whilst taking on the active role of the Goddess for herself, has offered to her female followers the much more limited and passive role of Lakshmi. I now investigate briefly the distinction between her role and that of her followers.
Sahaja Yoga

Firstly, there is some evidence that such a distinction between ordinary women and the Goddess is usually made within the Hindu culture. Whilst women are commonly identified with Lakshmi, they are rarely associated with the Goddess herself. Hurnes (1996), for example, in a study of pilgrims visiting a shrine of the Goddess, found that in Hindu culture a woman was felt sometimes to be similar to the Goddess, in that both are mothers. However, the Goddess was usually described as a divine being whose powers extend immeasurably beyond those of a mere female. She concluded that the Western understanding of the relationship between shakti and women needed to be seriously re-thought. In differentiating between herself and her devotees, then, Sri Mataji may only be adhering to established Hindu tradition. As has already been noted, this is a tradition which is strongly patriarchal and which has not, for the most part, stopped according an inferior status to women.

On the other hand, charismatic leaders, as Weber pointed out, delight in breaking with tradition (Gerth and Mills 1981, 250). This observation begs the question of what other factors have led to the idealisation of womanhood in Sahaja Yoga as nurturing and passive. Arguably, Sri Mataji’s need to retain an elevated position within the community is an obvious consideration. To do so, it is important that she differentiate herself from other women in order to vouchsafe her charismatic status. By being the Goddess, Sri Mataji has removed herself from the realm of other women. Indeed, she is no longer a women, but a divine being with all the attributes of all female and male deities. She cannot, logically, therefore, still be considered a woman, despite being the mother of two children and a devoted wife herself. Thus, ideally speaking, she is not available as a female role model for her women followers. Neither is there the possibility of another woman challenging her for her position within the movement, for by being the Goddess she has ensured that their status can never be as equals. Whilst there are many female goddesses, there is only one Goddess, and only one Adi Shakti. Her singular status, on all these counts, appears unassailable.
To sum up, it can be said that, through the mixed messages to female followers, women in Sahaja Yoga are seen as both equal and inferior in status in relation to men. Ideally, they are different but equal to men. However, they are not equal to Sri Mataji and are clearly distinguished from her, this distinction between the Goddess and her followers being commonly made in the culture with which Sri Mataji herself is most familiar. Thus, women are expected to adopt a female role in Sahaja Yoga in keeping with the much more limited powers accorded to women in Indian society, where they are usually inferior, not only to the Goddess but also to men. It follows, then, as is the case, that the socialization which women receive in the group through modelling is almost all from other women, and is not from Sri Mataji herself. She points the way, but leaves it to others to exemplify.

**Gender Socialization**

Having examined the mixture of messages that are a part of the idealised version of womanhood provided to female followers in Sahaja Yoga, we now explore how Western women, most of whom have been brought up quite differently, are socialized into accepting the role of Lakshmi within Sahaja Yoga.

To begin with, it is important to note that, as with other aspects of the movement, the distinctive gender roles in Sahaja Yoga are not usually apparent to outsiders who know little of the group. From the outside, it often appears as though men and women are treated equally. Consequently, if an individual attends the annual public meeting at the Royal Albert Hall on a casual basis, he or she will see men and women sitting together. Moreover, some women, albeit the minority, do go out to work. The ideal role of women in Sahaja Yoga, therefore, is really learnt only through increased contact with the group.

Secondly, the idea that this role is socially learnt is one to which Sri Mataji would probably take exception. She has expressed the view that as ‘realised beings’, Sahaja Yoga women should naturally exude the appropriate qualities. Thus, she has commented: “There is no need to imitate the Indian
women, because you are Sahaja Yogis. You get it spontaneously. Just accept that. Now accept that. Whatever is the past is the past. You can do it” (Sahaja Yoga 1982). Nevertheless, a variety of processes through which women learn of their new role and status are discernible to a sociological eye, these occurring during social interaction and the ritual practice of the group. These environments are, therefore, considered in turn.

**Social modelling**

Female newcomers into Sahaja Yoga learn of their new role within the group through their interaction with both male and female Sahaja Yogis, as well as from the words of Sri Mataji. However, due to the separation between the sexes which exists – the women tending to socialize with the women and the men with the men – it is the women in the group who provide the most significant social material for on the female newcomer, so enabling her to begin to build up her own understandings of what it means to be a woman in Sahaja Yoga. It is the other women who welcome her into Sahaja Yoga, as there is a strong, informal network amongst the women which is both supportive and inclusive. It is their behaviour which provides the model for the newcomer, and their discourse which sets out much of the behaviour of a female in the group.

Although men may sometimes ‘work on’ the *kundalini* of a female newcomer in a ritual setting, it is the established female devotees who commonly give her special photographs of Sri Mataji, bracelets and saris to wear at *pujas*, and lockets with Sri Mataji’s picture in them. The newcomer is usually invited to homes or *ashrams* to be ‘worked on’ and to chat over tea or coffee and cakes, and established women in the group make efforts to include her in their social activities. They typically lend her Sahaja Yoga books, tapes and copies of lectures by Sri Mataji and, if appropriate, offer help with child care. Such interaction provides significant amounts of implicit information about a woman’s role within Sahaja Yoga.
A Woman’s Role in Sahaja Yoga

A large part of this implicit information is behavioural. The image of Lakshmi, for instance, is visible in the fashions adopted by the majority of women in the group. One woman told me emphatically that she didn’t join Sahaja Yoga to be told how to dress (Diary 26.4.93). Nevertheless, most dress in a characteristic style. In Britain, long skirts and practical, feminine clothes have been the norm, ‘Laura Ashley’ style clothes being a particular favourite, along with Indian shawls and jewellery, and many wear their hair long and usually put on a little make-up. For pujas, and when in India, most wear saris. A common explanation given to newcomers for this is that they feel that saris give dignity to women and that they walk more gracefully when wearing them.

In their behaviour, too, the Sahaja Yoga women also express the feminine role they are allotted in the group. Many display artistic skills in painting, sewing, embroidery, photography, music, and cooking, and the newcomer is typically encouraged to do the same. Sweetness was the most valued characteristic amongst British female devotees at the time of this study, and this term was always used to describe another woman in a complementary way. The women reinforce the feeling of sisterliness created between them by acting as Aunty’s to each others’ children, and a new woman member will, if mature herself, also be introduced as Auntie to them.

Within a short time, a female newcomer learns to congregate with the other women rather than with the men when they meet as a collective. Even when socializing informally, segregation is evident. In a private home, women are most likely to retire to the kitchen to prepare food and chat, and perform different activities from the men. When a small group of men and women converged on a small Wiltshire village for the weekend with their children, for example, a typical separation between the genders was evident. Whilst the men played football and went for walks together, two women looked after the children and the others met together to embroider a quilt which was being prepared by the women in Britain as a present for Sri Mataji.
A female newcomer to Sahaja Yoga will also soon discover that great store is set by womanly virtue in the group and that, as might be expected, flirtatiousness between women and men is discouraged, as is pre-marital and extra-marital sex. Marriage, on the other hand, is seen as a natural state, and is encouraged. Despite the strong bonding between the women, sex was very rarely discussed amongst those I got to know well during the study, and menstruation only referred to sotto voce. Contraception is not outlawed, however, although a number of followers have suggested that in the early days there was a belief amongst the women that they had the duty of bringing more self-realised souls into the world and that they should have children, trusting that every pregnancy was divinely inspired. Attitudes have moderated since then, although large families are not uncommon. Nevertheless, contraception was not discussed openly.

Women in Sahaja Yoga are commonly addressed as ‘ladies’ and are related to in a sisterly fashion by the men. Their skills as mothers and wives, as nurturers and emotional providers, are respected and esteemed, and the men praise the women for their domestic virtues rather than for other skills they may possess. Men generally expect their wives to look after them, and the latter perform the vast majority of the domestic chores. In the households, the men have most authority and provide direction for the women. Some of the women have set up successful public meetings for Sahaja Yoga. However, unlike the men, women tend not to be acknowledged for what organisational contributions they do make, since these are rarely formalised.15

Despite the positive attitudes towards the marriage of women in the movement, few women join Sahaja Yoga and immediately put themselves forward for a marriage partner chosen by Sri Mataji.16 Most wait at least a couple of years before they feel ready to take such a step. Moreover, in practice not all are eligible. Since there are more women than men in the movement, the numbers simply do not add up and, recently, women older than forty have been advised that they should look for husbands outside Sahaja Yoga, instead, and then try to bring
A Woman’s Role in Sahaja Yoga

them into the group. Given the emphasis placed on marriage by Sri Mataji, it is perhaps not surprising that many of the younger women choose to become wives, whether or not this role formed part of their initial attraction to Sahaja Yoga.¹⁷

Before taking this step, a Sahaja Yoga woman will have talked to others going through the process, and shared their hopes, anxieties and experiences. Arranged marriages are almost always performed between followers of different nationalities, and it is likely that the couple will have only met for a period of a few days, or even only hours, before their wedding. Those wanting to be married put themselves forward for selection to their national leaders, and have to complete a short form detailing their name and address, physical features and circumstances.¹⁸

If chosen, the name of the woman and that of her partner is called out in a ceremony performed by Sri Mataji, usually on the eve of an international *puja* or the India Tour. Both men and women have reported feelings of tension as they wait to find out whether their name will be read out.¹⁹ For some, not having their name read out is interpreted as Sri Mataji’s not thinking them ‘good enough’. Those selected come before her amid applause, prostrate themselves or bow, and then converse for a period to establish that both parties wish to proceed further. Even if they are called, members do not have to marry the partner who is chosen for them if they do not wish to do so.²⁰ If they do, they arrange a separate legal ceremony, in addition to the Hindu ceremony that is performed *en masse* for up to one hundred and twenty Sahaja Yoga couples, and the wife then usually joins the husband in his country.²¹

Through social interaction, the new wife will have already learnt that, once married, Sahaja Yoga women tend to stay in the home, especially if they have children. Exceptions to this trend are accommodated so long as the woman is felt to retain her femininity. The mothering role of the wife that she is now expected to fulfil, moreover, is not confined solely to her children but is extended to all children within the movement:
Sahaja Yoga

The love you get for your child or feel for your child you should feel for all of them. You have to be mothers of all the people, not of your own child. Expand your love. Nobody can have respect for any woman who is not like that. You just have to be a mother to everyone.

(Sahaja Yoga Internal Circular 1.)

Her job is to nourish her family and the wider community and to support her husband, both in his work and in his membership of Sahaja Yoga.

Gender and ritual

I have already described how Sahaja Yoga rituals are significant in the socialization of new members and how, through participation in ritual, the female newcomer learns much about which qualities are expected of her as a woman in the group. In constructing their gendered understandings of their role in Sahaja Yoga, female novices, firstly, can draw on notions of the feminine embedded in the Sahaja Yoga body image. As previously noted, this image is replete with masculine and feminine images and associations, and provides a template for gender relations. Men are associated with the right side of the body. They are active and assertive, and are natural leaders. Women, on the other hand, are expected to manifest the qualities associated with the female, left side only, so providing emotional balance and nurturing in their complementary relationship with men. Secondly, especially in larger rituals, gender segregation and complementarity becomes marked. At large pujaas, for example, newcomers are invited to sit with the other women and the children on the left side whilst the men sit on the right side, replicating the two halves of the body. Women also participate by themselves at certain stages of the ritual, in particular the adorning of Sri Mataji with new clothes and jewellery.

During the group marriage which took place during Diwali in November 1993, the theme of gender complementarity was even more pronounced. Examples from the lengthy ritual have
been selected in order to illustrate the separation of the sexes and the differences in their behaviour. It began with the bridegrooms sitting at one end of the stadium and the brides at the other, meditating. Then, after haldi (turmeric) was pasted by other men and women over the faces and arms of those getting married, males and females danced separately, round and round, clapping as they whirled. After having dressed for the ceremony itself, the men again sat separately, with their backs to the women, and meditated whilst the women congregated behind a large curtain. Numbered and wearing masks, the brides then sat before Sri Mataji and washed her feet. Next, the brides went to stand behind a long white strip of material with swastikas painted on it, with their relatives standing beside them. The men, also wearing masks, took up their respective positions on the other side. When the sheet was removed, the brides and grooms went to sit around one of eighty small fires with their family representatives. These fires had been built by men, and the bricks around them were decorated with swastikas and other traditional Hindu symbols by women members.

The vows which the marriage partners made to each other during the ceremony also underlined the separate roles of men and women in the group. Although these were not read out during the ceremony which I attended, the following is an example of vows exchanged at a similar ceremony in the early 1980s:

Bride says: I will do all household work with my physical and spiritual powers. I will live with love and affection and obey you. You should help me in my work and I will help you in the work of Sahaja Yoga.

Groom says: I will give you happiness and peace with love and affection but you will also have to think about my happiness and peace. You should not go outside without my permission and I will tell you when I go outside. I will not discuss and think about the past and you will not discuss or think about the past... You should take care of
me and my children and you should respect and welcome other Sahaja brothers and sisters when they come to our house.  

(Marriage Vow Certificate)

**Women and social conformity**

Once her introduction into the social mores of Sahaja Yoga is completed, a woman new to the movement has been familiarised to a new gender role in a number of ways: by the advice and admonitions of Sri Mataji, through the example of other women and men, and by learning the qualities associated with the feminine. Similarly, her new orientation is affirmed through experiential ritual practice. Women who are unhappy with the ways in which they are expected to behave in Sahaja Yoga, of course, tend not to stay. However, to the extent that a woman has committed herself to Sahaja Yoga and seeks out the company of other women in the movement, her new gendered identity is affirmed and reinforced.

Sometimes this reinforcement comes directly from Sri Mataji. She has been known to punish women whose behaviour was not to her satisfaction, and has said that those women “who after marriage try to deviate their husbands from Sahaja Yoga are really the most cursed ones” (Sahaja Yoga Circular, 2). Those women who, in her eyes, fail in their marriages may be subjected to a public scolding by Sri Mataji; in the past others have had their husbands taken away, and have been moved to different countries. She has also personally strongly advised several women to send their children away to school in India, so that the young are removed from a negative environment.

At other times social reinforcement is less direct, as ritual experience and imagery reflect and strengthen the gendered constructions of members. However, on occasion other Sahaja Yogis have also become involved, with the stated aim of helping women express their femininity properly. Some members commented during the study, for instance, that they could ‘feel’ when a woman is either ‘stuck in her right side’, or over-active
and ‘male’. Similarly, members have claimed to feel blockages within women, these being understood to be inhibiting their ability to manifest their femininity. The *nabhi chakra*, for example, situated at the solar plexus, is associated with, amongst other things, the household which is controlled by the women. ‘Catches’ on the *nabhi chakra*, one female member told me, were therefore cited as the reason why she was experiencing difficulties in an Australian *ashram*. When she returned to womanly behaviour, her blockage was then felt to clear by others in the community.

**Reactions to the female role**

As we have seen, an attraction to the way of life exemplified by female devotees may form part of the reason for a woman’s conversion to the movement. This is especially so for women who are single parents, for they are likely to be more respected as mothers within Sahaja Yoga than they would be outside the group. Such women can also hope to get a husband who will provide for them and their children without, as we have seen in the marriage vows, asking questions about the past. Even if the female gender image offered in Sahaja Yoga is not the reason for joining, the majority of the women to whom I spoke during the study made positive comments about the way they saw their role in the movement. The reasons they gave were, unsurprisingly, often resonant with Sri Mataji’s own teachings.

Some, for example, felt that they were able to be much more feminine in Sahaja Yoga than they were previously allowed. They enjoyed the freedom to develop their artistic skills. They felt that they were also more respected than before, and more comfortable with the brother-sister relationships between men and women in the movement than they were with male-female interaction ‘outside’. One woman, for instance, characteristically told me that she saw Sahaja Yoga as offering women real feminism and egalitarianism, in which their own particular abilities were acknowledged and praised in ways in which they are not normally praised in Western society. Before she came
into the group, she had felt that her skills as a mother were denigrated and undervalued. Now, she felt respected and appreciated for them (Diary 7.1.93). Another mother, a career woman before joining the movement, said that Sahaja Yoga had given her a serenity she had not enjoyed before. She used to despise domesticity and described herself as having been successful but hard. “I was a snob”, she recalled (Diary 20.1.93).

Although they are responsible for the domestic work and the child care, Sahaja Yoga women are likely to say that they see this as their natural arena rather than as drudgery and, consequently, try to do this as beautifully as they can, without resentment. Although most of the women to whom I listened accepted their supporting role in the group, they also, in line with Sri Mataji’s pronouncements, declared that they did not experience themselves as subordinate to the men because of it. Neither did they say that they were frustrated by their limited role. Instead, a number commented that women who set themselves up in leadership positions have a tendency to form cliques and misuse their power (Diary 9.3.93). Women were best suited, they said, to assist their families and communities by displaying the nurturing qualities they now associated with the feminine. By so doing, they saw themselves working in partnership with men in Sahaja Yoga, since their contribution was equally respected.

When British devotees from backgrounds in which choosing a marriage partner is the norm were asked how they could contemplate entering an arranged marriage, most answered positively. Further, they listed personal reasons, rather than the fact that arranged marriages are expected within Sahaja Yoga. Many pointed to the high divorce rate in the West, and sometimes to their own unhappy past relationships, as evidence that the ability to choose one’s own partner does not always lead to a successful outcome. Sri Mataji, they said, chose them partners on the basis of compatible vibrations, and thus their marriages were much more likely to work in the long term than those based on ephemeral passion.
A Womans Role in Sahaja Yoga

A number also said that the spiritual values of Sahaja Yoga helped to bind them together with their chosen husband, in the absence of romance. They did not feel that they were surrendering their Western sense of female independence by applying for an arranged marriage. Sally, for example, described how she had been a committed feminist before joining Sahaja Yoga, but said that she did not see her choice of going into an arranged marriage as incompatible with this position. This was, she said, because marriage in Sahaja Yoga valued the female ability to nurture, instead of making women like men (Diary 7.1.93).

Such comments might be seen as pointing to the conclusion that the women have been totally socialized into a new style of femininity. However, more intimate conversations revealed a somewhat less idyllic portrayal of their role at times. Some, for example, despite Sri Mataji's advice to 'humble down', felt angry about the ways in which they were treated by the men. June, in a typical story, said that in one ashram which was set up in London, all the women were expected to behave like 'perfect Lakshmis' and were expected just to serve the men, without being treated respectfully (Diary 24.10.93). Moreover, not all are happy in their marriages, often because the fact that they are partnered with men from different cultural backgrounds and, despite their shared commitment to Sahaja Yoga, find it difficult to adjust.

Other complaints which women in Sahaja Yoga have voiced have concerned the ways in which their status is reinforced within the group, and the pressure to conform to social expectations. A fear expressed by several wives was that if they did not adhere to the standards set for them by Sri Mataji they would be publicly castigated for their failure or sent away and, as has happened on occasion in the past, their husbands given new, 'better behaved' wives. In Australia in particular, Sahaja Yoga appears to have had a troubled history of leaders treating women badly. It has been affirmed by members both past and present, for example, that women have been expelled from Australian Sahaja Yoga ashrams in the past because they would not 'toe the line'. In the words of one outspoken ex-member:
Mothers are sent to different cities for disciplinary action, mothers are sent out of the *ashram*, to a little flat ... so they are they are isolated and alienated. Maybe this woman has been in an *ashram* for three years for instance. She may not even have felt good about going out shopping once a week, because, after all, the outside world is something to be feared ... she has to come like a beggar to the door of the *ashram* then and people may or may not speak to her. And everyone will know that she is out and she is being disciplined.

(Australian Broadcasting Corporation 1991)

**Variety in the group**

Moving from the general to the particular, variation is apparent in the range of opinions expressed by the women in relation to the role they are given in Sahaja Yoga. Some of the variation seems to be due to differences in the socialization they have received as Sahaja Yogis in different temporal and geographical contexts. Some originates from the fact that the socialization of the group has to compete with socialization prior to membership. Finally, differences are discernible due to the power of individual women in the movement.

**Differing locations**

Part of the reason for this variation lies in differences in the movement as it has changed historically, and because of international and national differences. As the organisation has developed, Western female Sahaja Yogis generally seem to have taken a more relaxed attitude towards the feminine ideal than in the early days.\(^{26}\) Causes for this decrease in conformity are likely also to include the increase in membership over the years from a broader pool of candidates, and the lessening of personal contact with Sri Mataji, thus allowing for increasing selectivity in the adoption of her message. They also relate to the issue of prior socializations, which is discussed in the next section.
There are, furthermore, differences in the socialization of women within the movement which occur on the basis of geographical location. Social expectations can vary depending on which country a woman lives in as a Sahaja Yogi. Thus, there is some variation in the way in which the ideal woman is modelled in different countries. In Sahaja Yoga in Switzerland, for example, the issue of whether women should work outside the home is dealt with differently than in the United Kingdom. Although in Britain a woman is still likely to do all the domestic chores, in Switzerland:

the women who work are expected to do exactly the same as the ones who don't. Having to work is considered to be proof of the inadequacy of your Lakshmi powers and, almost as a punishment, you have to make up for it by working non-stop in the ashram at the weekend.

(Interview 20.6.95)

In France, I was told by a prominent member of the British collective, the most committed women living in the ashrams wait to eat until their husbands have finished, in accordance with strict Hindu custom. For the British, my informant observed, that “is taking things too far” (Diary 9.3.93).

Similarly, in Britain, the question of whether to send children to Sahaja Yoga schools in Rome and India has rested on parental choice. The British leaders at the time of the study did not send their own child to be educated there full-time, nor did they pressurise others in the national collective to do so. Thus, whilst some children were sent, it was not obligatory. In Switzerland, however, almost all the children have been sent to the schools. “They always said that people from other countries just made excuses not to send their children. [Swiss Sahaja Yogis] continually repeated the maxim ‘Rome at three, India at five’” (Interview 20.6.95).

There are differences within countries in the socialization received by new female members as well, these being based on the personal circumstances of the lives of individual women members. Influential factors include age, whether a women is
unmarried or married and whether she lives ‘collectively’ in an *ashram* or not. Depending on such differences, accounts and experiences vary considerably.

### Competing socializations

The next factor contributing to variation in the adoption of the ideal female role rests not on differential socialization within the movement but on the kind of socialization received prior to membership. Ralston (1991) has suggested, on the basis of her study of religious institutions in India, that powerful new gender ideologies are insufficient to displace long-established behaviours, because of the strength of patriarchal institutions. She wrote:

... although religious ideologies have been a powerful force in upholding the institution of the patriarchal family and have legitimated and reproduced unequal gender relations ... changing religious ideologies and religious practices will not change the status of women. (1991, 51)

This, she found, to be the case even when new gender ideologies are applied in the context of religious *ashrams* where there is little contact with the outside world. Prior socialization could not be eradicated in this regard, despite attempts to do so. Similarly, in Sahaja Yoga, although Western women are being socialized into a more patriarchal framework, former socialization in Western values, which generally accord women a more equal status, has not been permanently obliterated. Past socializations are not forgotten, but may be overlaid temporarily before being reintroduced and rewoven into their constructed understandings of femininity by women members.

### Informal authority

A third significant factor in the variation in conformity to the ideal role is the extent to which a woman is powerful within
Sahaja Yoga. Women, although they are usually excluded from formal authority, can sometimes wield it informally. The authority they have as individuals is conferred through a number of channels.

Firstly, status can be gained through marriage to powerful men in Sahaja Yoga. Thus, at the time of the study, the wife of the British leader was also the most powerful female member of the group in the Britain – although in part her authority was derived from the personal relationship she also enjoyed with Sri Mataji as an early convert to the movement. The social class, wealth and education of a woman before joining Sahaja Yoga is also significant in influencing her internal position and the degree to which she is likely to conform unquestioningly to a submissive feminine role. Status, to a lesser extent, can be also accrued by manifesting the womanly qualities valued by the group. In this way, some of the older women, especially the followers who had been members for years, were widely respected for their knowledge of ritual and their devotion to Sri Mataji. Younger women can gain respect for themselves for their behaviour as a wife and mother, and perhaps also for their ability to feel vibrations.

Status can also be derived from holding an utterly informal position within the group upon which others depend. One example of this was the standing of an unmarried woman in the English ‘collective’ who, although devoted to Sri Mataji, was not seen as particularly embodying the feminine qualities esteemed in Sahaja Yoga. Given this, and her unmarried status, I was intrigued to notice that after a puja it was normal for her to be approached and chatted to by both women and men, in such a way that denoted she was being accorded some authority. She was, I discovered, an astrologer. Not only was she, then, consulted by her brothers and sisters on important questions such as whether they should put their name on the marriage list or not, but she lent a discreet ear to their problems. Her confidentiality, moreover, could be guaranteed. Because of this, she was treated with more deference than might otherwise have been expected.
Informal status clearly produces differences in the ways in which women construct identities for themselves in the movement. The majority of ‘ordinary’ Sahaja Yoga women whom I asked during the study if they thought of Sri Mataji as a role model dismissed such a notion out of hand. This they did in a manner which conveyed that it was an inappropriate question to ask. However, the more powerful amongst them were far more likely to refer to things that Sri Mataji did as a justification for their own actions, and less likely to cite the example of other women in the group. One said, for example, when challenged on this point, that she did see Sri Mataji as a model of how to behave, although this did not make her identical in kind with her guru. “It’s obvious”, she replied, adding that the women did not at the moment have the necessary leadership qualities to be given formal power, although there were a few women leaders, for example one in North America and another in Kathmandu. More surprisingly perhaps, at least to those of a feminist persuasion, although she agreed that women were seen as nurturing, she said that the passivity of Western Sahaja Yoga women was due to their prior conditioning, and not to the group (Diary 21.1.95).

Rachel, too, the wife of the British leader, modelled at least part of her behaviour on that of Sri Mataji. During the period of the study, she was involved in the restoration of flats which she owned, and on more than one occasion said that this enterprise reminded her of the way in which Sri Mataji was involved in the building of her residences. She also stressed repeatedly that Sri Mataji’s believes that “a woman can do anything she wants, as long as she remains feminine” (Diary 15.10.93).32

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have explored the types of socialization and social reinforcement which are linked to the role and status of women in Sahaja Yoga. The fact that variation exists in the modelling of the women, and in the degree to which they
A Woman’s Role in Sahaja Yoga

conform with the ideals propounded by Sri Mataji, once more underscores a recurring theme of this book. Members’ constructions are assembled from disparate materials to hand, including memories from past socializations as well as the social context in the present.

The selective interpretation of Sri Mataji’s teaching may well increase after Sri Mataji’s death, and if the sect becomes more accommodating in relation to the mainstream, as is typically the case in sectarian development. With Sri Mataji no longer around to enforce the feminine role to which she subscribes, women’s authority may grow in Sahaja Yoga, especially since some of the more influential national leaders are Western. Such an increase will be assisted additionally, should the membership expand, by a further broadening of the constituency base and by an increase in the numbers of those living outside ashrams. If so, it may be that the ideal model will itself change. This has been observed, to an extent, in the Family (Millikan 1994, 212–217). Berg began his ministry by putting forward a very traditional and submissive role for women. Then, with the advent of Flirty Fishing, women began to assume a more active role in the movement. Maria, Berg’s widow who has since remarried, has been quoted recently as saying: “Maybe we’re going to have to forget all this ‘women being in submission to the men’ kind of thing. It doesn’t seem to jive with the need of the Church and the Ministry, and because of that, something’s gotta go!” (Millikan 1994, 216).

Conversely, however, it should be noted that some female members of ISKCON have complained that Prahupada, the founder, was more supportive of their role than the present leaders of the Governing Body Commission, although a woman has recently joined this group. It may be that Sri Mataji’s death will not assist the status of women in Sahaja Yoga, especially if she is replaced by a committee of men, as is likely.33 The future is, therefore, impossible to predict with confidence. However, what can be predicted with some assurance is that changes in the gender roles of men and women in Sahaja Yoga are very likely to reflected in the social constructions of the Sahaja Yoga body. It will be interesting to note in years to come whether the
Sahaja Yoga

balancing of male and female energies through the purifying power of *kundalini* will be increasingly emphasized, or whether the women will be persuaded increasingly of the need to manifest the qualities of the left side alone.
CHAPTER SEVEN

Socializing a Second Generation

According to Berger and Luckmann, the socialization of a second generation is achieved through the *internalisation* of a ‘base-world’ within each young person, which is emotionally as well as cognitively ‘fixed’. Thus, they argued, primary socialization is far more affective than secondary forms (1966, 151). I have suggested that this argument assumes that ‘self’ and ‘society’ are distinct entities, working on each other. I have also questioned the idea that each of us operates out of an entirely whole and stable ‘base-world’. Nevertheless, I still see primary socialization as undoubtedly significant for the ways in which children build up understandings of the world, and aspects of early constructions are often more resilient than those of later years. Furthermore, since adults and children often have different impressions of ‘what is going on’, it is important to include the latter in an exploration of socialization. For these reasons, the present chapter is an examination of primary socialization in Sahaja Yoga, and of the socializing environments offered to those children whose parents join the movement.

Belonging to a family

The number of children in Sahaja Yoga is growing. It has already been noted that the movement has a steadily expanding membership and is engaged in international expansion. As Table 1 shows, there were over 300 fully committed British adult members in 1993, representing an increase of about forty
percent from the number in 1987. Table 1, however, indicates not only that the numbers of children in the group rose during this period, but also that the growth rate outstripped that of adult members and increased at a rate of over ninety percent. This, in turn, affected the ratio of children to adults in the group.

Table 1: Children and Adults in Sahaja Yoga in Britain

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>number of children</th>
<th>number of adults</th>
<th>ratio of adults to children</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1987</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>222</td>
<td>3.26:1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td>132</td>
<td>311</td>
<td>2.36:1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>growth rate</td>
<td>94.12%</td>
<td>40.09%</td>
<td>-27.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Having children is encouraged in Sahaja Yoga, abortion is not condoned, and the majority of female members are of childbearing age. Given these facts, it is easy to assume that most of these additional children have been born into the group. However, whilst twenty-nine babies were added to ‘the English collective’ over the period 1987–1993 by this route, their number was largely offset by the twenty-one children who left it, either because of schooling, the relocation of parents within the international group or because of leaving Sahaja Yoga. By far the biggest group of new children, fifty-six in all, were those brought into the movement by one or both parents. Of these, the numbers of single parents coming to Sahaja Yoga with children rose from seven to fifteen during this period, apparently attracted by the support of the extended family it offers. No figures on the numbers of Sahaja Yoga children outside Britain have been available. However, every country in which Sahaja Yoga has been established has children in the movement and there is no reason to suppose the figures differ significantly elsewhere.

These statistics do not conform to the stereotypical image of those joining contemporary religious movements. Machalek and
Socializing a Second Generation

Snow (1993, 61) have noted that most of those who join new religions are 'structurally available' for conversion, in that "they lack the 'countervailing ties' that bind most people to more conventional lines of action, and they possess the discretionary or unscheduled time to explore and participate in the activities of new religious movements". Amongst these ties, the authors cite power, wealth and prestige and a lack of role obligations, such as family duties. Thus, the fact that many who join Sahaja Yoga have children appears unusual.

It seems less so, however, if NRMs are divided into those who focus their attention of the issue of children and those who do not. An example of the latter is Rajneeshism, where children are largely viewed as peripheral (Thompson and Heelas 1986). Rajneesh never explicitly presented his group as an alternative 'family' and on a number of occasions advised his followers not to have children. This advice was taken up by some of his female followers who chose to be sterilised. The Rajneesh movement caters to a limited degree for the children of followers – for example it runs a boarding school, Ko Hsuan, in Devon for older children – but the upbringing of the young is not a central concern.

Other NRMs place much more emphasis on childrearing, examples including The Family and The Church Universal and Triumphant. Often, such movements begin by attracting single people. However, as the organisations develop over time, families begin to grow. The Church Universal and Triumphant, for example:

...did not, as it began to expand, attract proportionally large numbers of converts with already established families. Nor did this movement initially emphasise in its teachings and organisational thrust the specific needs of families and the problems associated with child rearing... In the words of one early devotee (now on staff, married and a father of four): "In the beginning this was primarily a singles community of monks and nuns". The gradual accretion of marital relationships and
children, however, forced increasing recognition of a host of family issues.

(Shepherd and Lilliston 1994, 87)

Also in this category are groups which not only cater for families but who also see them as models of the new society they wish to bring about, such as 3H0, the educational wing of Sikh Dharm International, and The Unification Church.

Sahaja Yoga falls into this category, in that it is discernibly family-oriented. In common with others, members of Sahaja Yoga embrace a fictive kinship system which is held to be of greater spiritual validity than their families of origin (Shupe and Bromley 1980; Bromley and Oliver 1981). Sri Mataji, as we have seen, is called ‘Mother’ by her devotees and she refers to them as ‘Her children’. Similarly, adults relate to each other as ‘brothers’ and ‘sisters’. Moreover, the organisation has involved itself in the rearing of the young. Partly, this involvement can be explained by the high boundaries of the group, in that the inner “world-rejecting” stance of the teachings means that its children are seen as requiring protection from the decadence of the outside world. It also accords with Sri Mataji’s adoption of a maternal role from the outset. As the ‘Mother of all mothers’ she is naturally seen as being eminently qualified to superintend the upbringing of the next generation. Perhaps most significantly, however, it can be seen as a practical response to the growing numbers of children within Sahaja Yoga, and the narrowing ratio between them and adult members.

**The advice of Sri Mataji**

Sri Mataji has advised parents in Sahaja Yoga:

... don’t get too involved with your children, that’s a dangerous thing... You have to just do the work like a trustee of the child, just a trustee of the child, but don’t get involved with the child – that’s my job... The children are mine, not yours, so you just don’t get involved with them,
that's a temptation for you, too much involvement with the children, that's a sign of degradation.

(Sahaja Yoga 1984a)

She has said that all the children in the movement, whether 'born in' or 'brought in', are hers. Consequently, the relationship she has with them is seen by committed followers to take precedence over that of the natural parents. The reliance of the natural parents on the word of Sri Mataji is strengthened by the fact that many are estranged from their own parents. Even those who do maintain contact with their parents, however, are often reluctant to heed parental advice. This is, in part, due to the perceived specialness of the children themselves, which is seen to place the young beyond the experience of 'unrealised' relatives.

Children in Sahaja Yoga are viewed by members as different from ordinary children. All are considered 'realised', particularly sensitive to the vibrations of others and, therefore, especially in need of the guidance of group members and the protection of the guru. Many children who have been born in Sahaja Yoga, says Sri Mataji, are 'realised' from birth: "Mostly those who have been married in Sahaja Yoga have got children who are Realised Souls. That means they are children of a very high calibre" (Sahaja Yoga 1985c). Yet the others, those 'brought in' to Sahaja Yoga are, in practice, of equal sensitivity, having been given their 'realisation' by adults in the group during this lifetime. Thus, in the eyes of their parents, all require an upbringing which Sri Mataji, due to her authority and divine wisdom, is most qualified to dictate.

Given such considerations, the imperative to bring them up according to the wishes of Sri Mataji is strong. As in some other religious groups, this imperative is institutionalised in the Sahaja Yoga marriage ceremony, which includes the injunction: "We will bring our children up in Sahaja Yoga and that is our duty". Indeed, Sri Mataji has said on numerous occasions that parents should put Sahaja Yoga before their children. In a typical example, at an Easter Puja in Rome, she said: "... another type
of Sahaja Yogi are (sic) very self-centred... Some people came to Bombay with their children but didn’t come for the puja in Delhi. They are more worried about their children than about Sahaja Yoga or their own emancipation... They try to find excuses to get out of the collectivity. You are judged all the time and you judge yourself” (Sahaja Yoga 1992c), and she has regularly admonished her followers for being too attached to their families and children. Instead, she has encouraged parents to treat all children in the movement with equal love. 

In the early years, parents, especially mothers, usually take on the greater part of child rearing, unless their vibrations are considered so unhealthy for their babies that they must be separated from them. A copious amount of literature on the subject of child care is circulated within the group for parents with children to consult. Much of it is compiled from the detailed advice given by Sri Mataji herself. Such advice covers the minutiae of infant care, from breast feeding to the toilet training of infants, and most accords with traditional Indian wisdom, and common sense. Other advice concerns such matters as the ways in which babies pick up negativity and how they can be protected. For instance:

Sri Mataji has ... explained that God can protect the children from most harmful vibrations, but cannot protect them from the vibrations of the parents. Therefore it is important that the parents cleanse themselves as much as possible ... almost all vibrational problems that the babies and children have is that of the parents... Parents should bandhan themselves before picking up the baby in the beginning (ibid.)

Sri Mataji has stated that the period between two and six years is a crucial one for the correct upbringing of children. It is at this stage that the young begin to be socialized in the values of the movement formally. From the age of two, he or she is expected to learn the fundamental virtue of detachment, as must his or her parents. She has counselled:
... the child should be allowed to be slept (sic) alone but in parents room till the age of 2 years... But when they are grown up, say after 2 years or so, they can sleep in another room together in collectivity, all the children... Keep their clothes together, put things together, then they should not belong to anyone personally. Let them be together away from the parents, that's important. (Sahaja Yoga 1986b)

The children, she says, should be encouraged to see all adult Sahaja Yogis as their ‘Aunties’ and ‘Uncles’ and to accept praise or reprimand from all alike. Natural ties, are then, to an extent, to be superseded by the primacy of the group, and the children discouraged from relying too much on their parents. They are expected to learn by modelling their behaviour on the adult Sahaja Yogis, who must strive to be exemplary: “They will mature very sweetly if we manage to give a good example they can follow” (Sahaja Yoga, Internal Circular 3, 1).

The tendency for the children to be spoiled at this stage as a result of their special status is recognised, but is to be avoided: “realised children are to be looked upon by the parents and others just as ordinary children. It doesn’t help the child to be considered as someone extraordinary” (ibid.). Likewise, during this period, the children are not to be encouraged to adopt a questioning attitude:

Then another thing is asking questions, by children, it should not be allowed, at all till 6 years, they should not be allowed, so “what is this, what is that” not to be allowed. If they say anything – “you’ll understand this, you’ll find out yourself” ... don’t ask them to trouble you so the habit will not develop. (Sahaja Yoga 1986b)

In this way, Sri Mataji has directed, children are encouraged to develop self-reliance.

Between two and six, the children should learn to emulate traits associated by Sri Mataji with Sahaja Yogis. In terms of gender, to take one example, in an extract from the literature Sri Mataji said that girls:
Sahaja Yoga

can play such sweet games with the toys, for example giving nice names to the dolls, teaching them how to behave, to be quiet and polite with their elders, or how to put the dolls to sleep without making any disturbing noises. Motherhood develops from that age.

(Sahaja Yoga Internal Circular 3, 7)

Whereas: "cars and horses and things like that can be given" to the boys (ibid.). Children should also learn to be generous with possessions: "Sharing, giving, that's it, you see. Toys now, for example, the children who just give away all the toys are better children in India and those who don't give away their toys, keep to theirs at all time, are not good children" (Sahaja Yoga, 1986b, 9). Ideally, Sri Mataji has said, an environment in which Sahaja Yoga norms prevail should produce children who possess the qualities most extolled in the movement: innocence, sweetness, respectfulness, cleanliness and obedience. Modelling and encouraging these attributes are two important means towards this end. On the other hand, children, Sri Mataji has said are often badly behaved because of a lack of discipline:

Sahaja Yoga children have to be extremely well-disciplined... If they answer back give them two slaps, that's allowed... If you do not teach them they will be disrespectful to other people and other people will smack them, then you won't like it. But they have every right to smack if a child misbehaves, because children must know how to behave themselves. (ibid., 8)

A times, she has also attributed more sinister causes, such as possession or mental illness, to a refusal to conform. Thus, she explained the behaviour of a two year-old child belonging to a devotee who would not say good morning to her in the following terms:

I asked all of them, how is Sita, very sweet, very sweet... Soon as I saw her I said 'I'll go blind with this'. Little thing
like that, as if a big cunning woman had taken over her and so cunning her ways were, so cunning for a little girl of 2 years, none of us could manage her... there was nothing natural in her, but nobody could make her out, can you imagine... children can be very very cunning if they are bhutish and extremely clever... they'll end up with cancers, I'll tell you, or with lunacy. This girl might become, she's already schizophrenic, already she is schizophrenic. (Sahaja Yoga 1986b)

Most often, Sri Mataji has stressed the importance of loving children, albeit in a detached way, to enable them to develop as well-behaved members of the community.  

'Who Sri Mataji really is' through children's eyes

The children belong to Sri Mataji rather than to the natural parents. In line with this view, Sahaja Yoga parents seem to respect the relationship Sri Mataji has claimed with the children and they encourage their offspring to think of her as a divine maternal presence who cares for them. The children are usually taken to see Sri Mataji as babies, or when their parents become committed followers, and many have photographs of themselves with Sri Mataji which help to cement this tie. More generally, the children grow up surrounded by photographs of her and are regularly told stories of her miracles. Some are given Indian names by her, a few are allowed on her lap during festivals and the children often put on performances such as dances and plays for Sri Mataji at the end of festivals. Any attention she directs towards a particular child is, naturally, also cherished by interested adults.

As we have seen, a devotional perception of 'who Sri Mataji really is' marks the transition from newcomer to established member in Sahaja Yoga and this understanding is central to continued and committed affiliation. In regard to their socialization, therefore, it is interesting to ask how the children
understand Sri Mataji, and her relationship with them. On the question of Sri Mataji’s status, a high level of consistency in understanding can be observed across the range of children within the movement. All of the children whom I asked about her status expressed an awareness of the presence of Sri Mataji in their lives, and those belonging to more committed parents were most likely to articulate the belief that she is God. When Australian Sahaja Yogis were asked by a television interviewer to talk about the status of Sri Mataji, to explain the welcome they gave her on her arrival at Sydney airport, the adults gave somewhat equivocal replies, such as ‘I feel she must be a goddess’ and ‘a divine personality’. The interviewer then turned to the children for their comments:

   Interviewer: Is she a good person?
   First Infant: Yes.
   Interviewer: Why is she a good person?
   First Infant: Because she protects us from baddies.
   Interviewer: Who do you think she is?
   Second Infant: The Goddess.14

The majority of children in the UK who were asked who they thought Sri Mataji was responded along similar lines. One seven-year old explained: “Well, I think she is God . . . God and Jesus. Because she is sort of my Mother and God, I call her godmother. I feel nice about her. Sometimes I think her picture moves and that she is staring at me” (Interview a. 13.1.95). A few say simply that she is a ‘nice lady’ or describe her as ‘like my grandmother, but more special’. However, some are likely to echo the sentiments of one little girl who remarked to her mother: “You’re not the best mother, because Mother is”. But, she continued: “You are definitely the second-best!” (Diary, 13.9.94).

**Variations in socialization**

Sri Mataji, then, is an important presence in the lives of the children. Having said this, there is variation in the degree to which children in the movement are brought up to emulate the
ideal image of childhood that she has set out, and not all children are treated in the same ways in Sahaja Yoga. Young Sahaja Yogis, as with the adults in the movement, are subject to different levels of exposure to group norms, according to their location and the degree of commitment of their parent(s). Their upbringing will vary according to their country of residence. Parents living in Britain tend to interpret Sri Mataji’s words as advice rather than commands. On the other hand, those living in Switzerland, which has a higher proportion of followers living communally, are much more highly controlled over matters of child care. Indeed, as one would expect, children living ‘collectively’ in any Sahaja Yoga ashram are far more likely to be brought up according to the pronouncements of Sri Mataji than those whose parents do not live with other Sahaja Yogis.15

Because of this variation in socialization, it would be misleading to present a ‘typical’ picture which encompasses the lives of all the children in the movement. Instead, I give a description of the lives of Sahaja Yoga children living in Britain and of those children educated in the schools run by the movement. These two examples are drawn from two opposite ends of the range of child socialization in Sahaja Yoga. As we shall see, whereas the children in Britain are subject to a number of competing influences in their primary socialization, those in the schools are almost entirely isolated from socializing forces other than those in their immediate surroundings.

**Sahaja Yoga children in Britain**

In the family homes and ashrams across the UK, Sahaja Yoga children appear well cared for and as cherished and loved as any other normal set of youngsters. The girls tend to be dressed in pretty feminine clothes and the boys are also well-dressed, even when the parents have little money themselves. The children have toys, often chosen according to Sri Mataji’s advice, and all the normal accoutrements of childhood in the UK. Their diet is usually non-vegetarian and varied.16 Childhood ailments are
likely to be treated in the first instance with meditation and/or medications prescribed by Sri Mataji, but conventional medical advice is also sought when necessary.

In Britain, the children are expected to call adults ‘Aunties’ and ‘Uncles’ and relate to them as family members, desiring of affection and with some authority over them, although in practice this is not usually as much authority as that exercised by their own parents. Through these relationships, the children learn informally many of the teachings of the movement, such as the status of Sri Mataji. More structured socialization into the values of the movement is derived from ritual and from the education provided in Sahaja Yoga.

Through the socializing capacity of ritual, as with the adults, the children implicitly establish understandings about ‘being a Sahaja Yogi’. Given the attention paid to ritual by most of the adults in Sahaja Yoga, and the fact that daily ritual takes place in the home, it is unsurprising to note that the vast majority of the children are integrally involved in the ritual practices of the group, including babies. They are expected to meditate every day and to foot soak with the adults each evening and most whom I asked said they enjoyed their participation. They learn about ritual postures mostly from their parents, although at one puja I noticed a young child of no more than five years being instructed in how she should sit with arms outstretched to feel vibrations from Sri Mataji by another child of a similar age. The young are also told about kundalini, chakras and vibrations from an early age.

More collectively, British children observed during the study clearly enjoyed being involved in sessions of singing bhajans, or devotional songs, extolling virtues of Sri Mataji. Participation was often encouraged by their being allowed to play drums and cymbals as accompaniments as well as joining in the singing. The children were involved in larger rituals as well. In fact, in pujas all Sahaja Yoga children are called upon to play a key role in that, at an early stage in the proceedings, it is the children who wash a photograph of Sri Mataji’s feet, or her own feet should she be present. This practice is performed to release
Socializing a Second Generation

good vibrations for the puja and the innocence of the children is understood to make them ideal agents for this task. However, their participation in ritual in the UK is not enforced. There, in longer rituals which can last for a number of hours, such as pujas, young children are not expected to attend in silence for the whole proceedings, and are fed and given drinks during the national pujas held at Shudy Camps in Cambridgeshire. In addition, they often quietly slip out to play after their participation in foot washing is over, usually rejoining the company in time for the sharing out of prasad at the end. 20

The vast majority of Sahaja Yoga children in the UK do not receive a full-time education in the movement, despite the tendency of members to feel apprehensive about the negativity in the outside world. Instead, most receive a state education, although a few are in the independent sector. Perhaps because ‘normalcy’ is usually a prized commodity amongst children, and learnt in the early stages of peer interaction at school, most appear to reveal little about Sahaja Yoga whilst at school, either to other children or to their teachers. They learn from a young age that the teachings which they take for granted at home are not always understood on the outside, and adapt accordingly. Ben said, for instance: “Jennifer was my friend at school when I was really small and I... meditated on her and she didn’t even know. She thought I was tickling her. I didn’t do it again” (Interview 13.1.95). They are not withdrawn from religious education lessons, since Sahaja Yoga says that it upholds the authentic spiritual teachings of major religious traditions. However, parents may withdraw their children from sex education sessions, in order to protect their innocence.

Daily foot soaking, meditations and other rituals of purification are usually practised after school to rid them of the negative vibrations they may have, perhaps inadvertently, picked up during school hours. In the absence of socialization through a full-time education in Sahaja Yoga, however, some efforts are made to supplement the socialization gained from interaction
with adults in the movement and from ritual practice. Thus, parents are encouraged to send their children to weekend or weekly camps which are arranged from time to time, which are perhaps best described as a cross between Christian Sunday schools and activity holidays. A day at a weekend camp is summarised below by one of the organisers, which outlines the way in which children are socialized progressively according to age:

6.00am ... and the children were up and washed and dressed for meditation... The children were very good, calm, quiet and serene. Once meditation was over they made their way to the breakfast room. The children were then split into three groups according to their ages and commenced various activities, including: making a card for Sri Mataji, learning about the subtle system and learning about integrating their Sahaja knowledge into their everyday school life. Later in the day they discussed and rehearsed a play... After supper the children had a meditation and bhajan session and then washed and went to bed. (Sahaja Yoga 1994a)

The picture in Britain, then, is of a group of children who come into contact with a number of differing socializing influences and who appear, generally, to be happy and well-adjusted. Particularly amongst the teenagers, youngsters occasionally evidence a deal of enthusiasm for Sri Mataji and the movement. One girl of eleven, for example, meditated regularly without encouragement and, accompanied by an adult she knew, went on the India Tour without either of her parents as a result of her entreaties. Her mother observed some years later that, although her daughter now no longer participated, the experience had been valuable in deepening the young girl’s spirituality. However, most British children in Sahaja Yoga display as little fervour about their religious socialization as other children brought up in religious traditions in other parts of Britain. They accept it, for the most part, but it does not dominate their lives entirely.
Socializing a Second Generation

Children in Sahaja Yoga Schools

Turning now to full-time education in the movement, there have been two Sahaja Yoga schools to which followers from all over the world have sent their children. The school in Rome has accepted boarding infants from the age of two as well as offering summer courses. The school in India has accepted children from the age of four. Thus, often very young children are separated from their natural parents for prolonged periods, as they usually stay in India for nine months, returning home for the other three months of the year.

Relatively few of the British children in Sahaja Yoga, no more than a few dozen, have so far undergone full-time education in the schools set up by the movement, and there is seems no pressure on UK parents to send them. However, the extent to which parents choose to send their offspring to a Sahaja Yoga school, and feel pressure to do so from either their peers or the leadership, varies markedly depending on the country of residence. In Switzerland, for example, the vast majority of children are educated in Sahaja Yoga schools. The allegation has been made that when Swiss parents protested to Sri Mataji about their children going away from the age of three, thinking that the command to send their offspring came from the national leader rather than from her, she personally reinforced his orders and, moreover, ordered them to have no contact with their children for at least a year.

A document outlining the views of British Sahaja Yoga parents has said that some wish to send their children to India because:

The first problem in our [Western] schools is that many of the teenagers, sometimes even as young as 12 years old, start drinking alcohol and many of them smoke. There have been many cases and incidents of children smoking marijuana and even experimenting with harder drugs. Some of them have already had sexual experiences by the time they are 14 years old. (Sahaja Yoga 1992a)
Further reasons contained in the document include the desire of parents for their offspring to be brought up according to Sahaja Yoga principles; the fact that the class sizes are small; because parents believe that, as India has the purest vibrations, it is the best environment for their children; and that there the children are protected from the corrupting influence of the West.22

When the school first began in Dharamsala, India, the facilities were very poor. There was no telephone and building work was continually being done in order to make it habitable. The school has since moved to a new site. Its stated aims include the provision of ‘basic knowledge in all subjects in a happy, friendly, homely and stimulating environment’; the encouragement of each child ‘to develop personality and individuality and yet retain the ability to relate, work, share and play harmoniously without evoking competition and enjoy the reality of collectivity; and to ‘bring out the innate human quality through respect and love in each student of kindness, honesty, courage, propriety, sensitivity, dignity, compassion, consideration and spontaneity’.23

A report on the Indian school compiled for the Austrian Embassy noted:

There are 10 classes for 196 pupils ... of elementary school class... Among the children there are some Australians, Italians as well as some Europeans, North Americans and Asians but very few Indians... The main building of the school including the inner school yard, the classrooms, the dormitories, the canteen and offices are newly-built and bright, the furniture simple.24

The day begins early, at 6.00am for the younger ones and 5.30am for the older children. The timetable is full and the children retire to bed at 9pm, sleeping in dormitories of up to fifteen students. The curriculum includes English, Maths, Science, Social Studies, Art, Craft and Dance, and English is the spoken language. One foreign language is compulsory, with German or Hindi being offered. The children also practise the rituals of Sahaja Yoga. Depending on the pupil’s age, they are
Socializing a Second Generation

expected to meditate for up to an hour in the morning and evening, and the yearly reports on the children also contain assessments for meditative concentration, collectivity, obedience and self-esteem.

In contrast to the British children of Sahaja Yogis living in the UK, those attending the schools run by the movement have little access to outside influences. Notwithstanding the statement made by Sahaja Yogis about the school in Dharamsala in India, for instance, which says that: “many women from the village come to see the children, bring presents for them and look after them. The whole village enjoys looking after these children” (Sahaja Yoga 1992a), the report on the school in 1995 states that:

People dropping in at the door are – more or less unfriendly (sic) – refused. Because of that refusal of contact, the domestic and foreign population nearby does not know anything about the teachers, pupils and the daily routine at the school, which is – regarding the rustic surrounding – an astonishing fact.25

The school takes no children other than those belonging to Sahaja Yoga. Access to television and radio is not allowed and “the children seem to lack further information of or about their home countries” (ibid.). Contact between the children and their parents is limited. The children are allowed to write home once a week, to receive packages from home twice a year and, in addition, parents may telephone from time to time.

Criticisms of socialization

It is time to examine some of the criticisms that have been made about the socialization of children in Sahaja Yoga. Given the fact that Sahaja Yogis follow teachings that appear unusual to most Westerners, and given the general public antipathy towards NRM’s (Whitworth and Shiels, 1982; Beckford, 1985), it is to be expected that some misgivings have been voiced over the socialization of children in the movement. Overt
conflict, however, rarely arises in the UK over the socialization of children in Sahaja Yoga, especially when they are sent to local schools. Some British grandparents have expressed concern over the level of involvement of the children in the teachings and rituals of the group, which appear alien to them, and fear that the children are estranged from blood relations. A few have not been allowed contact with their grandchildren at all. However, those who have felt disquiet have opted for maintaining what ties they have and, so far, have not sought actively to take the children out of the group. The reasons they have given include being too frightened to contemplate legal action, in case contact is severed completely by the parents, and fear that such action would not be successful because the courts would uphold the religious freedom of the parents.

The numbers of UK grandparents that have turned to official channels for information and help is also relatively small in relation to their total size. Indeed, there are a couple of instances in which the fees for children attending Sahaja Yoga schools have been paid for by grandparents. One probable reason for this is that most grandparents expect to leave the upbringing of children to their parents. Moreover, Sahaja Yogis tend to adopt a low-profile in relation to outsiders, preferring not to tell them about things which might cause either distress or conflict.

In Europe as a whole, the amount of concern which has been voiced over children in the movement is greater than it is in Britain, and grandparents tend to adopt a more militant stance. This is partly because more Sahaja Yoga children on the Continent either live in ashrams or attend the Sahaja Yoga schools. In addition, there has been more critical media coverage on the Continent of the treatment of children in the sect, especially in France and Italy. There have also been a few instances in which legal action has been successfully taken by grandparents. In the most well known, at the Court of Appeal in Rennes, France, in 1991, a Sahaja Yoga mother was allowed custody of her two children only if she let them live with her at home. This prevented her from sending one of them back to the
Socializing a Second Generation

school in India – as was the intention of the ruling. The reasons given by the court included the following:

- that the quality of the teaching is in no way guaranteed
- that the child’s schooling and professional future is completely uncertain
- that he would for a very long time be in a situation of geographical and psychological isolation, without any real contact with the outside world, and that because of his young age and the absence of other references, would be completely incapable of refuting this situation

They concluded: “His mental health is in danger and his conditions of education very severely compromised”.

Parental misgivings

Although Sahaja Yogis are often aware of the misgivings of grandparents, and of the bad publicity generated by the schools, some have still made the choice to send their children. Sahaja Yoga parents in Britain have been keen for their children to grow up according to the principles they themselves have adopted. Furthermore, they are secure in the belief that Sri Mataji is watching over the children, and is the guiding hand. Illustrating this point, a group interview of British Sahaja Yogis with children in India was conducted in October 1992 by Dr Charlotte Hardman of INFORM, who asked, among other things, about the carer/child ratio at the school. One of the mothers commented afterwards that this had made her realise that she simply did not know. She felt, however, that the interviewer was not asking the right questions, because “Mother is looking after the children, so of course they are alright” (Diary 13.9.94).

During the course of this study, however, a number of parental misgivings were voiced in relation to the school in India, and reports about the school were mixed. Some parents said that their children were happy and well looked after there, and that their ‘vibrations’ were wonderful as a result of being in such an environment. They were perfectly satisfied with their
development and eager for them to return to India. One mother typically reported in 1994, that she was able to talk to her son on the phone. These conversations and the regular letters which she received suggested he was fine and had settled in well.

Others, however, privately expressed misgivings about the socialization of the children, one being that at times it did not seem to correspond to the teachings of Sri Mataji. Their misgivings included the quality of supervision at the school. One concern that was stated was that not all of the adult carers are long-standing Sahaja Yogis, although this had been assumed by parents. They were, therefore, anxious that the children were not having sufficient contact with group members. Another was that the children were inadequately supervised and left too much to fend for themselves, contrary to Sri Mataji’s advice that adults should act as models for behaviour. There had also been instances of children having been beaten in previous years and the Headmaster was removed from his position as a result, although he has been subsequently reinstated. The reason given for the beatings were that these reflected ‘teething troubles’. Some of the children were ‘running wild’ and had to be disciplined. One child arrived home from the school having lost over a stone in weight and was so changed in appearance that his mother failed to recognise him at the airport. The school, however, had consistently reported throughout the year that he was ‘doing fine’.

**Differences in world view**

Although the basics remain the same for all children in Sahaja Yoga – namely, the feeling of a special relationship with Sri Mataji and some involvement in ritual – it can be seen that there is wide variation in the degree to which their lives are influenced by their parents’ membership of the group. Some go to the schools but others have much less contact with stricter aspects of Sahaja Yoga. Fairly typically, for instance, one British parent confided that she had left the *ashram* she was living in with her daughter because the child was becoming a teenager and she
wanted her to grow up in a more unrestricted setting than was possible there.\textsuperscript{32}

The variety in the understandings of the young in Sahaja Yoga introduced through the different amounts of contact with Sahaja Yogis they enjoy is compounded by differences between the childrens' views of the world and those of the adults in the group. As Goode has commented: “It is wrong to assume that our social meanings are the same as the social meanings of children” (in Fire and Sandstrom 1988, 34). The following reminiscence of one of the parents is illustrative. She recalled how, during a particular meditation session, she and her husband told the children to place their right hands over the site of a certain \textit{chakra} in the body. The family then recited together the appropriate words: “Mother, please give me the pure knowledge”. Her smallest son, seated to one side of her, however, recited his own version of the litany: “Mother, please give me the pure yoghurt”, with no hint of irony (Diary, 8.1.94).

Such dissonance between adult and child world views is often disguised by the fact that children will say what they know an adult wants to hear. Moreover, unlike most adults, they tend not to have an elaborate conceptual understanding of what is taking place. In one interview for this study, although assured by the parents before speaking to two children of seven and nine who had been ‘born into’ Sahaja Yoga that the latter had been taught all about \textit{chakras} and \textit{kundalini} as soon as possible, the children themselves could give only the haziest of descriptions as to what these were. In fact, their impressions were often incompatible with those of adult members (Interview b. 13.1.95). Thus, there are differences between the ways in which the adults and the children see the world, notwithstanding the following extract from a description of a weekend camp for children which highlights the ability of adults to influence the understandings of children: “Sarah [an adult] was talking about the Mooladhara chakra to Ganesha [a child] and he said “\textit{How do you know?’}” Then someone said “\textit{Yes, how does Auntie know?’}” and Ganesha said “\textit{Oh yeah, she’s bigger than us}” (Sahaja Yoga 1994a. italics in original).
In those children attending Sahaja Yoga schools in which, it seems, they are isolated from competing influences, there has also been evidence of variation between their world views and those of adult Sahaja Yogis. Stories of the aggression and tantrums displayed by some of the children when at home have run counter to the loving and positive descriptions articulated by members. Possible explanations here are twofold.\(^3^3\) Firstly, if, as it has been alleged, children have been supervised inadequately in the past, and have spent the vast majority of time with their peers, the socialization they have received, outside their ritual practice, has not been from adults in Sahaja Yoga. Furthermore, at least a few of the adults with whom they have the greatest contact, their teachers, have not been Sahaja Yogis.

Secondly, whilst there is evidence that some children have enjoyed their time at the Sahaja Yoga school in India, a number of the children have expressed unhappiness at being returned to the India school.\(^3^4\) The family lives of at least some are at times unstable. Divorce, for example, or the breakdown of relationships arranged by Sri Mataji, is officially unknown in Sahaja Yoga, but unofficially is known to occur. She has also split partnerships up in the past, on the basis that they were destructive. The anger which can be generated in children by not enjoying school, and by insecure parenting, is not conducive to a happy acceptance of parental affiliations and can initiate rebellion against them.

**Conclusion**

It is too early in the life span of Sahaja Yoga to be able to evaluate the extent to which a second generation is being socialized successfully in the qualities extolled by Sri Mataji, to the point at which they will choose to stay in the group. Some NRMs, such as the Church Universal and Triumphant and ISKCON, have not succeeded in retaining many teenagers and young adults of the second generation. Even the Family have recently created structures to ease the departure of those
Socializing a Second Generation

children who choose to leave, both for their parents and for the children themselves. Palmer has commented that:

a new religion’s success in socializing their children might depend on the thickness of the boundaries separating the community from the outside world. If these boundaries are too thick and formidable, children become curious, feel deprived and rebel against captivity. If they are too flimsy, children absorb the secular attitudes of their friends.

(Palmer 1994b, 20)

Either way, too much variation in world view, whether in reaction to socialization or because of the permeability of group boundaries during socialization, leads to an inability to sustain commitment to the movement in question.

The fact that children do not choose to stay in a movement, however, is not necessarily a sign of failure in socialization. Children, like adults, “are not just the passive recipients of social structures and processes” (James and Prout 1990, 8). Factors such as anger can produce variations in world view, due to the interactive capacity of the child. However, children who have been socialized into being independent and self-reliant from an early age, like those who are sent to the Sahaja Yoga schools, also tend to continue with this behaviour. Further study, beyond the scope of this book, is required to determine the long-term effects of growing up as ‘Mother’s children’.

167
CHAPTER EIGHT

Leaving Mother

The link between socialization and departure from an NRM might not be evident at first glance. The very act of leaving seems to imply that the socialization process has broken down in some way, or at least that its influence is over. However, in this chapter, which is based on the accounts of leavers, departure is seen as an extended transition from one set of social expectations and roles to another, rather than as a singular event. Consequently, leaving Sahaja Yoga, and Sri Mataji, is explored in terms of the socializations that occur both before and after the actual moment of detachment. Departure, seen in this light, is a process in which members disentangle themselves from old social environments, and reorientate themselves through interacting with a new set of social expectations. As far as Sahaja Yoga is concerned, this process has sometimes produced more extreme reactions to departure in ex-members than is commonly found in the majority of documented new religions.

Forestalling Departure

There is plenty of evidence that the majority of new religions exhibit a high turnover of members (Bird and Reimer 1982; Barker 1984). Like other organisations, however, new religions usually exhibit a range of behaviours which have the effect of maintaining the commitment of members and deterring them from departure.
Leaving Mother

In some NRM s, members are encouraged to report those whose commitment is wavering to leaders (Richardson et al. 1986 in Robbins 1988, 91). In Sahaja Yoga, in the first instance, Sri Mataji has encouraged her followers to come directly to her with any misgivings that they have: “If there is negativity, you should tell Me, I will work it out” (Sahaja Yoga 1993, 11). She is also liable to recommend that her followers reassure themselves about the authenticity of the path by consulting their vibrations.

Discontent is additionally limited by ‘stop-gap explanations’, which have the effect of reducing the level of ‘cognitive dissonance’ experienced by a particular member which may be provoking a re-evaluation of his or her affiliation. When, for instance, a miracle healing is followed by a relapse, when a prophesy is apparently mistaken, or when clear evidence contradicts a previously unquestioned truth, such explanations can, with social reinforcement, reassure members. These kinds of explanation are commonplace in Sahaja Yoga, and are often offered by Sri Mataji herself. A favourite of her followers which has already been mentioned is the explanation that, as Sri Mataji is Mahamaya, the Great Illusionist, they cannot hope to understand her. This accords with Sri Mataji’s advice that: “You should realise that there are certain things in Sahaja Yoga that are Mahamaya’s job. So we should not get disturbed or upset if things seem to go in a way we had not expected” (Sahaja Yoga 1988, 124). Thus, when she behaves in a way which does not meet the expectations of followers, they feel insufficiently able to assess her actions. Such explanations are usually coupled with a refocusing on the virtues of membership. Followers are also inclined to say that, as she is also their loving Mother, everything she does is for their benefit and in order that they may grow. Who are they, then, to question the divine?

Such questioning is likely to be attributed by both followers and by Sri Mataji to ‘negativity’. Sometimes this ‘negativity’ has its origins in the external world. Timothy, for example, described how he went into a temple in India and was sitting
there quietly when somebody, a non-Sahaja Yogi, walked by him. Immediately, Timothy began to wonder whether there was any truth in Sahaja Yoga. However, he then realised that what had occurred was that the negativity of the man who had walked by him had inadvertently been transferred to him and that he himself had no such doubts (Diary 14.11.93). Recurring doubts, Sahaja Yogis have said, can also originate within the individual as a result of damage to chakras which may have been sustained some time ago. They may also be produced by an overactive ego (Sahaja Yoga 1992, 17). External explanations for misgivings relieve the individual of direct responsibility, whereas blaming the ego ensures that any scepticism felt about Sahaja Yoga is laid at the door of the member rather than the group.

Another common organisational response to dissatisfaction in NRMs, particularly in their earliest days, is to label negatively those who are expressing dissatisfaction (Brinkerhoff and Burke 1980), who have left or even those who have been expelled. Some groups conceptualise leavers in terms of having ‘cancelled their spiritual ticket’ once they have left a spiritual elite (Thompson 1991). Others, more radically, portray them as being vulnerable to illness or misfortune, or damned (see Rothbaum 1988). Similarly, Sri Mataji has advised her followers to stay away from those who have left the movement, for fear of contamination. They are often described as being ‘caught up’ by negativity, unable to ‘be collective’, prey to their overbearing egos and even ‘mad’. She has, moreover, spoken on a number of occasions of the likelihood that those who disagree with her or disobey her will meet with accidents, fall ill and die. Those who do not know of Sahaja Yoga, she has also maintained, are better off by far than those who have joined and left.

The threat of expulsion appears to be made usually as a final sanction, with the effect of maintaining social control over those who remain. As an ex-Sahaja Yogi put it:

The fear is there that is this is God’s plan and if you can’t get on with it, if you can’t toe the line and do exactly what
Leaving Mother

she says, then that’s it for you ... you are basically off the evolutionary wheel, as it were, and this is worse than death.11

For those who are struggling to remain members, the most common recourse is to intensify their ritual practice. Indeed, another common explanation for their beginning to doubt is that they have been lax in their practice and are, therefore, assailed by ‘negativity’.12 Thus, Sri Mataji has said, “Those who come to Sahaja Yoga and do not meditate and do not rise are destroyed or they are thrown out of Sahaja Yoga” (Sri Mataji 1985). This increase in the time spent in meditation and other ritual practices can, in the light of what has previously been stated about the social significance of ritual, be seen as an opportunity for followers to receive additional reinforcement for their membership through greater participation in ritual expressions of the teachings of Sahaja Yoga.

Another option is for individuals, unhappy with some aspects of Sahaja Yoga, to become peripheral members.13 Depending on which country they live, the circumstances surrounding their dissatisfaction, and whether they voice or remain silent about their misgivings, this may be a possible avenue for them to take.14 In the UK, they will thereafter meet other Sahaja Yogis socially from time to time, turn up at the occasional public meeting, such as Sri Mataji’s annual event at the Royal Albert Hall, and sometimes meditate quietly at home, but they will not involve themselves in more committed behaviour. I devote the rest of this chapter, however, to those who, temporarily or permanently, are unable to remain as Sahaja Yogis.

Modes of exit

As a number of scholars have pointed out (Beckford 1985; Lewis 1989; Wright 1987), there is usually more than one mode of exit from a new religious movement.15 In Sahaja Yoga, there are at least three.16 It should be stressed that the variety within the
Sahaja Yoga

group, in terms of levels of commitment, world views, national diversity and so on, ensures that there are multiple ways of exiting, reasons for leaving and responses to departure from those who have chosen that route. The most common exit route is that of voluntary departure, when the individual chooses to leave. The next is being given the choice by Sri Mataji of doing as she has asked, or leaving. Lastly, there are some Sahaja Yogi who have been, either temporarily or permanently, expelled. The differences in these modes of exit appear to affect the experiences of the individuals involved, and the degree to which they accomplish their departure with minimal pain.

Choosing to leave

There is no single reason why individuals choose to leave Sahaja Yoga, but few seem to do so very suddenly. Most, instead, go through a period of some months reassessing their membership of the group, and their belief in Sri Mataji. Carol, for example, said:

When I went on the India Tour just before leaving, it was for me a 'make or break' situation. For a long time I had felt as if nothing was happening, either inside myself or in Sahaja generally. Everything was a dull repetition – even the dancing and singing seemed forced ... the spiritual change I was hoping for did not by any means occur... For those few months I felt very frightened and unsure of myself. Gradually, I stopped meditating but a part of me still planned to return to Sahaja Yoga at some point in the future. (Interview 20.6.95)

The hope that they might return one day to Sahaja Yoga is one held by a number of those thinking of leaving, especially those struggling to come to terms with what are felt to be unreconciliable inner tensions:

I left because at the end of the day I felt I wasn’t being true to myself. It wasn’t fair on Sri Mataji or on the other
Leaving Mother

Sahaja Yogis because I had a lot of doubts. I was becoming more and more unfulfilled and a bit disillusioned. I had a lot of questions about Sahaja Yoga and the way it was conducted and about Sri Mataji herself that weren’t being answered. I had to face those things, and while I was doing that I felt I should go out of Sahaja Yoga. So when I left I didn’t feel I would never go back... I felt a bit betrayed and confused and I thought ‘I can’t work this out inside, I’ll have to step out for a bit’. (Interview a.3.5.95)

A number of the respondents also placed at least some of the responsibility for departure on failures of themselves rather than those of the group. Sheila, typically in this respect, blamed herself for her unwillingness to commit fully which led to her departure: “It came to a point spiritually where either I made that final jump or I pulled out, and it felt dishonest to carry on because I couldn’t – I couldn’t then and I couldn’t now” (Interview 21.7.95). Even those like Sheila, who never fully committed themselves to the collective aspect of Sahaja Yoga, especially to ashram life, take time to decide to leave. Nigel said: “I left because it had become an obligation for me. I didn’t really want to even meditate every day any more. I had felt guilty for some time because I wasn’t so committed. I think, basically, that my time had run its course” (Interview 9.7.95).

The reasons that make people finally decide that they have had enough are diverse. A number of ex-members talk about dreams involving Sri Mataji just before leaving which they feel acted as a catalyst for their departure. Occasionally individuals, like Nigel, say that they simply feel that they have grown as much as they are going to in Sahaja Yoga and that it is time to move on. These are likely to have the kind of history of seekership identified by Richardson (1978), where the individual spiritual path of the follower takes precedence over the demands of any one group. Thus, the individual forms either a series of multiple sequential, or sometimes simultaneous, affiliations to NRM. Such people are unusual in Sahaja Yoga, given its exclusivist orientation, but there are a few.

173
Sahaja Yoga

Others, like Sheila, leave because they cannot fully commit themselves to Sahaja Yoga. In fact, for those who have been members for less than two years, the explanation most often given for leaving is the level of commitment expected after the initial stages of membership. Ex-members who have been in the group for longer more usually cite unhappiness about the behaviour of leaders, including Sri Mataji, and the financial management within the movement as being their prime motives for leaving.

Both of these groups of individuals, however, are likely to voice several reasons for not being able to remain within Sahaja Yoga. Disquiet, it seems, often accumulates in the minds of those considering leaving until some trigger event occurs. Andrew, in common with some other ex-members who were in the movement for over five years, said that he felt unable to deal with his feelings of internal conflict any more:

In the end I had to be honest with myself. What did I really feel? I found that what Mataji was saying was always that $1 + 1 = 3$ and I could not cope with that any more. $1 + 1 = 2$. I couldn't handle the so-called maya [illusion] any more. I felt that a lot of it was just an excuse.

(Interview b.3.5.95)

Typically, however, he reached this decision after harbouring unease on a number of issues within the group for some time:

I didn't really understand or like the idea of a great spiritual person who wanted to save humanity being obsessed with so many properties. It didn't make any sense to me, why was all this time being spent on money and buildings? How could that help the cause? And I was having doubts about 'who she really was'. Also, I didn't like the way children were treated in Sahaja Yoga at all.

(ibid.)

In his case, the last reason given provided the trigger. Carol, in contrast, like many followers, had believed that "good Sahaja Yogis don't get ill and die" (Interview, 20.6.1995). Thus, the
sudden death of a national leader proved to be catalyst for leaving:

He dropped dead of a heart attack whilst he was cutting the grass for Mataji’s arrival. For me, this was like a sign. People came out with all sorts of theories about why he had died, such as that he had chosen to because the pressure of being a leader was too much for him. However, personally, I think that this is the last thing he would have chosen. He saw things in black and white terms and gave lectures on the terrible things that would happen to people who would not do what Mataji said... Once he even told us laughingly about the next door neighbour who had complained about the noise of the ashram and had died of a heart attack. A man with such a philosophy would never have ‘chosen’ to die under such circumstances. He would have felt it to be a sign of failure. (ibid.)

Whatever triggers leaving, those who choose to go usually do so quietly, however long they have been in Sahaja Yoga. Typically, they simply stop going to public meetings and discontinue meditating rather than making a declaration about their departure. Those who have been in the movement for over five years sometimes get in touch with Sahaja Yogis with whom they feel particularly close and quietly let them know. They are highly unlikely to make a scene. A notable exception to this rule in Australia was an ex-member who took television cameras with her to a public meeting to question Sri Mataji about the financial dealings of the movement, the treatment of women and about the death of a member from AIDS, despite Sri Mataji’s pronouncement that he was cured.22 The vast majority, however, are unwilling to draw attention to themselves or the group in this way.

To summarise, then, although there is no single reason for people choosing to leave Sahaja Yoga, patterns are evident in the accounts of leavers. Voluntary departure is typically gradual and subdued, with the member meditating less and less over time before ceasing altogether. Those who leave after having
spent less than two years in Sahaja Yoga are most likely in their accounts to emphasise their unwillingness to commit themselves more fully. More established members who leave tend to emphasise disillusionment with aspects of the leadership or the organisation.

**Stay or leave**

The second mode of exit out of Sahaja Yoga is to be given the choice to remain or leave by Sri Mataji. The most common time for this rarely used option seems to occur when she is dealing with married couples. Sri Mataji, on a number of occasions, has decided that a particular wife is unsuitable for one of her male followers, and that his partner is filling him with negativity. It may be that the wife has already left the movement, or that she is still a member but has been singled out as a source of disobedience or displeasure. In such circumstances, Sri Mataji has been known to offer the husband the choice of remarrying someone more suitable within the movement and remaining inside, or of staying with his wife – and probably children – and departing.

In such cases, the trigger is the choice presented to the follower, and, when this type of exit is chosen, it usually has a more ‘out of the blue’ flavour than those exits which are entirely voluntary. The follower, often previously deeply committed and willing to put aside occasional doubt because of the benefits felt to come from membership of Sahaja Yoga, is forced by Sri Mataji to make a decision that in other circumstances he might not have chosen to make. Unlike voluntary departure, this type of leaving is quick and can very occasionally be declarative, with the aggrieved member going to the press or to the courts in response.

**Expulsion**

Robbins (1988, 98) listed possible reasons for expulsions from NRMs as dissidence, insubordination and challenges to authority, rule-breaking and the incapacity of some members
to contribute positively, through finance or recruitment, to the movement. According to a document issued by Sahaja Yoga, expulsion is a comparatively rare occurrence:

In the twenty one years of Sahaja Yoga hardly a dozen people have been asked to leave. Apart from wrongfully collecting money, people were asked to leave for the following reasons: homosexuality, flirting and adultery, mental disease, aggression and domination of others, particularly towards women... We are happy that we are not so unfortunate as to come to Sahaja Yoga, see the truth and still misbehave and be sent away.

(Sahaja Yoga A Declaration, 3)

Furthermore, expulsion can be temporary rather than permanent and need not necessarily be punitive. Some members, for instance, have been told in the past to leave for a period of time whilst they deal with situations in which their affiliation to Sahaja Yoga might prove damaging either to them or to the movement.24 Thus, the leader of a British ashram advised followers to:

solve your divorce problems, solve your court problems, then come to Sahaja Yoga. We do not want to get involved into this sort of thing at all that we have broken any family or anything. If you cannot carry on with your wife, Sahaja Yoga should not be an excuse ... go out of Sahaja Yoga, do what you like with your wife, finish it off once and for all. And you should tell her I am no more a Sahaja Yogi. Get it out and then come to Sahaja Yoga.

(Sahaja Yoga 1984b, 38)25

It has been said of those who have been expelled for wrongdoing: “These people were given all opportunities to improve their behaviour before being asked to leave. Some of them have since overcome their problems and returned” (Sahaja Yoga A Declaration, 3). Temporary expulsion, however, can have a more punitive aspect. In such instances the member, and sometimes his or her family, can be banned from entering
Sahaja Yoga

Sahaja Yoga ashrams or from having contact with Sri Mataji for an allotted period whilst they ‘work out’ their problems. These problems may be explained as an imbalance in their chakras which is making them insubordinate or ‘non-collective’. Once they, through ritual practice and penance, have cleansed themselves and the period of contrition is at an end, they may return to the fold. There have been other cases, though, in which expulsion has been permanent. This has apparently happened only in grave circumstances, however, such as when a leader from abroad was found to have been sexually abusing younger members and was forcibly evicted in disgust by other members from the English Sahaja Yoga building where he was visiting (Diary 10.5.94).

Going outside

From interviews conducted in 1990 with ex-members from Exegesis, a human potential movement, I noted that the departure experiences of these individuals fell into three phases that were tied to transitions from one set of social expectations to another. These I labelled disgrace, disassociation and reintegration (Thompson 1991). These categories were not identified as steps in a causal model, but as pointers to the types of experiences which could beset ex-members of relatively exclusive communities.

In the first phase, disgrace, ex-members tended to feel highly ambivalent about the group they had left and uncertain about their own beliefs now that they perceived gaps in the ‘plausibility structure’ of the NRM. The ex-members were also very likely to view their departure in the way they believed it was being interpreted by the group. Thus, whilst they felt freed, they were likely to feel that they had transgressed in some way and so, literally, were dis-graced (removed from grace). During this period, they experienced a significant degree of residue from the role they had in the group and the social expectation which went with that role.26 Ex-members, usually after a period of a few months, then moved into the second phase, that of
Leaving Mother

disassociation, in which the teachings of the movement were seen as increasingly untenable. This transition was often assisted by geographical distance. In this phase, individuals stopped interpreting their actions and their lives according to the group’s definitions. Nevertheless, they had not yet found a new purpose and still felt a lack of clarity. In the final phase, that of reintegration, ex-members found a new ‘identification’, whether it was spiritual or secular, and a renewed sense of purpose in their lives.27

I have found that these categories remain useful enough to be employed as a broad contextualisation for the experiences of the ex-Sahaja Yoga respondents. Nevertheless, two provisos should be noted at the outset. Firstly, variations in leavers’ experiences are underplayed, to an extent, by the use of such categories. One would expect variations to be generated by different levels of commitment to an organisation, these varying degrees of commitment being correlated with different levels of participation. Such is the case in the present instance. Thus, those who had displayed relatively little commitment to Sahaja Yoga whilst members, and who had not been ‘collective’, seem to have experienced the least trauma in their transition to other roles. Ironically, but not surprisingly, those who made a deeper commitment Sahaja Yoga were generally those who faced a more difficult period of readjustment to the next phase of their life. The point is summed up by the following comment made by Sheila about another ex-member whom she knew well: “I don’t have the anger that, say, Beth has. Because she accepted an awful lot of things in Sahaja Yoga that, frankly, I would never have done, and now she is blaming Sahaja Yoga” (Interview 21.7.95).

Secondly, the category of reintegration implicitly conveys the impression that the social influence of Sahaja Yoga on ex-members is at an end when they have reached this stage, in that they have been resocialized by a new social grouping into a different world view. This, in fact, is true only to an extent. Instead, as we shall see, ex-members do not relinquish entirely what they have learned in the movement.


Sahaja Yoga

Disgrace

A prevalent understanding amongst committed members of Sahaja is that followers are protected by invisible spiritual entities who ensure their well-being.\textsuperscript{28} It follows that, when they leave Sahaja Yoga, the grace they have enjoyed through the protection of these entities is removed. Further, some who have newly left are haunted not only by the absence of protection but also, they feel, by the presence of a malevolent retribution, directed by the guru herself. Such individuals are strongly apprehensive about various kinds of attack as a result of their apostasy. They are fearful that they will develop cancer or Parkinson’s disease, that they will descend into hell, that they will be psychically or literally attacked, or that the car or aeroplane they are travelling in will mysteriously crash. In short, they believe that the long arm of the Goddess will reach out and terrifyingly punish them for their disobedience.\textsuperscript{29} Some believe that they have already actually been attacked through the psychic powers of Sri Mataji.\textsuperscript{30}

Such beliefs, and the traumatised feelings which accompany them, are most common amongst the previously extremely committed ex-members. They are more likely to be held by those who left the movement some years ago, as such followers had complete faith in the claims of Sri Mataji. Because of accumulating evidence that Sahaja Yogis do fall ill and do die, expectations have had to be partially adjusted and, consequently, the fear of retribution, although present in most recent leavers, is not quite so strong. As Rose, who left in 1994, said:

When I first left, I was very afraid of dying and meeting Sri Mataji afterwards and of her judging me for having turned away from the truth. I wasn’t so afraid of getting cancer or something like that because I now know you can get cancer and die in Sahaja Yoga. We used to believe that we were protected from everything like that and that there was no way we were going to die … but now it doesn’t hold much weight. \hspace{1cm} (Interview a.3.5.95)

180
Despite this partial revision, the majority of ex-members interviewed who had been committed express unease about their departure at this stage, an unease associated with the degree to which they, as Sahaja Yogis, believed in the powers of Sri Mataji. This unease can be seen as stemming from the previous roles which they inhabited within the group. Nigel, a member for two years, did not feel anxious about the possibility of retribution from Sahaja Yoga or Sri Mataji. However, he had never really accepted her divinity in the first place. He also commented that one of the things he disliked about Sahaja Yoga was its exclusivity:

The one thing I did find difficult about Sahaja Yogis is that they are very inflexible. Sometimes I would come away full of love and I would want to share that more with non-Sahaja Yogis than with Sahaja Yogis. But Sahaja Yogis only want to share it with other Sahaja Yogis, which is quite pointless.

Nigel, then, never adopted a sufficiently exclusive mentality or a strong enough faith in the powers of Sri Mataji to make him fear the consequences of departure.

However, those members who whilst Sahaja Yogis did believe that Sri Mataji had supernatural powers, or who believed in retribution, were correspondingly more anxious about having left. One ex-member said that he had believed that he was in telepathic contact with Sri Mataji whilst in the movement. When he left, he understood Sri Mataji as someone who had enormous psychic abilities but who used them for her own, base ends instead of for spiritual good, and feared for his safety (Interview 20.12.94). Another member, Pauline, who said: “I believed that Sri Mataji was who she said she was. I was desperate to believe” (Interview, 29.8.95), commented at this stage, “To begin with, I was terrified. Now I am more sceptical but I am still uneasy, just in case she is and I will be punished. I don’t like to think about it”. Similarly, Rose, who feared being judged and found wanting by Sri Mataji for ‘rejecting the truth’, and who was brought up to hold a Christian understanding of hell, said:
I thought I would leave my spirit behind when I left Sahaja Yoga . . . that was my biggest fear, that by turning my back on Sahaja Yoga I would be turning my back on the truth, God itself and the Spirit. I was just waiting for the day when I would wake up and I would be depressed and I would never come out of it. Because I had found the ultimate, and if you turn your back on the ultimate then you go on the nice slippery slide to hell.

(Interview a.3.5.95)

Nevertheless, not all of the problems voiced concerning their departure from Sahaja Yoga sprang from the fear generated by residual understandings of retribution held, in one form or another, by leavers. Such fears, juxtaposed with the disillusionment that led the majority to leave, often caused confusion to be expressed in the accounts of leavers over their feelings about Sahaja Yoga as they struggled to understand their present perspective on the movement. This confusion was sometimes exacerbated by the fact that ex-members felt that Sahaja Yoga was, in reality, quite different from the NRM they thought they had joined, this, in itself, leading to anxiety and self-doubt. For others, especially those who surrendered more deeply to the way of life in Sahaja Yoga, the strongest emotion was often anger. Sometimes, this anger followed fear, as in Pauline’s case: “I was very frightened to begin with when I left and I had panic attacks, which was something I had before I went in. But then I got angry and annoyed and I just said ‘so come on if you are going to do it’” (Interview 29.8.95).

Others still, including some of those who are in arranged marriages as a result of their involvement in Sahaja Yoga, have felt justified in feeling aggrieved after leaving the movement. As one such ex-member put it bitterly, she now felt that her partner’s lifestyle and perceived inadequacy “was thrust upon me without any concern at all for my well-being” (Interview 20.6.95). She felt angry because “in Sahaja Yoga I had two miscarriages – subconsciously I think I really didn’t want to have children, as in [the country in which she was based] they
Leaving Mother

had to go to Rome at the age of three and I saw how much parents suffered” (ibid.). Some ex-members also felt angry that they accepted things about Sahaja Yoga, because of the trust Sri Mataji asked them to place in her, which they subsequently regretted. Rose, for example, felt distressed because she had not been able to grieve over the death her parents in Australia. Instead, in the case of her mother: “it was seen as good that she had died, that this was some sort of divine plan, because she would never have accepted Sahaja Yoga” (Interview a.3.5.95).

Another hurt voiced by leavers is one particularly common to many of those who leave NRMs. This was the way in which they believed they were now being viewed and treated by practising Sahaja Yogis, whom they had previously regarded as sisters or brothers. They believed that they were being labelled as ‘negative’ or ‘caught up’ and that many Sahaja Yogis would go out of their way to avoid them as a result. Indeed, in some instances this has happened. However, in other instances, some who leave are able to maintain – at least superficially – a few friendships formed whilst in the group. Unsurprisingly, this is more likely if they refrain from explicitly articulating whatever disenchantment they feel.33

Wright has commented on the similarities between departure from an NRM and divorce. Individuals involved in either transition have to come to terms with having abandoned something to which they had previously felt a high degree of commitment. He noted: “defection and disavowal … are challenges to self-identity that entail incorporating one’s previous beliefs and involvements into a current self-definition” (Wright and Ebaugh 1993, 124). Such a process is almost invariably painful for the individual as he or she confronts the losses and reassessments it entails. Most respondents said, however, that their experiences of the early days after leaving Sahaja Yoga were not entirely negative. A commonly cited experience was a sense of exhilaration, especially for those who had felt increasingly repressed within the movement.34 As Carol, who was a member of Sahaja Yoga for more than a decade, characteristically put it: “After the initial fear had worn off, I
felt euphoric after leaving Sahaja Yoga. I had such a tremendous sense of freedom, little things like wearing jeans instead of long skirts felt so wonderfully daring” (Interview 20.6.95). Other leavers revelled in being able to enjoy the occasional pint of beer or glass of wine, and in being able to say whatever they like without feeling constrained by the social conventions to which they adhered in the group. Moreover, departure often lessened the internal conflict suffered by the wavering member. As Nigel commented: “I stopped feeling guilty about belonging to something my heart wasn’t in any longer” (Interview 9.7.95).

As is characteristic of those who leave voluntarily from new religious movements (Beckford 1985; Lewis 1989; Wright 1987, 88), the majority were also able to find some good things to say about the movement.35 Thus Nigel, who never thought that Sahaja Yoga was perfect in the first instance and who was selective in his commitment, took a sanguine stance:

I harbour no ill will towards anyone in the organisation. I met some people I didn’t particularly like who had wormed their way into positions of power, I thought ‘These guys are on an ego trip’, but you get them in all walks of life. Even Sri Mataji I’m not upset with. I consider she has given me an awful lot, she has allowed me to discover an awful lot about myself, about life. If you approach it in the right way it opens your heart to an immense degree. It taps the source of love within you, and allows you to share that with other people. (Interview 9.7.95)

He continued:

The truth in Sahaja Yoga is very profound and very strong but there is a lot of garbage. Most of the garbage comes from egocentric leaders in different countries. I don’t say that Sri Mataji isn’t in it for the money, but I don’t think she started off that way. In fact, I’m convinced she didn’t. Sri Mataji has saved people, perhaps from death, drug addicts, alcoholism, people dying of cancer that Sri Mataji has healed. (ibid.)
Leaving Mother

Perhaps more surprisingly, however, an appreciation that Sahaja Yoga is not wholly bad coloured the accounts of the more committed of those who had left. Thus Andrew, despite having been deeply committed for many years and having left due to feelings of disillusionment, also appeared balanced in his evaluation of the movement and its leader:

I feel as though she has a lot to answer for. I think a lot of people’s lives have been totally mucked up. But it’s up to them to tell her that, not for me. On the other hand, I see that she has also done good for people. There are these two sides. Some people have been literally rescued and have been pulled up, sorted out. So you have to put the two things together. My feeling is, she started off with very good intentions and she obviously had a very strong experience and went very deep. And she obviously does believe she is divine, I really think that. She really believes she is the Adi Shakti. Maybe there is the odd occasion when she has doubts in herself, but generally she is not consciously going out and fooling people all the time.

(Interview b.3.5.95)

Those most likely to characterise Sahaja Yoga as almost entirely destructive were those who had internalised Sri Mataji’s warnings of her retributive powers to the greatest extent.

Disassociation

In the next phase of the model, that of disassociation, leavers gain an increasing emotional distance from Sahaja Yoga and limit the extent to which they interpret their actions and their lives according to the group’s philosophy. Sometimes, this distance is created simply by time and separation from the movement. This disassociation, however, is not absolute. That is to say, although this stage signifies, at least partially, the letting go of commitment and the attendant emotions of confusion, fear and anger, this letting go is itself often expressed by familiar means.

185
Dreams, for example, which are seen as meaningful within the movement, often remained significant for those who have left.\textsuperscript{36} Caroline, thus, had a series of dreams of Sri Mataji in which her guru became progressively smaller and smaller and correspondingly less punitive. This decrease in size, felt Caroline, was linked to the decrease in the power she imputed to Sri Mataji. Vibrations, once used to authenticate the truth of Sri Mataji’s claims, were also rarely abandoned by those who had left. Indeed, all of those interviewed still felt vibrations to a greater or lesser degree, and all were still aware of their \textit{kundalini} rising from time to time. To discover that their vibrations were their own, and not at the beck and call of their former guru, was usually construed as comforting and a cause for surprise.\textsuperscript{37} Caroline expressed astonishment that she was able to feel vibrations after her departure from Sahaja Yoga. Equally, when she meditated – using the basic Sahaja Yoga technique but without Sri Mataji’s picture or mantras – she was surprised to discover how ‘clear’ she felt afterwards. Both these experiences, she had assumed, were inextricably tied to membership of the group (Diary 6.6.95).

The difference, then, was not so much whether the individual still felt vibrations, but in the interpretation of their experience, because of their ability to draw on new-found information in their constructions. This sometimes involved a shift from a belief that vibrations can be felt only through the grace of Sri Mataji, that is to say an \textit{exclusive} model, to a belief that vibrations are available to anyone who wishes to have access to them, an \textit{inclusive} model. Such ex-members did not discard the notion that ‘If you can feel it, it must be true’. However, that truth was negotiated differently outside the Sahaja Yoga environment, because of additional resources to hand. Other ex-members, however, would agree with Brian, who commented that “I think you believe in what you want to believe. Sometimes it felt so strong. But I think a lot of it was suggestion” (Diary 8.6.95).

Just as in Sahaja Yoga stories circulate to validate the charisma of Sri Mataji, so stories travelled between the more
disaffected ex-members, validating their decision to leave. These might be accounts of the harrowing experiences of particular members at the hands of Sri Mataji or her leaders, of overhearing her castigating national leaders for not having raised enough money for the construction or maintenance of her properties, of shady financial deals, the neglect of children, or even of links to the Mafia. Other stories, such as the one below, questioned ‘who she really is’, again using the theme of vibrations to emphasise the message:

It is said that in one of the German ashrams the leader, Harry, called the other Sahaja Yogis into the meditation room one day. Harry said that he had two questions written on a piece of paper. The Yogis were to put their attention on the questions [which were hidden from them] and feel the vibrations. Firstly the first question. Nobody felt vibrations. Then the second question. Suddenly, everyone felt really cool vibrations. Then he told them what the questions were. The first was ‘Is Sri Mataji the Adi Shakti?’ The second was ‘Is the Adi Shakti on earth at the moment?’ About half of the – collective left with Harry and his wife. (Interview 13.9.94)38

The ‘downsizing’ of Sri Mataji which was reflected in dreams, the shifting interpretation of vibrations and in the discourse between some ex-members, characterised this stage in the departure process and was sometimes pursued quite consciously. Some members, for example, who made contact with a small group of disaffected ex-members, concerned parents and professionals, started to refer to Sri Mataji as ‘Mrs S’ or ‘Mrs Srivastava’. This use of her married name explicitly reduced her in stature and, correspondingly, decreased the degree to which she was felt to have influence over their lives. Most other leavers, those not in contact with this group, also shied away from their former custom of referring to Sri Mataji as ‘Mother’. Instead, they called her ‘Sri Mataji’ or, more commonly ‘Mataji’, depending on the degree of respect which she was now accorded.
During this phase of departure, those individuals who had lived collectively in Sahaja Yoga, or who had displayed a high degree of commitment whilst members, often articulated feelings of confusion, but for reasons that differed from those elaborated in the first stage. Instead of their confusion centring on the coupling of disenchantment with residual loyalty to Sahaja Yoga, it was more likely to shift to an unease about choosing between rival arguments or lifestyles on offer outside the group. Having lived for years within a single environment in which all others could be either safely accommodated or rejected, having to weigh up competing claims and construct a new identity could be strange and daunting. Caroline, for instance, commented that when she listened to one person voicing an opinion, she agreed with them. However, when she listened to another person voicing a diametrically opposed opinion, she agreed with that person as well (Diary 6.7.95).39 Another area in which confusion and distress occurred was that of relationships between spouses. Often brought together in an arranged marriage, they now faced each other outside the framework defined by Sahaja Yoga. Such confusion, the sense of having unresolved emotional conflicts or the inability to identify new social roles, motivated some to seek counselling or other professional help.40

During this stage, ex-members began to form social contacts with people outside the group and, in some cases, re-established good relationships with their own families. Some spoke of improved health after leaving the group. Those who had regularly contributed money to Sahaja Yoga through standing orders and voluntary donations, or by attending pujas, also spoke of an improvement in their financial position.41

**Reintegration**

In this last phase, the social influences of new acquaintances and networks to which they slowly adjust begin to make ex-members feel more comfortable, both with ‘living outside’ and with themselves. As Rose stated:

188
Leaving Mother

I can be completely who I want to be. If I forget what that is occasionally, then that’s all right, because that’s part of the human process . . . I feel that the world’s not completely perfect and that’s all right and I’m not completely perfect and that’s all right too. (Interview a.3.5.95)

At this point, ex-members found a new direction in their lives, though it was not usually through formal affiliation to another NRM. As has already been noted, Sahaja Yogis do not usually follow ‘conversion careers’. In one sense, this is not readily understandable. Given that many seem attracted by the cognitive cohesion provided by Sahaja Yoga, it is surprising that more do not seek to replace it with another strongly defined structure. The explanation seems to lie in the exclusivist stance of Sahaja Yoga, the distrust of other NRMs encouraged in the group and the feeling of ‘once bitten, twice shy’. Brian observed, characteristically:

I don’t want anything to do with any religion now. Not that I don’t believe in the existence of the spirit, because I do, but I don’t want any religion. I believe in the self, that it’s there and that there is some force. I don’t understand it but I have experienced it. It is just love.

(Interview b.3.5.95)

It may also have something to do with the fact that memories of their lives in Sahaja Yoga, so different from the lifestyle most adopted subsequently, either lost their intensity as time passed or were painful to recall. As one ex-member said of another whom she thought might assist this research:

I spoke to George about you and he said he would send a tape or a letter, but actually I don’t think he will. Since he left Sahaja [Yoga] he wants nothing to do with anything spiritual or unconventional, he has become Mr. Man-In-The-Street. His life has changed completely since leaving Sahaja [Yoga] and I suppose in a way it is all unreal to him.

(Interview 20.6.95)
Nevertheless, less than half of the ex-members interviewed had completely divested themselves of the paraphernalia of Sahaja Yoga, and informal conversations with other leavers confirmed this behaviour. In particular, when asked whether they kept any pictures of Sri Mataji, most said that they did. For Sheila, who had left due to feeling that she was unable to commit herself properly to the life of a Sahaja Yogi, and who had continued to refer respectfully to her former guru as Sri Mataji, the photos were a reminder of something precious:

I have a picture in the sitting room that is still there. I have a big picture that I don’t know what to do with. I cannot quite bring myself to give it away... At the time they were special and even now I still feel they’re special. I’ve not rejected that. Perhaps it sounds contradictory, but I haven’t. I mean, I couldn’t throw a picture of Sri Mataji into a bin.

(Interview 21.7.95)

Rose, however, who had left feeling disillusioned and that her trust in her guru had been misplaced, and who quickly began to use the single term ‘Mataji’, was more typically ambivalent. Thus, for instance, she commented positively at one time that she still had some items from her days in Sahaja Yoga:

Yes, I do still have bits from Sahaja Yoga. In fact, in our bedroom I have a very little picture of Sri Mataji that I dust. It’s the one picture that is actually up, the others I have taken down. The actual photo was one of my most loved photos so it means a lot to me. I would like to give the rest of the stuff we have to a Sahaja Yogi to whom it would mean something, but I haven’t yet.

(Interview a.3.5.95)

On a later occasion, she observed that she had not taken the little picture down because it was “like a jinx”. She feared that if she took it down “something awful will happen to us” (Interview 13.1.96). When reminded of her previous statement, she then said: “Yes, I know, but it’s both”.

190
Leaving Mother

Conclusion

The accounts of ex-members reveal the various ways in which they responded to leaving an environment to which they adhered in different ways and within which they, consequently, received varying degrees of socialization. Overall, in comparison with the experiences of leavers from other NRMs, those of Sahaja Yogis fall towards the more traumatic end of the scale. This is especially so for those ex-members who communicated a high level of fear, both through body language and verbally, when I discussed the possibility of interviewing them and who, with one exception, declined to ‘go on the record’. The explanation for the severity of trauma in some of those who leave Sahaja Yoga is threefold. Firstly, the physical experiences engendered by Sahaja Yoga tend to strengthen the faith of members in psychic phenomena and, therefore, in psychic attack. This fear is, secondly, enhanced by the exclusivist stance of Sahaja Yoga in some countries, according to which those who leave are perceived as vulnerable to harm. Thirdly, the all-powerful status of Sri Mataji means that, unless her status is reduced, she is viewed as entirely capable of carrying out whatever punishment she wishes to inflict.

What seems clear is that departure is deliberated over for some time before the moment of disengagement. Moreover, the stages of departure from Sahaja Yoga are not only similar to those constructed from interviews with ex-members from Exegesis, but also appear to correspond closely with those found in accounts of the departure transitions given by ex-members from other new religions (Skonovd 1983; Beckford 1985b; Wright 1987).

Balch, noting the resemblance between his findings and those of Skonovd, observed: “The striking similarity in our findings suggests that the organisational characteristic of totalism has a much greater impact on the nature of defection than does the content of any particular belief system” (1985, 54). Notwithstanding this observation, I have emphasised in the present study the extent to which departure is coloured by the particular
teachings of a new religion. Just as low profiles are maintained by followers whilst in Sahaja Yoga, so departure is also, as we have seen, usually conducted quietly and with the minimum conflict. A number of group interpretations, such as kundalini, are still attributed to their somatic experiences by leavers. Furthermore, departure can be averted – or delayed – by an intensification of socializing activities such as meditation and other forms of ritual practice. Conversely, it is more likely to occur, as we have seen, when these practices are discontinued or not performed regularly.

Finally, a fact which additionally supports the concept of departure as an extended social transition is that most of those who left, and even those who made ‘a clean break’ in the sense of having no further contact with the movement, retained much from their days in Sahaja Yoga. This was the case even for those who successfully adjusted to another social setting. The evidence for this lies in the photographs of Sri Mataji and the boxes of tapes some retained in the attic; in the vibrations some still felt; in their psychic and dream life and the significance it was given; in the confusion that sometimes coloured their accounts; and in their disinclination to join another NRM. The group socialization and subsequent re-socialization which mark exits from the group and entry into a new social environment can, then, overlap and merge to a significant degree. This should not be surprising. We are all, after all, the sum of our experiences and carry our contradictions and our conditionings with us. Indeed, it is our prior socialization which enables us to make future choices, for it is this on which we rely in order to discriminate between alternative possibilities. Sahaja Yoga offers a strongly defined life experience. It is to be expected that this is never entirely discarded.
CHAPTER NINE

Closing Reflections

At the beginning of this account, I made a number of theoretical points. These related to assumptions about 'agency', and the distinction between the 'self and 'society'; the significance of both the body and authority in social construction; and the nature of social understandings of members of Sahaja Yoga. In this final chapter, I reconsider these themes in the light of what has been said about Sahaja Yoga thus far. Before this reconsideration takes place, however, I propose to refocus on a thread that has run throughout this book, namely that the understandings of members are socially constructed.

My contention has been that 'Sahaja Yogis' experience a radical kind of secondary 'socialization' both in and out of the group, and that their understandings about Sahaja Yoga are, at least to an extent, socially determined. Conversion, which has been seen as a radical re-identification taking place at a deep level, occurs through the learning of a distinctive vocabulary, social interaction and environmental cues. In addition, and to a significant extent, engaging in the ritual practice of the group promotes the member's assemblage of views which appear consistent with those expressed by Sri Mataji. I have also understood the charisma of Sri Mataji as socially generated, this being learned by newcomers over a period of some months. At the time of joining, few members know of her special status in the group, and only gradually do they come to recognise 'who she really is'. That gender is also socially constituted is evidenced in the distinctive reframing of 'what it is to be a
woman’ which is offered to Western women by Sri Mataji. A female newcomer learns the qualities associated with femininity in the group, through the advice of her Divine Mother, the example of established women members, and ritual practice. Leaving the group entails further re-socialization. Leavers, on departure, shift from constructed understandings which are anchored through membership to a reconstruction of their relationship with Sahaja Yoga which, usually, gives much less credence to Sri Mataji’s powers and to her opinions on apostasy. Illustrating the way in which understandings are built up from a range of sources, the experiences of ex-members indicate that many of the cognitive changes which occur as a result of coming into contact with Sahaja Yogis often extend beyond the period of membership, and continue to exert a residual influence.

However, the understandings of Sahaja Yogis, are not homogeneous. Different, albeit overlapping, perspectives about ‘what is going on’ in Sahaja Yoga are apparent. Moreover, the variation between these perspectives is patterned and these patterns can, to an extent, be charted. There is variation, for instance, between the teachings of Sri Mataji and the situation as experienced by members. One example of the discrepancies which exist can be found by juxtaposing Sri Mataji’s pronouncements on the upbringing of children with the behaviour of members. Although Sri Mataji has said that Sahaja Yoga children belong to the collective rather than to the parents, not all parents comply utterly with this injunction. All Sahaja Yoga children are involved in the rituals of the group, but to a greater or lesser extent. Whilst such variations fall within certain parameters of behaviour which are acceptable in Sahaja Yoga, they are still observable.

There is also variation between the understandings of the members themselves. I have cited a number of factors which appear to contribute to this variation. One is the environment in which the member is located, whether this be in a commune, Sahaja Yoga school or family home. Each setting provides a different social context within which different understandings are produced. Some variation is accounted for by age. Adults
and children have different understandings which can be related to such factors as development, whether they convert actively, are born or brought into the movement, and the concomitant differences in their socialization. Authority produces additional variations, as does the previous socialization to which an individual has been exposed.

Although it does not cause conversion, prior socialization predisposes a person to join Sahaja Yoga, or not. If someone has already been socialized into a non-exclusive spiritual framework, for instance, he or she is unlikely to be attracted by the exclusivist message of Sri Mataji. Further, it is the prior socialization as well as the personal circumstances of those who do join, rather than their ability to feel cool breezes, which seems important in determining whether someone will become a member. Once members, prior socialization influences how Sahaja Yoga is understood, as is illustrated by the manner in which Western women modify the ideal image of traditional womanhood propounded by Sri Mataji. Prior socialization is of significance in determining whether and how members leave. Furthermore, the residual influences of socialization experienced by ex-members highlight the fact that previous socialization can have a marked impact after leaving.

I have argued, therefore, that differences in constructed understandings are not established in a haphazard manner. Barker has observed that variations in the views of those outside NRMs looking in – for instance, the media, the law, academics, and members of the anti cult movement – are not random and can be traced by the sociologist to a number of factors: "... many of the disparities are systematically related to such variables as values, ideological or economic interests, subcultural assumptions, previous experiences, position in society and so on" (1993b, 194). I have suggested in this book that the views of members inside NRMs are similarly patterned. This suggestion should not, however, be construed as indicating an entirely deterministic understanding of socialization. I have outlined the roots, as I see them, of the controversy over the extent to which members of NRMs are passive or active, and
Sahaja Yoga

have already indicated my preference for simply acknowledging that we are social individuals.

Having restated the argument that the understandings of Sahaja Yogis are socially constituted and systematically varied, whilst also being dogmatically produced, it is time to revisit the modifications made at the beginning of the book to the model of social construction proposed by Berger and Luckmann. To begin with, it is apparent that members of Sahaja Yoga incorporate aspects of their selves which lie outside their experience of being Sahaja Yogis – such as their past histories – into their accounts of ‘what is going on’ as Sahaja Yogis. Thus, it cannot be said that they have been irresistibly overwhelmed by cultic pressure to conform. Were the socialization they receive to be irresistible and overwhelming, all Sahaja Yogis would hold the same opinions. Demonstrably, they do not. Instead, adult members select the degree to which they participate in the movement and choose the location in which they live. Both adults and children construct, on a pragmatic basis, understandings about Sahaja Yoga which best accord with their own personal and social circumstances. Conversely, the distinctive flavour of their understandings as Sahaja Yogis produces a sense of common ground with other members, and sets them apart from others outside the movement in some important respects. This points to a potent social process of somatic and cognitive re-fashioning in operation. However, it is one that still admits Sahaja Yoga to Berger and Luckmann’s general model of socialization, rather than placing it outside it.

Unlike their model of socialization, the one put forward in this book has emphasised the significant impact authority has on the constructed understandings of members. Authority, much as expected, has been seen to act as a social cement. The authority of a leader can increase social conformity to the ideal construction of reality they articulate. Sri Mataji uses her status as the Goddess to exert pressure on followers to conform to their designated roles. She tells female and male followers how to behave as Sahaja Yogis, and how to bring up their children. She also uses her authority to rectify the behaviour of members
Closing Reflections

when they do not display the qualities she expects of them. This was clearly illustrated by her actions after members failed to greet her at the airport in France.

However, status, whether it is internally or externally generated, also produces disparities in understandings. Due to their positions in the group hierarchy, the perspectives of Sri Mataji and those of the national leaders are distinct from those of the ‘rank and file’. The leaders have far more personal contact with Sri Mataji than ordinary members. They are also privy to additional kinds of information about Sahaja Yoga, such as financial matters. They, therefore, have more, or at least different, resources with which to construct. Due to socio-economic status outside the group, female constructions of Sahaja Yoga also exhibit variation. Certain women in the movement have informal status which enables them to construct their roles somewhat differently both to other women in the group and to the idealised definition of a woman’s role as it is articulated by Sri Mataji. Authority, then, whatever its source, can lead to variations in constructed understandings.

Just as it is impossible to differentiate the social from the individual, so I have also argued that it is equally impossible to differentiate the social from the individual body, or to establish ‘which came first’. What is clear, however, is that contemporary understandings of the significance of the body in socialization require reappraisal. The way in which the body is re-socialized in order to effect the social re-alignment necessary for membership in Sahaja Yoga has been highlighted a number of times. Re-socialization begins with significance being attributed to an experience of cool breezes. This physical experience is given a cognitive interpretation consistent with the teachings of Sri Mataji. Having learnt what to feel for, and how to interpret the feeling, the newcomer then refines this information through further practice until it is embedded and becomes a ‘given’.

For those who are recruited, the physical domain is reconstructed gradually through ritual until experiences and understandings consonant with being a Sahaja Yogi are in place. The hierarchical ordering of the chakras in the new body reflects
Sahaja Yoga

the social hierarchy of the organisation. Thus, Sri Mataji's association with the topmost chakra underscores her pre-eminence in the religious cosmology, once the initial notion of chakras is accepted. Similarly, the endorsement of the left and right sides of the body as passive and active has far-reaching implications in the social domain, especially in terms of gender roles. This reconstructed image of the body is then sustained through the largely pleasurable effects of meditation. The potency of such socialization is perhaps most apparent when members leave the group, yet still carry the residual effects with them with their continued interpretation of sensations as kundalini rising, and as 'vibrations'.

Reprise

This book has constituted a detailed investigation of the socialization of members of Sahaja Yoga, and of the ways in which they engage, on a pragmatic basis and in conjunction with others, in the building of constructed understandings. The findings of the book appear to merit a reassessment of the role of the body, and of the significance of status and authority in the social construction of reality. I have also argued for the notion that socially constructed understandings are contextually situated and patterned. They are, moreover, partial; they are views of the world produced through social engagement, and are not necessarily evidence of any unified stable world that we carry within ourselves.

The account I have put together here of Sahaja Yoga is equally incomplete. It should be viewed as a series of impressions, organized during the period of 1993–1996, rather than as an exhaustive presentation of all the facets of this new religion. However, the account has been based on consistencies I observed in my interactions with members and ex-members during this time. My hope is that these impressions will be recognisable to all Sahaja Yogis.

Jai Devi!
Much has been made, during the course of this book, of the idea that understandings of ‘what is going on’ are not constructed in a vacuum, but instead are partial accounts, produced through social interaction. Since this book is also a partial account which has been put together in the same way, I set out the issues involved in the production of the material for the project here, beginning with the choice of research methods used. I follow this with a description of the research relationship which was established with Sahaja Yogis, and some of the difficulties encountered during the project. It is offered up in “... explicit recognition of the fact that the social researcher, and the research act itself, are part and parcel of the social world under investigation” (Hammersley and Atkinson 1983, 234).

A case study approach

The project took the form of a focused single case study, rather than being an unstructured exploration process. The initial impetus for the research came from the question which immediately occurred to me on first hearing about the group, which was “How is it that people feel cool breezes?”. This was reformulated soon afterwards into the more directed question of “What is the process or processes whereby members of Sahaja Yoga adopt radically different understandings from ‘society at large’, and how are these maintained?”. Thus redefined, this question remained central to the research which followed.
Consequently, from the outset it was directed towards a particular end.

Bryan Wilson has described participant observation as: “perhaps the core method of enquiry into sects and the key to understanding them” (1990, 40), and the method was chosen as the major research tool in this project for a number of reasons. Firstly, it was clear from the outset that Sahaja Yogis would not readily divulge their beliefs to others. For example, during my initial meeting with Jane, the first of my informants, she mentioned Sri Mataji as the person who had started the form of meditation used by the group, although the information which I was able to obtain elsewhere made it clear that Sri Mataji was perceived in a much more significant way by members. This reluctance to “tell all” from the start made participant observation an obvious choice, since it provides the best opportunity to inform the ‘public image’ of a group more fully. Secondly, it was also apparent from the beginning that I was having problems negotiating access and that this would prevent more structured methods, such as formal interviews and questionnaires, being used.

More positively, because Sahaja Yoga has a radically different world view from that of ‘mainstream’ Britain, it was important to become accustomed to members’ understandings as much as possible, so that my questions would be relevant to the people concerned. Moreover, to increase the group’s familiarity with me and the research, it was hoped that the fact that I was prepared to participate would make them feel more at ease and increase their trust. Most significantly, participant observation exposed me to the socializing processes that were central to the study, far more effectively than any other research tool.

This participant observation took place from April 1992 to July 1994. Table 2, below, provides a statistical overview of structured interaction, which provided data on Sahaja Yoga at local, national and international levels. In addition, many informal meetings took place with members of the group.
Table 2: Participant Observation with Sahaja Yoga

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of structured interaction</th>
<th>Numbers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Local</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>adult members contacted</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>informal meditations</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>public meetings</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>events at which Sri Mataji was present</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>group marriages</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pujas</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>other rituals</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The participant observation was organised along the lines described by Barker (1987, 144), in that it was clearly delineated into three stages: the passive, the interactive and the active. The first stage noted by Barker involves a process of familiarisation with the beliefs and practices of the group. During this stage, I followed the course of any new entrant. I sat in kitchens and chatted over cups of tea, I meditated informally with members, went to public meetings and also attended more public occasions, such as three of Sri Mataji’s annual visits to the Royal Albert Hall. I rarely asked questions, except for clarification of particular points; instead I let the unfamiliar wash over me until, little by little, it became a natural part of my life. In my ‘ordinary’ life, I also consciously avoided listening to or reading anything which was negative about the group, so that my ability to form natural and sincere positive relationships with members would not be undermined.

In the second, or interactive, stage of the fieldwork, the researcher learns to ‘pass’ as a member and indeed, may well be mistaken for one by members not already familiar with their role. The interactive stage is reached when there is an
understanding of key aspects of cosmology and practice. In Sahaja Yoga, at least, this involved more than simply being able to use the language of the group. As we have seen, such understanding is often experientially-based, and has to be inferred because it is rarely explicitly stated by members. Indeed, it is often the ability of newcomers to make such inferences which influences whether or not they move into a more committed phase of their association.

In addition to maintaining relationships with local followers and especially with key informants, in this stage of the proceedings I began to attend national pujas, travelling to them with Sahaja Yogis from my local group, as well as other public meetings held by Sahaja Yogis. With the blessing of the British leaders, I accompanied a contingent of forty British followers to an international puja held over a long weekend in a Moscow stadium. I also began to meet regularly with Rachel, the wife of the British leader. The questions I was asking were less and less of the ‘Why do you do such and such?’ variety. Instead, they focused on information about members and issues within the group, and interactions often took the form of informal, unstructured interviews. How, for instance, had members been attracted to the group? What did the Sahaja Yogis think were the origins of the rituals they practised? I was able to enquire further if I was unsatisfied by a particular answer, rather than simply appear content with what I had been told, as before. Moreover, the followers were clearly becoming accustomed to me, and were chatting to me in a much more relaxed and open fashion.

I used these sessions to supplement other information gleaned from participant observation. For example, I witnessed only one group marriage ceremony, involving over eighty couples in Moscow. However, I was able to listen to and discuss the reasons given by Western women as to why they were prepared to enter into arranged marriages, especially having known their allotted partners for only forty-eight hours. In this way, I gained some insight into what it was like for those not chosen to be married after putting their names forward. Further, some who
were actually living in arranged marriages were willing to talk, sometimes very frankly, about the joys and pitfalls of the experience.

In the third, active stage, according to Barker, the researcher tests the scope and limitations of a movement by "questioning the unquestionable" (ibid., 146). This I was reluctant to do, partly because I felt insecure about my status and felt the door could be closed at any time. I also felt sad at the probable end of some of the relationships I had formed over the period of research with members. Nevertheless, I began to ask more controversial questions of both leadership and followers. Why, for instance, was one ex-member whom I had met terrified by the thought that Sri Mataji might use her powers to make his car crash as a punishment for leaving the group? Why did some members withhold information about their involvement from their families? How did they feel about being labelled as a cult in the press? How did the information I was given by the leaders square with different information I was given by other Sahaja Yogis?

I also sent a copy of a chapter on Sahaja Yoga children, which I had been asked to contribute to a book on children in NRMs, to the British leadership for their views. This chapter, which included some criticisms which had been made of Sahaja Yoga schooling, evoked no official reply from the male leaders; Rachel sent me a photocopied refutation of the first five pages of the manuscript. Perhaps the most informative response came from a local follower, Julia, who was kind enough to read my prose from beginning to end and who finished her list of observations and objections with the comment, "You have to understand that we believe you are criticising God, Jude, and we are shocked and concerned for you" (Diary 24.1.96).

**Recording data**

After each episode with Sahaja Yogis, unable to use a tape recorder openly and unwilling to do so covertly, I entered as much as I could remember in my fieldwork diary as soon as
possible. Along the lines suggested by Lofland and Lofland (1984), the diary included descriptions of events, any material which was forgotten and recalled later, interpretative ideas about the material and reminders to look for additional information on key issues. It also included notes to myself to cross-check particular pieces of information with other sources. As in the preceding paragraph, some excerpts from the diary have been included in this text. When reading such excerpts, the reader should remember that these entries constitute my version of events, rather than verbatim reports based on mechanical recording.

These authors also suggest that such a diary should include personal feelings and impressions. However, following Agar (1980), I put this material in a shorter ‘personal influences’ diary. As he advised, this diary focused: “more on the reactions of the ethnographer to the field setting and the informants, the general sense of how the research is going, feelings of detachment and involvement and so on” (Agar 1980, 113). The usefulness of such a diary, Agar reasoned, is that it brings the ethnographer’s role more explicitly into the research process, so enhancing reflexivity. For instance, I was particularly careful to note in it any critical observations made to me about Sahaja Yoga by outsiders. Example entries describe my alternative healer’s aversion to Sri Mataji, the hostile views of a colleague about Rachel, and my increasing attraction to the teachings of another female guru, which I construed to be an emotional and spiritual counterweight to my study of Sri Mataji. These notes enabled me to be as aware as possible of the influence such events had on my perception of the group.

**Other sources**

I used a variety of documentation to deepen my understanding of Sahaja Yoga and, in particular, to check the accuracy of my sources. Books about Sahaja Yoga have not so far been available in book shops in the same way as is literature on, for example, ISKCON, Rajneeshism or Mother Meera. Instead,
books on Sahaja Yoga are either lent by Sahaja Yogis to each other or they are on sale at international functions. Through such channels, I was able to read the small number of books about Sahaja Yoga which most followers would also read.

Additionally, I used material from internal newsletters, letters and circulars. I engaged in written correspondence with three followers from abroad. I listened to tapes of talks given by Sri Mataji and watched videos of *pujas* and television interviews. I was also given copies of two internal address and telephone lists of British members, dated 1987 and 1993, which proved invaluable as the leadership would not give me data on numbers of followers and children. Using the lists, to Rachel’s horror, I was able to produce basic statistics about British members, such as numbers of adults and children, and changes to these figures over time. However, these lists were probably not complete and the extracted statistics should be viewed as suggestive rather than entirely accurate.

As well as primary documentation, I gained access to a variety of secondary literature about Sahaja Yoga. These included legal documents relating to child custody cases, books by ex-members and academics, cult-watching information and media reports. The rest of the secondary literature included in the study was used to contextualise the data being assembled. Firstly, academic literature and information on a variety of other NRM’s and healing traditions were utilised for the purposes of comparison. Secondly, a review was made of theoretical literature on pertinent themes, such as socialization, the social construction of reality, charisma, ritual and gender. Thirdly, to locate Sahaja Yoga in a Hindu setting, I familiarized myself with literature relating to that tradition. Lastly, and more specifically, I also read a number of Hindu scriptures recommended to me by Sahaja Yogis which are understood by group members to legitimise the status of Sri Mataji.

By midway through the second stage, I felt confident enough about my relationships with Sahaja Yogis to be able to meet with other interested outsiders, such as grandparents who were concerned about the group and willing to talk. I also talked with
others who were not hostile, to obtain a range of views of the movement, and conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with twelve ex-members. All those interviewed were promised anonymity. Names and other features which might identify people have, therefore, been changed throughout the text, in order to protect informants and respect their privacy.13

The research relationship

I began my investigation of Sahaja Yoga with relatively few preconceptions, and unaware of the view of outsiders held by most members. Having had previous experience of researching a new religion (Thompson and Heelas, 1986), however, I decided from the outset to be explicit about my research intentions and practices. This decision was strengthened by the fact that leaders of Sahaja Yoga in Britain had previously expressed a strong desire for a ‘proper’ study of Sahaja Yoga to my research supervisor.

Accordingly, I presented myself as a serious, open-minded researcher; one who sought to participate in the ritual life of the movement in order to develop a rich understanding. So as not to be seen as a novice, in case this increased any apprehension felt by members about such research, I also referred to the fact that I had already conducted similar research on another NRM, the Neo-Sannyas movement of Osho Rajneesh, and that I had a broad knowledge of many new religions.

With hindsight, this was a problematic approach to take. Since Sahaja Yoga is seen as unique by its members, my knowledge of other groups was deemed, at best, irrelevant. Sri Mataji has stated on many occasions that fake gurus abound in this day and age, ready to trap the unwary and lead them to hell. Furthermore, Rajneesh was a guru who had been specifically denounced by Sri Mataji as one of the most dangerous and demonic frauds. My association with him, therefore, even as an independent researcher, was unwelcome news. In short, my knowledge of other groups was seen as a hindrance rather than as a benefit, in that it was probable that I
had been contaminated by such contact. Leaving the exclusivist mentality of most Sahaja Yogis out of the research equation through ignorance, therefore, had a result which was markedly at odds with my aims. This unfortunate start was largely offset, however, by my expressed desire to be involved at an experiential level during the research. Such a stance is not without its dangers. However, it is unlikely that I would have been granted access to this particular group without it. Nor would I have had the opportunity of meeting the wide range of members which I did, one of the main ways in which Sahaja Yogis interact in larger groups being through communal ritual.

Despite my explicit presentation of myself as an academic researcher, I was primarily identified by members as a spiritual ‘seeker’. However, the ways in which I was seen by followers varied on the basis of how well they knew me, and their position in the hierarchy. Ordinary members who knew me well tended to describe me favourably, at least to my face. To most of them, I was ‘open-hearted’ and ‘unbiased’ in my approach. Moreover, highly significantly for them, my ‘vibrations’ were good. To at least some others who knew me less well, I was seen as threatening, both because of my contact with Rajneesh and because I was a sociologist. The latter identity meant that I was overly intellectual, to the detriment of my spiritual acumen, and would never properly understand the movement. For the leaders in Britain, I understandably appeared to represent a ‘double-edged sword’. If I were to write a glowing analysis of Sahaja Yoga, this would obviously be a positive step. If, on the other hand, I were to write a report that was less than glowing, in any way whatsoever, I was a threat.

These perceptions of me, of course, defined the ways in which group members interacted with me during the study. Before giving an account of this period, however, it is important to note that I never met Sri Mataji. The effects of this were considerable. Whilst it is not necessarily vital to meet its leader for an understanding of any movement, such a meeting is generally insightful in terms of comprehending the attraction
they hold for members and the type of power they command. Further, just as the backing of a leader can open many doors for a researcher, so the lack of support can close them. However, I was able to observe her on four occasions, for periods lasting from several hours to most of a long weekend. The amount of contact that I had was, in fact, probably no less in this respect than the majority of her followers.

**Negotiating access**

As intimated earlier, my initial contact with Sahaja Yoga was with local devotees. Even so, after our first meeting, Jane telephoned Rachel, to confirm my credentials and alert her to my interest in the group. Rachel's early response was encouraging: "She is the answer to my prayers", she was reported as exclaiming (Diary, 27.1.93). However, my meeting with her and her husband did not take place until six months later in October 1992, despite repeated assurances from Jane of their interest. Finally, I was invited, with Jane, to the lovely Cotswold residence of some highly regarded Sahaja Yogis to meet both Rachel and Gordon, the British leader, over a Sunday lunch. Those present sat in a group while I outlined my proposed study. Extracts from my diary give a flavour of the discussion which followed:

Gordon asked exactly what the study entailed. If I was to study an orange, for instance, would I be content to write about where the orange had come from and who had picked it, or would I want to taste the orange? I said both.

One reservation they had was that if I was going to interview people who were 'negative' I would get an unbalanced picture. Another was over [my supervisor], whom they distrusted. Jane spoke up for me and said that ... my vibrations were very clear, so she thought it would be fine for me to do the study.

Who would read the study? I said I didn't know whether it would be published or not, or who would read it, but I
believed impartial information about Sahaja Yoga could only be of benefit to the group.

We left it on the note that Gordon would decide very shortly whether the study was possible or not. He suggested his preferred option was for me to study something else and to join Sahaja Yoga, but I told him (in the nicest possible way, I hope!) that it wasn’t mine.

(Diary, 11.10.92.)

In fact, however, the decision of whether or not I would be officially allowed to do a study of Sahaja Yoga was repeatedly postponed by the British leadership over the next two years, despite the study unofficially taking place during the period outlined. As far as it is possible to ascertain through our conversations, the stumbling block was Sri Mataji herself. As early as June 1992, I had introduced myself to Sri Mataji by letter, asking for permission to conduct a scholarly study of the movement. Then, in November, a request came through for a photograph of me which could be given to Sri Mataji so that she could ‘feel’ the state of my vibrations. This was duly sent. Later that month, Jane told me she had some important news:

She told me that Gordon had not shown [Sri Mataji] my picture, but he had told her about me and Sri Mataji thought that this was auspicious. She said that she would like to meet me, in January ... in India.

(Diary, 25.11.92.)

Jane’s excitement at this prospect, however, was not shared by me. My misgivings were twofold. Firstly, I was concerned that if I met her too soon, and if Sri Mataji did not like me, she would be able to stop the study before it had really begun. Secondly, I was sensitive to criticisms made of researchers who had close contact with the groups they were studying.\(^\text{18}\) I did not want to have to defend myself from charges of having been brainwashed during a highly experiential series of encounters with Sri Mataji in a confined space, once my research was made available to a wider audience.\(^\text{19}\) After considerable discussion with my supervisor, I
Sahaja Yoga
demurred politely, saying that, although a January meeting was impossible, I looked forward to one later on. It never, however, materialised.

Bryan Wilson has observed that “Clearly, if adherents are adamant that the movement’s self-claims are the absolute truth and beyond compromise, even for the benefit of a public which is uninstructed in it, the sociologist of religion will find himself in a position of unsurmountable difficulty.” (Wilson 1982, 19). Although negotiating access with members of Sahaja Yoga did not finally prove impossible, his words appeared prophetic when I received a telephone call from Gordon in June 1994. The following extracts are taken from my diary, and were written immediately after the conversation had taken place:

He said that he had talked to Mother [Sri Mataji] and she was not keen on an academic study. One reason was that I would talk critically about Sahaja Yoga, or even give facts which Mother would not want broadcast. Let me give you some examples, he said... Mother’s words are like mantras. She says what she desires and so brings it into being.

... She talks about a situation she wants to bring about and if you say differently you will be adding negativity to a situation.

I asked, do you mean that Mother says what she does as a form of positive affirmation? He said that it was.

(Diary, 3.6.94)

Sahaja Yoga, he seemed to be saying, must not be portrayed as ‘less than perfect’. As a sociologist, interested in building up as full an understanding of as many views on the movement as possible, I would inevitably come into conflict with that position. An academic stance was a negative one in Sri Mataji’s eyes, since it would not necessarily privilege her account over those of others. Gordon continued:

Mother has said that the people who write negative things about Sahaja Yoga have bad things happen to them. But
she would not want bad things to happen to you, he said. She feels protective towards you. I thanked him for her concern. (ibid.)

Notwithstanding Sri Mataji’s misgivings, however, a coherent sense of resistance to a study was actually lacking. The British leaders appeared to find themselves torn between their own enthusiasm for an academic study, and Sri Mataji’s reluctance for it to take place.

The dilemma faced by the British leaders was thrown into relief in the final stages of the fieldwork, in 1994, when negotiations were still taking place over whether it was possible for me to conduct a series of unstructured interviews with British members. Gordon and Rachel professed themselves to be interested in the idea of such interviews. However, they were still unable to persuade Sri Mataji. It was then suggested that if my research supervisor would be willing to apologise to Sri Mataji for a perceived criticism, my own work might well be received more favourably. Since my supervisor felt, however, that she had nothing to apologise for, this was not forthcoming.

Even so, throughout the period from 1992-4, the British leaders were both warm and hospitable towards me. They invited me to their house on numerous occasions, introduced me to other Sahaja Yogis, answered my questions and allowed me to observe and participate in the rituals of the movement. Unofficially, then, the study took place with the knowledge of both ‘ordinary’ followers, and the British leadership. Explicitly, this was in the hope that official permission would be forthcoming at a later stage. Gordon, in particular, seemed to continue in his hope that contact with followers, coupled with my ability to feel vibrations, would lead to my conversion. In the meantime, both he and his wife naturally sought to present as positive an image of Sahaja Yoga as they could. This was perhaps because they misunderstood my aim of including as many perspectives as possible, seeing instead my work as a quest to find the ‘right’ voice. Thus, in the later stages of research, when I challenged the image of the group which I was being
given by Rachel, she told me that some members of Sahaja Yoga had what she termed ‘a cultic mentality’. Because of this mentality, such people had been attracted to Sahaja Yoga. However, she emphasised, their behaviour was not ‘what Sahaja Yoga is really about’ and, therefore, that she did not want me to write about them (Diary, 10.5.95).

In fact, although full access was never officially achieved during the period of research, I was given ample opportunity to conduct participant observation. Moreover, the problems I encountered during the process of attempting to negotiate ‘the research bargain’ (Hammersley and Atkinson 1983) told me much that was relevant about the boundaries of Sahaja Yoga. Equally, it provided illuminating information about the distribution and wielding of power within the group, and about some of the ways in which the understandings of the leadership were structured and maintained.

Research difficulties

Only one of the problems which arose during the study has been so far mentioned. This was the difficulty which was met in gaining and maintaining access to the movement, given both my request that I be allowed to engage in an impartial study of the movement as a sociologist rather than an insider, and my previous research connections with members of Rajneesh’s organisation. To a limited extent, this curtailed the scope of the study. I was never, for instance, able to go to the airport with Sahaja Yogis in order to welcome or say farewell to Sri Mataji as is customary on her arrival or departure in Britain. However, the access I was given, when coupled with information from other sources, gave me more than sufficient opportunity to study the group in detail.

Yet a variety of other problematical issues emerged during the course of the study, the most worrying being the feeling of emotional and even ‘psychic’ vulnerability which I developed in relation to the experiential aspects of Sahaja Yoga practice. To be accepted, I felt that I had to physically ‘open myself up’ to
feeling cool breezes and to adopting a view of life in which my vibrations could be read by others, including Sri Mataji. This I found intrusive and threatening to my sense of personal boundaries. Indeed, so disturbed was I by it at one point that, in the grip of a paranoia which I now find hard to fully recall, I took to wearing a locket as a protective amulet and, in moments of unease, to visualising myself being surrounded by a golden light.22

A method which was used to provide some distance and re-establish personal boundaries was to emphasise my role as a social scientist conducting a study whenever it was suggested by Sahaja Yogis that I was really a fellow devotee, or whenever I felt that the boundaries were becoming blurred. Further, immediately after a strong experience, whether positive or negative, I would make my diary entries and conscientiously telephone or make contact with a friend or colleague with an entirely different world view to that of Sahaja Yoga to enable me to relinquish the role of participant and to re-adopt the scholarly perspective I had chosen.23

Not all of the problems which occurred, however, resulted from difficulties in internal boundary maintenance. Two others related to the distinctive gender roles in the movement, and the ways in which these influenced and delineated the behaviour of both women and men. One was that the women in Sahaja Yoga have a strong supportive network and it is customary when a new woman enters the movement that she is given gifts by the other women, to ensure that she has the right accoutrements. Thus, I was given a beautiful sari, pictures of the guru, bracelets and even a wedding dress.24 This raised the question of whether to accept such gifts, or whether these would be construed by others as attempts to influence me, and be used to invalidate the study. They were, however, gratefully accepted without too much debate.

The second was that the tendency for the women to mingle with the women and the men with the men meant that whilst it was easy and natural for me to be drawn into conversations and confidences with the former, it was difficult to have
the same level of contact with the men. This proved impossible to surmount for, although I was able to establish some good ‘sisterly’ relationships with some of the men, I was never able to collect sufficient information to complement that obtained on the women. As a result, although the images of manhood and the behaviour of the men in Sahaja Yoga are outlined in the book, especially in the chapter relating to the social construction of gender, the main focus of this chapter became the women’s constructions of their role within the group.

A further problem which constrained the production of material was the reactions of some ex-members to my requests for interviews. It has been my experience in contact with ex-members of other movements that such interviews usually have positive consequences for the interviewee, not least because they have often felt unable to talk to family or friends about their experiences. Thus, they have welcomed the opportunity to talk to a non-judgmental listener. However, although I succeeded in interviewing enough ex-Sahaja Yogis to build up a picture of a range of views held by departees relevant to the research agenda, I was able to convince only four who felt particularly aggrieved to meet me. Furthermore, despite assurances of anonymity and confidentiality, only one of these agreed to ‘go on the record’. Others belonging to this category were too fearful of reprisals, or felt the experience would be too painful, to agree to give their assistance to the project. These reactions were data in themselves, but it did mean that the experiences of these former members remain untold.

Finally, throughout the study I faced the challenge of getting Sahaja Yogis to let me get behind the public facade. This was achieved with varying degrees of success. On one fortunate occasion, for instance, I attended a national puja, after which there was an extremely frank and revealing discussion of why Sahaja Yoga had been seen as a cult in a particular press article and of the level of secrecy in the group. There I listened to a number of speakers talk about the ways in which they disguised some of their beliefs when in contact with non-members.
At other times, Sahaja Yogis who knew me well and who wanted the movement to move towards a more open stance were also informative. Further, on at least one occasion I was given critical information by a member to whom I was not particularly close and who had no intention of leaving Sahaja Yoga but who clearly felt that I might be able to influence the group to modify its behaviour as a result. On the other hand, others were far less forthcoming, perhaps mainly because Sahaja Yogis are accustomed to adopting a low profile in their contacts with uncommitted individuals. Moreover, some subjects, such as the Sahaja Yoga schools and group finances were generally, although not entirely, ‘off limits’.

It must be stressed that such problems as were encountered should be seen alongside the often positive relationships with Sahaja Yogis which I had during the study; and I usually thoroughly enjoyed participating in the rituals of the movement. Furthermore, as is common during participant observation, some anticipated difficulties never materialised. For instance, when I attended the Moscow puja in November 1993 I was anxious that I would not be able to take notes without arousing suspicion and expected to have to make repeated trips to the toilet for this purpose. When we arrived, however, it was to find that the toilets were indescribably filthy and evil-smelling and that queuing for them for could last for over an hour at a time. However, with over five thousand attending the weekend, the multitude provided anonymity and no-one once commented on the writing of fieldwork notes. Moreover, the queues provided perfect opportunities to chat to followers from around the world, who were only too keen to offer information about themselves and the movement in their country.

**Conclusion**

One of my friends, a member of a contemporary religious movement I have not [yet?] studied, asked me recently, and with some heat, how I would like it were I to be researched in my
home setting. "I would hate it" I replied, "I would feel as if my maternal and home-making skills were being judged ... but perhaps other people could then understand me better, and the researcher could also tell me things about myself that I'm not aware of, which could be useful?"

"You are just trying to defend your colleagues and your profession" was his rejoinder.

To an extent, I am in agreement with his analysis, but I should like to add to it. As I have made clear, I see all accounts of NRMs, whether given by members, scholars, the media or others, as being selective and partisan; and, if I have caused offence to anyone with the representation I have produced here of Sahaja Yoga, this is to my regret. My scholarly interest in new religions is motivated partly by a conviction that something useful can come from being able to convey, however inadequately, the rationales of those considered by many to be eccentric and unworthy of serious consideration. Partly, too, it is born of a conviction that studying the social construction of understandings within the rarefied setting of an NRM can illuminate such processes in a wider setting. For me, such considerations, when coupled with the fact that I am always honest about my research interests and try to be scrupulous in my methods, justify my endeavours. I can only reiterate that since any understanding is always partial it will never please everybody. I would not, moreover, ever insist that this account should be privileged above those of Sri Mataji, members, ex-members and other interested parties, merely on the basis that it is scholarly. However, I can see no reason why it should not be placed alongside them, and I hope it will prove of interest to many.

With hindsight, as with all projects, it is possible to envisage ways in which the design and implementation of the study might have been improved. For instance, had the invitation to visit Sri Mataji been taken up, or had I not mentioned my research on the Neo-Sannyas movement of Rajneesh, this appendix might have read very differently. Nevertheless, what was achieved, I hope, was more than sufficient for an examination of socialization in the context of Sahaja Yoga.
NOTES

Introduction

1. All names and details of individuals connected with Sahaja Yoga have been changed throughout in order to respect the confidentiality and privacy of those involved. The only exceptions are the name of the guru and the movement.
2. This is not to suggest that NRMs are replicas of larger societies. However, they come close enough to provide useful data.
3. The research methods used are detailed in the Appendix.

Chapter One: Sahaja Yoga and Social Construction

1. For a detailed description of such an initiation, see Chapter Three.
2. This is most characteristically the view propounded by the anticult movement. For example, in What Is A Cult? A 10 Point Guide, a 'consultant psychiatrist' advised that its features include “(4) A set of rules which have to be rigidly adhered to (6) Rigid obedience enforced with punitive action (7) The use of strong peer pressure to achieve conformity” (FAIR News 1994, 5).
3. Hassan, for instance, contended that “hypnotic processes are combined with group dynamics to create a potent indoctrination” (1990, 56 italics in original).
4. However, as Robbins (1988, 79) has observed, even those sociologists, the majority, who reject this model have found the need to answer its challenge and have directed their efforts towards this end. Thus, the brainwashing debate has dominated the academic study of entry and subsequent commitment to new religions (see, for instance, Bromley and Shupe 1981; Richardson and Bromley 1983; Barker 1984). The brainwashing model has,
therefore, been extensively critiqued on a variety of grounds. These are usefully summarised by Richardson (1993).

5. The split between those who lean towards activity and those who see passivity in members of NRMs is often a disciplinary one. With some exceptions on both sides, psychologists most usually rely on clinical material from disaffected members to claim passivity, whereas anthropologists and sociologists, with more access to current members' accounts, affirm a more active model (Saliba 1995).

6. Classic texts on value transmission include Etzioni (1961), Bernstein (1975) and Bourdieu and Passeron (1977). However, the concept is pervasive throughout the literature.

7. As Derne (1994, 267) has commented, few sociologists would now agree with the Weberian-Parsonian model which portrayed culture as influencing actions through the transmission of values.

8. Watching others and imitating them has long been thought to form a significant aspect of socialization (see, for instance, Bandura 1977). Indeed, given that “we are all imitators”, as James Pratt pointed out in his early investigation into the acquisition of a religious tradition, “… it is only a question of whom we shall imitate” (in Wulff 1991, 134).

9. Examining processes of social construction relating to NRMs is not an entirely new undertaking. In the past few years, a number of authors have paid some measure of attention to the social construction of features of these movements (see, for instance Wallis 1976, 1982; Balch 1985: Neitz 1987; Barker 1993; McGuire 1993).

10. Berger and Luckmann defined socialization as “the comprehensive and consistent induction of an individual into the objective world of a society or a sector of it” (1966, 150).

11. It should be noted that they shared their assumptions about the importance of language to socialization with the vast majority of scholars. Language has been viewed generally as Wallis saw it in his account of Scientology: “… the basic building material for the construction and repair of social reality” (Wallis 1976, 231). See also Whorf (1956) for a classic account of the role of language in reality creation.

12. However, studies of physical religious experiences have so far, largely, been confined to the phenomenon of glossalalia (Goodman 1972; Bourgignon 1973; Neitz 1987) and healing (McGuire 1989).

13. Although many have made the attempt. Some scholars, who see the body as the originator of schemes which are then taken into
the social domain would agree that: “The centrality of human embodiment directly influences what and how things can be meaningful for us, the ways in which these meanings can be developed and articulated, the ways we are able to comprehend and reason about our experience, and the actions we take” (Johnson 1987, xix). Others see the social as coming first. Thus, Polhemus (1978, 21) suggested: “the human body ... is not understandable apart from the social construction of reality”.

14. As Weber pointed out: “The tendency towards secrecy in certain administrative fields follows their material nature: everywhere that the power interests of the domination structure towards the outside are at stake ... we find secrecy” (in Gerth and Mills 1981, 233).

15. Such was the position adopted by Wittgenstein in his early work Tractatus. However, he later refuted the notion that words stand for things (Wittgenstein 1968).

Chapter Two: Introducing Sahaja Yoga

1. However, her sister has commented that as children they were taught to revere all religions and that Christian hymns were not preferred over other types of religious songs (Sahaja Yoga 1985a, 38).

2. Such miracle stories are very commonly associated with spiritual figures in India. For instance, the mother of another female guru, The Holy Mother Amritandamayi, is said to have had unusual dreams involving Hindu divinities just prior to giving birth to her, and the birth itself was entirely painless (S. Amritaswarupananda 1994, 4).

3. One of her sisters has recalled: “Our mother had to take all of us in the car whenever she and father had to attend the meetings of the then Congress and I remember that [Nirmala] held similar meetings at home for us and, imitating the leaders, she delivered speeches from the ‘home stage’” (Sahaja Yoga 1985a, 36).

4. Rajneesh (1931–1990) was one of the most radical and unconventional Indian gurus of his generation. Preaching a volatile concoction of Eastern spirituality and Western philosophy, he attracted a large Western following. Rajneesh moved to the United States in July 1981. By 1985, his ashram in Oregon was riven by allegations of poisonings and of fraudulent activities undertaken by leading members. He returned to India where he died, claiming to have been fatally poisoned by the US authorities (see Mullan 1983; Thompson and Heelas 1986; Brecher 1993).
Sahaja Yoga

5. The extent of her vitriol can be gauged in a series of extraordinary allegations she made against a guru, who is described as a having a sex theory, being diabetic and appearing older than his years, as was Rajneesh. These are reproduced in Pullar (1984, 236–238).

6. Muktananda (1908–1982) taught ‘Siddha Yoga’. This is a path which is “based upon shaktipat initiation, or the awakening of the spiritual energy (kundalini) through the grace of the guru. The practice of the yoga includes meditation, chanting, service and devotion to the guru” (Melton 1993, 1526).

7. Interestingly, it was also during this period that Rajneesh spoke at length on kundalini, the Indian spiritual energy at the heart of Sri Mataji’s system (Rajneesh 1993 refers to teachings about kundalini given at Nargol). He also, according to early followers, bestowed secret teachings on selected followers at this time. However, the extent of and motivation for Nirmala’s involvement with Rajneesh is impossible to establish objectively. She, herself, though, confirmed her contact with Muktananda in an interview published in Hinduism Today (October 1990 Vol 12. Number 10, 7).

8. Ironically, Sri Mataji can be seen smiling beatifically during a 1968 meditation camp held at Nargol by Rajneesh in a video The Rising Moon (1992) which was compiled selectively from early recordings by his followers.

9. To say that they are the Shakti is an unusual claim for Indian gurus to make, although another person who has done so is Sathya Sai Baba, who declared in 1963 that he was both Shiva and Shakti (Fuller 1992, 179).

10. The association between the Adi Shakti and the all-powerful Devi is made explicit in these lines from the Hindu scripture, the Devi Mahatmā: “By you this universe is borne, by you this world has been created. By you it is protected and you, O Devi, shall consume it at the end... You are the shakti, the power of all things” (quoted in Klostermaier 1994, 278).

11. As Babb (1987, 178) has noted in relation to the miracles of Sathya Sai Baba, stories of miracles are crucial and central to Sri Mataji’s authority and are discussed in detail in Chapter Five which examines her charismatic status.

12. That more Sahaja Yogis came from TM than from other NRMNs is not so much to do with any similarity between the movements, although both spring from Indian soil, as to do with the fact that a few key defectors from TM who joined Sahaja Yoga took others with them.

13. Although Sri Mataji has stressed repeatedly that Sahaja Yoga does not ask members to give money, an internal document indicates
Notes

that English Sahaja Yogis were encouraged to donate money towards the purchase of Shudy Camps: “All of us in permanent employment are endeavouring to raise at least 1000 (substantially more and probably several times that amount if we have our own home or some money put away). Students and unemployed are clubbing together to raise the 1000. There are so many ways available now: bank loans, credit card arrangements, loan facilities etc” (Sahaja Yoga, 1986a).

14. Membership numbers calculated from an address list of Sahaja Yogis in Britain, dated 28/10/87.
16. The universalist perspective presented by Sahaja Yoga is characteristic of many NRMs, including Transcendental Meditation, Mahikari and the Unification Church (see Mayer 1987).
17. These nations include Argentina, Australia, Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Canada, Colombia, Czech Republic, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Holland, Hong Kong, Hungary, India, Israel, Italy, Lithuania, New Zealand, Poland, Romania, Russia, South Africa, Spain, UK, Ukraine, and the USA (claimed in correspondence to INFORM 1994). Other countries in which Sahaja Yoga claims a presence include Norway, Bolivia, Algeria, Brazil, Burkino Faso, Armenia, Egypt, Taiwan, Slovenia, Portugal, Turkey, Iran, Senegal, the Ivory Coast and Uruguay (Sahaja Yoga 1992b, 16). In many of these, there has been a rapid increase in converts, although total numbers remain very small. In Belgium, for example, Sahaja Yoga had 16 members in 1986, but this number had apparently increased to almost 160 by 1993 (Belgian Parliamentary Commission Report 1997).
18. Indeed, there is a delightful story of what occurred when Sri Mataji, after many happy years of marriage, revealed her true spiritual status to her husband. His response, in the version told to me, was neither incredulity nor joy. Instead, he was concerned simply with why it had taken her until now to tell him.
19. Information on 1993 membership figures and centres is drawn from a Sahaja Yoga address list compiled in November 1993.
20. This syncretism is returned to in Chapter Four, which examines the social significance of the rituals of the group.
21. However, Sri Mataji has absolutely condemned Tantra (de Kalbermatten 1979, 196–245).
22. Sahaja Yoga cosmology, moreover, has incorporated the tantric principle of the oneness of microcosm and macrocosm. This means that the world and the body are, in this sense, reflections of
each other. Consequently, each geographical region on the Earth is also assigned a *chakra* in the cosmology of the movement. Britain, for instance, is ruled by the fourth, *anahata chakra*, located at the heart.

23. Although *kundalini* is seen as beneficial in Sahaja Yoga and by some other religious leaders such as Muktananda and Anandi Ma (see Johnsen, 1994:58–72), this opinion is not, however, universal. Gurdjieff described *kundalini* as “not anything useful or desirable for man’s development … In reality *kundalini* is the power of the imagination, the power of fantasy … *kundalini* is the force that keeps (man imprisoned) in a hypnotic state” (Ouspensky 1955, 220). Rajneesh took a middle road by affirming that *kundalini* can be spiritual but can also be false: “So many false and pseudo experiences can be created. They are not false and pseudo in the sense that they do not exist but in the sense that they are not spiritual; they are only psychic processes … when someone says that ‘I am the doer’ then it is a psychic phenomenon and it is no more than hypnosis” (Osho 1993, 57–59).

24. The sacrum bone is an unusual site for *kundalini*, it being traditionally placed in the Mooladhara chakra. However, the Mooladhara is usually associated with the genitals (see Klostermaier 1994, 288), which makes it an unsuitable location in Sri Mataji’s eyes.

25. *Kundalini* as shakti energy is often associated with tremendous heat (Abbott 1932, 7–9), as is magical power in many regions of the world (Eliade 1975, 85–6) and the experiences of Sahaja Yogis have resonances elsewhere. For instance, *kundalini* displays similarities to the boiling energy induced to rise from the base of the spine by the Kalahari bushmen for the purposes of healing (Katz 1982). The ‘coolness’ associated with *kundalini* in Sahaja Yoga has few ethnographic parallels, although comparison can just possibly be made with the experiences of the Semai tribe in Malaysia. “Their dance-songs … establish a channel through which a cool spiritual essence … is conducted and distributed throughout the members of the community” (Samuel 1990, 114). However, although Indian goddesses are usually considered to be ‘hot’ (Fuller, 1992:45–6), the Goddess is sometimes associated with a wind or a cool breeze in Indian mythology, for example, in *The Story of Queen Tara* (Erndl 1993, 107).

26. Again, this is consistent with a tantric idea which is that, as Klostermaier (1994, 289) puts it: “While the *kundalini shakti* moves upward it assumes all the deities and qualities inherent in the different *chakras*, thus becoming ‘everything’.”
27. This is especially the case when Sri Mataji tries to dissolve vibrational blockages on a national, rather than an individual, scale. In 1993, for instance, when she was engaged on such an endeavour in Russia – which is ruled by the Agya chakra in the forehead – many British Sahaja Yogis typically complained of headaches until the impurities of Russia, taken on by Sri Mataji and dispersed to her disciples through the inner network of the ‘collective’, were dissolved.

28. Good and evil are not themes which often appear in the literature on Indian religions, although there are exceptions (see, for instance, O’Flaherty 1976).

29. For convenience, I have grouped these associations into four categories in this chapter. These categories, I stress, are mine and are not invoked in Sahaja Yoga discourse as ‘types’.

30. It is likely, as Sahaja Yoga matures and if an apocalypse is averted, that its members will give less credence to that strand. As Wallis (1984:131) observed: “there is a tendency for even those few ardently world-rejecting movements which manage to turn aside the many forces encouraging disintegration, to accommodate to the world in some measure”.

31. It is traditional for the feet of the guru to be venerated in Hinduism. As Walker observed, the ‘foot-worship’ of the guru is common in India and usually involves prostration and the offering of flowers and money. The guru’s feet are also washed and the water drunk by devotees (1968, 419). Jackson and Killingley noted that the head is usually associated with purity in India, and the feet with impurity (1988, 66) Thus, bowing to the feet to guru is thus tantamount to saying “You are so superior to me that your feet, which are impure to you, are pure to me” (ibid., 106).

32. Again, the idea that whatever a guru touches becomes charged with his or her energy is common in South Asia (see Abbott 1932, 95).

33. Abbott’s study of Indian ritual and belief confirmed that there is a Hindu folk precedent for such actions: “A woman’s hair is credited with the power of averting the evil-eye. It is placed in gardens to protect creepers, it is tied to milch cattle or burnt before them, and it is tied to a house, when it is entered for the first time, to render innocuous the potentiality of the unknown for evil” (1932, 55).

34. Thus the author of a book on Sahaja Yoga wrote: “At the beginning of this volume there is a picture of ... Her Holiness Mataji Nirmala Devi. The picture ... is endowed with the power of radiating the vibrations of Chaitanya: they can give realisation”
Sahaja Yoga

(de Kalbermatten:1979:173). In the same vein, videos of the guru are believed to give out good vibrations which can be picked up by devotees, and those visiting the Sahaja Yoga web page on the Internet are encouraged to hold out their hands towards the screen and feel the vibrations. The photograph of Mother Meera, another Indian female guru, is similarly claimed to be charged with power (Mother Meera 1991, 63).

35. Vibrated water is commonly used by Sahaja Yogis in their gardens towards this end. Similarly, Pullar (1984, 220) wrote of a follower who, being a farmer, regularly “vibrated his seed and his irrigation water... Since vibrations, he said, his yield had increased by 28%” (see also de Kalbermatten, 1979:186–7).

36. Information on the means of recording data used during the research with Sahaja Yoga can be found in Appendix 1 which contains a report on the research methods and problematics.

37. The Kali Yuga is the last of four, progressively degenerate, Yugas, or Ages. Hindus usually say that it began at midnight between February 17th and 18th 3102 BC, that it will last for over four hundred and twenty thousand years more, and that it is typified by universal viciousness and weakness, disease and immorality (Walker 1968, 7). However, Sri Mataji, like the Brahma Kumaris, has also claimed that, in fact, we have entered yet another Yuga, the Satya Yuga as the Last Days approach. This, according to Sri Mataji, is because of the presence of Sahaja Yoga (Sahaja Yoga 1993, 11).

38. Sri Kalki is said to ride a white horse. This has been explained by de Kalbermatten (1979) to be Sahaja Yoga.

39. The following claim is an example of this kind of early belief: “Ultimately it is the Sahaja Yogis who will be called for a conference and not the diplomats. The Sahaja Yogis will be consulted and they will decide what is to be done and they will become the rulers of tomorrow’s world” (Sahaja Yoga 1984b, 26). As Barker (1993a) observed, the majority of NRMs – especially, though not exclusively those falling into Wallis’ ‘world-rejecting category (Wallis, 1984) – offer a social blueprint for a ‘New Jerusalem’ which is often conceived of as being established after the demise of the present order.

40. Rather more extremely, some devotees appear to have believed that they will evolve into angels. Sahaja Yogis are fond of telling ‘miracle stories’ to affirm their faith and, in one of these, an early devotee is cited as having woken up one day to find that he had grown wings during the night. No-one else could see them, but so convinced was he of their existence that he walked sideways
through doors to protect his new accoutrements. Dreams of flying are also considered very significant by devotees, some interpreting them as signs that they are progressing along the path towards this end.

41. A similar image of the way in which negativity can travel from one person to another is found in the Hindu idea of mala, or impurity. "What is mala (impurity)? It is supposed to be one non-spiritual stuff, which behaves with manifold functions. It is for this reason that when the mala is removed in one person it may function in other persons" (Dasgupta, quoted in O'Flaherty 1976, 73). O'Flaherty goes on to observe, "Impurity in this instance behaves precisely like good or evil karma that sticks to a person until it is transferred to another" (ibid.). Impurity, in other words, is regarded as evil doing, but it behaves as pollution.

42. Thus, Sri Mataji said, for instance, during a talk given at Feregene, Italy on 8.5.1988: "How can the good apples cure the bad apples, can they? Even if you put twenty thousand on top of that bad apple it will spoil all of them... Only thing what (sic) you can do is to pull that person into the collectivity showing that you are wrong, you are wrong, you are wrong and you have to be all right".

43. This echoes the Hindu notion of karma, explained as follows by Smart: "Literally karma means 'action', but it can be treated as a force, or law, which allots destinies to individuals in terms of their actions" (Smart 1969, 99). The idea is that people carry with them the results of their actions through the rebirths that they undergo. However, reincarnation is not a central tenet of Sahaja Yoga. Sri Mataji, more often, refers to the concepts of 'heaven' and 'hell'.

44. Traditionally, however, they take on that role only when seen in structural opposition to the gods of Hindu mythology for, as O'Flaherty observed, "the ambiguous nature of demons makes them unsuitable to bear the blame for the origin of evil" (1976, 57).

45. Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, the founder of Transcendental Meditation, and Rajneesh are particularly singled out in this respect, the former perhaps because a number of Sahaja Yogis were his followers and the latter probably as a result of Sri Mataji's past association. Some devotees believe Rajneesh to have been Rasputin in an earlier incarnation, and to be Ravenna, the mythological Lord of the Demons, proof of this diabolic association lying in the recurrent first letter of each name.

46. As Sri Mataji has said, "Those who have not recognised me will not be blessed" (Sahaja Yoga 1988, 12).

47. Sri Mataji has lamented the day in which she introduced the concepts of bhuts to Sahaja Yogis. "I will not say that I made a
Sahaja Yoga

mistake but it happened to be a mistake... But a lady came into Sahaja Yoga who was possessed and who tried all kinds of tantric tricks, so I had to tell them. Now every Sahaja Yogi is a bundle of bhuts. You ask any Sahaja Yogi ‘why did you do it?’ Must be a bhut” (Sahaja Yoga 1988, 31). However, the term is still in common usage in the movement.

48. Abbott described how chillies are used to determine whether someone has the evil-eye and then as a means of banishment (1932, 124). Similarly, he says that lemons are also used to avert the evil-eye and draw out negativity because of their similarity in shape to an eye (ibid., 125). A description of the ritual use of lemons and chillies in Sahaja Yoga is given in Chapter Four.

Chapter Three: Making Contact with Mother

1. Although the time required can vary according to the type of conversion being undergone because of the variegated nature of the phenomenon (Lofland and Skonovd 1981; Shinn 1989, 129).

2. Because no two experiences are the same, no attempt has been made to outline a detailed step-by-step model of these changes akin to that of Downton (1980, 381–96).

3. This reticence is present in an number of NRM. For example, Scientology has taken out writs against a number of individuals whom they claim are responsible for posting advanced Scientology material on the Internet, because: “It's not helpful to [see secrets] before you have gone up a carefully gradient path of knowledge” (The Independent newspaper, 4/9/1995 Section 2, 12).

4. Such behaviour is unlike that of sects such as the Unification Church where ‘‘Witno-captains’ took the members in a ‘Witno-bus’ on ‘Witno-ventures’ to campuses, laundromats, the National Zoo and airports” (quoted in Barker 1984, 53) or ISKCON, where nama-sankirtana (public chanting) is performed (Gelberg 1989, 149).

5. Richardson and Stewart pointed out as long ago as 1978 that a sizeable number of those attracted to new religions “have been involved in experiences of shifting alliances among various groups and ideologies” (Richardson and Stewart 1978, 24).

6. As Barker (1992, 14) has observed: “By and large, Westerners who become involved in movements such as the Brahma Kumaris, Elan Vital, ISKCON, the Rajneeshees, Sahaja Yoga, the Church of Scientology, Transcendental Meditation or the Unification Church come disproportionately from the middle and upper-middle
classes” Kakar (1982, 214) noted that Sahaja Yogis in India are also generally middle-class and “belong to the newly urbanised, emerging middle-classes”.

7. One possible reason for this attraction is that weekly Sahaja Yoga meetings are held at Flood Street, Chelsea which also has regular meetings for Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous. A leading member of Sahaja Yoga in the UK attends both these groups. Another is that the physical experiences engendered in Sahaja Yoga are pleasurable. De Kalbermatten (1979, 257) described a woman who “used to go ‘incredibly high’ while driving her car past the house where HH Mataji was granting realisation”. She said “Driving down that bit of Marylebone Road I just used to get tuned into a different dimension. Better than a joint. Perceptions were more acute: magnified sounds, brighter colours. I was ridiculously happy, elated”. The Meher Baba movement (Robbins and Anthony 1972) and Hare Krishna (Johnson 1976), similarly, have attracted drug users.

8. One reason for the drop in the proportion of newcomers joining by this route may be that the group has an increasing number of venues other than Flood Street for meetings, both in London and in the regions.

9. Interview a., 3.5.95.

10. Interview, 9.7.95.

11. Healing is a feature found in the majority of NRM which have been researched, both in the UK and cross-culturally (for examples of the latter, see Bennetta 1979; Nobutaka 1991; Beckford and Suzara 1994).

12. Observation suggests that a sizeable minority is attracted through family networks. However, without access to records, this observation is impossible to test.

13. Interview b., 3.5.95.

14. This is perhaps because there is no literature available on the movement in book shops and the group keeps a low public profile (Coney and Tritter 1995).

15. Another difference is that far fewer people today engage in face-to-face interaction with Sri Mataji herself for their first contact, due to the increase in numbers of the movement. Thus, the circumstance of ‘getting your realisation’ directly from Sri Mataji on an individual basis is unusual.

16. Although she failed to turn up to a full house on July 3rd 1997, having missed her flight from America.

17. The event is paid for by donations from followers and is staffed on a volunteer basis.
18. These attendance figures are estimates, based on my own impressions, the records of colleagues and from conversations with Sahaja Yogi.
19. In addition, I have watched a number of videos of large public events held by Sahaja Yoga around the world. These are also very similar in content.
20. Whilst the devotee’s talk is given or devotional songs are being sung, followers believe that Sri Mataji ‘works on’ the ‘energy’ of the audience unobtrusively, in order to assist their kundalini to rise later in the evening.
21. In 1995, for the first time, newcomers were also invited to a picnic.
22. However, no numbers are available on how many of these newcomers went on to become fully committed members.
23. In July 1997, twelve meetings per week were advertised in the London area.
24. Friends Meeting Houses are popular venues.
25. Interview, 2.7.95.
26. The practice of ‘foot soaking’ is described in more detail in the next chapter.
27. An open letter from a leading British Sahaja Yogi, a consultant psychiatrist, has referred to “the recently discovered system of naturally occurring opiate-like substances (enkephlins and endorphins) in human nervous tissue” (Sahaja Yoga, 1988). The activation of such substances by the meditation may perhaps account for these physiological effects.
28. Interview, 2.7.95.
29. Interview, 16.4.93.
30. Interview b., 3.5.95.
31. As Hilgard (1991, 3) points out, numerous definitions of suggestion have been proposed in the psychological literature. The word can refer to “a specific influential message or communication (e.g. ‘The Holy Ghost is entering your body’ or ‘The room is becoming very hot’)” or to the whole process whereby suggestions are communicated and received.
32. Interview, 2.7.95.
33. +/- 2.5% of the number who felt a cool breeze, based on group estimates.
34. Interview 9.7.95.
35. This observation is reminiscent of that made by Barker in her study of the Unification Church. There she found that “a certain amount of susceptibility would seem to increase the likelihood of a person’s becoming a Moonie – but only up to a point. If the
Notes

'susceptibility-to-persuasion' characteristics were too strongly represented, the workshop attender would be less likely to join" (Barker 1984, 198).

36. Dreams involving Sri Mataji occur often amongst members and are understood to be very significant. This is because she is believed to be actually present in them and they are therefore a form of communication. This is a common notion held by followers in a variety of groups with Hindu origins, as well as amongst members of the Unification Church. Conversely, Neitz (1987, 105) notes that members of the Christian Charismatic community she studied tended to distrust them as signs because "the universality of dreams prevent them from becoming a distinctive sign for Charismatics".

37. A similar point has been made about having been attracted by a distinctive quality in existing members by members of Soka Gakkai UK (Wilson 1994, 54-5).

38. Interview b., 3.5.95.
39. Interview 9.7.95.
40. This, however, is the case only in a few instances, almost all of them members who have been in Transcendental Meditation.
41. These differences can also be felt by practitioners, who quickly become sensitive to whether they are 'stuck' in their right or left sides.

42. A story told in Sahaja Yoga is of Sri Mataji, in the early years of her work, taking a small group of vegetarian disciples to eat at a MacDonalds restaurant. This act is interpreted as illustrating to them that any extreme is counter-productive.

43. Indian dress is usually only worn for national rituals. Even so, when these are witnessed by outsiders, such as at the Royal Albert Hall, followers usually blend into the larger population by wearing Western clothes.

44. The feelings of ex-members about their time in Sahaja Yoga are returned to in Chapter Nine.
45. Interview, 28.8.95. This remark is particularly reminiscent of that made by a defector from the UFO, which was similarly characterised as typical by Balch (1985, 50): "They never talked me into anything. I made up my own mind... It really disgusts me to hear people say 'You made me do this'. That's a falsehood. Nobody makes you do anything".

46. Such a picture is consonant with the 'social drift' model of conversion described by Long and Hadden as a process in which "people become converts gradually through the influence of social relationships, especially during times of personal strain" (1983:1).
Chapter Four: Practising Sahaja Yoga

1. See Chapter One.
2. For a reasonably comprehensive overview of definitions for ritual, see Bell (1992).
3. This distinction is not an absolute one. Many Sahaja Yoga rituals take place in spaces which have been sacralised, for example, but others are performed in everyday situations, as we shall see. Thus, the act of distinguishing between such activities and others is, to an extent, a utilitarian abstraction from the act itself, and should be regarded as such.
4. Described in detail in Chapter Three.
5. The rituals of the group are organised here into stages for the convenience of the reader. These stages are not explicitly recognised in Sahaja Yoga and represent an abstraction which has been formulated to highlight their progressive nature and make them accessible to the uninitiated.
6. Unless, that is, they have received their ‘realisation’ en masse at a large venue such as the Royal Albert Hall, London.
7. However, Sahaja Yogis seem much less anxious about the polluted state of this water nowadays than they were in the early years of the movement. This relaxation of pollution fears is perhaps associated with a lessening of social exclusivity as the organisation becomes increasingly accommodationist.
8. Just as Sahaja Yoga followers are advised to be discreet when in the company of others to avoid accusations of eccentricity, Cornille (1991) notes that Western members of the Japanese new religion Mahikari are also told to ‘act normal’ in the public arena.
9. Sahaja Yogis believe that this ritual originates from Islam and that it is derived from an incident in which Mohammed exhorted his soldiers to beat their shoes on the enemy before battle in order to be victorious. However, I have been unable to verify the source. There is no mention of the incident by either Lings (1983) or Guillaume (1980).
10. The swastika which is painted on them is traditionally “an object bringing luck, an auspicious sign... In India it is still associated with the cult of Vishnu and when painted on doors, it is believed to protect from the evil eye” (Werner 1994, 147–8).
11. However, individual Sahaja Yogis will occasionally perform simple pujas by themselves.
12. Variety in pujas is the norm in India as Fuller observes (1992, 63).
13. Coconuts are associated with the worship of the Goddess in India. The milk they contain can be seen as a symbolic reference to
fertility and maternal nourishment and many Hindu scriptures include stories legitimating the association (e.g. in Ernld 1993, 46). These fruit are also often described as cool (see Fuller 1992, 45).

14. In Hinduism, *puja* is often made to Sri Ganesha first because he is the Remover of Obstacles.

15. In South Asian *pujas*, the ceremonial waving of a lamp in this way is called *arati* (See Werner 1994, 34).

16. The *Devi Mahatma* Purana tells of how the shell was given to the Goddess by Vishnu.

17. In Hindu ritual, food that has been offered to the deity is called *prasad* and is also traditionally distributed at the end of a *puja*.

18. *Amrit* (*amrta*) is described as the drink of immortality in Hindu scriptures. There it is said to have been obtained by the gods and demons, who were originally mortal, when churning the cosmic ocean (Werner 1994, 29). It is traditionally called *panchamrīta*, meaning “the five immortal or life-giving things” and is drunk as a purifying liquid (see Jackson and Killingly 1988, 69).

19. At such *pujas* Sri Mataji is treated much as statues of the Goddess are treated in Hindu temples, in that she is ritually washed and dressed and offerings are made to her.

20. Examples of gifts which have been given in the past include a statue of an elephant, a carpet, jewellery and china.

21. In Sahaja Yoga, songs are sung in a variety of languages, including Marathi, Hindi, Sanskrit, English, Italian, Spanish and Russian.

22. These are group marriages which are presided over by Sri Mataji and are discussed in more detail in Chapter Six.

23. These elements include The Lords Prayer, or *Pater Noster*, from Christianity and the recitation of *Allah Akbar* from Islam.

24. Sri Mataji is presented as one who embodies all previous authentic spiritual leaders. Thus, to worship her is to worship them. Indeed, one Sahaja Yoga writer notes that these ‘predecessors’ will be angered, should her teaching be rejected, and will harm the aspirant (Sharma 1993, 855).

25. In a book of mantras published for devotees there is a list of satanic leaders and groups and the mantras to be used to ‘destroy’ them. As well as the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi and Rajneesh the list includes Muktananda, Sir Chinmoy, Krishnamurti, Sathya Sai Baba, the Dalai Lama, Findhorn, the Pope, the Catholic Church and Adolf Hitler (Sahaja Yoga 1989b).


27. Thus, as Spickard and Neitz have both argued, the experiences within religious ritual contain an incontrovertible social dimension (see Spickard 1990; 1991; 1993; Neitz 1987; 1990).
28. See, for instance, Lukes (1975, 289-308) where he suggests that this notion is too simple to deal with the complexity of modern political rituals.

29. Spickard has based much of his theorising on the nature of ritual experience on the work of Alfred Schutz, who developed a “sociology of subjectivity”. In particular, Schutz saw society as being based on living together simultaneously in specific aspects of time (1951, 162). Language creates this congruence, but so does experience. Listening to music, therefore, gives the individual the sense of sharing the inner time of the composer and being united with him or her.

30. This is a reference to the image of the body in Sahaja Yoga as being divided into right and left sides, the one active and the other passive.

Chapter Five: Learning to Love Mother

1. Roy Wallis (1984, 110-118) identified four ways in which gurus respond to the institutionalisation of charisma, these being through acquiescence, as in the case of Guru Maharaj of Divine Light who diminished in stature by his own volition for some years; encouragement, this being exemplified in the behaviour of Mary Baker Eddy who built up a bureaucracy; displacement, a model here being the founder of the Process who was removed from power by others in the movement for not acceding to their demands for more conventional behaviour; and resistance, this being exemplified by Father David Berg of the Children of God, whose inconsistent messages ensured that routinisation could not set in.

2. It should be noted that there is no attempt in this chapter to evaluate the degree to which spiritual leaders are authentic by assessing their ‘charisma type’. Indeed, any such endeavour on these grounds would be misleading. No research has been done which has established that the affective type of charisma operates entirely outside the social sphere; and the fact that absorbed charisma is gradually learned does not necessarily make it any more artificial than the affective form.

3. Neither type fits exactly the Conversion Motifs outlined by Lofland and Skonovd (1981). However, affective charisma is more likely to be associated with their Mystical motif, in which belief precedes participation in the rituals of a movement, whereas absorbed charisma is more likely to relate to their Experimental motif, in which participation precedes belief.
Notes

4. Dupertuis (1986, 113) commented that Weber said that charisma can never be taught or learned. It can only be awakened and tested (Weber 1968, 249). However, Weber also said that it can be inspired by training and discipline (ibid., 1149) and at one point refers the reader to a chapter on “the charismatic type of education”, which unfortunately he never wrote.

5. Women are likely to be given jewellery, such as lockets, containing her picture.

6. Tambiah notes that amulets often act as reminders of the virtues of the leaders of charismatic groups (1984, 335). These ‘repositories of power’, amongst which I would include Sri Mataji’s photograph, are either intentionally charged or, as in this instance, their power is simply a by-product of the guru’s charisma.

7. In particular, they are referred to The Sri Lalita Sahasranama – a text containing the Thousand Names of the Goddess – The Devi Mahatmayam and The Devi Bhagavatam Purana.

8. de Kalbermatten eulogises: “In the smile of Her eyes, in the caress of Her voice, motherhood vibrates in the fullness of love, tenderness and sweetness” (1979, 270).

9. In both instances, photographs and stories are usually proffered with little comment on their significance as far as her true identity is concerned. This, it seems, is because the acceptance that she is miraculous is often sought by established members before turning to the issue of her divinity.

10. These images, interestingly, also show her wearing her hair loose, in accordance with traditional symbolism associated with the Goddess in Hinduism, though this is a cue which British Sahaja Yogis are culturally unaware of for the most part.

11. Rosen noted in relation to Rebirthing, for example, that “stories about increased wealth, health and happiness abound” (Rosen 1977, 133), and Messer (1976) talked of a tale passed along Divine Light Mission devotees about the ability of Maharaj Ji to guide them to Heaven. Discussing charisma in the context of the Unification Church, Barker (1993c), too, emphasised the role of storytelling, in this instance to build up the appeal of Reverend Moon as an intensely human yet messianic figure.

12. On one occasion, for example, he said that “you have known the Creator of this world very intimately. You love Her as she loves you” (Sahaja Yoga, 1989a). Neither of her two daughters are, however, followers. Nor does there seem to have been someone close to Sri Mataji who recognised ‘who she really is’ before she did, as was the case with Moses David (see Wallis, 1982b).

14. Indeed, Sri Mataji, as the following revealing excerpt suggests, sometimes feels the need to reaffirm her charisma to herself: "Then, I just stand before the mirror and I say: 'Now, come along. You are the one who has had all the chakras awakened. None of the Advents had this. You are the one who has created this world and You are the one who has to save it. So now, get up'" (Sahaja Yoga 1988, 64).

15. This luggage is seen as prasad by her followers and is understood, so followers have indicated, to be protected in transit by the invisible minor deities who protect the Goddess.

16. In December 1993, for example, thirty-nine British devotees, and myself, were requested to bring eighty boxes of goods for Sri Mataji from Russia to the UK as hand luggage. All passed through British customs, without comment.

17. Most gurus have recourse to this fall-back position in one form or another, which generally has the disorienting effect of creating shifting sands on which the follower must walk. Thus Sogyal Rinpoche, a Tibetan lama criticised for sexual indiscretions, has had his behaviour explained by committed disciples as 'Buddha activity'. Thus, it cannot be assessed by ordinary mortals.

18. Perhaps, too, Rajneesh's greater display of inconsistencies allowed more room for reinterpretation.

19. For an account of the New Age see Heelas (1996). Other devotees, however, attempted to build up a deeper understanding of 'who she really was' by reading extensively about Hinduism and the role of the Devi rather than resting on prior information.

20. Similarly, during my research at the Rajneesh commune, Medina, I asked a sannyasin how he felt about often being moved from job to job, and with very little notice. He replied that he felt each move was because the leader of the commune had sensed what was necessary for his spiritual development. However, when I checked this with the leader, she replied that she simply assigned people to jobs on the basis of the needs of the organisation, and that it had nothing to do with spiritual development.

21. Wallis (1982a), for instance, said of the leadership in the Children of God that they continued to profess loyalty to Moses David because of their investment in the status and power they were given as a result of their close association.
Chapter Six: A Woman's Role in Sahaja Yoga

1. Matriarchies are found in some NRMs, with powerful women clustering around a charismatic male leader, these leaders tending to under emphasize the procreative aspect of women in favour of their leadership skills. Examples include the now defunct Exegesis movement of Robert D'Aubigny, and the Neo-Sannyas movement of Osho Rajneesh (for a compilation of Rajneesh's pronouncements on the role of women, see Rajneesh 1987).

2. The meaning of the term 'gender' as it is used in this chapter rests on the following succinct definition: "Sex as expressed by social or cultural distinctions" (The New Oxford Shorter English Dictionary 1993, 1072).

3. However, although the general tenor of her argument is that NRMs elevate one gender role over others, Palmer also says that mixtures of gender roles "can be noted in some NRMs; and one type can transform into another type during the course of its history" (1994a, 11).

4. Likewise, Rose (1987) found in a study of women's roles in a Messianic community that, despite a strong hierarchical distinction which favoured the males being evident in the group ideology, in practice the power relationships were not so rigid. Similarly, in a study of male and female roles in ISKCON by Knott (1987), she stresses the variety amongst female devotees, both in livelihood and behaviour, which is not reflected in the group's ideal model.

5. Mukerjee has noted that brahminical doctrine inspired by the Code has brought about a situation in India in which "no rules have been so uniformly changed ... for the worse as those which affect the legal position of women" (Mukerjee 1978, 65). See also Devendra (1985) and Rao & Rao (1982).

6. "Though destitute of virtue, or seeking pleasure (elsewhere), or devoid of good qualities, (yet) a husband must be constantly worshipped as a god by a faithful wife. No sacrifice, no vow, no fast must be performed by women apart from their husbands; if a woman obeys her husband, she will for that (reason alone) be exalted in heaven" (Code of Manu V., 154–5).

7. Sex complementarity is a gender motif found in a variety of other NRMs, especially those which are family-based, such as the Unification Church, 3HO (Sikh Dharm International) and the Family. The motif itself is described by Palmer (1994, 10) as one in which: "each sex is endowed with different qualities and emphasizes the importance of marriage for uniting two halves of the same soul to form one, complete androgynous being".

Notes
Sahaja Yoga

8. Sri Mataji’s position on this issue has much in common with that articulated by David Berg of the Children of God in his early years: “God’s law was that woman’s desire shall be to her husband (Genesis.3.16) and the devil’s been trying to overthrow that ever since, of which Women’s Lib is a classic example. They don’t desire to please their husbands, they desire to rule over them” (in Millikan 1994, 213). Similarly, Davis (1980, 199) noted that the leader of Mahikari commented: “if women’s liberation succeeds in Japan, the country will be doomed. Furthermore, if women do not properly respect their husbands, they will not be able to worship their ancestors correctly”.

9. Although she beautifully exemplified this category of ‘equal but different’ in one lecture in which she described marriage as a partnership of wifely devotion and husbandly respectfulness, where the partners “are not similar but both are equal, no doubt. One is the right and the other the left wheel of the chariot... But a woman has to behave like a woman and a man has to be like a man” (Sahaja Yoga 1982).

10. NRM often display nationalistic tendencies and ascribe sacred connotations to the country of origin. For instance, members of Mahikari believe that Japan is the place and origin of salvation for the world and the Japanese are the chosen people (Cornille 1994). Similarly, Reverend Moon of the Unification Church has identified Korea as the locus of salvation (Chryssides 1991).

11. Quoted from Indian Marriage a Perfect Formula. The Sun, Australia. 1.4.81.

12. This need often has an impact on the behaviour of charismatic figures in relation to those disciples closest to them. Rajneesh, for instance, arguably for the same reason, kept men at some distance, with just a very few exceptions, and encouraged women to take up positions of power. He also removed the authority of leading therapists in his community when they became powerful within the movement (Thompson and Heelas 1986).

13. In that Sri Mataji is understood to be awakened and fully realised and to integrate the qualities of all the male and female deities, she achieves the androgyny typical in the supreme powers of movements which extol sex complementarity (Palmer 1994a, 10).

14. Sri Mataji has advised: “Try, men, to form your own group of men and women should form your own group of women. There should be no instruction to women from men too much” (Sahaja Yoga 1981b).

15. Thus at the Navratri puja in October 1994, leaders from within Britain, defined as those responsible for organising meetings and
dispersing information, were invited to perform part of the ritual during the ceremony. Of the twenty or so who did so, only two were women. Then more leaders, similarly defined, were invited to perform the same ritual, and after a moment’s hesitation many of the women then participated. They had hung back, some explained to me afterwards, because they felt their role to be a more informal one and, although they did run meetings, they did not see themselves as official leaders.

16. It should be noted that these are seen not as romantic marriages but as complementary spiritual partnerships, contributing to the collective more than to the individuals themselves: “Your attitude should be of enhancing mutual understanding, mutual love and not romantic feelings … the main thing one has to know is that you are married to have children. Not to be Romeo and Juliet anymore” (Sahaja Yoga 1980b). Further: “The children that will be born to Sahaja Yogis are going to be realised souls. Tremendous souls or energy. That’s why you are married; that’s why you are going to have children” (ibid.).

17. Other couples who want to marry ask Sri Mataji to bless their marriage and can also join in the ceremony for those in arranged marriages if this blessing is given. Again, they are encouraged to see their union as more than simply a ‘romantic liaison’ but as one which benefits the wider Sahaja Yoga community.

18. A leading female Sahaja Yogi told me that Sri Mataji consults the leaders and long-standing followers in each country about whether they think her suggestion for a match suitable. For example, she said, if Mother asked me about an English girl I would say: “Yes, she is a sweet nice girl and as long as he is a good boy, Mother, that is fine”. If they knew of a woman or man in their own country who wanted to get married, the British leaders would also ask leaders from other countries if they had someone to partner them. She said Sahaja Yoga was like one big family and so the leaders and Mother between them assessed each couple, as an Indian family would do, to decide if they were a good match (Diary 20.1.93).

19. Recently, Sri Mataji seems to have been reluctant to choose English girls, on the basis that they do not make good wives, find it difficult to ‘humble down’ and are liable to leave their husbands. As she said some time ago: “The woman is known by the amount of sacrifices she makes. It’s a challenge, I tell you, for all you women who are realised souls to see to it that you humble down yourself. Your quality cannot improve unless and until you humble down” (Sahaja Yoga 1981).
Sahaja Yoga

20. Palmer (1994a, 84–5) noted of arranged marriages in the Unification Church that, in similar fashion to Sahaja Yoga: “Almost all Unificationists accept their leader’s choice of spouse, but some refuse. Of the twenty-two Canadians who attended the Matching ceremony before the 1982 wedding in Madison Square Garden, two rejected their partners... Members can turn down their chosen partners with no loss of status, but must then wait for the next Matching”.

21. Female members do not invariably move to be with their new spouses. In particular, Eastern European and Indian husbands tend to come to the West, perhaps for economic reasons.

22. In washing her feet, the women were doing puja to Gauri the virgin.

23. Each individual getting married constructs a family if they have no Sahaja Yoga relatives present and other Sahaja Yogis will stand in during the ritual as the mother, father, aunt and uncle. This leads to conversations in the planning stage such as: “Nick, will you be my father?” “I’m really sorry, but I’m already being an uncle for one of the Lithuanians”.

24. The recontextualisation of the mundane is common in NRM. At the Programmes Group, for example, telesales was understood to be a method of increasing the ability of an individual to ‘create their world’ and ‘get what they want’. Similarly, work was elevated to worship in Rajneesh’s communes in the early 1980s.

25. Again, this view coincides with Sri Mataji’s: “You do not argue with your leaders. You may be his wife but don’t argue. We’re having a very bad time from some of the wives because they try to influence their husbands. As far as Sahaja Yoga is concerned they have nothing to do with that; supposing you are working in some office and the husband is some great official and you are a clerk, will you correct the husband?” (Sahaja Yoga Internal Circular 1.).

26. An example of a change in behaviour as a result of experience is the issue of contraception in the early days. Interpreting their duty from Sri Mataji’s talks as being to give birth to spiritually advanced souls, the idea arose amongst the female followers that they should not use contraceptives. However, the women felt, too many babies were being born. The members then realised, according to one respondent, that Sri Mataji had never actually told them not to use contraceptives (Diary 24.10.93).

27. International differences may be due partly to the fact that Sahaja Yoga began in Britain and was exported elsewhere. Wherever it went, except in Russia, ashrams were set up in the first instance. In Britain, however, only a minority of committed members live in ashrams, and these do not have the same authority as those abroad.
Notes

28. Such geographical variation is not confined to Sahaja Yoga. Thus, Sita Deva Dasi, a female ISKCON devotee, notes: “Within ISKCON it is well observed that different temples have different ambiances” (ISKCON 1995, 84). Membership differences based on national differences were also apparent in Rajneeshism during my research on the movement with Paul Heelas (1979–85). Thus, Indians were labelled as ‘hopeless organisers’ and Germans were ‘power-mad’ and ‘rule-bound’.

29. Recently, Barker (1992b, 12) has, following Weber, defined power as “the ability to get others to do what one wants”. I would go further in the present instance, to suggest that it also includes being able to do what one wants, i.e. to be selective, despite the charismatic authority of Sri Mataji, and the authority divested in male leaders. This ability, however, is naturally limited in range.

30. In some NRMs, women have informal status through their ability to produce visions and prophecies, or because of their healing skills (see, for instance, Hackett 1995; Davis 1980; Jules-Rosette 1979). This is not, however, the case in Sahaja Yoga, one reason possibly being that this type of status would narrow the gap between the women and Sri Mataji. Any healing that women do is dependent on her, and is accorded no more efficacy than that performed by the men.

31. A number of studies of the status of women in India have, similarly, found that class and education empower some sections of the female Indian population (see, for example, Young 1987) and that, within these sections, women are more likely to redefine their role in society.

32. This stance is resonant with that of Yogi Bhajan of 3HO who has said that a woman’s special responsibility is to the home and children but once this is satisfied she can do anything she likes in the wider world (Melton 1993).

33. Contemporaries of Sri Mataji who were replaced by committees after their death include Rajneesh and Prahupada, although powerful leaders within these elites are discernible.

Chapter Seven: Socializing a Second Generation

1. An early version of this chapter “Growing Up as Mother’s Children” is in Hardman C. and Palmer, S. Children in New Religious Movements. Rutgers Press. forthcoming.

2. This statistic brings to mind a statement issued by the Family which said: “Our children belong to the Family and all of us, and
we are all their parents and they are all our children, so no ‘unwed’ mother need fear for herself or her children” (in Palmer 1994b, 15).

3. Such was also the case at Exegesis, where commitment to child care was seen as diverting the energy of the individual away from the group. In both cases, significantly, women were seen to be as, or more, powerful than men.

4. As Wilson (1990, 240–241) has noted, an NRM basing its recruitment on the recurrent socialization of a single constituency is more vulnerable to failure than a movement which encompasses families.

5. A Sahaja Yoga circular containing advice for mothers underscores the absence of blood relations in the following way: “Sri Mataji has also advised the reading of books about mother and child care in order to educate ourselves in the absence of sensible parental advice” (Sahaja Yoga Internal Circular 3.).

6. Relatives can sometimes be seen as a source of negativity and if so are, on the advice of Sri Mataji, to be avoided in the interest of the child.

7. Although Sri Mataji has also said: “... children are still not human beings. Either you make them human beings or you make them devils. It's in your hands” (Sahaja Yoga Internal Circular 3.).

8. Similarly, Palmer (1994b, 12) observed that in the Family “it is understood that the kids belong to the commune first and to their parents second” and quotes the following words of an adult member: “We are all Uncles and Aunties to all the children. I would never go out and buy toys or sweets and come back and give them to my own kids. Every kid is equal and they all have to learn to share”.

9. Sri Mataji has said, for example: “Now there are some children in Sahaja Yoga who are born alright but because of their mother or father being very overactive they develop a new disease called overactivity of the child. So such a child must be immediately removed from the parents, especially from the mother, because they get it from the mother, you can find out from the character of the mother, and should be sent to some other ashram to be looked after, so that the child doesn’t get the influence of the thing” (Sahaja Yoga 1986b).

10. Guidelines for parents in Sahaja Yoga, however, have never reached the degree of pressure to conform to the group code found in the Children of God in 1978. That organisation sent out a checklist which had to be filled in and returned to headquarters...
monthly It included such items as “Encouraged to witness to others? Y__, N__; Taught Bible and Mo letters daily? Y__, N__” (Palmer 1994b, 15).

11. Furthermore, says Sri Mataji, “It’s not wise to acquire things to be used by the baby with bad vibrations, like old second-hand things or presents from people involved with false gurus. Vibratory awareness is to be used and followed; people related with any religious fanaticism or falsehood or anti-dharmic activities always represent a potential danger” (Sahaja Yoga Internal Circular 3.).

12. Sri Mataji has advised: “Two to six years is absolutely the time... At the time when the pot is now made... From two till six, that's the time you fire it, but before that you put all the impressions then fire it” (Sahaja Yoga 1986b, 8).

13. For example: “Children should know that you love them. Do little things that show that you care. Love must be expressed” (Sahaja Yoga Internal Circular 3.).


15. Also to be expected is that ashram life in the early years of Sahaja Yoga was stricter for children than it is today. In 1985, the Melbourne Ashram, in which there were twenty-five adults and twenty-five children, agreed on a set of house rules which were based on the pronouncements of Sri Mataji. Toddlers, for example, were ‘not to talk continuously and demand an audience’ and ‘not to ask questions’ and children should ‘have awareness that Sri Mataji is here at all times so that they act respectfully at all times’ (Sahaja Yoga 1985d).

16. However, it often includes more sugar than is common in the West.

17. Whilst some of the children have good relationships with non Sahaja Yogi grandparents, there are others who have not been allowed contact with older blood relations, although there have been signs in the last year that this exclusivity is lessening.

18. Mothers are advised that “working on the babies with Sahaja Yoga techniques is an important practice. While the baby is being massaged with oil, a specific mantra can be used according to the vibratory problems. Sri Mataji has recommended that young children should meditate with us in the early morning from being young babies” (Sahaja Yoga Internal Circular 3, 3). As we have seen, the majority of rituals in Sahaja Yoga revolve around purification, and the children are seen as being especially sensitive and in need of protection.
19. In fact, *pujas* are made to a number of deities during the course of a single *Puja* ritual. Before a major *puja* is performed, a *puja* is first done to Sri Ganesha, the Remover of Obstacles. It is at this point in the ritual that the children wash Sri Mataji’s feet.

20. In the 1980s in Australia, however, the situation seems to have been very different, judging from the following advice given to mothers in an internal circular:

> “[In India] they certainly have babies and children at meetings but these are just sat virtually at the Feet of Sri Mataji in AWE. This silent awe has to be awakened in our children... The less attention we draw to ourselves the less ego we encourage in ourselves and our children. We should not of course neglect or starve our children but they do not need to be pampered with constant bribes. Crisps, sweets, drinks, toys, asking them what they want when Sri Mataji is present! It’s ridiculous”.

(Sahaja Yoga Internal Circular 4.)

21. Similarly, another ‘world-rejecting’ movement, the Family, have declared: “We believe that most secular schools (and sad to say, even many modern parochial schools) have far too many misguided children, corrupting peers and devilish doctrines and devices busy at work undoing and ‘unsocializing’ the moral foundation that Christian parents desire to establish in their children” (The Family 1992).

22. It should be noted, however, that the principle author of the document did not send his own children to the India school, as they were past school age.

23. Quotations taken from the *International Sahaja Public School Prospectus*.


25. ibid.

26. Legal proceedings in Britain, for example, have been confined to a couple of cases concerning child custody, instituted after the departure of a parent from the movement.

27. In the last few years in the UK there has been a policy of not sending children to the India school if other family members are distressed. Thus, in 1997 when a grandparent expressed concern to the British leadership about a grandchild being sent to the school, the parents where advised by the national leader to keep the child with them.

28. For the impressions of the home visit of a seven-year old Sahaja Yoga boy attending the India school written by a set of grandparents, see FAIR News, Spring 1993.
Notes

29. A documentary about the Rome school on Italian television in 1988 raised fears after including surreptitiously filmed footage of children sleeping six to a bed and rising at 5.00 am. There has also been negative press coverage in Le Figaro, 16.5.91; Paris Match, 30.1.91; Noveau Detective, 6.6.91 and Marie France, February 1992.

30. This fact was confirmed in the translation of a legal deposition lodged in January 1992 by a German Sahaja Yogi outlining her reasons for sending her child to India. It says: “I should mention that not all the teachers in Dharamsala meditate in the Sahaja Yoga manner”.

31. Indeed, in the Report on the Sahaja Yoga School Republic of Austria, Ministry of Justice, May 1995 it says: “Despite the altitude, eight months of sunshine a year and outdoor activities and sports in the open, the European children appeared pale which was unexplainable to the visitor”.

32. Similarly, in the Church Universal and Triumphant, Shepherd and Lilliston report that a father was considering leaving the community because “I want my daughter to be able to use all the colours and not be told that black and red are bad, to be able to watch TV and have my daughter taught about dinosaurs and liberal ideas” (1994, 94).

33. Sahaja Yogis might well put forward a third reason, however, that the children are being affected by the negativity in their home environment, so supporting the idea that the best course of action is to return them to India.

34. However, in an email to the author in 1998, Swiss Sahaja Yogis said that a police enquiry into the welfare of Swiss children at the India school “ended up describing in glowing terms the above average maturity of the children and the excellent relationships within all the families.”

Chapter Eight: Leaving Mother

1. Like conversion, departure often entails dramatic shifts in identity which involve the reconstruction of the past in line with current thinking. Such reconstruction, whether by members or ex-members, is subject to socializing influences (Barker 1984; Beckford 1985). Reconstructions can shift to accommodate external events which have a bearing on the departure of members from a movement depending on the stage in the departure process which has been reached (Carter 1987). They are also likely to change over time, be influenced by those closest
Sahaja Yoga

to the ex-member and are characteristically most positive when the ex-member has subsequently experienced success in his or her life (San Giovanni 1978, cited in Wright and Ebaugh 1993).
2. Beckford (1985, 138) helpfully differentiates between models of departure from religious organisations on the basis of whether departure is regarded as “a multi-dimensional phenomenon frozen at a given point in time (synchronic)” or, as in the present case, whether the models are “mainly concerned with disengagement as a process occurring across time (diachronic)”.  
3. Other academic writers who adopt the processual model of departure include Skonovd (1983), Balch (1985) and Wright and Ebaugh (1993).
4. Thus, as one ex-member noted typically, “I suppose up to the point of leaving, for ten years, things that you didn’t understand or couldn’t agree with and didn’t think were right, you could put them aside, year after year after year” (Interview b.3.5.95).
5. Indeed, Sri Mataji has commented: “Sahaja Yogis will protest. ‘This was not good, this was done…’ Against each other, against everything they will protest, ‘Sahaja Yoga took this much money from us, this should not have happened’, they always tell me. Complaints and complaints and complaints!” (Sahaja Yoga 1988, 106).
6. Cognitive dissonance was described by Festinger et al. in their seminal study of prophetic failure as “the experience of competing, opposing or contradictory attitudes, thoughts or actions leading to a feeling of tension and a need to achieve consonance” (1956, 10). Consonance is most satisfactorily provided, they argued, by group explanations which are reinforced by social contact. When this contact is absent, such explanations do not renew the commitment of the follower. Despite the methodological weaknesses of Festinger’s study, its findings have been widely accepted.
7. This is not to suggest, as some commentators have (see, for instance Skonovd 1983), that members always evaluate their commitment on rational grounds, weighing up the advantages and disadvantages.
8. This explanation of doubt fits with Sri Mataji’s own expressed view that “if you go into a temple, you’ll find every temple has got nice arrangements for you to be possessed … you find suddenly you get attacked and come out absolutely confused, puzzled and caught up yourself, maybe ending up even in a lunatic asylum” (Sahaja Yoga 1988, 132).
9. Sri Mataji, for example, described an ex-member as ‘mad’ on television in An ex-member of Sahaja Yoga confronts Sri Mataji

10. As Sri Mataji has said, the Mother “is the one who is the most furious personality, when it comes to the killing of people who are totally negative and who are trying to destroy her creation and her children” (Sahaja Yoga, 1988, 135).


12. In the 1980s in Australia, where members have been zealously committed to Sahaja Yoga, missing some aspect of ritual practice was seen as being bound to result in misfortune. Thus: “You would not miss a foot soak. I just would not have done it because it was of the utmost importance to keep your vibrations clear and keep the negativity at bay and at that stage we were also doing daily puja... I remember one woman had terrible nightmares and the leader then said to her ‘Did you do your puja?’ and she said ‘Oh no, it was the one night I forgot’. So that really hit home to us, we thought ‘It’s not just a way of keeping the vibrations good, it’s also a way of keeping the negativity at bay’” (Interview a.3.5.95).

13. The position of those on the periphery of Sahaja Yoga is superficially similar to those on the periphery of the Neo-Sannyas Movement of Rajneesh, in that both distance themselves from organisational structures; but in practice they are somewhat different. In Sahaja Yoga, peripheral members tend to stay because of the meditation technique and its physical benefits, whereas in Neo-Sannyas they have tended to remain in contact because of the inner relationship they feel with Osho, or for social contact.

14. Although Sri Mataji has said that “those who are at the periphery are a problem, definitely, for me. Because in my compassion I cannot throw them out. Everyone has to see that the peripheral people are brought in properly, so that they don’t go out of Sahaja Yoga... everybody must try to settle down and come up to minimum standards at least. Otherwise, I’m sorry, many will be sieved out” (Sahaja Yoga 1988, 55).

15. In his study of voluntary departure, Wright (1987, 67) identified three patterns of exiting: overt, covert and declarative. All have been used in Sahaja Yoga, although there are insufficient data from the present study to confirm Wright’s own findings that, for instance, newcomers were more likely to make covert departures.

16. None of the ex-members contacted for this study had been forcibly extracted and deprogrammed from Sahaja Yoga and no record of any such event ever having happened came to light.
during the study. However, it is possible that a few Sahaja Yogis may have exited this way, thus providing a fourth mode of exit.

17. Modes of departure have been found to be significant in shaping ex-members’ accounts of the NRM they have left, at least in part, to the social influences affecting leavers. Perhaps the clearest evidence for this comes from a study of 154 apostates from a range of new religious movements reported in 1989. There, the researcher uncovered a substantial amount of data pointing towards “a high correlation between negative, cult-stereotypical attitudes and exposure to anti-cult socialization” (Lewis 1989, 386).

18. Only one exit mode is described in detail, however, that of voluntary departure. This is because, although information has been given to me privately about the other two modes of exit, the request of the ex-members concerned for confidentiality is being respected.

19. When Beckford (1985, 159) examined departures from the Unification Church, he found that most occurred on the spur of the moment. More typically, however, research into departure suggests that, whilst some may leave abruptly, most of those who leave NRM do so after a period of consideration about their commitment to the group.

20. Beckford similarly noted of ex-members of the Unification Church that they “often turned feelings of disappointment back on themselves. They felt that they had personally failed to their best” (1985, 153).

21. Less typically, there are drug addicts who have not managed to give up their addictions and who also leave Sahaja Yoga blaming themselves. Some later return (Diary 15.11.93).

22. This pronouncement was confirmed by a leading member of Sahaja Yoga on Australian television in 1987. See also The Healing Guru by Darren Horrigan in The Sun, Sydney, Australia, 1985.

23. This is notwithstanding the fact that such marriages are usually arranged by the guru.

24. Coney and Tritter (1996) outline the ways in which Sahaja Yogis conduct a low profile strategy in its dealings with the outside world, of which this behaviour is an example.

25. Similarly, the Unification Church has told some members to go away and ‘sort themselves out’ before returning (personal communication with Unification Church researcher).

26. Wright and Ebaugh describe role residue as a “hangover identity” (1993, 124). During the ‘hangover’ period, the individual continues to identify strongly with group beliefs, especially in relation to outsiders and leavers.
Notes

27. In his study of sixty ex-members of new religious movements, Skonovd found that the transition from membership to cognitive reorganisation usually lasted between six and eighteen months (in Balch 1985, 13).
28. See Chapter Two.
29. These feelings are sometimes encountered in ex-members from other movements. In a personal communication to me, for example, an ex-member of the Unification Church has described how he felt under ‘psychic surveillance’ by the group. Balch (1985, 47), also noted that a number of the defectors from the UFO cult he interviewed reported feelings of acute paranoia and fear of psychic attack.
30. Just as members begin to attribute all positive events in their lives to Sri Mataji, so such ex-members interpret all adversities to her retributive powers. Accounts of psychic attacks have included descriptions of pains in different parts of the body, seeing blackness, and feelings of disorientation. These have been accompanied by the uncomfortable realisation that the person is having unpleasant thoughts directed towards them.
31. Such confusion is common in the accounts of leavers from exclusivist NRMs (see, for instance, Wright 1987).
32. There are reports that a number of gay men are in Sahaja Yoga, perhaps attracted by the existing network of gay men in the movement, the mothering aspect of Sri Mataji and her promise that she can cure homosexuality. Some enter into arranged heterosexual marriages, which causes further tensions when couples leave.
33. As Wright noted in a general comment on departure from new religions, “even in cases in which exiting is not viewed negatively, it is difficult for ex-members to sustain relationships when interests and daily activities begin to diverge from those of group members (Wright 1993, 126).
34. San Giovanni’s research (1978) on ex-nuns found that many felt exhilaration as they tried to ‘compensate for an ‘arrested role-passage’ in their teenage years” (in Beckford 1985, 168).
35. Those who are expelled are, unsurprisingly, far less likely to express positive feelings about the group.
36. Some ex-members may have believed in the significance of dreams before joining Sahaja Yoga. Dreams are commonly meaningful for ex-members of other groups who find dreams significant. They have been associated with “exit decisions that were anxiety-provoking” rather than with ambivalence (Wright and Ebaugh 1993). Beckford found that the dreams of ex-members of the Unification Church were often guilt-ridden, perhaps reflecting the sense many
articulated of having failed Moon. Many of these dreams were frightening, although whilst in the Church, these ex-members had had positive dream experiences (Beckford 1985, 164–167).

37. A few individuals had felt vibrations prior to their joining Sahaja Yoga and were not surprised that these continued after departure. Pauline said: “Before I got involved in Sahaja Yoga I got tingling feelings in the base of my spine and then when I got ‘worked on’ I had a very strong reaction. I still have those feelings which I had before Sahaja [Yoga], but no stronger” (Interview 29.8.95).

38. It has not been possible for me to interview either Harry or his wife to confirm the details of the story but as a group narrative it is interesting on two counts. Firstly, and unusually, the departure is described declarative rather than simply overt, in the sense that the act of leaving was twinned with the act of ‘making a point’. Secondly, because the social control exercised through vibrations by Sri Mataji is, in this case, reversed.

39. Wright (1988, 159) noted that Singer (1979, 75) included “uncritical passivity” on her list of “common post cult symptoms”. This uncritical acceptance, she argued, is because converts have previously learnt to accept everything they see and hear. Her explanation bolstered her contention that members are passive rather than active throughout the process. However, those who leave NRM s have logically been able, unless expelled against their wishes, to detect cracks in the ‘plausibility structure’ of the group, so belying the notion of them as passive. Moreover, most of her informants have been de-programmed or exit-counselling.

40. Such problems, in some cases, may be acknowledged to have been present before the individual joined the movement. This is unsurprising, given that a sizeable proportion of converts seem to join having experienced a psychological or physical crisis of some kind in the months prior to joining.

41. Monthly standing orders set up by Sahaja Yogis in the UK in 1995 typically ranged from £7–£21. Followers were additionally asked to donate towards projects such as paying for the hire of the Royal Albert Hall and the buying of properties or presents for Sri Mataji. In characteristic style in 1995, for instance, 275 Australian followers were asked to raise the money for a property costing $380,00 for Sri Mataji, with the assurance that “Everyone should know that in purchasing it we are doing what Sri Mataji has asked us to do” (Sahaja Yoga 1995). Devotees also pay to attend pujas. At Diwali in Moscow in 1994 I was asked to give £108 ‘darshan money’. Once there, however, the sum was raised to £130. This increase in the rate, I was told by the British leader,
was typical, and funded the presence of the less well-off members from Eastern Europe (Diary 12.11.93).

42. Another reason for rejecting memories of their membership on the part of ex-members may be the hostility which many fear from others if they raise the subject. Ex-members across a range of NRM s in Britain often say that they feel they can speak to no-one about their experiences, either because ‘they would not understand’ or because they fear they may lose friends and employment if it becomes known generally that they have been in a cult.

43. Balch (1985, 19) similarly noted, in relation to the UFO cult, that: “several years after defecting, some former members continue to believe much of what the Two had to say”.

Appendix: Research Methods

1. As Ragin noted, “Social scientists must select from the vast amount of information that social life offers and construct their representation from carefully selected bits and slices” (Ragin 1994, 19–20).

2. The case study method has been outlined by Yin as an empirical enquiry which investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, in which the boundaries between the phenomenon and the context are not clearly delineated, and which uses multiple sources of evidence (1989, 23). It involves fieldwork which is pursued in a targeted fashion, focused on the research issue (Yin 1993, 46). Yin, however, has described this approach as one which presupposes that an objective reality can be accessed, whereas the present study of Sahaja Yoga does not.

3. The characteristics of this type of research are well documented in texts of fieldwork (Hammersley and Atkinson 1983; Agar 1980; Fetterman 1989; Burgess et al. 1994).

4. The information I obtained was from INFORM, a centre based at the London School of Economics providing accurate and well-researched information on New Religious Movements. Tel: 0171 955 7654.

5. I conducted unstructured in-depth interviews with over fifty followers which took the form of conversations of varying length, sometimes lasting for several hours. Some informants were repeatedly interviewed. These were noted in my diaries as soon as possible after they occurred.

6. As Stone said, “Showing first drafts of research reports to participants of a movement ... can be another valuable opportunity for testing biases. If the researcher cannot account for the participant’s objections, the work is not done” (Stone 1978, 145).
Sahaja Yoga

7. Drafts were, instead, shown to ex-members, chosen for their balanced attitude towards Sahaja Yoga, for comments and corrections.

8. See Stone (1978, 143) as well, who also favours such a diary for much the same reasons.

9. I applied the criteria to this documentation outlined by Scott (1990) in order to ensure its quality. This is a) authenticity – is it genuine? b) credibility – is it free from error or distortion? c) representativeness – is it typical? d) meaning – is it clear and comprehensible?

10. Responding to an article I wrote containing information from these lists, she commented in a letter (16.4.95): “I will personally advise that no names or numbers of children born to ‘Sahaja Yogis’ in the United Kingdom be mentioned on our address lists... in future, so that the joyous and precious birth of a much-loved child will not form the butt of a calculation and tabulation in the future”.

11. As Hammersley observed, “We cannot extrapolate on logical grounds from the study of a single case, or from the study of a small or large number of cases, to necessary truths about all cases of a given type” (1992, 180). Moreover, methodological problems emerge in comparing material collected from different NRMs because of an absence of consistency in techniques and focus (Balch in Robbins 1988, 14). Bearing these facts in mind, however, comparative material has been used where deemed appropriate in order to point out similarities and differences between Sahaja Yoga and other movements.

12. For instance, the Devi Mahatma.

13. This includes the children, for whom privacy is especially important (see Melton 1992, 75).

14. Dick Anthony, for instance, has reported that his study of the Jesus Freaks curtailed when tension heightened over the fact that Anthony did not convert, despite understanding the beliefs of the group. Anthony realised that his subjects were “ultimately as threatened and demoralised by his symbolic realism as they might have been by a non-empathic reductionism” (Anthony et al. 1974), although this interpretation has also been criticised (Richardson et al. 1978, 245–249). Conversion, however, has its own drawbacks (Wilson 1982, 13; 1983, 184).

15. This view of me, held by those who knew little of me, was conveyed by others more favourably inclined towards my research.

16. Although, of course, this information can be gleaned in other ways (see for instance, Wallis 1976).
Notes

17. For an evocative description of how a researcher was included, excluded and re-included in a single day in interaction with a group of Divine Light Mission premies due to permission problems, see Galanter (1989, 28–9).

18. As Robbins has noted, “There may be pitfalls in too close a collaboration of scholars with manipulative, authoritarian sects, which want to use the researcher to project a favourable image” (Robbins 1983). Such closeness has been seen as potentially problematical (Beckford, 1983), attacked (Horowitz 1983) and defended (Barker 1983; Wallis 1983).

19. Chryssides (1991, 17) similarly noted some limitations to his role as participant observer in his study of the Unification Church: “For example, I declined one member’s suggestion of undertaking certain ‘prayer conditions’ which, he said, would provide me with experiences which would demonstrate conclusively to me that there is a spirit world”. The conclusion he drew about the nature of his role as a researcher accords with my own: “the armour of the researcher is intellectual rigour rather than spiritual advancement and I have not attempted to change the rules of western scholarship”.

20. Godon’s explanation of the power of Sri Mataji’s words is very similar to that given by the guru herself at a Guru Puja in Bordi, India on February 7th 1985. There she stated that “whatever I say is a mantra. It should have a direct effect on you, and you should feel that effect, that penetration within you” (Sahaja Yoga 1988).


22. In the locket was the ‘Litany from Fear’ of the Bene Gesserit from Dune, a novel by Frank Herbert. This passage was selected because it is not explicitly religious and I wanted to avoid countering one religion with another.

23. This de-briefing was parallel to that advocated for research teams by Richardson et al. (1978, 248).

24. When I attended the Sahaja Yoga celebration of Diwali which took place in November 1993, three young Russian women came up to me during the closing stages and asked me if I was English. When I confirmed that I was, one of them then made a present of the wedding dress she had made for the event, as she had not been given a marriage partner on that occasion, as she had hoped.

26. This experience is different to that of a non Afro-Caribbean but Muslim British researcher on the Nation of Islam, engaged in participant observation. She found that the women in the group were unwilling to accept her and call her ‘sister’. However, the men with whom she had contact were happy to do so and to give her information (Afghan 1996).

27. I have formerly conducted interviews both with ex-Rajneeshees and with ex-members of a human potential movement called Exegesis and its business arm, the Programmes Group. I have had additional contact with ex-members from a variety of NRMs through my participation in the volunteer network run by INFORM.

28. Characteristically, and somewhat paradoxically given the tone of the meeting, when I thanked the leader for letting me listen, he replied: “Your being here proves that Sahaja Yoga has nothing to hide” (Diary 27.2.94).

29. Barker (1984) similarly found that she was occasionally approached with critical information by members of the Unification Church in order to effect change within the group.


Sahaja Yoga


Sahaja Yoga


Bibliography

Sahaja Yoga

Glock, C.V. (1976) Consciousness among Contemporary Youth. in Glock et al ed.
Bibliography


Sahaja Yoga

Bibliography

— (1981a) Heart to Sahasrara. Delhi, India. 9.2.81.
— (1982) Her Holiness Sri Mataji’s Advice to Western Women. Switzerland.
— (1984a) Sahasrara Day. Mesniere en Bray, France. 5.5.84.
— (1984b) Nirmala Yoga No.23.
— (1985a) Nirmala Yoga No.25.
— (1985b) Nirmala Yoga No.27.
— (1986b) Shri Mataji’s talk on childcare. Vienna, Austria. 9.7.86.
— (1992a) “Education in Sahaja Yoga: Why do we Choose to Send our Children to a Sahaj school in India?” unpublished internal document.
— (1994b) Sri Mataji at the Royal Albert Hall, London. 3.7.94.
  – A Declaration by All the Sahaja Yogis of the World.
  – Advising the Brides-To-Be. Internal Circular 2.
  – Heaven Forbid that my Child Should Interrupt or Disrupt the Speech, Work or Worship of the Adi Shakti Herself. Internal Circular 4.
  – Guru Puja, Cabella. Sahaja Yoga audio cassette. Saliba, J.

263
Sahaja Yoga

Bibliography


265
Bibliography

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Index Item</th>
<th>Page Numbers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>amrit</td>
<td>xv, 79–80, 231</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ashrams</td>
<td>xv, 27–8, 54–5, 128, 155, 162</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>authority</td>
<td>18–9, 110–4, 140–2, 196–7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>badha</td>
<td>xv, 76–7, 191</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Balch, R.</td>
<td>65, 86, 88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barker, E.</td>
<td>xiii, 2, 4–5, 8–9, 94, 96, 98, 118, 168, 195, 226, 228–9, 252</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bell, C.</td>
<td>65, 86, 88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Berger, P. and T. Luckmann</td>
<td>13–23, 145</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bhuts</td>
<td>xv, 41–42, 83, 225–6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>brainwashing</td>
<td>8–9, 66, 217</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>coconuts</td>
<td>35–36, 79, 230–1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>collective consciousness</td>
<td>65, 89–90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cool breezes</td>
<td>1, 32, 34, 36, 52–60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comoroff, J.</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>divine beings</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ganesha</td>
<td>78, 102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kalki</td>
<td>36, 93, 104, 110, 112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Krishna</td>
<td>38, 69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lakshmi</td>
<td>105, 121, 125–6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Virgin Mary</td>
<td>93, 103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dreams</td>
<td>60–1, 173, 186–7, 229, 247–8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flew, A.</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>finances</td>
<td>188, 215, 220–1, 248–9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>followers, profiles</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>adults</td>
<td>28–30, 53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>children</td>
<td>2, 131–2, 174</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foucault, M.</td>
<td>17, 19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ganas</td>
<td>xv, 37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gender</td>
<td>6, 63, 119–4, 151–2, 193–4, 235–7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goodman, F.</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>healing</td>
<td>27, 32, 48–49, 61–2, 106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hindu tradition</td>
<td>82–5, 110, 121–2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jacobs, J.</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kakar, S.</td>
<td>56–8, 227</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kundalini</td>
<td>xv, 30–34, 39, 42, 52–55, 101, 110, 128, 144, 222</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>miracles</td>
<td>44, 105–9, 219, 224</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muktananda</td>
<td>26, 217, 231</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Bibliography

nadi xvi, 30-1, negativity xvi, 38-40, 169-70
Neitz, J. 3, 18

Palmer, S. 120, 167, 235, 240
Parkin, D. 34
purity 34-8, 69, 71, 74
Pullar, P. 71, 80-1

Rajneesh 3, 26, 114-5, 147, 206-7, 217-8, 231
Ralston, H.. 121, 140

ritual
aims and effects 69
bandhan 72-4, 78, 88, 108
bhajan 101-2, 156,
foot-soaking 72-3, 228
havan 76-7, 81
lemons and chillies 42, 74-5, 226
meditation 49, 71-2, 87, 91,
157, 165, 171, 186, 228
puja 77-80, 107-9, 113,
128-9, 156-7, 230
ritual stages 70-80
shoe-beating 75-7, 88, 230
tyling up kundalini 72, 78
Robbins, T. 8, 176, 217

sadhana xvi, 29
Sahaja Yoga
conversion to 45-66, 192, 195,
226-9
departure from 168-92, 243-9
schools 139, 159-66
variation in 14-5, 43-4, 92,
114-5, 138-42, 154-5,
164-6, 195-6
self-realisation 7, 51-55

shakti xvi, 104, 125
Shotter, J. 22
social construction of reality 2,
12-23
socialization
of children 14, 145-166, 194,
240-3
secondary 3, 10-12, 86-8,
140, 193-8
somatic 16-18, 85-6, 197-8

Sri Mataji
as the Adi Shakti xv, 27, 93,
103, 105, 107, 114, 115-6,
185
as the Goddess 114, 104,
125-7, 154, 180, 196
as Mahamaya 104, 111, 169
charisma of 93-118, 193,
233-4
life 24-29
images of 35, 53, 71, 78, 83,
101, 190, 223
teachings 2, 30-42, 47, 121-5,
148-53

Tantra 29- 30, 221-2
Tonkin, E. 12
Tours 80-2, 172
Transcendental Meditation 27,
84, 220, 231

Van Zandt, D.E. 10
vibratory awareness 32, 34, 64,
186-7

Wallis, R. 42-3, 96, 107, 118,
218, 123, 234
Wilson, B. xiii, 51, 84, 200, 210
Wright, S. 171, 183