Globalisation, charisma, innovation, and tradition: An exploration of the transformations in the organisational vehicles for the transmission of the teachings of Prem Rawat (Maharaji)[1]

Ron Geaves

1. Introduction

David Smith notes that the efforts of travelling gurus, in addition to migration processes, have been significant in the global impact of Hinduism around the world (2003:180). Leaving aside the difficult question of which movements can be defined as Hindu from amongst the successful transmissions to the west and elsewhere, one of the problems for the scholar of such movements is the 'scatter-gun' pattern of transmigration. There would seem to be no obvious link or commonality between, for example, ISKCON (The International Society for Krishna Consciousness), TM (Transcendental Meditation), Brahma Kumaris, Sai Baba or Divine Light Mission other than they have all been successful in attracting non-Indian adherents, were begun by travelling gurus and were studied in the west as part of the phenomenon of 'New Religious Movements'. However, sociological study of eastern new religious movements rarely looked at their origins and background within Indian traditions, being more concerned with the western transplants and their social organisation. Consequently, little reliable knowledge of their roots (history and doctrines) in Indian *sampradaya* (religious movements) appeared other than what the movements communicated about themselves in their own publicity. I would argue that any meaningful analysis of globalisation in an Indian religious context would need to discover such common links, if indeed they exist, other than in the obvious development of the global village in the second half of the twentieth century. Each guru came from a very different *sampradaya* and caste background, social class, educational achievement, age group and region of India. However, each was able, by personal charisma, and the ability to innovate, to relocate ancient traditions in settings of modernity, giving them new dynamism and a global reach.

Consequently, the usual arguments concerning religion and globalisation do not appear to be useful in the context of Indian travelling gurus. This paper will look at these arguments but put forward the theory that the complex relationship between charisma, innovation and tradition is more useful in understanding globalisation processes in Indian *sampradaya*s moving

successfully around the globe. This paper will focus on the case study of Prem Rawat, also known as Maharaji, and the various organisations used to transmit his teachings. Prem Rawat has been successful since he left India in 1971, establishing his teachings in over eighty countries, and his original vehicle Divine Light Mission was described as the fastest growing new religious movement in the West. Thus it provides an excellent example of globalisation in this category of religious tradition. In addition, Prem Rawat has affinities with the mediaeval *nirguna bhakti* (formless devotion) tradition of Northern India, more commonly known as Sant. With its emphasis on universalism, equality, direct experience, criticism of blind allegiance to religious ritual and dogma, and tendency towards syncretism, it could be argued that if any Indian movement, given the necessary advances in communications and technology, was likely to transcend its cultural moorings, then the Sants would be high on the list.[2] Methodologically, the article will continue to assert my stance that:

> [S]ocial scientists who focus on "cult" and "sect" formation need to take into account the epistemological underpinnings of a religious movement on which its unique worldview is based, as this can be the key to understanding motivation. In this regard, ethnography needs to develop an interpretive framework that takes into account emic reality constructions as well as etic understandings that often involve impositions of one worldview onto another. (Geaves 2004a:45)

2. Prem Rawat and his organisations

In order to comprehend Prem Rawat's success in the last four decades, first only in India and then on a global scale, it is necessary to explore the various organisations that have been created as vehicles for dissemination as an aspect of 'resources', here used to describe the spiritual and material dimensions of a changing situation wherein people were able to make new meaning of their inner lives and of their lives as a group, and to situate themselves in new locations in regard to the wider society. The paper will argue, that in spite of forces such as globalisation, Prem Rawat's message as a narrative of transformation appeals because it provides some people with a more appropriate way of existing in the world. Each organisation has been an evolving attempt to produce a closer match between vision and appropriateness in order to produce a more effective resource.

The organisations that have developed over the last twenty-five years are Divine Light Mission (1971-1982); Divine United Organisation (1974-), Elan Vital (1982-2002) and The Prem Rawat Foundation (2003-). It is not so

simple as to argue that each organisation replaces the other chronologically as sometimes both are functioning at the same period, and with different purposes. However, it can be argued that each organisation has been simultaneously a response to a new situation whilst at the same time being an attempt to maintain the integrity of Prem Rawat's vision. Although it would be tempting to argue that globalisation factors, especially related to technology and the impact of Prem Rawat's teachings reaching over eighty nations, have most influenced organisational transformation, the intention of the paper is to argue that the dynamic tension between innovation and tradition in the context of a particular kind of charisma, that I am going to label 'charisma relating to the experiential dimension', has had a far more significant impact.

2.1 *Divine Light Mission*

Initially, the followers of Prem Rawat's teachings in the UK established Divine Light Mission in 1971, shortly after his first arrival in the west at the age of 13.[3] There had been a presence in the UK since 1969, located in a basement flat in West Kensington and then in a semi-detached house in Golders Green, North London. This had come about as a result of four young British members of the counter-culture, taking the 'hippy trail' to India in 1968 discovering the young Prem Rawat and his teachings and requesting that a 'mahatma' be sent to London who could promote the message and show interested individuals the four techniques known as 'knowledge'. Interest in the teachings had spread slowly by word of mouth through the counter-culture's informal networks of communication but it was only with the arrival of Prem Rawat and his subsequent appearance at the first Glastonbury festival that the teachings caught on and spread rapidly through the milieu of the disenchanted counter-culture of Britain and the US in the early 1970s. Divine Light Mission was also established in the United States and by 1972 had its international office in Denver, Colorado.

Although Divine Light Mission was established as an organisational vehicle for promoting Prem Rawat's teachings, it rapidly developed into a vigorous new religious movement with its own distinctive appearance combining the typical characteristics of a contemporary North Indian Sant *panth* (sectarian institution) in which *nirguna bhakti* was combined with intense reverence for the living *satguru* and millennial expectations of the western counter-culture (Geaves 2004a). Many of the characteristics of the Indian movement founded by Prem Rawat's father, who had died only in 1966, were imported wholesale into the western environment. Ashrams were established with a lifetime commitment of celibacy expected from those who joined. Members

were expected to forswear drugs and alcohol, and adopt a strict vegetarian diet. The teachings were primarily taught by saffron-robed mahatmas who came from India and toured the west. The teachings were essentially Hindu in origin, embracing a worldview that accepted transmigration of souls, karma, human avatars and imbedded in an interpretation of the Upanishads and the Bhagavad Gita. However, a discerning listener would have recognised the radical voice of the North Indian *nirguna bhaktas,* also defined as Sants, notably Nanak and Kabir, especially in the message of universalism, equality and the focus on inwardness rather than the outward forms of Hinduism.

It was this renewal of the Sant idiom that led many academics to mistake Divine Light Mission for an offshoot of the Radhasoami movement[4], but in fact, Prem Rawat's charisma owed itself to a combination of factors that enabled individuals to perceive something far more dynamic than an established *sampradaya* lineage could provide. His age, his ability to speak spontaneously drawing upon real life experiences, anecdotes and his own experience, rather than scriptural interpretation, and the intense devotion of his following based upon their own inner experiences combined with an already developing hagiography, led to the conviction of an individual master, uncluttered by tradition in the vein of a contemporary Kabir or Nanak. The intense *gurubhakti* had resulted in many in India regarding Prem Rawat as an avatar of Krishna or Ram.

By 1974, the movement had experienced a number of crises resulting from the marriage of Prem Rawat to Marolyn Johnson, a Californian follower; the financial crisis created by the failure to fill the Houston astrodome[5] and the disillusionment of American followers, whose millennialism had always been stronger than in Europe or Britain, when their expectations of a messianic event were not fulfilled. The marriage was to prove more significant, as it caused a deep rift in Prem Rawat's family, angered that he had not followed Indian custom, and the loss of many trusted followers inherited from the time of Prem Rawat's father. However, there was another more hidden agenda to the crisis. As Prem Rawat developed from a thirteen year old to an adolescent, about to be married and raise his own family, he was no longer prepared to be a figurehead whilst others dictated the direction and management of the movement established on the basis of his teachings. Increasingly Prem Rawat was developing his own ideas of how that vision should manifest. From 1974 to 1982 a number of new organisational forms were experimented with, including Divine United Organisation, which remained in India until recently when it became defunct, to be replaced by Raj Vidya Bhavan.

2.2 *Elan Vital*

The new organisational forms all demonstrated an embryonic vision that did not come to fruition until the 1980s with the creation of Elan Vital (see Geaves 2004b). As early as 1975, the ashrams were disbanded and the inherited Indian worldview was seriously challenged by a number of workshops originating in the USA. The majority of the mahatmas returned to India and western initiators, later to be known as instructors, were appointed, with conscious attempts to deconstruct the myth of enlightenment that had surrounded the Indian *sannyasins*. The new appointments were conceived as much more functional. This first attempt by Prem Rawat to create an organisation of his own failed, probably because the rapid transformation of the movement to an organisational form and resulting loss of the Indian metanarrative was too soon for many committed followers of the teachings. The period from 1977 to 1982 was marked by a re-opening of the ashrams and a series of international events in which Prem Rawat inspired personal loyalty and devotion from the already committed through a number of highly charismatic appearances in which he would dance on stage.

In 1982, the ashrams were finally closed, Divine Light Mission was deactivated throughout the world and a series of national organisations under the umbrella title of Elan Vital were created. Each organisation established itself according to local custom, laws and culture. For example, in Britain, Elan Vital functioned as an educational charity which existed to promote the teachings of Maharaji (Prem Rawat). The important point to note is that strenuous efforts were undertaken to ensure that Elan Vital remained an administrative tool rather than develop into a movement as Divine Light Mission had undoubtedly done. There was no membership, but a small number of paid and unpaid volunteers who looked after organisational matters such as Prem Rawat's tours, finance, legal affairs, public relations, and communication.

The closing of the ashrams took away the possibility of a committed workforce and instead Prem Rawat's activities to promote his teachings became more dependent on part-time volunteer assistance from individuals who were now raising families and creating careers for themselves. Elan Vital displayed none of the characteristics of a religion found in Divine Light Mission. For example, none of Smart's dimensions of religion[6] could be found in Elan Vital and Prem Rawat increasingly used its organisational neutrality as a vehicle to promote his message of inner peace and fulfilment with a marked decrease in the trappings of the Indian heritage. Although occasionally drawing upon Indian anecdotes to use as examples for his

teachings and referring to Kabir and Nanak, there is apparently little in his current idiom that could be linked to Hinduism, on the contrary, he openly challenges transmigration and the law of karma as only belief systems that cannot be verified as fact.

However, Elan Vital itself was to grow immensely in the last two decades of the twentieth century, and although, unlike Divine Light Mission it never displayed the characteristics of a religious movement, it had its own problems of institutionalisation, lack of spontaneity and inflexibility common to bureaucratic structures. In the first years of the twentieth-first century, Prem Rawat once again began a process of deconstruction, dismantling the over-hierarchical structures of the organisation, leaving it toothless except as a vehicle for dealing with official bodies such as hiring of halls, legal frameworks, health and safety issues, rights of volunteers, and the financial management of donations to support the promotion of the teachings.

2.3 *The Prem Rawat Foundation*

In 2003, the emphasis returned to the promotion of the message, combining in Prem Rawat's words 'the enthusiasm of the 70s with the consciousness of the 1990s'. However, the organisation was not responsible for this task, which was handed over to individuals around the world who felt personally committed to organise events and publicity, even down to inviting Prem Rawat to speak in their towns and cities. A new organisation was created by Prem Rawat, and named The Prem Rawat Foundation (TPRF). The Foundation provides a range of publicity materials and seeks opportunities for Prem Rawat to speak at public engagements such as university departments, NGOs, and business conventions. These events are independent of those organised by individuals or organisations such as Elan Vital who have benefited from practising Prem Rawat's teachings. The Foundation website states that: 'The Prem Rawat Foundation is dedicated to promoting and disseminating the speeches, writings, music, art and public forums of Prem Rawat'.[7] An interesting feature is a bookstore containing a wide range of quotations that can be self-selected to form downloadable brochures, thus enabling those individuals interested in promoting the message to create their own library of publicity materials. In his own letter introducing the Foundation, Prem Rawat writes:

> More than just words, I offer people Knowledge, a practical way to feel the contentment that is already inside them. My message is neither new nor old. It is timeless: the peace, the contentment that people seek is within. It was, is, and always will be. Now is the time

> to turn within. That is why the Prem Rawat Foundation has been created. It is my hope that through my work, and through the support of the Foundation, this message will reach those around the world with a thirst to enjoy the best there is in life.[8]

This new development provides an agency through which Prem Rawat can independently promote his message, but also offer the same independence to individuals who wish to assist him locally, organising their own events through supplying both print and electronic materials. In addition, it is now even more possible for Prem Rawat to distance himself from any organisation or movement that links him to some kind of religious activity or regards him as a spiritual leader. The possibility of Indian worldviews prevailing is even further eroded.

2.4 *Prem Rawat and globalisation*

It would be tempting to place Prem Rawat in the context of global Hinduism and the arrival of Indian gurus in the west, but this would be far too simplistic. The reality of the transformation of the organisational forms used to promote the message reveals a complex interweaving and opposition between charisma, globalisation, innovation and tradition that need to carefully assessed. Certainly Prem Rawat is very aware of the 'global village'[9] and utilises technology extremely efficiently. The small boy who used to watch jet aircraft fly high above his house and yearn to fly, and who travelled on Air India, accompanied only by one family retainer, arriving in Britain in June 1971, now pilots a leased private jet around a quarter of a million miles every year. This is, perhaps, as claimed by Elan Vital, the only effective way of reaching out to over eighty nations where his teachings are now promoted. The message goes out by satellite and cable TV, websites, video distribution and printed materials, but it is still possible to find traditional methods in remote parts of India, Nepal or sub-Saharan Africa. Prem Rawat undoubtedly could be described as a citizen of the 'global village', and certainly the successful communication of his message has drawn upon such globalised features of spirituality as the easternisation of western spirituality and the movement of Indians throughout the world, providing centres of interest in the Far East and the Pacific bowl.

David Smith points out that there is no "thorough academic study of the Hindu aspect of what is often called the guru phenomenon" (Smith 2003:168). However, he goes on to list a number of characteristics, shared by some but not all gurus, because as pointed out by Gavin Flood, the diversity

of Hinduism leads to a "heterogeneity of types" (Flood 1997:272) that should defy stereotyping. In summary Smith lists the following characteristics:

1. The guru requires submission from the disciple, whose limited powers of reason might inhibit understanding of superior truth.

2. A standard procedure in guru/disciple relationships is a process of initiation (*diksha*) in which a disciple is given a secret Sanskrit phrase (*mantra*) for either internal remembrance or external chanting.

3. A guru may either assert his authority by simply convincing people through his charisma, or alternatively lay claim to authenticity through a recognised lineage.

4. Gurus are commonly held to have special powers, at least the ability to read their disciples' thoughts, or possibly healing powers.

5. Gurus are often renunciates belonging to one of Hinduism's principal renunciate orders.

6. Gurus may claim to be an *avatar* of a deity, the supreme being or an *avatar* of a previous guru, or at least the direct and immediate representative of God. (Smith 2003:167-173)

Although Smith acknowledges that the teachings of a guru may be traditional, traditional with a new emphasis or entirely new, as in the case of Rajneesh (Smith 2003:172), a close look at Prem Rawat would find many of the above categories being undermined. Prem Rawat does not lay claim to any special powers, does not heal and has stated sardonically that the last thing he would want is access to anyone else's mind and he encourages would-be students to think for themselves, delaying formal teaching of the four techniques for at least five months during which time they should listen and resolve any questions. Prem Rawat is not a renunciate, but married with four children, and generally addresses a public audience dressed in a conservative suit, and although there is a lineage of masters behind him, he rarely refers to them. Although there are many who would assert that his authority lies in his charisma, Prem Rawat himself has stated that he does not consider himself to be a charismatic figure, preferring to refer to his teachings and the efficacy of the practice of the four techniques on the individual as the basis of his authority. The showing of the four techniques replaces the traditional *diksha*, and although it marks the sealing of

master/disciple relationship that is not emphasised in the session itself. Rather, the focus is on correct practice and staying in touch through participation or listening.

Although Prem Rawat's followers, in both east and west, have asserted strongly that he is either an *avatar* of the supreme being or one of the *avatars* of Vishnu, especially Krishna, he has gone to great lengths to assert his humanity and deconstruct the hagiography that has developed around his life.

3. Prem Rawat and globalisation theory

Globalisation theory cannot be simply viewed as a cause of these transformations. Improvements in communication systems are not a cause in themselves for religious transformation, or even the movement of new religions around the globe. New technologies are rather an intensification of certain processes of change that lie elsewhere and must still be explained as causes. Rosenberg has argued that globalisation theorists posit, "[T]he emergence of single global space as the arena of social action increasingly outweighing in its consequences other kinds of causality" (2000:3). He is critical of this approach and argues that globalisation theory has moved from *explanandum* (the developing outcome of some historical process) to *explanans* (globalisation explains the changing character of the modern world) (ibid). In addition, Prem Rawat's global popularity does not fit the type of analysis that argues that religion reasserts itself in various forms responding to the globalisation of western secular values, often creating passionate assertions of identity. It is not about self-protection, self-preservation or even self-definition.[10] Asserting particularistic or exclusivist religious identities may be one manifestation of response to Ben Barber's thesis of consumer economic imperialism creating a reaction to homogeneity (Barber 1996) but over the past twenty years Prem Rawat has moved towards more inclusive and universal rhetoric, stripping away any practices or beliefs that could have been utilised to reinforce group identity. However, Prem Rawat views the world as a 'global village' in more than McLuhan's terms. It is a positive rather than a negative vision and has more in common with Roland Robertson's idea of the "person planet" which places the well-being of each individual on an "almost sacred plane"[11] than Bauman's more negative view of the dis-ease created by the global spread of relativism and uncertainty (Baumann 1998). However, the phenomenon of Prem Rawat does not fit cosily into Baumann's "community of dreams", the like-minded counselling and new age communities, who he argues constitutes a "community of sameness", the "like-minded and like-behaving" (Baumann 2001:63-4). Any analyses of those drawn to Prem Rawat's teachings do not

indicate sameness but rather an emphasis on difference, uniqueness and individuality. His view of the world indicates not so much a physical entity drawn closer by technology and communication, and struggling to combat the spread of consumer values, but rather a 'person planet' brought together by the universal desire for fulfilment.

Prem Rawat's journey from India in 1971 has to be seen as pivotal, as it was a break from the past and a step into independence; a beginning of his own work as opposed to continuing his father's activities in India. It could be argued that this created a spatio-temporal transformation that could have only have come about through globalisation processes, but a theory of globalisation can be created out of 'anything that is seen to have a spatio-temporal dimension (Baumann 2001:4). Prem Rawat often speaks of this journey and provides the anecdote of wearing two outfits on top of each other: one western and one Indian – an example of transition between worlds. Tomlinson speaks of modern commercial flights as an example of the "intrusion of territory into space" (Tomlinson 1999:5) and states that such journeys are not simply a traversing through time by the externalities of space that result in distant places becoming accessible, but a social and cultural distance that real material space preserves (ibid).

In Prem Rawat's case this journey from Delhi to London on Air India resulted in a rapid exchange of religious and cultural baggage – a movement of tradition and ideas much faster than could be conveyed along the old silk road or by Guru Nanak's symbolic journeys to the four cardinal points of the compass, or even by Vivekananda in the nineteenth century. However, the intensification permitted by modern communications does not allow for the sophistication and ease of integration that the older and slower forms of cultural exchange permitted. The Indian framework of Prem Rawat's teachings moved instantaneously into the counter-culture drama of drug-induced mysticism, millennialism and ideas of the 'cosmic' formed by drug experience, Marvel comics and the lyrics of psychedelic music; all fuelling a not particularly well-thought out religious universalism. Several months later in 1971, a chartered Air India Boeing 747 would transport over 300 western seekers back to India to stay in Prem Rawat's ashrams in Delhi and Hardiwar. East came west and in return west went east, but to the reality rather than psychedelic projected fantasies.

The result was the establishing of Divine Light Mission as a global new religious movement, a hybrid created by these rapid speed communications of two worlds, with a fiercely passionate and exclusivist religiosity that could never be sustained. However, from the moment that Prem Rawat achieved

adulthood, he turned his attention on both the Indian ideas and practices that arrived with him, and the hybrid new religion of Divine Light Mission, and began to deconstruct it. As Divine Light Mission faded and Elan Vital emerged, Prem Rawat transformed himself from 'Guru Maharaj Ji' to 'Maharaji' and scrutinised the language used to convey the message removing all previous idioms familiar to the North Indian Sant tradition such as *satguru*, *satnam*, and *satsang.* The four techniques known as Knowledge simply became first, second, third and fourth technique rather than the Indian terminology describing light (*prakash*), sound (*nada*), holy name or word (*shabd*) and nectar (*amrit*). The exclusivism of Divine Light Mission was moderated, and although Prem Rawat still insisted upon the necessity of a living master to enliven the experience of Knowledge, his language moved more towards the non-theistic, and an assertion that the teachings were outside the domain of religion. Certainly the deconstruction that accompanied the end of Divine Light Mission removed many of the dimensions of religion that would have been recognised by Ninian Smart, leaving only an emphasis on individual experience.

The move from Divine Light Mission to Elan Vital was a shift from 'universalism' to a cultural particularity which emphasised a 'unity in diversity' rather than the imposition of an Indian conceptual framework. As the message moved around the world to over eighty countries, each place established its own organisation according to the cultural, religious and legal frameworks therein. The newly established Prem Rawat Foundation, in which for the first time utilises the given family name rather than a honorific Indian title, demonstrates a further deconstruction of Prem Rawat's role as an Indian guru, but more significantly shows a shift away from authority based on personal charisma The audiences addressed by Prem Rawat through the activities of the Foundation will provide the opportunity to place the emphasis on the message rather than the personality as these new audiences will be independent of existing congregations made up of those with a strong allegiance to the person of Prem Rawat.

4. Conclusion

In the paper's title, large abstractions appear that identify significant aspects of contemporary sociological or cultural discourse, and which manifest themselves as significant locators of religious or spiritual transformation in the study of contemporary religiosity. However, the domain of belief and faith as motivation for action is largely missing from social science discourse and is often perceived as difficult terrain. For example, the anthropologist, Talal Asad argues that recent works on religious conversion insist that the

converted are free agents making informed and free individual choices (Asad 1993). However, for Talal Asad, conversion is a function of social forces rarely in the convert's control (ibid:263).

I intend to reassert the well-known words of Rudolf Otto: "For if there be any single domain of human experience that presents us with something unmistakably specific and unique, peculiar to itself, assuredly it is that of religious life" (1958:4). Pals has pointed out that even sociologists such as Robert Bellah and Peter Berger have stated that the best way to enter the world of religious phenomena is to accept the idea of the 'irreducible sacred' (1999:180). Pals quotes Berger as stating, "I would recommend that the scientific study of religion return to the perspective on the phenomenon 'from within', that is, to viewing it in terms of the meanings intended by the religious consciousness" (1999:180). Robert Wilken states that, "[H]ow something is perceived is an aspect of what it is" (Wilken 1986:xiii). In the case of Prem Rawat (Maharaji) and the various vehicles utilised to promote a message, perceptions range dramatically across the insider/outsider spectrum and I have given due consideration to the insider's understanding of reality construction and motivation as well as various theorists of globalisation, charisma and institutionalisation

Tomlinson (1999) argues that it is possible to perceive a general pattern of the dissolution of links between cultural experience and territorial location. This argument could also be extended to religion. However, any analysis of the religious domain must take into account the unique features of belief and practice. Prem Rawat's self-perceptions and those of his followers regarding him have to be analysed in order to fully understand the changes over the last thirty years. Religions are never static as they consist of living communities enduring through time, and increasingly across space. It would be easy to see the transformations as due to the transmigration from east to west. Listening to Prem Rawat's discourse echoes the motto of the Royal Society, *in verba nullius*. Secular western societies since the Enlightenment, are increasingly sceptical of any authority that is vested in claims to be venerable or sacred. Prem Rawat's attitude to religious tradition is similar to the reference in the 1846 Communist Manifesto to, "[T]he burden of all the dead generations weighing like a nightmare on the mind of the living". His message is promoted for the living with no claims to an afterlife, and his eschatological position is one of immanence and imminence. The emphasis on experience and a living master could be compared with Thomas Paine's statement that, "[T]he vanity and presumption of governing beyond the grave is the most ridiculous and insolent of all tyrannies," (1798:9) but once again transferring the sentiments to the realm of religion. Griffand (forthcoming) states that this

is a uniquely modernist position to traditional authority that arose because the rise of science depended on a view of truth as 'not back there' but rather through experiment and verification. Griffand argues that traditional societies deferred to their predecessors. Yet any attempt to analyse the epistemology of Prem Rawat would have to explore the complex inter-relationship of modernity, on one hand, and the teachings of the North Indian *nirguna bhaktas*, on the other, who espoused their own critique of tradition and emphasised the experiential.

Prem Rawat's teachings make no reference to any traditional authority, neither person nor text. The shift in language, directly appealing to human understandings of their own existential dilemma, removed the earlier and more Indian- orientated style of a traditional Sant idiom that could be grounded in reference to previous sacred figures and texts, providing authenticity by comparison and asserting that the message conformed to the 'real' meaning of sacred text. This brings the paper to the issue of authority. Weber's ideal charismatic authority, was not only unpredictable and unstable, requiring routinisation in order to provide continuity, but was also centred in the personal qualities of the charismatic leader and demanding obedience. Charisma and tradition are seen as having an antagonistic relationship with each other. Prem Rawat could be defined as charismatic only in the latter sense. He does not demand obedience, in that no outer requirements or prohibitions are placed on those taught the techniques. The simple axiom, "If you like it, practice it, if you don't, try something else," is applied on frequent occasions in his public discourses. Neither does Prem Rawat regard himself as an exemplary leader, a role often ascribed to religious founders.

The changes in organisational structures could be perceived as 'unpredictable' but I have argued elsewhere that these are best understood as part of the ongoing creative tension between tradition and authority (Geaves 2004a). Utilising Gold's (1987) analysis, it could be argued that Prem Rawat perceives himself as the solitary Sant whose authority is derived from his message and the authority placed in him by his own master, and therefore is not bound to any overarching formal organisation and nor does he have to subscribe to any particular religious tradition or worldview.[12] Gold argued that such figures have little inclination to establish a *panth* or sectarian institution. Thus, any understanding of Prem Rawat's motivations would have to take into account the challenge to maintain the purity of his teachings from any sign of institutionalisation, including the traditional forms of Sant *panths* and lineages that have developed in the twentieth century such as Radhasoamis or Sant Nirankaris, even though these have organisational

similarities to the defunct Divine Light Mission. In fact, it is unlikely that Prem Rawat would fully agree to the definition of Sant as he would consider that this in some way defined the indefinable, even though he has stated publicly that he regards his teachings as part of *bhaktimarg*. In O'Dea's terms this is a classic confrontation between charisma, on one hand, and institutionalisation, on the other. O'Dea argues that the founder-innovator is only concerned with the communication of the message and maintaining the spontaneity of the experience.[13] Although O'Dea perceives these conflicts and tensions chronologically as a way of exploring the development of charismatic authority to institutional authority, an analysis of a new Sant phenomenon still at the first stage of development provides an example of how a contemporary Sant, the first to fully globalise his teachings, grapples with and seeks innovative solutions to the problems of institutionalisation and continuity. Prem Rawat appears to have chosen a route of perpetual transformation in which organisational forms are created and utilised and then destroyed, thus providing a flexibility to deal with rapidly changing social attitudes or cultural diversity, but, above all, to keep his students focussed on the core message rather than the peripheral requirements of organisational forms.[14]

Any analysis that attempts to assert globalisation as a cause for these transformations would have to bear in mind the flowing tension between charisma, tradition and innovation. As Flood reminds us, the gurus who came from India represented a broad range of Indian traditions. The Sant phenomenon of Northern India, with its emphasis on inner experience of immanence and *nirguna bhakti*, under the guidance of a living master (*satguru*) and its criticism of established religions and exotericism, already contained a universalism that predisposed it to crossing both geographic and religious borders, whilst asserting a particularism that defined itself as either above religion or alternatively as an essential religion. This is evident in the formation of the Sikh sacred texts and in the symbolic value of Nanak's four journeys. Although there is nothing inevitable in the arrival of a Sant teacher in the west, the universalism that is innate to the worldview makes it likely that the Sant notion of truth would one day break out of the confines of India's claim to ownership as part of the Hindu tradition. Certainly, the communication revolution enhanced the actuality, but I would argue was only a case of intensification rather than a cause. Certainly Prem Rawat has used technology to open up a transnational space, which to some degree, for those who have embraced his teachings forms a transnational social space, especially for those who meet together when attending his various events worldwide. Short argues that globalisation is the construction of space and the creation of place. Space is constructed through cultural homogenisation

and space-time convergence, whereas place is created through community consciousness and self-conscious constructions of ethnic identity, forces that can operate to both connect and differentiate the world (Short 2001:18). Prem Rawat's message claims to be an age-old renewal concerning real identity and self-knowledge that transcends all of the above categories of identity formation and as such could be described as 'supra-global' rather than 'transglobal'. I would argue that his focus on 'world' as personhood rather than a geographical location would permit a 'supra-global' analysis which would lend itself to the image, described by Smith as seen on a contemporary poster, of Ganesh, the Hindu god of wisdom and knowledge, sitting confidently astride the globe. As Flood (1997:273) points out, not all Indian traditions have reacted to contemporary global culture with exclusive defensiveness, some have drawn upon ancient narratives of inclusiveness and universalism to contribute positively to the emergence of a new global culture. Any analysis of transformation in the organisational forms used to convey the message would need to take into account the tensions between maintaining the 'supra-global' with the need to engage with the practical concerns of resourcing a message which is increasingly 'transglobal'.

References

Asad, Talal, 1993, *Introduction to Genealogies of Religion: Disciplines and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*, London: John Hopkins University Press.

Barber, Ben, 1996, *Jihad versus McWorld*, New York: SUNY.

Baumann, Zygmunt, 1997, *Postmodernity and Its Discontents*, Oxford: Polity Press.

Baumann, Zygmunt, 1998, *Globalization: the Human Consequences*, Cambridge: Polity Press.

Baumann, Zygmunt, 2001, *Community: Seeking Safety in an Insecure World,* Cambridge: Polity Press.

Collier, Sophie, 1975, *Soul Rush: An Odyssey of a Young Woman in the 70s*, New York: William Morrow.

Flood, Gavin, 1997, *An Introduction to Hinduism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Foss, Daniel and Ralph Larkin, 1978, "Worshipping the Absurd: The Negation of Social Causality Among the Followers of Guru Maharaji," *Sociological Analysis* 39.2.

Geaves, RA, 2002, "From Totapuri to Maharaji: Reflections on a Parampara (lineage)", The 27th Spalding Symposium on Indian Religions, Regents Park College, Oxford, 22-24 March, to be published as Geaves, RA, 2006, "From Totapuri to Maharaji (Prem Rawat)?" in Anna King, ed, 2006, *Reflections on a Lineage (parampara) in Indian Religions: Renaissance and Renewal*, London: Equinox.

Geaves, RA, 2004a, "From Divine Light Mission to Elan Vital and beyond: An Exploration of change and adaptation", *Nova Religio* 7.3 45-62.

Geaves, RA, 2004b, "Elan Vital" in *Encyclopaedia of New Religions*, Christopher Partridge, ed, Oxford: Lion Publishing, pp 201-202

Geaves, RA, 2005, "Forget transmitted memory: The de-traditionalized 'religion' of Prem Rawat'", *Religion and Society: Challenging Boundaries*, 28th Conference of the International Society for the Sociology of Religion, Zagreb, 18-22 July.

Gold, Daniel, 1987, *The Lord as Guru: Hindu Sants in the Northern Indian Tradition*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Griffand, Paul, 2005, "Religious Authority: Scripture, Tradition, Charisma" in John Hinnells, ed, *The Routledge Companion to the Study of Religion*, London: Routledge, pp 379-392

Juergensmeyer, Mark, 1991, *Radhasoami Reality: The Logic of a Modern Faith*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Lyon, David, 2002, "'Religion and Globalization" in *Dictionary of Contemporary Religion in the Western World*, Christopher Partridge, ed, Leicester: Intervarsity Press, p68.

O'Dea, Thomas, 1978, "Sociological Dilemmas: Five Paradoxes of Institutionalisation" reproduced in Whitfield Foy, ed, *Man's Religious Quest*, Milton Keynes: Open University Press, pp 298-314.

Paine, Thomas, 1798, *Rights of Man*, London: Wordsworth Classics.

Pilarzyk, Thomas, 1978, "The Origin, Development, and Decline of a Youth Culture Religion: An Application of Sectarianization Theory," *Review of Religious Research* 20.1, pp 23-43.

Price, Maeve, 1979, "Divine Light Mission as a Social Organization," *Sociological Review*, 27.2, February, pp 279-296.

Ramadan, Tariq, 2004, *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam*, Oxford: Blackwell.

Rosenburg, Justin, 2000, *The Follies of Globalization Theory*, London: Verso.

Short, John Rennie, 2001, *Global Dimensions: Space, Place and the Contemporary World*, London: Reaktion Books.

Smart, Ninian, 1995, *Worldviews: Crosscultural Explorations of Human Beliefs*, New Jersey: Prentice Hall.

Smith, David, 2003, *Hinduism and Modernity*, Oxford: Blackwell

Tomlinson, John, 1999, *Globalization and Culture*, Cambridge: Polity Press.

Wilken, Robert, 1986, *The Christians as the Romans saw them*, New Haven: Yale University Press.

Notes

[1] This article is based on a paper presented at the international conference on Alternative Spiritualities and New Age Studies, The Open University, Milton Keynes, 30 May to 1 June 2003.

[2] In fact, the Sant tradition had collected western adherents prior to Prem Rawat and Divine Light Mission, although not too successfully in terms of numbers or geographical spread. The Radhasoamis of Satsang Beas had British followers from the early decades of the twentieth century (see Juergensmeyer (1991)).

[3] A comprehensive historical account of the various movements used by Prem Rawat can be found in Geaves (2004a). There was an earlier literature on Divine Light Mission but academic study ceased in the early 1980s and did not reappear until my own studies twenty years later. See Foss and Larkin (1978); Price (1979); Pilarzyk (1978) and Collier (1975).

[4] See my refutation of this claim and the placing of Prem Rawat's background as originating out from his father's guru, Swarupanand Ji Maharaji. The s*ampradaya*

founded on the lineage of gurus including Swarupanand Ji and his guru, Advaitanand Ji, calls itself Advait Math and sees its roots originating in Advaita Vedanta and the Dasnami renunciates (Geaves 2002).

[5] In November 1973, Divine Light Mission had booked the Houston Astrodome, a large sports stadium with a capacity of 90,000. The event had taken on millennial expectations in the US, with devotees announcing and advertising Maharaji's appearance at the stadium as a second-coming, complete with angelic and alien visitors. Only 20,000 attended the event and Maharaji did not appear to have any knowledge of his American followers's expectations. He spoke as he usually does at such gatherings with no hint of messianic promises.

[6] Elan Vital was set up wherever possible as an educational charity. Although meetings hosted by Elan Vital for Maharaji to speak would have exhibited to the observer an experiential dimension expressed in the feelings of the audience towards the speaker, there was no evidence of Smart's ritual, mythical, or ethical dimensions. The emphasis was on the individual experience rather than any community belonging thus negating the social dimension. The only material dimension evident was the sale of DVDs, video and audio tapes of Maharaji's discourses, although there are permanent locations in India and one in Australia. Ninian Smart has defined religion by the presence of six or seven dimensions, namely experiential, ethical, doctrinal, mythical, ritual, social and sometimes material in a number of works, the most recent being Smart (1995).

[7] Home page of www.tprf.org visited on 12 May 2003.

[8] Letter written to introduce The Prem Rawat Foundation in www.tprf.org.

[9] Marshall McLuhan first coined the idea of the global village in his influential analysis of the change of media from print to electronic forms. In 1968 he utilised the phrase in his *War and Peace in the Global Village*. In particular, McLuhan emphasised the ability of television to immerse people in events, to bring them to other peoples and places together on a high-speed simultaneity. McLuhan was writing before the invention of personal computers, cellular telephones or the worldwide web but accurately foresaw the consequences of such developments in technology.

[10] Tariq Ramadan summarising key globalisation theories with regard to religion in Ramadan (2004:4). Zygmunt Baumann would seem to be main proponent of the argument that there is an intimate connection between political and religious tribalisation and the economic forces of globalisation (Baumann 1997:65).

[11] Roland Robertson cited by David Lyon (2002:86).

[12] Gold has suggested that the various forms that sant lineages have taken is affected by their relationship to the charisma of the founder Sant. He posits a three stage theory in the life of Sant lineage: a) It begins with a solitary figure such as Kabir, Nanak, or Ravidas. Their authority is derived from their own personal charisma, and it is highly unlikely that they had any intention of beginning a *panth* (see definition below). The followers of an individual Sant were part of no overarching formal organisation, but were united with their teacher in commitment to the value of personal experience. b) These lineages are sometimes continued by disciples who

became noteworthy Sants in their own right. Usually the disciple is chosen to continue as the Guru by the original Sant. A Sant lineage is called a *parampara* as long as the dominant focus of spiritual power is still contained in the living holy man. Sikhism, for example, was thus a *parampara* until the death of the tenth Guru, Gobind Singh. c) The term *panth* is used for the final phase of Sant lineage, when it has become a sectarian institution. The *panths* claim to spread the teachings of the past Sant(s), but the dominant focus of spiritual power now resides in ritual forms and scripture. A *panth* is usually officiated over by a *mahunt* who looks after the ritual and administration. Often even the *mahunt* is overseen by a committee of eminent followers as the *panth* becomes progressively institutionalised. The *mahunt's* charisma is clearly derived from his position, and his traditional connection to the original Sant (Gold 1987:85).

[13] It is the first two dilemmas that are particularly useful for the arguments presented here. In the dilemma of mixed motivation, O'Dea argued that the only motivation of the founder-innovator is communicating his or her message, but that successors will have additional motivations, such as personal power, prestige, status, and influence. The Symbolic Dilemma deals with the conflict between the spontaneity of the transcendental experience, often ecstatic, and the requirements for the fruits of that experience to be stored up and passed on for the benefit of future generations. Thus the symbols of a faith, especially sacred objects like scriptures or liturgies and sacraments are preserved and formalised in sacred rites and objects to meet the psychological needs of successive generations of followers.

[14] For an in-depth treatment of this continuous process of deconstruction, see Geaves (2005).

"Globalisation, charisma, innovation, and tradition: An exploration of the transformations in the organisational vehicles for the transmission of the teachings of Prem Rawat (Maharaji)", © Ron Geaves, 2006, *Journal of Alternative Spiritualities and New Age Studies*, 2 44-62.