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## **Influence of a Psycho-Cult on Personality: Theoretical Aspect (the Case of Psycho-Cult “Vedic Feminity”)**

E. S. Lutoshliva, O. A. Osipenok, E. D. Kalinovskaya, I. M. Karnakova

*Irkutsk State University, Irkutsk, Russian Federation*

**Abstract.** The article considers a number of aspects concerned with the influence of psycho-cults on the personality of its adherers basing on the literature theoretical analysis on the case of the psycho-cult “Vedic feminity”. The authors have identified certain sect attributes peculiar to the psycho-cult “Vedic feminist”: focus on personal contact in the recruitment process; the commitment to turn the member into a successful person; a mentor personality cult; deprivation of conviction in one’s own beliefs and reassessment of the passed life; creating dependence on the organization and turning the member into an obedient doer. The authors examined the process of taking control over a personality and consciousness on the BITE Model, which includes the control over behavior, information, thinking, and emotions. The findings have revealed that affiliation with a psycho-cult changes self-esteem and self-acceptance of female members, leads to domination of the external motivation system over the internal one, violates the ability to assess one’s own competence.

**Keywords:** sect, cult, psycho-cult, Vedic feminity, BITE Model, personality changes.

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### **Introduction**

The issue of psycho-cult influence on personality is becoming acute, as pseudo-Vedic ideas promoted by “gurus” of various kinds as part of training on Veda (or Vedic trainings) are becoming increasingly popular, particularly, the psycho-cult “Vedic feminity”. These trainings targeted primarily at women pledge happiness and prosperity as a result of the so called “woman’s destiny” realization and adjust the behavior and thinking of the members according to the idea of “Vedic feminity”. While the analysis of the activity of these trainings reveal clear attributes of psycho-cults, and shows their negative impact on the members’ personality in the form of distorting self-acceptance and self-esteem, disturbance of internal consistency of motives, decisions, and actions. Changes in personality are due to sticking to rigidly prescribed rules and instructions carrying sacred knowledge that guarantees a better life and harmonic being. A long-duration stay under the influence of the psycho-cult leads to depressing critical consciousness, developing anxio-depressive states, and even to psychotic schizophrenia-like disorders in severe cases [Korolenko, Dmitrieva, 1999; Lutoshliva

et al., 2019b]. Taking into account the danger of developing such states there is a need to study the impact of psycho-cults on personality in order to be able to provide adequate psychological assistance to its victims.

On the basis of the method of theoretical analysis of academic sources we are focused on revealing the impact of psycho-cult on the personality of its followers as the objective of our research.

Scientific and theoretical significance of the study lies in the fact that the influence of the psycho-cult “Vedic femininity” as one of contemporary destructive cults has been studied and analyzed for the first time.

### **Research Methodology**

The term “cult” was introduced in 1912 by a German theologian, historian and sociologist E. Troeltsch. In his works he used the concept “modern unconventional cult” [Smirnov, 2011]. R. Stark and W. S. Bainbridge defined a sociological concept “cult” as a type of new religious movements of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century [Grusman, 2007].

One of the most wide-spread definitions of “cult” was formulated at the joint conference of the American Family Foundation (AFF) and California University in Los Angeles in 1985: “A totalist cult: a group or movement exhibiting a great or excessive devotion or dedication to some person, idea, or thing and employing unethically manipulative techniques of persuasion and control (e.g., isolation from former friends and family, debilitation, use of special methods to heighten suggestibility and subservience, powerful group pressures, information management, suspension of individuality or critical judgment, promotion of total dependency on the group etc.) designed to advance the goals of the group’s leaders to the actual or possible detriment of members, their families, or the community” [Lyubitov, 2015, p. 230].

I. E. Lyubitov [2015, p. 230] uses the term “cult relationships” assuming that it denotes the processes and interactions taking place within the cult more exactly. From his point of view, “cult relationships are the relationships where one person intentionally persuades the others to accept absolute or almost absolute dependency on him in making practically all the principal vital decisions and inspires the belief in his talent, gift, and knowledge of a special kind”.

The primary stage of studying the phenomenon of psycho-cult directly refers to the period of early 1940s of the XX century. It is connected with the introduction of the concept “psychological violence”, and the term “brainwashing” introduced by E. Hunter in 1950, which is based on the Chinese phrase “xǐ nǎo” (洗脑 – to wash brains) as using manipulative methods in coercive change of thinking and human behaviour.

The groundwork for further research in the field of mind control and studying a new phenomenon, later named as “psycho-cult”, was laid down by R. Lifton’s works who investigated the techniques of “correction of thinking” tested on the American captives during the Korean war (1950-1953 y.) [Lifton, 1961, 2005].

In 1982 M. Teperlin and D. Temerlin [1982] in their paper “Psychotherapy cults: An iatrogenic perversion” emphasize appearing of a new phenomenon –

psychotherapeutic cult (or psycho-cult). They note that some doctors violate ethical prohibitions and use a combination of persuasive and deceptive psychological techniques to control their clients.

In the domestic approach the definition of A. L. Dvorkin is used. In our country he introduced this concept into practice considering a psycho-cult as the type of a totalitarian sect. According to him a psycho-cult can be considered as an authoritarian organization conducting its activity in the form of psychological instruction courses and seminars to gain power and receiving money for the leadership. As attributes of a psycho-cult the author singles out deception while recruiting, mind control and strict regulation of members' lives, and idealization of the leader as well [Dvorkin, 2007]. To our mind, this very approach most fully reflects the essence of this phenomenon in the research being conducted.

We assume that the birth of a new type of an organization focused on mind control is connected with shifting the emphasis in the society from the search for a true prophet, the explanation of the picture of the world order or guarantees of salvation to the sphere of welfare and family happiness, success achievement, strong health, sex appeal, power over the people.

Religion, as it is, does not exist in psycho-cults any more, it is being replaced by psycho-technologies relying on pseudoscientific basis, or psycho-techniques presented as a modern interpretation of some ancient knowledge. It is possible to assume that we witness how psycho-technologies and psycho-techniques start to play a role that traditionally belonged to religion, i.e. they form ideology, ease psychological stress, support appropriate motivation – all this is necessary for successful personal adaptation in terms of the current social situation. Dynamic using psychology as a science giving reasons for reliability and effectiveness of psycho-cults worsens the problem, and the participation of highly-qualified specialists in the field of psychology and psychotherapy as well.

But in spite of the contemporary approach to the organization and administering within a psycho-cult, its similarity with destructive cults and sects remains strong enough.

A destructive sect is a totalitarian movement, more often similar to a religious, cultural or therapeutic group, which demands complete obedience from its members, being loyal to its ideology, uncompensated work for the group or the leader. Due to the elaborated system of control, prohibitions, and punishments, and also psycho-technologies it achieves complete dependency of the sect adepts from the group with breaking up family relationships and society links [Kon', 2008].

R. Stark and W. S. Bainbridge consider that the difference between a sect and a cult is in the fact that sects are schismatic groups positioning themselves as something old and attempt to renew and reform dominant religion in the society, where there is no need in a charismatic leader; cults represent a new religion, as a rule, under the leadership of a new charismatic leader different from the traditional for this society beliefs [Kon', 2008].

The following features of cults can be observed within psycho-cults:

First, recruiting techniques are still focused on the personal contact. In most cases, a recruiter is a somebody who is a relative or an acquaintance (a member of the family, a colleague, a friend). Sometimes people fall into the clutches of the

cult having read some special literature or heard about a new psychological technology in the mass media which promises to solve a definite problem. As E. N. Volkov writes that, as before, “cults recruiters seem to be very concerned about the welfare of the people they communicate with” [Volkov, 1996; Kalinovskaya, 2018; Lutoshliva et al., 2019a], promising bright prospects and wonderful metamorphoses at their seminars, lectures and webinars.

Second, like sects, cults are focused on the promises of personal transformation not into a unique personality, leader and the creator of his or her own fortune, absolutely happy and successful in all spheres of life rather than an enlightened and selected person.

Third, the cult of the personality of a leader, a guru, a coach possessing unique knowledge and techniques that ensure welfare, happiness, and success is typical to psycho-cults. The implantation of bipolar thinking, contrasting the ideology promoted by the leader to the worldview of people who are not involved in psycho-cult are also inherent to it.

### **Results of the Study**

Currently, seminars, trainings, and training schools promoting the so called “Vedic femininity” allegedly based on Indian ancient holy texts the Veda, which are a collection of hymns and mantras as well as explanations and commentaries to them, are increasingly popular in our country. Most followers of “Vedic femininity”, however, have never referred to the Veda in the original; instead, they all use as a reference the ideas of O. Torsunov and O. Valyaeva advocating service of a man as a wife being the primary and sole purpose of woman’s life. The ways to achieve it can be different, but they have a number of common features:

1. Strict separation of “male” and “female” worlds;
2. Pursuing a specific female destiny;
3. Following the so called “woman’s fate”.

In order to be happy, a woman must play a traditional patriarchal female role and follow her female destiny: run the home and bring up the children, obey and indulge her husband, tolerate, and, at the same time, be able to manage her husband using gentle voice, wearing fine clothes, cooking delicious food, and creating a cozy atmosphere. According to the cult “Vedic femininity”, only this way a woman can be happy and be free from all problems.

At the same time, trainings / seminars are not perceived as a psych-cult, although they demonstrate its basic attributes contributing violent change in the mindset:

1. A woman’s balance of mind is disturbed and she is not confident in her ideas.
2. A woman is encouraged and forced to radically reassess her passed life, reexamine her former ideas about reality and consent to the proposed new interpretation.
3. A woman becomes dependent on the organization and is turned into an obedient doer [Hassen, 2001].

Notwithstanding the significance of the problem of a psychological impact of a psycho-cult on the personality of its adepts, its manipulating aspect in partic-

ular, this problem remains insufficiently explored, as well as the phenomenon of predisposition to manipulative pressure on the part of destructive cults [Kuchmistov, 2014]. D. M. Ugrinovich [1987] asserts that there is no ground to think all sect members to be mentally ill. A. A. Skorodumov [1995] also comes to the conclusion that in any case devotion to sectarianism is the result of interactions of person's capacities, social situation, and social environment.

It is possible that the critical factor is not personal traits causing the behavior that facilitates falling under destructive influence, particularly a set of situational factors. R. Chaldini states that the lack of confidence is of key importance, since "when people are not confident they pay special attention to the actions of others to draw on for their own actions" [Chaldini, 2001, p. 119].

This standpoint corresponds to the ongoing trend: all organizations that are sectarian in nature, including the psycho-cult "Vedic femininity", as an ideological foundation use the structure seeking to solve the problem quickly enough [Bettinghaus, 1987].

A process when a person is falling under the influence of a psycho-cult is dangerous because it does not look like anything devastating. As F. Zimbardo noted, although many people think that they are unreceptive to any influence of cults and sects, most of them can be greatly inspired by shared purposes or even people who share the same values [Zimbardo, Andersen, 2000, p. 9].

In the realities of the day, this process takes the form of attractive advertising campaigns propagating "Vedic femininity" that cannot be suspected in committing anything unlawful or destructive. On the contrary, they are in strict compliance with current trends of improving oneself and becoming successful while excluding any aggressive slogans and actions. Within the framework of highly elaborated marketing strategies a potential consumer is offered a wide variety of attractive promises from broad-brush "new opportunities, extending the horizons", to firm guarantees of basing happy family relations. The process of inveigling a person into psycho-cults activity is called training. A thought-leader gets his or her message across to the adepts through seminars, lectures, trainings, and sometimes by selling reading materials, books, and videos.

At first sight, nothing potentially dangerous takes place: there are not any signs of violent action; the involvement process is artfully hiding under the thirst of self-development, which is highly encouraged by the society, and appears to be a free choice of a person willing to improve his or her quality and standard of living. Later although the information onslaught develops according to a basic strategy of the BITE Model created by S. Hassan to explain specific methods that cults use to maintain their control over the people. BITE means Behavior control, Information control, Thought control, and Emotional Control [Hassan, 2001].

The psycho-cult "Vedic femininity" exercises control over its followers' mind strictly within the framework of the BITE Model that can be summarized in the form of a scheme:

1. Behavior control.
2. Information control.
3. Thought control.
4. Emotional Control.

Thus, the first aspect of the BITE Model, *Behavior control*, is manifested in the analysis and further arrangement of basic behavior aspect that are voluntarily publicized by the participants, namely:

a) where, how, and with whom the group member lives and interacts. The cult members must observe strict rules of leading their lives, which regulate their social circle. A cult member can be demanded to break her relationships even with close relatives if they do not support “Vedic femininity” ideas.

b) what clothes and hairdo the person wears, what colours she chooses. In other words, personal appearance is regulated by specific rules: a slender figure; long beautifully coiffured hair; smart appearance (manicure, jewelry); the member must wear only skirts as they strengthen “female energy” and so on

c) what the person eats, what the person drinks, what the person prefers and rejects in her nutrition [Kalinovskaya, 2018; Lutoshliva et al., 2019a]. Under the guise of a special diet to improve health and spiritual enlightenment strict limits of actual intake are forced. Occasionally full aversion to food for some time is practiced (24 hours and longer).

As the monitoring of abiding the rules, the adepts are inspected whether their real behavior corresponds to the instructions provided in the teaching materials. The following points of the BITE Model are actualized:

d) coordination of important decisions with leader’s standpoint;

e) public discussion of personal thoughts, feelings, and actions with other people involved in the psycho-cult;

f) system of emotional encouragement and punishment using positive and negative reinforcement;

g) overt disapproval of individualism, predominance of “group thinking”;

h) strict rules and regulations [Kalinovskaya, 2018; Lutoshliva et al., 2019a].

Carrying out the control on the behavior lays the foundation for changes in personality making the external motivation system dominate over the internal one.

The next component of the BITE Model, *Informational control*, manifests itself in amputation of personality and sometimes in total denial of the information from all the sources other than relating to psycho-cults materials. The same attitude is towards the information passed along by the former members who left the cult. Further, there is opposition of “outsiders” and “insiders. Within the framework of virtual communication the persons involved in the psycho-cult are encouraged to assess each other’s behavior and features of thinking. This way the following points of the BITE Model are actualized:

a) establishing self-organizing system to exercise control over each other;

b) public discussion of “wrong” thoughts, feelings, and actions

c) group supervision over the person’s behavior;

d) extensive use of the information and propaganda produced within the framework of the psycho-cult;

e) use of distorted citations, descriptions from taken out of the sources not produced by the cult;

f) constructing the system of so-called “sins” referred to as “mistakes” (in the behavior, perception, thinking) that the person made before getting under the

influence of the psycho-cult and persistently eradicated during training [Kalitovskaya, 2018; Lutoshliva et al., 2019a].

Presenting distorted information about fundamental laws and elements constituting and characterizing real life situations in combination with depreciation of the personal experience deprives women, who fell under the influence of the psycho-cult “Vedic femininity”, adequateness footing when assessing their inner state and the external world. This way the women are forced to refuse such components of personal autonomy as their own intrinsic values and merits, personal intentions and decisions and to replace them with allegedly social (actually created by the leaders of the psycho-cult) requirements, rules, and situational factors.

The third component of the BITE Model called *Thinking control* modifies the area of critical perception of reality and includes:

- a) the necessity to take the psycho-cult’s doctrine as “the Truth”;
- b) adoption of the conceptualized reality picture as the immediate reality;
- c) shaping black-and-white thinking;
- d) apparent struggle of “Good and Evil” manifesting itself in contrasting “a truly female destiny” and “shift to a male territory”;
- e) juggling with words, the use of “contrived” words;
- f) praising “good” and “right” thoughts;
- g) rejection of rational analytical thinking and constructive assessment [Lutoshliva et al., 2019a].

Satisfying the above mentioned points atrophies the ability to analyze and critically assess one’s own actions making them meaningful, prompts rejecting independent behavior, provokes confrontation with group norms existing beyond the psycho-cult.

The last component of the BITE Model, *Emotional control*, includes manipulation with emotional sphere of personality:

- a) an attempt to make the person feel guilty in all the problems that she faces with;
- b) exploitation of pang of guilt;
- c) exploitation of sensation of fear:
  - fear to think independently;
  - fear of “external”;
  - planting irrational fears related to supporting ties with people not belonging to the group [Ibid].

All of these things make the women illusively think that that if they behave a certain way they will be able to control the world around them and things happening to them. If the woman believes that performing simple prescribed actions she can influence her life and manage not only herself but her husband and her children she begins to feel strong. However, it is an illusion of control over the situation, and the real situation that has made her anxious does not actually change.

Due to the use of such techniques, perceiving oneself adequately is replaced by the ideas imposed by the psycho-cult. Thus, it is reasonable to assume that the attempts of the leaders of the psycho-cult “Vedic femininity” to teach women to simplify their cognitive sphere, by making the tasks being carried out less diffi-

cult, leads to personal changes that end up in personality destruction. The deformations result in somatic reactions and depressive states [Ryan, Deci, 2000].

### Conclusion

On the assumption of the aforementioned, on the basis of the theoretical analysis we can state that personality is exposed to negative influence while being involved in a psycho-cult. Particularly, following the prescriptions and instructions offered to the women involved in the psycho-cult “Vedic femininity” changes such aspects as: the capacity to express negative emotions; the level of self-esteem and self-acceptance; the level of internal coordination of motives, decisions, and actions; and perception of personal competence.

The woman who has fallen under the influence of the psycho-cult “Vedic femininity” shows a low level of critical evaluation of the information she receives, which leads to thoughtless following the “guru”. This allows using her as a source of wealth and power.

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## **Влияние психокульта на личность: теоретический аспект (на примере психокульта «ведическая женственность»)**

Е. С. Лутошлива, О. А. Осипенок, Е. Д. Калиновская, И. М. Карнакова  
*Иркутский государственный университет, г. Иркутск, Россия*

**Аннотация.** С использованием теоретического анализа литературы на примере психокульта «ведическая женственность» рассмотрен комплекс вопросов, связанных с влиянием психокульта на личность его сторонников. Выделен ряд признаков сект, свойственных психокульту «ведическая женственность»: ориентировка при вербовке на персональный контакт; обещание трансформации участника в успешную личность; наличие

культы личности наставника; лишение уверенности в своих убеждениях и переоценка прожитой жизни; формирование зависимости от организации и превращение участника в послушного исполнителя. Рассмотрен процесс осуществления контроля за личностью и сознанием в рамках ВІТЕ-модели, включающей в себя контроль за поведением, информацией, мышлением и эмоциями. Определено, что участие в психокульте изменяет уровень самооценки и самопринятия участниц, формирует преобладание внешней мотивационной системы над внутренней, нарушает способность оценивать собственную компетентность.

**Ключевые слова:** секта, культ, психокульт, «ведическая женственность», ВІТЕ-модель, изменения личности.

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***Лутошлыва Екатерина Станиславовна***  
кандидат педагогических наук, доцент  
Иркутский государственный университет  
Россия, 664000, Иркутск, ул. К. Маркса, 1  
e-mail: eka3676@yandex.ru

***Lutoshliva Ekaterina Stanislavovna***  
Candidate of Sciences (Pedagogy),  
Associate Professor, Irkutsk State University  
1, K. Marx st., Irkutsk, 664003,  
Russian Federation  
e-mail: eka3676@yandex.ru

***Осипенко Оксана Александровна***  
кандидат педагогических наук, доцент  
заведующий, кафедра иностранных языков  
для неязыковых направлений подготовки  
Иркутский государственный университет  
Россия, 664003, г. Иркутск, ул. К. Маркса, 1  
e-mail: cominagetcha@mail.ru

***Osipenok Oksana Aleksndrovna***  
Candidate of Sciences (Pedagogy),  
Associate Professor, Head of the Department  
of Foreign Languages for Training  
Irkutsk State University  
1, K. Marx st., Irkutsk, 664003,  
Russian Federation  
e-mail: cominagetcha@mail.ru

***Калиновская Евгения Дмитриевна***  
магистрант, факультет психологии  
Иркутский государственный университет  
Россия, 664003, г. Иркутск, ул. К. Маркса, 1  
e-mail: erely@mail.ru

***Kalinovskaya Evgenia Dmitrievna***  
Master's Degree, Faculty of Psychology  
Irkutsk State University  
1, K. Marx st., Irkutsk, 664003,  
Russian Federation  
e-mail: erely@mail.ru

***Карнакова Ирина Михайловна***  
старший преподаватель, кафедра  
иностраных языков для неязыковых  
направлений подготовки  
Иркутский государственный университет  
Россия, 664003, г. Иркутск, ул. К. Маркса, 1  
e-mail: karnakova.i@mail.ru

***Karnakova Irina Mikhailovna***  
Senior Lecturer, Department of Foreign  
Languages for Training Non-Linguistic  
Specialities  
1, K. Marx st., Irkutsk, 664003,  
Russian Federation  
e-mail: karnakova.i@mail.ru

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