The New Age Cycles Back to India
Category : April/May/June 2009
Published by senthil on Jun. 01, 2009

Culture

The New Age Cycles Back to India

A Western movement sparked by Hindu mysticism is embraced through books and magazines by some in the culture that gave it birth

The "new age" is a movement that became popular in the West in the 1960s and 1970s. At that time, it carried a clear Eastern pedigree, drawing from Hindu mysticism and Western occult teachings that appealed to the idealist counterculture then in the ascendancy. But over the course of the 80s and 90s, virtually all overt signs of Hinduism faded away. New Age authors, writing for a Christian and Jewish readership, retained popular Sanskrit words in their books, such as chakra, but with a nonspecific spiritual connection. Cut from its Eastern roots, the still popular New Age morphed from a quasi-religious movement to a loose spiritual philosophy with a strong marketing angle, aimed primarily at women, promoting health, beauty, inner peace and successful relationships.

Recently, decades after its blossoming in the West and 8,000 miles away, the "New Age" has surfaced in India in the form of popular books, magazines and products. But in the process, someone forgot to tell the Indian journalists (who were writing for Hindu readers) that the "New Age" isn't supposed to be overtly Hindu. But this lapse has not stalled its popularity. Hinduism Today dispatched its correspondents to investigate the nature of India's New Age mystical, cultural phenomenon which journeyed India to the West and back to India again.

In India, It's Just Hinduism

Priyanka Malhotra, director of Full Circle Books, tells us, "The term New Age was coined in the US, and there people connect it to the hippie culture, or to magic. But it's actually about peace, love and understanding. Over the years, people misused and misunderstood the term in the West." Priyanka's Delhi-based publishing house

and bookstore chain specializes in what she calls the "body, mind, spirit" segment of the publishing trade. "If I have to define the concept of New Age in the Indian mind, it is anything that goes beyond the physical body, and anything alternative to the mainstream."

"Our books on yoga, meditation and finding inner peace do very well," Priyanka explains. "There is a wide demand for these from people who are looking for a life beyond materialism." Intent on also appealing to the five senses, her stores offer music, candles, incense, herbal food and natural drinks, as would a comparable store in San Francisco. Priyanka says that men and women are equally drawn to their products.

One of the most popular titles at Circle Books is You Can Heal Your Life. Another top seller is Mind the Gap, which Priyanka tells us is about "bringing spirituality into daily life without renouncing the world and material possessions." The shelves are brimming with such guides on how spirituality can improve your personal life.

Swati Bhise, a customer at the Delhi store, comments: "It is good that in today's fast-paced life people can find spiritual books this easily, or audio books to listen to while on the move. New Age books have made it very simple. If we need a particular mantra, for example, we can find it on a tape or in books that are easily understandable and not complicated." Swati sees no conflict between the New Age trend and her Hindu background. Hinduism, she explains, is an essential part of her profession. "I was the first disciple of Sonal Mansingh (a famous Odissi dancer). To be a dancer you have to have knowledge of our ancient Hindu scriptures. You have to study sculpture and temple architecture; without this, you cannot learn the art of dancing."

Prakash Kumar, also here shopping for books, relates, "New Age books are an extension of Hinduism. It is clear when you read these books. I even feel it is good that New Age authors do not mention that their works are sourced from Hinduism. Otherwise their readership would be restricted. What I like the most is that they project the message in a simple way. Our traditional books are vast and difficult to digest."

Abhishek Jain of Motilal Banarsidass, one of India's largest and most respected

publishers, started a New Age line eight years ago. Abhishek, who now specializes in that niche, explains, "These are books to heal yourself, to study yourself. Chakras, yoga, meditation, Reiki, auras, self-healing and alternative therapies are some of the popular subjects. Tai Chi, Chinese medicine, vastu and parapsychology are also part of our New Age section. Our collection also includes titles on Hindu Gods and Goddesses, Sai Baba, Buddhism, Ramana Maharishi and Hindu philosophy." Describing a market that is just the opposite in the West, he says, "We even carry a few titles on Islamic mysticism, but no books on Christianity. Christians don't buy these books, only Hindus and Buddhists do." He notes that there is plenty of room for growth in this segment: "I can see increasing market possibilities in India and in the Southeast Asian markets. Sometimes we buy the rights to a title for all of South Asia."

New Age Magazines

A popular side of India's New Age niche is the magazine market, paralleling the American trend. Titles in top demand include Life Positive, Soul Curry and The Eternal Solutions, which recently celebrated its tenth anniversary. It is published monthly in color with a respectable print run of 65,000. Its many advertisers exemplify the favorable winds propelling this progressive market.

India's New Age journals closely follow their American precursors in content and style, with a look that is sometimes almost identical (see photos on page 63). Most articles celebrate success, harmony and, inexorably, consumerism. But there are two notable differences between the American and Indian magazines. First, overt religious content in Indian articles is far more abundant, mostly Hindu, and unapologetic--rarely toned down, simplified or disguised. Second, women are assumed to be the substantial part of the readership, but not all of it. Many Indian advertisers clearly aim at a male audience.

Pandit R.K. Sharma, an astrologer, is the main figure behind The Eternal Solutions, which he dubs "India's first manual to life" in a magazine format. Sharma writes about dharma, astrology, karma, Hindu Gods, reincarnation and other spiritual subjects, and uses excerpts from the Gita and the Vedas to address questions sent by readers. Still, he sees it as a New Age magazine. "If we had tried to pass on Hindu knowledge more overtly, people may not have accepted it easily. So we described our magazine as a 'manual to life.' We must use the New Age material for bridging the gap between the old and new generations, because what happens is

that it actually passes on the message of Sanatana Dharma."

"The whole idea behind The Eternal Solutions," Sharma explains, "is to improve the intentions of people. Negativity is being promoted by so many in the media. When I had started the magazine, many friends in the media were skeptical of its commercial viability. But I was inspired from within. I proceeded, thinking that even if it brought no profit, it would still be my way of serving people. Today we are a commercial success while still keeping to the original intentions."

The Eternal Solutions bears resemblance to its American counterparts. Sprinkled among the feature articles are tidbits of news and advice that reflect a secular side of the magazine. Advertisements for housing developments, fashionable clothing and spa retreats target an upscale readership. Sharma confirms, "We are read by intellectuals, businessmen, politicians and industrialists. A sizable number of our readers are judges."

"Though New Age publications are using a lot of ideas from Hinduism," Sharma points out, "they do not give due credit to it. In our case, what I write is based on what the spiritual masters and scriptures of my tradition have said. The rishis created it all. That has been the foundation of my learning; how could I deny that?"

Another magazine in this genre, Life Positive, takes a holistic approach to news that encompasses mind, body and spirit. Touting itself as an early example of "spiritual journalism," the magazine often focuses on the life-affirming initiatives of high-minded individuals. The theme of spirituality runs throughout the articles, as contributors work to weave spirit into all facets of daily life, from home decor to fashion, from food to work. Advertisements take an interesting departure from its Indian New Age peers. They are, by far, the most mystically oriented, featuring New Age remedies to ailments, New Age solutions to personal problems, workshops and consultations for those seeking divine energies, retreats to achieve Self-realization, and herbs and naturopathic supplements to restore health.

Soul Curry is a newcomer to the market. Well written and intellectually dense, it is published by devotees of Haryana-based Anandmurti Gurumaa, whom Wikipedia calls "a New Age spiritual guide." She is known for her universalistic discourses and for translating the Sufi poems of Rumi into the Hindi language.

With regular sections on spirituality, meditation and Zen, Soul Curry presents itself as a voice for those who wish to be "free from the clutches of religion, dogmas and societal conditioning." Nevertheless, the articles are permeated by spirituality and reference to religions and religious figures. Soul Curry publishes mystical texts from many traditions, focusing primarily on the philosophy of Advaita and connecting with one's inner divinity.

Soul Curry is more oriented to women than its counterparts, repeatedly encouraging women, for example, to "empower" and "divinize" their lives. Though its editorial line closely follows the philosophy of Gurumaa, the magazine has an appeal beyond her devotees. Its advertisements, always a good indication of who is thought to be reading a magazine, are upscale and include engineering firms, high-end real estate projects, health products and pharmaceutical firms.

Where does all this leave us? In "The Hostile New Age Takeover of Yoga," back in America (an article in the online journal Slate, March 2007), Ron Rosenbaum laments the "commodification" and "dumbing down" of yoga and the Eastern philosophy that gives meaning to the practice. One of his readers agreed wholeheartedly, writing that she stopped subscribing to Yoga Journal "when there were more recommendations for $130 pants and $4,000 retreats than there were actual discussions of philosophy and form." They could not have made the same complaints about the New Age in India--and that's a good thing. PIpi

India interviews by Rajiv Malik; New Age magazine analysis by Colleen Morrison

9 Beliefs of the West's New Age Movement

The term New Age was coined to denote an awakening of the mass consciousness to deeper realities and the need for individual attunement with universal, higher consciousness and creative transformation. In practice, New-Age thinking embraces myriad enlightenment teachings, mostly of Eastern origin--from crystallography to Zen, parapsychology to holistic medicine. Below is a summary of its beliefs formulated by Hinduism Today that reflect the movement in the 1970's U.S.

I believe in the one Eternal Source or Ultimate Reality, called by many names, which flows through all forms of nature and can be known through spiritual realization and experience.

I believe in unseen worlds and beings who may interact with our world, and that some are benevolent and help guide and protect us, while others are malevolent, and that channeling, or mediumship, is a means of contacting such souls.

I believe that the world is a dynamic, conscious entity; that mankind is but one part of the cosmic ecology and that, as stewards, we must treat the world responsibly, with love, respect and reverence.

I believe that consciousness is present in and conveyed through some structures more than others. Thus, for example, crystals are powerful sources or channels of knowledge and spiritual strength.

I believe in meditation, trance, rebirthing, self-healing, channeling, past-life regression, crystals, sexual tantras, drugs and more as effective tools in the quest for wholeness and oneness with the sacred, and that one should continue to explore alternatives and not feel restricted to the disciplines of any one system of thought.

I believe the world has entered the New Age, the age of Aquarius, awakening to the consciousness of love, selflessness, compassion and creativity, from the old age of hatred, war, ignorance and greed. Those who perceive this vision should share it with others to uplift society.

I believe that traditional religions are outmoded and that we are moving toward a universal brotherhood; yet, the Eastern religions and so-called primitive faiths are rich reservoirs of truth and spiritual practice.

I believe in nonconformity and noncommitment: that each person is responsible to

his or her own conscience only and not to the dictates of society which often unduly hamper freedom of expression, and that even spiritual gurus are to be approached with circumspection.

I believe that many of society's traditional economic and social structures are outmoded and should be abandoned for ones which reflect New Age consciousness, and that dropping out of society is a valid New Age alternative.

The New Age: 121 Years Young

Helena blavatsky, the founder of Theosophy, made first use of the term "New Age" in her 1888 book The Secret Doctrine, in reference to an upcoming era when the world would become a place of understanding and cooperation, free from wars, diseases and greed.

Her book introduced to a European audience key Hindu concepts, such as dharma and the cyclical nature of time. Teeming with Sanskrit terms like manvantara and pralaya, her work paved the way for other occultist societies to re-examine the mystical teachings of Western schools under the light, of Eastern mysticism. For the first time, teaching on the chakras, reincarnation and dharma were presented alongside the esoteric mysticism of the Abrahamic faiths.

Ms. Blavatsky founded a group dedicated to the exploration of these ideas, the Theosophical Society. On its seal (inset), Theosophy sported an aum and a swastika, along with the star of David, an Egyptian ankh cross and the alchemical ouroboros, a snake swallowing its tail.

The investigation of occult aspects of the world's religions instigated by Ms. Blavatsky was not a marginal subject in its day. It interested the educated bright-minded gentlemen, scholars, thinkers, poets and scientists. Theosophy influenced the likes of Aldous Huxley, Wassily Kandinsky, Piet Mondrian, Franz Kafka, William Butler Yeats and T. S. Eliot. Sherlock Holmes, fictional hero of the acclaimed series of detective books by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, met an untimely death when his author decided to end the series by killing his hero so Doyle could dedicate himself fully to studying reincarnation, elementals and Spiritualism.

By the early 20th century, two other movements--Spiritualism and New Thought--had emerged as popular disseminators of New Age concepts. Both were replete with distinctly Hindu ideas that were heretical to mainstream Christianity.

Spiritualism, founded by the Swedish mystic Emanuel Swedenborg in the 1700s, introduced the daring theory that the dead do not lay asleep awaiting Judgement Day, but roam the subtle planes in ethereal bodies--a view that coincides perfectly with the Hindu view. Much of Spiritualism's appeal came from the thrilling possibility of contacting deceased loved ones through trained mediums, a practice that is also recognized in the East. In addition to popularizing seances and mediumship, Spiritualism introduced multitudes to the concept of reincarnation. Seances revealed that many of the dearly departed were waiting not for a train to heaven, but a ticket back to Earth.

New Thought, the third branch of the early New Age movement, was founded in late 19th-century America by a group of spiritual thinkers. It maintains that God is ubiquitous, that spirit is the totality of real things, and the true human self is divine. It focuses on the correct use of the power of thoughts, visualizations and vibrations.

The New Age movement, per se, came into prominence in the 1960s, manifesting as a counterculture that swept across the West, especially among college-age youth, who brazenly opposed the Vietnam War and questioned the ways of society. Many turn to Eastern teachings, occultism and drugs. Folk musicians, like Bob Dylan, Joan Baez, Cat Stevens and Joni Mitchell, brought New Age thought to the mainstream through compelling, impassioned, often revolutionary songs.

In 1967, singers in the musical drama called Hair stamped the phrase "This is the dawning of the Age of Aquarius!" into the minds of Americans. That era of Earth's evolution, will, according Theosophist Alice Bailey, officially begin when the Sun is in Aquarius on March 21, the vernal equinox. The song continued, "Harmony and understanding/Sympathy and trust abounding/...Mystic crystal revelation/And the mind's true liberation/Aquarius! Aquarius!" The "Age of Aquarius" became a synonym for the New Age, described as a period in which organized religions would disappear and humankind would abide in universal brotherhood.

Adopting the catch-phrase, the New Age Journal was launched in 1974. It became a central source of wisdom for a wider New Age following. As "liberated" youth of the early 1970s embraced the movement, they also shaped and changed it. Building on the foundation of chakras, reincarnation, yoga and esoteric Christian teachings, they encompassed healing crystals, benign extraterrestrials, Mayan prophecies, ecology, parapsychology, mentalism, Zen, trance, self-healing, channeling, past-life regression, sexual tantras, psychedelic drugs and myriad techniques to raise individual and collective consciousness.

In December, 1987, the New Age made the cover of Time magazine with a photo of actress Shirley MacLaine, holding a cluster of crystals. The headline read, "The New Age, Starring Shirley MacLaine, faith healers, channelers, space travelers and crystals galore." In the same year, an event called the "Harmonic Convergence" engaged extensive media coverage as followers gathered across the globe, from Stonehenge to the Golden Gate Bridge, from Buenos Aires to Copenhagen, to celebrate a cosmic occurrence that marks the start of a new era of peace and spirituality, as foretold in the Mayan calendar.

New Age ideas had entered the mainstream. Tending to the proper spinning of one's chakras was suddenly a concern of millions of American women. Meditation, "Higher Self," energies and vibrations became common parlance. New publications spoke to this public interest, including Psychic Guide Magazine (later renamed Body, Mind & Spirit), Yoga Journal and New Age Voice.

Many authors found fame and fortune with New Age books. Louise Hay's title on self-healing, colors and energy, You Can Heal Your Life, sold 35 million copies; James Redfield's The Celestine Prophecy, revealing Mayan secrets, sold 23 million. Bestselling authors, like Eckhart Tolle and Deepak Chopra, skillfully repackaged Hindu and Eastern religious concepts for their Western audiences.

As the appetite for books and magazines grew, so did the market for related products and a healthy, spiritual lifestyle. Over the years, most publications adapted their tone and content to please advertisers and reach wider audiences. The pioneering New Age Journal, for example, changed its name to Body + Soul after it was bought by America's most influential homemaking consultant, Martha Stewart. Today it is aimed almost completely at a female audience, espousing a

secular approach to spirituality and filtering out any reference to religion. This is typical of most Western publications of this genre, in which the "New Age" has become a mere shadow of its former, deeply spiritual self.