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**Symposium on Religion and Politics**

**WOMEN IN RELIGIOUS LEADERSHIP**

**“Women Gurus in Hinduism”**

**Reading Packet 6**

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BOISI CENTER  
FOR RELIGION AND AMERICAN PUBLIC LIFE

## Symposium on Religion and Politics

### WOMEN IN RELIGIOUS LEADERSHIP

#### “Women Gurus in Hinduism”

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## CHAPTER 1



# WOMEN IN HINDU TRADITIONS

*Leona M. Anderson*

## INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

As almost every textbook on Hinduism will tell you, the term *Hindu* is a modern Western one originating from an older term that described the people living along the Indus River, in the northwest part of the Indian subcontinent. Because Hinduism originated as a geographic designation, there is a lot of confusion as to what exactly it means to be a Hindu. One characteristic of Hinduism is clear, however: it is diverse, and this diversity extends to the status of women within the Hindu fold.

Hinduism is often presented as a total way of life, and within that life there are a multitude of images, ideas, rituals, and traditions. There is no one founder and no one book but many texts that are believed to contain revelation. Hinduism is the most ancient of the living religions, having reached a high state of development from at least 1500 BCE, and it has survived the missionary drive of other religions. Many gods and goddesses populate this tradition and this plurality of deities has made Hinduism more tolerant and accepting of other, non-Hindu beliefs of deity.

Woman's roles in Hinduism differ depending on a number of factors, including region, caste, occupation, and education, so that it is virtually impossible to present an image of woman that is coherent and self-contained. One must, therefore, speak to the question of women in India in a pluralistic fashion, recognizing that there are a number of concerns and clusters of concerns that are relevant. The following chapter seeks to address a select number of these concerns, but it is by no means exhaustive.

## BASIC CONCEPTS

The Hindu vision of the world is cyclical, an ever-repeating cycle of births and deaths known as *samsara*, which has no beginning and which repeats itself

over long periods of time. The present age is the last stage of the development of the world. Political strife, war, poverty, inflation, and the like characterize this age. Finally, after several more eons, the world will become so degenerate that it will be destroyed and the cycle will repeat itself. Humans undergo a sequence of births and deaths that parallel that of the world. Samsara refers to the cyclical pattern of birth and death undergone by individuals as well as that undergone by the world. In one of the most sacred texts of Hinduism, the *Bhagavad Gītā*, the movement from death to rebirth has been compared to a change of clothing:

Just as a person casts off worn garments and puts on others that are new, even so does the embodied soul cast off worn out bodies and take on others that are new. (2.22) (Mascaro 1968: 50)

Samsara is not haphazard, but governed by the law of action and reaction, cause and effect, also known as the law of *karma* (literally, action). The doctrine of karma is a doctrine of consequences. As a moral law, it means that every action, every thought, has a result. There are no shortcuts. Individuals are responsible for their actions, not just in one lifetime but over a series of many lifetimes. Our position in this life is determined by our past actions and our current actions will determine our subsequent births. The goal is, first, to attain a better birth by performing morally good actions, and second, to attain *mokṣa* which means release from the cycle of birth and death. Thus, the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* states:

According as one acts, according as one conducts oneself, so does one become. The doer of good becomes good. The doer of evil becomes evil. (4.3.35–8) (Vyas 1987: 81)

## The Paths

There are three paths that serve as general guidelines for the attainment of *mokṣa* in Hinduism: the path of knowledge, the path of action, and the path of devotion. These paths are not exclusive; a combination of them is common in religious practice. Nor are these paths the only means available to reach the final goal.

The path of knowledge emerges out of the earliest of Hindu texts, the Vedas, especially the Upaniṣads. The basic idea is that knowledge, not just ordinary, discursive knowledge, but intuitive knowledge of truth, will effect *mokṣa*. An important concept in this path is *Brahman*, which is equated with *prāṇa* (breath, life). Brahman permeates the world as salt permeates water (*Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 6.13; Hume: 248). A second term of note is *Ātman*, the individual's

innermost self or soul or the universal self. Ascetic discipline assists in the process of detaching oneself from the pursuits of the world and from an interest in one's individual existence.

The religious quest in the Upaniṣads involves realizing the fundamental identity of Brahman and Ātman—the realization that one's essential self transcends individuality, limitation, decay, and death. The realization of this truth wins the disciple liberation or mokṣa. Although there are a few women acknowledged as authorities, this path restricted rather than liberated women. Woman came to be associated with *māyā* or the world of appearance, equated with the physical world of multiplicity and thus opposed to the spiritual realm of unity. The goal of the path of knowledge is to transcend *māyā*.

The second path is the path of action. The emphasis on this path is *dharma*, which is often understood as action in accordance with certain social and ritual standards. The details of these standards have been gradually worked out from the Brāhmaṇas (c. 500 BCE) through the later texts including the Dharmaśāstras (law books). This latter is a large body of teachings on various social and ritual responsibilities. There is also according to this path the notion that one should act selflessly.

The rules of dharma encompass rules of caste behaviour. Caste is a complicated system of social stratification. One way to look at it is as a set of occupational categories, though this is more an ideal than a reality. Each caste in modern India encompasses a large range of occupations and social statuses. A typical formulation of caste has it that there are four castes, including the *Brahmins*, whose duties are purely religious. Brahmins are mandated to study and teach. They are the custodians of all knowledge that the Veda—a large corpus of literature considered to contain revelation—implies and as such they are held in high esteem. The second caste is the *Kṣatriya* or warrior caste, whose primary duty is the protection of their subjects. At the head of this caste stands the king. The third caste is the *Vaiśya*. This caste includes merchants, bankers, and landowners. They have the moral responsibility of wealth. Finally there are the *Śūdras*, or labourers, whose duties are service to the other three castes. Within this system there are a seemingly infinite number of subdivisions. Outside of this system, there are a large number of people who typically perform menial tasks and are referred to as outcastes or, as Mahatma Gandhi called them, the Harijans (people of god).

In addition to caste, there are also laid out certain stages of life or *āśramas*. These include student, householder (who is devoted to marriage and the production of children), forest-dweller, and renouncer. The latter two stages involve removing oneself from the world and ultimately becoming a wandering renouncer, living on alms alone, abandoning one's caste identity and all of one's possessions.

The impact of these two systems of stratification on the position and status of women is significant. Both situate women within clear structural boundaries and assign to them clear roles. The caste system, as described above, accords the Brahmin a high status. Overall, this system can be described as *brahmanic patriarchy*, a term which emphasizes that both brahmanism and patriarchy are key features that must be taken into consideration when analyzing the position of women in India (Chakravarty 1993: 580 in Omvedt: 187). Women's dharma was to be chaste, loyal, and subservient, especially to their husbands, but their essential nature was one of disturbing, uncontrolled sexuality and it needed to be controlled by men who were their protectors and guardians (Omvedt: 187). This control included bans on widow remarriage, seclusion of women in the household, and assigning to women the religious duty of devotion to their husbands as gods (Omvedt: 187). Further, there was a kind of caste-patriarchal bargain: high-caste women accepted a life of subordination and seclusion in exchange for a share in the status and wealth of their husbands (Omvedt: 187). Evidence of the continuing pervasiveness of brahmanic authority is to be found in a 4 October 2002 decision of the Supreme Court in Delhi, which stated that non-Brahmins can also perform religious ceremonies and work as temple priests, but only if they are well-versed in relevant rituals (Bhatnagar 2002).

The *āśrama* system assigned a high value to the second stage of life, especially for women. Women fulfilled their spiritual destiny through marriage and they were mandated to treat their husbands as gods. Women came to be identified with the domestic realm and the protection of that realm, and widows, because they no longer contributed to the domestic sphere, were treated with contempt. At the same time that women were increasingly excluded from the public realm they were assigned the role of guardian of tradition. Women were generally excluded from the last stage of the *āśrama* system, renunciation, because they were not permitted to travel alone. And more often than not, they were refused entry to ascetic religious orders.

The final path is the path of *bhakti* (devotion). Emphasis in this path is the development of a strong personal attachment to a personal deity. Worship, love, and devotion are key concepts, though the relationship between deity and devotee tends not to be a relationship of equals. This path encourages a 'feminine' mode of religiosity, including surrender and subservience to the deity. Male and female devotees alike are encouraged to relate to male deities as would female devotees. The cultivation of worship, love, and devotion contributes positively to the pantheon of gods and goddesses that populate the Hindu imagination. The multiplicity of goddesses who are worshipped in this context provides us with insight into the conception of the feminine in Hindu culture. The goddess is identified with the physical world, nature, orderliness, and intensity. The earth, for example, is depicted as a goddess, as is the Indian

subcontinent. From the seventh to the twelfth centuries CE, various devotional movements gained in prominence and more religious options became open to women, who began to frequent temples, lead devotional groups, and compose songs. A significant number of female devotees became acknowledged as saints.

During the colonial period and in response to the European presence in India, the Vedic tradition and brahmanism were reinterpreted. Many institutions, including *sati* (widow-burning) and child marriage, came under attack as the reformers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, responding to the European critique of Hinduism, sought to rid it of elements they believed did not represent its core. As this core came to be further defined, it became clear that patriarchy and brahmanism were to play a major role. The sanctity of marriage, bans on widow remarriage, and the authority of husbands in the home all came to be seen as central to Hinduism. As Omvedt argues in her review of Uma Chakravarty's book *Rewriting History*:

A new brahmanism was being constructed, which saw brahmins as the elite representatives of a broader 'Hindu community' whose characteristics included the extension of the devoted wife, the *pativrata* to all castes. (Omvedt 2000)

Women emerged as freedom fighters and supporters of the cause for independence. Independence was achieved in 1947, and article 15 of the Indian constitution prohibits discrimination against any citizen on the grounds of religion, race, caste, sex, or place of birth. Despite this prohibition, the status of women remains below that of men. One could well argue that nationalism alongside colonialism reified the idea of the Hindu woman who guards the inner sanctum of Hindu culture. Both the nationalist and the colonialist agenda resonate with traditional patriarchal control of women. The current rise in popularity of Hindu fundamentalist movements has resulted in an even more rigid interpretation of the roles of male and female.

Today, there are numerous important Hindu women in the spotlight, and researchers focusing on women's issues, including religion, are on the increase. The status of women in India today is complex and multifaceted; caste, region, class, and relative wealth all contribute to this complexity. Further, the experience of Hindu women cannot easily be homologized to the Western experience, especially to Western feminism. As Suma Chitnis argues, feminist anger in the West is in part tied to the hypocrisy of a culture that stresses the value of equality and individual freedom, but nevertheless denies social and legislative equality to women. This concept of equality does not have much relation to the highly stratified society of India (Chitnis cited in Humes: 145). Today's Hindu women are active in their attempts to reformulate tradition in the



context of modernity and change. There are numerous centres and institutes that focus on women's issues, including for example, the Centre for Women's Development Studies in New Delhi, a research centre that works towards the realization of women's equality and development in all spheres of life. The press *Kali for Women* is important to mention in this regard because it primarily publishes primarily current feminist material. Though efforts on this front are ongoing, the status of women in India remains largely below that of men.

## TEXTS AND INTERPRETATIONS

In Hinduism, several texts are considered sacred. However, unlike many other religions, no one text is considered authoritative. Rather, there is a large corpus of literature known as the Vedas, which are considered to contain revelation. There are, further, a number of other books that have been composed from very early times through to modernity that are relevant to our study and are considered, to one degree or another, sacred. In this huge body of literature, we find a large amount of material pertaining to the role of women and to the feminine aspects of Hinduism, but this material is penned, of course, by patriarchal hands. Hindu texts are excellent sources on the status of women in particular times and at particular places in the tradition, as viewed through male eyes. Though there are many texts in Hinduism, the focus here is the Veda (and its component parts), the law books, and the Epics.

### **Veda and the Vedic Age**

The earliest texts in Hinduism are known as the Vedas and they are said to be composed by the Āryans, a group of Indo-European-speaking peoples who appear in the subcontinent about 1500 BCE. *Veda* means 'knowledge' and these texts are considered to be repositories of all knowledge. The Vedas are often divided into three categories: the hymn books, the earliest of which is the *Ṛg Veda*; the *Brāhmaṇas*, or priestly manuals; and the *Upaniṣads* and *Āraṇyakas*, which are more philosophical. The first category contains hymns of praise to various deities, the majority of which are male and include, for example, the warrior god, Indra; the god of fire, Agni; and the intoxicating god, Soma. The *Brāhmaṇas* are almost completely preoccupied with sacrifice and tell us much about the details, history, and symbolic significance of this practice. The *Brāhmaṇas* reflect a stabilization of culture; priests dominate and a pattern of elaborate sacrifice emerges. The *Upaniṣads* and *Āraṇyakas* are usually dated at around the sixth century BCE and reflect a period of questioning of the efficacy of sacrificial ritual and a critique of the status quo.

Vedic religion is life affirming, and religious rituals focused on achieving the basic goals of life: progeny, prosperity, longevity, and preservation. Sacrifices

were performed for good crops and for progeny, among other goals. Women played a crucial role by producing children and maintaining family life. A primary player in this tradition is the householder and his wife, who are required to perform certain sacrificial ceremonies throughout their lifetimes. The *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* (SB) and the *Taittirīya Brāhmaṇa* (TB) make this necessity perfectly clear: 'a ritual without a wife is not a ritual' (TB 2.2.2.6; see also SB 1.3.1.12). Some scholars suggest that women during this period enjoyed a certain amount of freedom and were esteemed in the religious milieu of the Vedas.<sup>1</sup> Katherine Young, for example, calls attention to the role of women as necessary partners in sacrifice as well as to her essential role in bearing children (1999: 60f.). Even in this era, however, it is clear that the role of husband and father was dominant.

The sacrificer's wife plays an important cooperative role in the rituals, but she may not participate if she is sonless. The *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa* states that one's wife should be looked on as one's mother insofar as through her one is reborn again in the form of one's son (vii.13). Also in the *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa*, we read: 'A wife is a comrade, a daughter a misery, and a son a light in the highest heaven.' Commenting on the role of the sacrificer's wife, Stephanie W. Jamison (1996: 53) writes, 'One of the wife's most important roles is that of injecting sexuality into the perfect, ordered world of the ritual. One of the abiding concerns of all Vedic rituals, no matter what else they are directed toward, is fertility, the increase of prosperity through the generation of offspring and cattle, and the assurance of good pasturage and crops through abundant rain.' Here then, fertility and food are of abiding concern. The texts make so many overlapping connections between wives, food, sex (fertility), and hospitality that it is difficult to summarize their implications.

Female imagery, especially goddess imagery, is not dominant in the Vedic texts although it has been argued that the great goddesses of later Hinduism are found, in seed form, in the Vedas. There are goddesses, to be sure, but they tend to be minor deities. The imagery of the cow is also frequent, and goddesses are often likened to cows or mothers of cows that yield milk for the benefit of the world, blessings being bestowed through her udder. Womb imagery is also common, and the four corners of the fire pan found in sacrificial ritual are said to be shaped like nipples (SB VI.5.2.16–19). There is also agricultural symbolism as, for example, the plowing and planting of crops, which is related to female fecundity.

A central myth of the *Brāhmaṇas* is that of Prajāpati exhausting himself in creating the world, and a primary aim of the sacrifice is to restore or reinvigorate Prajāpati. Later on, this theme is found with respect to goddesses such as Durgā and Kālī, who receive blood offerings that restore the vital, creative power that becomes exhausted when they create.

Another important myth in the Brāhmaṇas is the eternal struggle between the gods (*devas*) and the demons (*asuras*). In this context, the goddess Vāc (intelligible speech) plays a significant role. In the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, the gods purchase the Soma from the demons with Vāc. In this same text, Vāc is equated with the earth but tries to escape the gods by hiding in the sap of the plants and the trees (IV.6.9.16). There are hints also that it is through Vāc, or in pairing with her, that Prajāpati creates. Speech is the intermediary between humans and gods and this intermediary function is especially evident when the gods offer Vāc up in sacrifice. It is also clear that Vāc's actions have eternally paradigmatic effects when it comes to women. That is, women are the way they are because in the beginning Vāc did this or that. One myth of Vāc's creation is thus:

Both the gods and asuras were born of Prajāpati. The gods inherited mind, sacrifice (*yajña*) and heaven and the asuras inherited speech (Vāc) and the earth. The sacrifice, thinking that he could lure Vāc into the camp of the gods because she was a woman, beckoned to her but she disdained him. So it is, we are told, that a woman, when beckoned, at first disdains man. He tried again and Vāc just nodded 'no.' When he tried a third time, Vāc said 'come to me'. Thereupon the gods warned him that women are alluring, and advised him to make her come to him. Finally Vāc approached him and when she did, the gods enveloped her completely in fire, making her into an offering of the gods. So it was that the asuras were deprived of speech. (SB IV.6.9.16)

Vāc also has the capacity to create havoc when she is upset. Sometimes she turns into a lioness and is only calmed when she is promised all offerings (SB III.5.1.13–22).

Another goddess who is fairly significant in this context is Nirṛti. The *devas* and the *asuras* are separated into opposing camps; the *devas* have access to the sacrifice, and the *asuras* do not but they are constantly trying to get a share. Nirṛti is allied with the *asuras*, or at least she is clearly seen as a being that seeks to have a share of the sacrifice and to disrupt it. She represents all those things that sacrifice seeks to avoid or insure against, including death, sickness, chaos, and injury. She embodies, as it were, the *asuras* and those forces that would destroy or diminish the beneficial effects of the sacrifice.

## Upaniṣads

The Upaniṣads are basically philosophical texts that emphasize the relationship between student and teacher. Most of the teachers are men, but there are women, such as Gargi, who appear as authoritative in these texts. The Upaniṣads privilege the idea of renouncing the world and tend to place a lower priority on worldly concerns such as long life, progeny, and so on.



Because the Upaniṣads emphasize renunciation, an ideal that is usually unavailable to women for various reasons, the status of women tended to decline from that of the earlier period where they played a role in the sacrifice. The world of impermanence came to be identified as an obstacle to the attainment of mokṣa and, at the same time, the world became increasingly associated with women. By association, women came to be considered a source of bondage. There are Upaniṣads dedicated exclusively to the goddess, including, for example, the *Devi Upaniṣad*. In these texts the gods glorify the goddess and seek refuge in her. However, these texts appear much later in the tradition, from the ninth century onwards.

If women were central to the family-oriented religion of the early Veda, their situation soon changed. The importance of producing sons grew and women became silent and invisible in all but those rituals aimed at producing pregnancy. Women were gradually restricted in their public participation in religion at the same time that their roles in the domestic realm became rigidly controlled. Institutions such as child marriage, purdah (veiling and seclusion of women), and the prohibition of widow remarriage crept into the tradition, and the study of the Veda fell almost exclusively to males. In the context of their domestic duties, women were encouraged to develop a capacity for sacrifice. Scholars such as Katherine Young argue that self-sacrifice is essentially a feminine mode of religion in Hinduism (1999: 75), a mode related to female subservience and male dominance.

### **The Laws of Manu**

Regulations governing morality in Hinduism tend to be context specific and dependent, for example, on caste, stage of life, region, custom, and tradition. However, the legal tradition as represented in texts known as the Dharmaśāstras, or law books, is notable for its influence on the status of women. In particular, *The Laws of Manu* is a pivotal text for the subordination and mistreatment of women in Hinduism. There are few texts so prolifically quoted and profoundly implicated when it comes to the position of women. The authority of *The Laws of Manu* was entrenched by the British during the colonial period<sup>2</sup> and it is a contested point. For example, when a statue of Manu was being installed in the Rajasthan high court, protestors burned copies of his text (Kishwar 2000: 3). It is difficult to know whether Manu reflects practice contemporary to him or not. Though it is most likely that Manu writes about how he would have people behave ideally, many of his prescriptions when it comes to women are found elsewhere in the tradition, including in the Epics and other literary works. According to Manu, women are subordinate to their fathers, brothers, and husbands. Manu does not hesitate to subordinate women. He says:

Her father protects (her) in childhood, her husband protects (her) in youth, and her sons protect (her) in old age; a woman is never fit for independence. (ix.3)

Manu mandates women to worship their husbands as if they were gods and he declares that marriage is the supreme mode of female religious fulfillment. Also in Manu we find the seemingly universal notion that women are dangerous (ix 13, 17), and he warns women that disloyalty would bring them all sorts of harm, including being born into the womb of a jackal and tormented by disease for these sins (ix 29–30). Though Manu's authority is contested, a key source of female power is through their husbands and sons (see, for example, Bannerji: 195).

## The Epics

There are two major epics in the Hindu tradition, the *Māhābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa*, the first compiled from 400 to 200 BCE and the second from 300 BCE to 300 CE. These texts are narrative in format and subject to numerous versions. As well as relating a basic or frame story, each contains material pertinent to the status of women. Female imagery in these texts tends to be associated with pilgrimage spots including temples, rivers, and lakes. There are no independent great goddesses, and the goddesses that do appear are subject to male authority. Two figures of interest for our study are Draupadī from the *Māhābhārata*, and Sītā from the *Rāmāyaṇa*. Draupadī is a dramatic, rebellious personality, while Sītā never rebels.

### *The Māhābhārata and Draupadī*

The frame story of the *Māhābhārata* revolves around a conflict between two branches of one family, the endearing Pāṇḍava brothers and their followers, and their not-so-endearing cousins, the Kauravas. Draupadī is the beautiful and intelligent wife of the five Pāṇḍava brothers and an interesting figure from the perspective of women. She was won in an archery contest by Arjuna, and afterwards became known as Pañchalī, the wife to all five brothers. To facilitate her marriage to multiple partners, Draupadī is said to have spent one year with each husband.

When Yuddhiṣṭhira, the eldest of the Pāṇḍavas, loses Draupadī in a game of dice, she challenges the assembly. Duryodhana, the winner of the bet, insists that Draupadī is indeed his to do with as he pleases and orders that she be publicly disrobed. Furious at this insult to her honour, Draupadī loosens her coiffed hair and vows that she will not knot it again until she has washed it in Duryodhana's blood. As she is disrobed, the more her sari is pulled away the longer it becomes. Draupadī is thus a figure who takes issue with the forces of patriarchy and male power. In a modern story of Draupadī written by

Mahāvēta Devī, Draupadī is depicted as a Naxal figure named Dopdi. The text focuses on resistance to hegemonic powers.

A word here must be added on the *Bhagavad Gītā*, or the Song of the Lord, which is included in the *Māhābhārata* but also appears as a separate text of great importance to Hinduism. The *Gītā* is a text that takes up issues of war and power, and hence it is not surprising that the male voice is overwhelmingly dominant. The *Gītā* is almost entirely bereft of the female voice.

### *The Rāmāyaṇa and Sītā*

One of the most pervasive role models for women in the Hindu epics is Sītā, the devoted wife of Rāma and also, in many circles, the ideal women. Sītā is one of the most difficult of the Hindu goddesses/women to portray. She is the heroine of the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the personification of wifely fidelity and purity. Hindu women strive to live up to her example. Brides are commonly blessed with the words 'be like Sītā'. Sītā has no particular identity of her own; she is so completely submissive to her husband, Rāma, that she gives up her very life to protect his honour. Indeed, Sītā refuses independence, refuses to accept life on any other terms than prescribed to her by her position as wife of Rāma, to whom she owes blind obedience. The story of the *Rāmāyaṇa* can be summarized as follows (Shastri):

Rāma, the eldest son of the king of Ayodhya Daśaratha, wins Sītā in an archery contest. Rāma is forced into exile in the forest, accompanied by Sītā and his brother Lakṣmana. While in the forest, Rāma is lured away by a demon in the form of a golden deer. At Sītā's request, Rāma chases after the deer, and while he is away, the demon Rāvaṇa abducts her. Aided by Sugrīva, the monkey king, his minister, Hanuman, and the monkey army, Rāma besieges Laṅka, defeats Rāvaṇa's armies, kills Rāvaṇa, and brings Sītā back. Upon her rescue, Rāma makes the following surprising statement:

Lovely One, the ten regions are at thy disposal; I can have nothing more to do with thee! What man of honour would give reign to his passion so far as to permit himself to take back a woman who has dwelt in the house of another? Thou hast been taken into Rāvaṇa's lap and he has cast lustful glances on thee; how can I reclaim thee, I who boast of belonging to an illustrious House? (Chapter 117, 335–6)

Sītā is shocked, but she recovers quickly and retorts:

Why dost thou address such words to me, O Hero, as a common man addresses an ordinary woman? I swear to thee, O Long-armed Warrior,

that my conduct is worthy of thy respect! If my limbs came into contact with another's, it was against my will, O Lord, and not through any inclination on my part. (Chapter 118, 336)

She then orders that a funeral pyre be built and throws herself into the flames. The gods rescue her and she emerges unscathed. Rāma is crowned king but continues to be plagued by jealous thoughts of Sītā, and the inhabitants of Ayodhya doubt the purity of Sītā's character because she lived in the house of another man. Sītā becomes pregnant and is banished to the forest, where she gives birth to two sons, Lava and Kuśa.

When Sītā returns to the kingdom with her sons some 15 years later, she declares her chastity before the assembly that requests the earth to swallow her up as proof of her purity. Rāma admits that she is virtuous and begs to be forgiven for abandoning her. The earth breaks open, and swallows Sītā up.

Throughout all of these ordeals, Sītā retains her composure and character. Her love for Rāma does not waver, even after she is rejected by him. She says:

So I, thus well-equipped and of the top rank, well versed in all the aspects of dharma, O revered one, can I ever be expected to disrespect my lord when husband is the god for all the women. (Chapter 119, 338–9)

For some, Sītā is such a clear construction of Hindu patriarchy, and Rāma is such a blatantly typical example of the patriarchal ideal that it is difficult to imagine why she is so beloved in India. As Linda Hess in 'Rejecting Sītā' puts it:

The specificity of the husband–wife relationship, the relentless reminders of the husband's superiority, the horrifying abuse inherent in the model of the husband-lord and the worshipful wife who lives only to guard her purity and surrender to his will, the sacralizing of the whole arrangement by making the perpetrator an incarnation of God . . . (Hess 1999: 8)

Sītā is thus identified as a pure and innocent virtuous woman and an ideal wife, an image exploited to serve the patriarchal brahmanic system. Her ideal status links her quite clearly to suffering, and sends the message that a good Hindu woman should obey her husband without question, even when he subjects her to abuse. Response to this ideal has been mixed. Nabaneeta Dev Sen rejects Sītā, saying that there is little women in the Epics can do other than get

abducted or rescued, pawned or molested or humiliated in some way or other (1998: 18). Others try to subvert Sītā. Bina Agarwal's 1985 poem begins: 'Sītā speak your side of the story, / We know the other side too well' (quoted in Hess: 17).

At the same time, because the Sītā myth focuses on the subservience of women, it also functions as a vehicle to articulate certain concerns of women (Sen 1998: 18). Women's folk traditions use the myth of Sītā to interpret and give voice to certain day-to-day experiences and problems and to critique more traditional ways of viewing both the Sītā story and the lot of women, especially in rural areas. Here Sītā tends to be portrayed as the one who patiently bears injustice, the typical suffering wife; she is a sorrowful figure, the victim of loneliness and injustice. Major themes here revolve around the most intense moments of insecurity or physical risk in women's lives: Sītā's birth, wedding, abduction, pregnancy, abandonment, and childbearing. Women complain about neglect and the denial of their rights, not about hard work or poverty. This voice of disenchantment and criticism is one that only women can share with Sītā, or Sītā with women.

As Anne Murphy and Shana Sippy tell us, the *Rāmāyaṇa* is a living text, told and retold in ritual and performance traditions not just in India but throughout the world (2000: 17). Here Sītā is a symbol of the oppression of women but also the epitome of female power. Sītā's ordeal by fire is in many ways the defining moment in Sītā's life and in her relationship with her husband. It is here that she proves her strength and her virtue. It is here that she emerges as a powerful Śaktī (Murphy and Sippy 2000: 20).

One might also cite the Lakshmi Mukti program in Maharashtra, which emphasizes that husbands who keep their wives economically dependent and powerless in the family cannot hope to get a fair deal with government. This campaign tried to empower women with land rights, arguing that the curse of Sītā stayed with them (Kishwar 1997b: 26). Kishwar tells us that the purpose of the Lakshmi Mukti program was to see that no modern-day Sītā would ever have to suffer the fate of Rāma's Sītā because she had nothing to call her own. By transferring land to their wives, village men were paying off 'a long overdue debt' to Sītā (Kishwar 1997b: 27).

## SYMBOLS

One of Hinduism's most appealing characteristics is its richness in female symbolism. The ubiquity of female imagery is evidenced, for example, in the multitude of goddesses that populate Hindu texts and Hindu ritual practice. There are probably as many goddesses in Hinduism as there are gods, though this is not always the way in which Hinduism is presented. To be sure, there



are a significant number of male deities, but these male deities do not dominate the female deities—at least not entirely. The goddesses are intriguing to the student of Hinduism for a number of reasons. First, their sheer number is staggering; the traditions of Judaism, Islam, Christianity, and even Buddhism pale in comparison. No other living religious tradition displays such an ancient, continuous diverse history of goddess worship. Second, the goddesses of Hinduism offer an interesting counterpoint to other traditions that are goddess-challenged. Because much of the work on goddesses in the Western world focuses on the past as a central source of meaning, the goddesses of Hinduism are important as contemporary examples of ‘living’ goddess traditions. Finally, the goddesses are noticeably diverse and complex, and each one is unique, and this tends to put to rest the myth of the one-dimensional mother goddess. It is important to note at the outset that though goddesses are venerated by literally millions of Hindus, male and female, there is no necessary parallel between the status of women and that of female divinities in Hinduism, though many would like this to be so. What these figures do point out is how the female personality at the divine level and the distribution of power in that realm is formulated, and this does not generally correspond to the human level.

It is interesting to note also that Hindu India continues to produce and worship female figures. Still, the goddesses in even the earliest of texts are patriarchal attempts to describe desired behaviour or envisioned roles of women in various capacities. Hindu goddesses are conceptualized not from the vantage point of women but rather from a predominantly male perspective.

One recurring paradigm would have us accept that there are two types of goddesses, or one goddess with two sides: goddesses who nourish and protect, and goddesses who are fearful and destructive.<sup>3</sup> In the first category we find goddesses whose primary modus is to create and nurture life. These goddesses respond to prayers for safe childbirth, sons, and prosperity. These nurturing and auspicious goddesses are almost always controlled by male gods or sheltered by them as, for example, by marriage. These goddesses are safe and domesticated, protective and nurturing, and their powers are adjudicated by social and cultural norms. High-ranking goddesses are mothers, cows, and the providers of sustenance.

Śrī-Lakṣmī, the consort of Viṣṇu, for example, is associated with riches and abundance at the family and state level. She is a goddess of fertility and purity, a model wife and obedient servant of her husband. She is often depicted as devoutly and eternally massaging Viṣṇu’s feet while he sleeps at the end of the cosmic cycle of creation. Another example of this type of goddess is Sītā, mentioned above, the exemplary wife of Rāma in the *Rāmāyaṇa*, who is willing to sacrifice everything, including herself.

In opposition to these goddesses, there are goddesses who are ambivalent, dangerous, and sometimes erotic. Goddesses of this latter type devour one's essence, play non-feminine, martial roles, and are called upon in times of crisis such as epidemics, warfare, and famine. These threatening figures are generally unmarried, but if they are married they dominate their consorts. These goddesses are often conceived as sexually threatening figures and they are exemplified as killers of their demon lovers or goddesses who dance on their lovers' corpses. Durgā, for example, beheads the demon Mahiṣa, and Kālī dances uncontrollably on Śiva's corpse (Kinsley 1986: 116f.). Chinnamastā is another example of a goddess of this type. Chinnamastā is depicted as headless, feeding herself and others with her lifeblood as she stands on top of a copulating couple. In fulfilling her role as sustainer and maintainer of life, she has exhausted and destroyed herself. According to David Kinsley, goddesses of this type are often tamed by marriage:

A central point of the South Indian myths about Durgā and Mahiṣa is that any sexual association with the goddess is dangerous and that before her sexuality can be rendered safe she must be dominated by, made subservient to, defeated by, or humiliated by a male. (Kinsley 1986: 115)

To subdue Kālī on the battlefield, Śiva takes the form of an infant, and Kālī picks him up and nurses him. When this fails to soothe him, she dances until he becomes delighted and calm.

O'Flaherty argues further that the Hindu female cannot be simultaneously erotic and maternal (O'Flaherty 1973: 102, 111) and Madhu Kishwar notes that Indian men are trained to fear the wrath of non-consort goddess figures and revere consort goddesses. Further, she says, similarly a woman who rises above being sexually accessible, consort of none, nor in search of a consort, tends to command tremendous awe and reverence (Kishwar 1997c: 25).

The goddess emphasizes symbiosis, the interconnections that nurture life and sustain it, and as such she is a powerful force that inhabits and permeates all things. In Hinduism, the goddess is envisioned sometimes as the entire cosmos, a great all-encompassing, living being. She is present everywhere, from the gods to each blade of grass. At dissolution she is said to withdraw the world into her womb and then to exist as the seed of the universe—until the next creation, when she grows and blossoms forth. As a spider weaves its web, the goddess creates the universe out of her own body. The mountains are her bones, rivers her veins, trees her body hair, the sun and moon her eyes. Thus, the goddess connects all spheres of reality. She is a mediator, and devotion to her focuses on the improvement of life in this world. She is a great healer with the cooling effect of healing waters. She is nourishment, the food of the earth,

and no one is denied her blessings. The immanence of the goddess is rooted in everyday subsistence—and this is one basis for the feminist position.

## EARLY GODDESSES

Compared to the Indus Valley civilization and the later traditions of Hinduism, the early Vedas contain surprisingly few goddesses, and those that do appear play comparatively minor roles, though there are certain parallels between the goddesses in the early Vedic literature and later goddesses, including Śrī, Sārasvatī, and Vāc. Early Vedic religion is dominated by male deities such as the warrior god, Indra, and the god of fire, Agni. The goddesses of the Vedas are often associated with the human and natural world and as such they evidence its complexity and orderliness. In this context, we can cite Pṛthvī, the goddess of the earth; Usas, the dawn; Rātrī, the night; Nirṛti, decay and corruption; Sārasvatī, the river; Vāc, speech; and Śrī, prosperity.

## Śaktism

Both Śaktism and Tantra arose during the sixth century CE. Śaktī refers to female power, the creative force of the universe, and the energizing power behind all male deities. In Śaktā traditions, the female principle is regarded as the supreme deity and the life-giving power of the universe. Although individual Śaktis are generally categorized according to association with either Śiva or Viṣṇu, they do not seem to be helped or hindered by their presence or lack thereof. Śaktis have a propensity to violence, but their battles are both necessary and worthy of praise. On more than one occasion, Śaktī rescues a god who has been overcome by a demon. Though she is the recipient of worship, she is also greatly feared (see Kinsley 1986: 124–5). Without his Śaktī, who is known as Pārvatī, Śiva is powerless and inert. Further, there are a number of Śaktī texts, including Śaktī purāṇas, which contain information on Śaktī worship, including pūjā, donations, meditations, and pilgrimages to Śaktā Pīṭhas (sacred sites).

## Saundaryalaharī

The *Saundaryalaharī*, a text composed c. 1000 CE, conceives of the universe as animated and controlled by feminine power. In it, we find an example of the notion that Śiva can act only when he is united with Śaktī. On his own, he is unable to stir (v. 1). The goddess is supreme and the text describes her in detail starting with her diadem and down through the separate parts of her body, ending with her feet and a prayer that the poet may drink the water in which they are bathed. Here too, the universe is said to be created by her from a speck of dust, but Śiva shatters it and uses it to dust himself as with ashes (v. 2). From the closing and opening of her eyes the earth is dissolved and created (v. 24).



## Yoni

A pervasive feminine symbol in Hindu ritual and mythology is the yoni, or female genital organ. Śiva's penis or *liṅga* and the goddess's vagina are common motifs in Hindu temples and in Hindu iconography. The yoni symbolizes female creativity, the power of life-giving force. Typically the yoni is depicted as smallish against the backdrop of the usually huge *liṅga*.

One of the most important goddess temples is at Kamakhya, which is revered as the most potent of all Śaktī sites. It is unique in that it enshrines no image of the goddess. In a corner of a cave within the temple, there is a block of stone with a yoni imprinted on it. The yoni is moistened by water dripping from a spring within the cave, and devotees touch it and leave offerings of flowers and leaves upon it. Once a year, during the goddess' menses, the temple is closed for three days; on the fourth day, the doors are opened and pilgrims are allowed in. It is said that during those three days, the spring water that keeps the yoni moist turns a pale red colour. Priests wipe the yoni clean, and the cloths they use are prized by pilgrims who believe them to have great powers.

## SEXUALITY

The varieties of Hindu views on sexuality can only be understood within the cultural context of India, especially in the case of kinship and marriage structures. The control of women's sexuality in Hinduism, as in other traditions, is intimately linked to notions of purity, virginity, and sexual loyalty. 'Women are not to have any independent sexuality outside of the context of marriage' (Bannerji: 197). The practice of child-marriage underscores their lack of control over their own sexuality. The chaste wife, on the other hand, should be attractive and always ready for her husband's pleasure (Bannerji: 198).

It is also the case that notions of sexual liberation that originate in the West cannot be easily transplanted on Indian soil, where community takes precedence over individuality. Despite this, there are certain features of Hinduism that might be understood to challenge traditional gender roles.

## Androgynes

One such feature, not uncommon in Hindu mythology and iconography, is the androgyne. The most common androgyne is the *Ardhanārīśvara*, or the lord (*iśvara*) who is half woman. This image is usually understood in relationship to the deity Śiva and his Śaktī, or female power. The image is ancient; extant examples date from the middle of the first century CE (Goldberg: 26). The figure is easily identified: its right half is male and the left half is female. Like

androgynous images elsewhere, the Ardhanārīśvara expresses male attitudes toward females. It is a male construction, and Śaktī functions here as wife, the active energy behind the male deity Śiva. The male side is dominant; for example, when he chants the Veda, she smiles (Goldberg: 99). We have little data on how this figure is perceived by women (Goldberg: 133).

Androgynes are sometimes understood as symbols of equality and balance. Philosophically, Ardhanārīśvara can be understood as representing the eternal unity of male and female principles, the non-duality of Śiva and Śaktī. The image functions as a devotional device to aid worshippers (Goldberg: 11) who seek self-realization of their inner male and female principles. At the same time, the image often distorts the male–female relationship (O’Flaherty 1973: 284). They are male images, not female images. In an interesting comment in this regard, O’Flaherty says:

Most ancient Indian androgynes are primarily male—men who can have babies as women do . . . on the other hand, it does not happen that some woman or goddess suddenly finds herself endowed with a phallus, or, to her surprise and ours, becomes able to produce children all by herself. (O’Flaherty 1980: 29)

O’Flaherty suggests that androgynes are often associated with fears of loss of power and virility:

. . . all these myths lend themselves to the psychological interpretation that a man transformed into a woman is a man suffering from impotence. (O’Flaherty 1973: 308)

### **Gender Ambiguity**

In the tantric tradition in particular, individuals are perceived as composed of both male and female principles. The primary deity in Tantra, Śiva, is envisioned as both male (Śiva) and female (Śaktī), and most of the male gods in Hinduism are conceptualized as incomplete without their feminine counterpart, their Śaktī. In Hindu mythology transformations of male deities into females is not uncommon. For example, Viṣṇu transforms himself into the beautiful woman Mohinī in order to win back the nectar of immortality (amṛta) from the demons who have stolen it, and Kṛṣṇa takes on a female form to destroy a demon. In some Hindu myths a male deity takes on a female form specifically to experience sexual relations with another man, and at the Jagannatha temple in Orissa Balabhadra, the ascetic elder brother of the deity Jagannatha, is homosexually seduced by a transvestite (Nanda: 22). Male transvestitism among the sākhibhāva (worshippers of Viṣṇu) seems to be the norm

and sometimes devotees imitate female behaviour simulating Rādhā (Kṛṣṇa's lover) in order to worship Kṛṣṇa. These latter sometimes simulate menstruation, they also may engage in sexual acts with men as acts of devotion, and some devotees even castrate themselves in order to more nearly approximate a female identification with Rādhā (Bullough 1976: 267–8, Kakar 1981, and Spratt 1966: 315 in Nanda: 21). In other tantric sects, religious exercises involve a male devotee simulating a woman in order to realize the woman in himself and to transcend his own self. On the other hand, we note that homosexuality was condemned in the ancient law books including *The Laws of Manu*. This latter text tells us that two men who engage in anal sex lose their caste (xi.68), other law books say that they are reborn impotent.

### Hijras

An interesting case of gender ambiguity is the hijras. The term *hijra* refers to a community whose cultural identity is reflected in their renunciation of male sexuality. Hindu culture defines this community as neither men nor women. We may also refer to them as the combined man/woman or an institutionalized third gender (Nanda: 20). Generally hijras dress as women and use the female gender to refer to themselves. They live in households in various districts throughout India.

Many hijras identify themselves with Śiva, himself a somewhat ambiguous figure in the realm of sexuality. Hijras will also identify themselves as wives of Kṛṣṇa, but the experienced gender identity of many of them is as women (Nanda: xix). Some hijras are born hermaphrodites and some undergo an emasculation operation, but it is not at all clear how many hijras comply with either of these conditions. Nanda demonstrates in her study of this community that most members of this community join voluntarily (xx).

Hijras worship at all mother goddess temples and Śiva temples, their major object of devotion is Bahuchara Mata, a version of the Indian mother goddess whose main temple is near Ahmedabad in Gujarat. Every hijra household has a small shrine dedicated to Bahuchara Mata and ideally each should visit her temple. It is in the name of this goddess that hijras shower blessings of fertility and prosperity on newborns and married couples. In Bahuchara's temple, hijras act as temple servants of the mother and bless followers (Nanda: 24). The origin of her worship is as follows:

Bahachura was a pretty, young maiden in a party of travelers passing through the forest in Gujarat. The party was attacked, and, fearing that they would outrage her modesty, Bahuchara drew her dagger and cut off her breast, offering it to the outlaws in place of her virtues. This act, and her ensuing death, led to Bahuchara's deification and the practice of self-mutilation and sexual

abstinence by her devotees to secure her favor. Bahu is also specially worshipped by childless women in the hope of bearing a child. (summarized from Nanda: 25)

Emasculation is the major source of ritual power of the hijras (Nanda: 24). It is the source of their uniqueness and the most authentic way of identifying oneself as a hijra. Emasculation links the hijras to the two most powerful deities in Hinduism, Śiva and the mother goddess. It is emasculation that sanctions the hijras' ritual role as performers at marriages and births (Nanda: 24).

Hijras call into question the basic social categories of gender on which Indian society is built. This makes them objects of fear, abuse, ridicule, and sometimes pity. But they are also conceptualized as special, sacred beings who have achieved their status through ritual transformation (Nanda: 23). While the west attempts to resolve sexual contradictions and ambiguities by denial or segregation, Hinduism appears content to allow opposites to confront each other without resolution and even to grant them a measure of power (Nanda: 23).

## Fire

A word here about Deepa Mehta's 1998 film *Fire* seems in order. This film depicts a friendship and sexual relationship between two middle-class women, Rādhā and Sītā, married to two brothers in an extended family. The title of the film itself is evocative in the Hindu context. While it is true that Sītā (whose name was changed to Nītā in the Hindi version) is not the only role model for Hindu women, she is a powerful one. The film is about the rejection of the traditional mould of marriage for women and the same-sex relationship that these two women, Rādhā and Sītā develop. The film sparked a controversy in India and was interpreted by some as an all-out attack upon Hindu values. It was banned in Delhi and Mumbai after violent demonstrations (Naim: 955). Critics argued that it presented India as homophobic; that its Canadian director, Deepa Mehta, relied heavily upon a Western perception of the plight of Indian women; and that the film demeaned and caricatured the Hindu family life. The film's defenders argued that lesbian love was not uncommon in Indian literature and tradition, but its critics maintained that the film suggested that same-sex relationships among women are most likely to arise only when they are treated badly by men (Kishwar 1998: 7) or that female homoeroticism is 'caused' by a denial of women's natural heterosexual desires—that is, a sexually denied heterosexual female becomes a lesbian. Few reviewers considered the issue in terms of the human condition—that homosexuals, male and female, could be as helpless and normal in their desire and orientation as any so-called 'normal' heterosexual. Perhaps that is why at least one lesbian activist

group in Delhi, called 'Ekangi', is reported to have stayed away from taking a public position on the film (Naim: 957).

## SOCIAL CHANGE

Just as the roles of women are diverse in the Indian subcontinent, so too are the forces of change. It is not possible to enumerate all of them, but the following sections describe a few.

### **Bhakti**

The bhakti tradition swept the subcontinent from the seventh to the twelfth century CE emphasizing individual and personal spirituality. At its best, bhakti cuts across caste, class, and gender lines and removes many of the barriers of ritual and religious practice established previously. Women in the bhakti tradition become recognized as spiritual leaders and models of devotion. Though it is true that this movement is rooted in brahmanic patriarchy, there is evidence that among certain groups women's religiosity did, in fact, challenge existing norms. This path is not woman-centred, but many women came to be recognized as great devotees, including Mīrabai in the sixteenth century CE (see sidebar), and Andal in the ninth century CE (see sidebar).

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### Mīrabai (1498–1546)

*Leona M. Anderson*

Mīrabai is a famous poet-saint of North India. She was born at the height of the bhakti movement and is often cited for breaking some of the barriers of gender. She was the only daughter of a Rajput chieftain in what is today known as Rajasthan. Her mother died when she was a child and she spent much of her childhood in her grandfather's house. Upon the death of her grandfather, her uncle arranged her marriage, but Mīrabai, we are told, took no interest in her earthly spouse, since she believed herself to be married to Lord Kṛṣṇa. When her husband died, Mīrabai was said to have been abused by her conservative male relatives who locked her in her room and tried to poison her. During this time, she became increasingly detached from the world. She began to frequent the temple and converse with the sadhus. Eventually, Mīrabai settled in Vrindavan, and, shortly before her death, she moved to Dwarka.

Mīrabai claims the freedom to worship Kṛṣṇa as her husband. Her songs express her intense love for Kṛṣṇa, which is compared to the love a wife has



for her husband. Her poetry focuses on the longing of the individual to merge with the universal, the wife to merge with her husband. She passionately describes the madness of her love and the pain of separation. She borrows many of the traditional clichés of Indian love poetry that express deep, personal emotions. She writes in 'The Wild Woman of the Forests':

The wild woman of the forests  
 Discovered the sweet plums by tasting,  
 And brought them to her Lord—  
 She who was neither cultured nor lovely,  
 She who was filthy in disarrayed clothes,  
 She of the lowest castes.  
 But the Lord, seeing her heart,  
 Took the ruined plums from her hand.  
 She saw no difference between low and high,  
 Wanting only the milk of his presence.  
 Illiterate, she never studied the Teachings—  
 A single turn of the chariot's wheel  
 Brought her to Knowledge.  
 Now she is bound to the Storm Bodied One.  
 By gold cords of Love, and wanders his woods.  
 Servant Mira says:  
 Whoever can love like this will be saved.  
 My Master lifts all that is fallen,  
 And from the beginning I have been the handmaiden  
 Herding cows by his side

(Trans. Jane Hirshfield)

## Antal

*Michelle Folk*

The ninth-century CE Alvar named Antal is the leading female saint of the Śrīvaiṣṇava movement. Her poems, the 'Tiruppavai', or 'Sacred Vow of Pavai', and the 'Nacciyar Tirumoli', or 'Sacred Song of the Lady', are included in the *Four Thousand Verses of the Alvars*, a text referred to as the *Tamil Veda*.

The Alvars, or 'those who dive deep into the divine', were a group of Vaiṣṇava poet-saints who lived in Tamilnadu in South India during the seventh to tenth centuries CE. The Alvars are believed to be incarnations of the attributes and/or companions of the deity Viṣṇu. Antal is the only female belonging to the Alvar tradition. As such, she is believed to be the

incarnation of the goddess Bhūdevī, or Earth, the second consort of Viṣṇu and receives worship accordingly at the temple in her hometown of Śrīvilliputtar. The Antal temple there, built in the thirteenth century CE, houses a manifestation of Viṣṇu, flanked by Antal as his consort, on his right, and the eagle Garuda, the vehicle of Viṣṇu, on his left in its inner sanctum sanctorum.

Antal's poetry focuses on Kṛṣṇa (Dehejia: 4). Sexual longing and union, as expressed in the symbolism of the *gopīs*, or cowherd women, are the means whereby she articulates her religious experience as she visualizes herself as a *gopī* engaging in dalliances with Kṛṣṇa, using sexual imagery as the metaphor and means to ultimate realization.

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It is also interesting to note that the strengthening of brahmanic and patriarchal structures that typified the colonial period and tended to exclude women from the religious sphere contrasts with the present day, when many women are accepted as spiritual leaders (Omvedt 2000: 190).

### **Manushi**

The media is a powerful instrument for social change and the journal *Manushi* has played a prominent role since its inception in 1978 in addressing issues that pertain to women and social change. *Manushi* regularly publishes material relevant to the position of women in Hinduism. According to its mandate, 'Manushi sees itself as playing a catalytic role towards making our society more just and humane'. In the first issue of *Manushi* in 1978 we read:

Why *Manushi*? *Manushi* hopes to provide a medium for women to 'speak out', to raise questions in their own minds, to generate a widespread debate, and move towards a shared understanding—for a common struggle. *Manushi* wants to bring women's organizations and activists in touch with each other, reach women everywhere who want to break out of their passivity and isolation, enquire into and re-evaluate the historical experience of women all over the world, counter the systematic distortion of the life, situation and image of women, and trivialization of women's issues carried on by mass-media.

*Manushi*'s editor and founder, Madhu Kishwar, lives in Delhi and is a well-known activist and the author of several books and articles.

### **Women Priests**

Although many changes have taken place in Hindu worship, the priesthood is traditionally a male domain and resistant to change. However, challenges to the

male monopoly of the priesthood have existed since at least 1976. Today, schools in different locations teach women to perform rites of worship and marriage, read religious texts, and conduct various types of sacrifice (Manjul 1997: 38). In 1976 in Maharashtra there were only a small number of women trainees, but this number gradually grew, and from 1976 to 1999, more than 7,000 women priests from all castes have graduated (*Women Priests* 2002). Women now train other women. There has been resistance, especially from male priests who resented the competition and argued that Hinduism did not confer upon women the right to perform rituals. Female priests receive a fee, though sometimes not as much as their male counterparts, and they use the income to supplement the family income (Manjul 1997: 39). There are a growing number of women priests in India today and they are gaining steadily in their popularity amongst clients. As one client puts it, 'Women priests do not take shortcuts while performing rituals' (*Women Priests* 2002).

### **Powerful and Public Women**

Given the status of women in Hindu India, it is striking to note that many high-profile remarkable women, especially in the political realm, have periodically dominated the political scene. Indira Gandhi, Jayalalitha, and others come to mind immediately. One explanation for their success is that they possess female power or Śakti parallel to that of numerous unattached goddesses in villages throughout India. Village myths tell us of ordinary human women who were cheated into marrying untouchables or raped by a local villain, or killed or buried by cruel brothers. Out of such desecrations they rose in fury, and grew in stature to become figures that spanned heaven and earth, with powers of destruction that terrified the village into submission, sacrifice, and worship (Kishwar 1999: 3). Theirs are not myths of descent or avatara, but of ascent from the human into divine form (Ramanujan 1992: 20). 'These non-consort goddesses represent the other side of the beneficent mother, who punishes, afflicting people with plague and pox, and when propitiated, heals the afflicted. They are deities of crisis; they preside over famine, plague, death and madness' (Kishwar 1999: 10). In a 1999 article in *Manushi*, Madhu Kishwar equates modern Indian female politicians, including Mamta Banerjee, Jayalalitha, Mayawati, and Sonia Gandhi, with Durgā (Kishwar 1999: 8–10). Kishwar argues that Indian males, who have difficulty accepting the authority of women as wives, have no difficulty in accepting their mothers as authority figures to whom unconditional deference and respect is shown (Kishwar: 7). Such a family upbringing for most Indian men, combined with the tradition of goddess worship, provides a good training ground for men to be psychologically subservient to strong women who assume charge of the family and act as matriarchs.



Another explanation for the powerful position of certain women in India is simply that they inherit their positions from their husbands. In such circumstances, however, one wonders why male heirs do not inherit, especially when males are so preferred to females. Dipankar Gupta argues that it is easier for a female to gain power after the death of a king or powerful male political figure because sons, unlike daughters or wives, are compared to their fathers. Because women are not supposed to have any attributes relevant to the public sphere, they are not measured for their abilities in that sphere. A female heir does not threaten the male order, but makes it possible to revere the departed male hero, unhindered by comparison. Later, women can and do become leaders in their own right, but their initial ascendance stems from the fact they had charismatic fathers or husbands, as in the case of Indira Gandhi. Thus, Gupta maintains, only when women are considered to have no worthwhile qualities of their own, can they be elevated as pure symbols (Gupta 2001).

While neither of these arguments is particularly convincing in and of itself, both rely on an appeal, at some level, to constructions of power and the manner in which these constructions are accorded religious sanction.

### **Women's Devotional Songs**

Women's folk songs illustrate the perpetual articulation and reinterpretation of women's social and religious roles within oral traditions (Gold 1996: 13). Women sing devotional folk songs about the gods (Śiva, Kṛṣṇa, Sītā, Rādhā) and about their experiences (their husbands, their children, and so on). Some of these songs have women complaining about the habits, behaviour, and character of their husbands. Gold notes that many of these songs depict husband-and-wife exchanges and construct a fictional intimacy that strongly contradicts anything visible or permissible in public; or they reflect on the culturally enforced distance between spouses, and attempt in various ways to mend this state of affairs (16). These songs give voice to women's grievances and subvert the image of women as compliant participants in their oppression. These songs seem to illustrate Himani Bannerji's point that 'women make their idea of god their criticism of man's world' (202).

### **WOMEN'S OFFICIAL AND UNOFFICIAL ROLES**

While male space is public space, women's space in Hinduism tends to be the domestic sphere. In this context, we might speak also of the dichotomy of the spiritual and the material. Women's roles tend to fall into the latter and are often constructed with reference to dharma, or duty that is specific to women. The term most frequently found in this respect is *strīdharma* (literally, the dharma of women). A woman's dharma is to be dependent; she is to sacrifice

everything for the well-being and protection of her family and her community, and she is to do so with an attitude of devotion. This is not to say that women in India do not function in public nor that they do not seek mokṣa as a religious goal. Rather, Hindu women often spend most of their time in religiously sanctioned domestic tasks, and they are seen as upholding dharma as a religious goal more often than they are seen as public figures seeking, by any of the traditional means, voice in cultural change or a path to mokṣa.

The role of women has been further complicated in the colonial and post-colonial era. Victorian British gender ideology, based on the 'natural' division of society into male and female spheres, was imposed on Indian public society (Chatterjee 1993: 35–157). Male and female categories became racialized, and private and public domains were altered. Outside in the world, imitation of and adaptation to Western norms was a necessity; but at home, they were tantamount to annihilation of one's very identity (Chatterjee: 121). Women became invested with the duty of preserving the inner sanctity of national culture. It is this dichotomy of the public/private sphere or material/spiritual sphere that is at the heart of the independence movement. 'In demarcating a political position in opposition to colonial rule, Indian nationalists took up the woman's question as a problem of Indian tradition' (119). 'The Anglo-Indian strategy of using women's subordination in India as a handy stick with which to beat back Indian demands for political equality had converted the "woman-question" into a battleground over the political rights of Indians' (Chatterjee 1993: 45). The result was a convenient explanation both for continuing to see women as guardians of conservative traditional Hinduism and for excluding women from public institutions.

### **Wives and Mothers**

Women in Hindu India have been dominantly identified as wives and mothers. In a very immediate way, a Hindu woman is defined by her relationships and in particular by the male upon whom, at any particular moment in her life, she is dependent. The duties of women (their *strīdharma*) are many, but most involve service to others, especially their husbands and children.

The role of wife is primary, and marriage is arguably the single most important life cycle ritual for women. The ideal wife, the wife who exhibits total devotion to her husband, is known as a *pativrata* (literally, one who has taken a vow to her husband). One of the most popular *pativratas* in Hindu mythology is *Sāvitṛī*. Her story is as follows:

King *Aśvapati* had no children and when he became old he took a vow and the goddess *Sāvitṛī* appeared before him and granted him a boon. *Aśvapati* asked for a child. In due course, a female child was born and *Aśvapati* named

her Sāvitṛī in honour of the goddess. The child grew up and eventually the time came for her to be married. Sāvitṛī chose Satyavana, a prince cursed to die in a year. When, after the year had expired, Yama, the god of death, came to take him away, Sāvitṛī would not let him go and pleaded with Yama to revive him. Sāvitṛī's virtue and devotion to her husband eventually won back his life. (*Mahābhārata*: 803f.)

The pativrata vows to protect and serve her husband as if he were a god and to provide him with children (especially sons). Though there are many variations on this theme, generally women are seen as the responsibility of men and their primary roles are to produce sons and facilitate their husbands' salvation through domestic and ritual chores. By surrendering to her husband, by obliterating her own wishes, the ideal wife (especially the upper-caste wife) enhances the qualities of her husband and gains salvation for him and for herself (Omvedt 2000: 188). Manu, for example, makes it clear that

A virtuous wife should constantly serve her husband like a god, even if he behaves badly, freely indulges his lust, and is devoid of any good qualities. Apart [from their husbands], women cannot sacrifice or undertake a vow or fast; it is because a wife obeys her husband that she is exalted in heaven. (115)

Hindu marriages tend to be arranged marriages, not 'love' marriages, and it is uncommon for a woman to remain unmarried in Hindu India. Unmarried women are considered unfortunate creatures and this state reflects badly upon herself and her family. As an unmarried woman, she belongs to no recognized social category (see, for example, Phillimore 1991: 331). Thus, women who do not follow the conventions of conduct that mandate marriage are often deemed dangerous.

Indian women's strategies for building a stable family life are varied, but the foremost concerns are those relating to their children. Women can demand obedience, love, and service from their children in a manner that they cannot from their husbands. As mothers, women are culturally revered. The popularity and power of mother figures such as Ānandamayī Mā (see sidebar) and Mā Nirmālā Devī, who command huge followings among men, demonstrate this cultural reverence (Kishwar 1997c: 25). As Himani Bannerji remarks:

It is not surprising that women frequently try to use the ideology of motherhood to their own advantage. As she is only sexual 'for', rather than 'in' herself, motherhood becomes a woman's preferred vocation in which a physicality of a direct but different sort with young children gives her some satisfaction and keeps the husband at bay within socially approved sanctions. (198–9)

## Ānandamayī Mā (1896–1982)

Leona M. Anderson

Up until her death in 1982, Ānandamayī is said to have possessed extraordinarily powerful divine intoxication and the ability to heal, perform miracles, and have prescience. Her body is said to have undergone various transformations in evidence of her divinity. These spontaneous outbursts of religious sentiment are common identifying marks of divinity and include such manifestations as sweating, crying, and hair standing on end. For example, the sound of religious chanting sometimes rendered her body stiff; sometimes caused it to lengthen or shrink and contort. She is said to have taken on the appearance of various goddesses, and is attributed with the power to heal by touch alone. Ānandamayī was married at an early age, but when her husband tried to touch her on their wedding night, he received an electric shock that threw him across the room. He became her devotee and lived a celibate life thereafter. Ānandamayī did not have any formal religious training, nor was she initiated by a guru. She travelled ceaselessly and established a network of ashrams throughout India. Ānandamayī's international centre is located in Kandhal, where accommodation is available for her devotees.

As you love your own body, so regard everyone as equal to your own body. When the Supreme Experience supervenes, everyone's service is revealed as one's own service. Call it a bird, an insect, an animal or a man, call it by any name you please, one serves one's own Self in every one of them.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Ānandamayī Mā. *Ananda Varta Quarterly* 1/60. <<http://www.cosmicharmony.com/Sp/AnandMM/Mataji.htm#Sublime>>

Amrita Basu and Ritu Menon tell us that in India, woman as mother represents the nation or motherland, man as father represents the state. Patriarchal control is exercised by the paternalistic male rulers of the state who offer protection to its women and children on the assumption that they cannot protect themselves. The price of this protection is control over women's sexuality (Basu and Menon 1998 in Goldberg: 169, note 2). If we look closely at the Ārya Samaj movement in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, we find that despite this movement's espousal of women's education and stress on the role

of education in preventing exploitation of women, women were educated to be suitable wives and good Hindu mothers for the newly educated men (Kishwar 1989: 98).

### **Vratas or Vrats**

Austerities known as *vrats*, or vows, play an important role in structuring the religious practice of many Hindu women. The observance of *vrats* produces good fortune and happiness for the continued sustenance of their families. Sometimes, vows are taken when an obstacle arises, but they are also taken for the safety and security of others and for personal and communal reasons. A single woman might take a vow for a good husband; a married women (as a *pativrata*), for the welfare and protection of her husband and family; and a widowed women for the continued protection of her family and departed husband. In practice, *vrats* most often involve a regimen of fasting. Their observance often includes the narration of a legend tracing the origin of the *vrata*, the devotion to it, and how it is to be performed. The observance of *vrats* has been linked to ideals of wifeliness; *vrata* rituals tend to demarcate domestic space as women's space and give this space a religious orientation in the promotion of prosperity and fertility within the household. *Vrats* are, then, attempts to realize in their day-to-day lives what patriarchy requires of women (Bannerji: 199). At the same time *vrats* are highly individualistic and they function in the lives of Hindu women in more than one way. Women observe *vrats*, as Pearson shows, as social events that have elements of religiosity, but they also afford an opportunity for women to interact with other women in the preparation of food, art, and in discourse (Pearson 1996: 200f.).

A popular vow among Indian women in the north is to the goddess Santoshi Mā, a deity popularized in Vijay Sharma's 1975 film *Jai Santoshi Mā* (Hail Santoshi Mā). The film is about the efficacy of making a vow to the goddess Santoshi Mā. After the film's release, the popularity of this *vrata* and of Santoshi Mā literally swept across North India, where it remains immensely popular.

### **Widows**

There are roughly 30 to 50 million widows in India today and their fate is relatively bleak; this is especially true for those who are uneducated and unprovided for by their husbands or relatives. Traditionally, widows are prohibited from remarriage, from wearing coloured saris (white clothing is prescribed), and from wearing jewellery. Until Independence in 1947, they were mandated to shave their heads. They are often considered to be a burden to the family. Though there is no authoritative religious scripture to support this treatment of widows, often they are shunned by those who believe that widows are



somehow responsible for their husband's demise and that their dharma was not strong enough to ensure their husbands' longevity.<sup>4</sup> High-caste widows seem more susceptible to restrictions than low-caste widows (Chen 2002). Many widows relocate to pilgrimage centres, especially Vrindavan, which is sometimes referred to as the City of Widows, and there, they rename themselves *dasi* (servant). The Indian government provides less-fortunate widows a small pension, but most women report that it is difficult to collect.

There are a number of training centres for widows in India today, including Aamar Bari (meaning, My Home) in Vrindavan, which opened in 1998 (Coulter 2002). Organizations such as SEWA (Self-Employed Women's Organization) in Ahmedabad have recently introduced a scheme whereby a woman can insure against her husband's death.

In a report on the 1994 Bangalore Conference on Indian Widows, Marty Chen examines the status of Indian widows and tells us that, although the Hindu Succession Act of 1969 made women eligible to inherit equally with men, widows are still deprived of their legal rights. The inheritance rights of the majority of Indian rural widows are governed by actual practice, and practice can differ from village to village, even in the same region and among the same caste, and conflicts often arise.

Many Indian women are unwilling to remarry after a divorce or widowhood, especially if they have children, because of the risks involved particularly to their relationship with their children (Kishwar 1997c: 24). Mahatma Gandhi believed that a real Hindu widow was a treasure, a gift to humanity (Kishwar 1997c: 25). He further described her as one who had learned to find happiness in suffering, and had accepted suffering as sacred humanity. Not all widows in India are treated badly. Many remain at home and are treated with respect. However, the number of widows that do not receive this treatment is alarming.

### **Sisters and Brothers: Rakṣabandhana**

One of the most popular festivals in North India is the festival of Rakṣabandhana, observed in July or August. *Rakṣa* means protection and *bandhana* means tie or bond. Together, they refer to a bond that unites male and female, most usually brothers and sisters. The ritual is a simple one: sisters place a dot of kumkum on the foreheads of their brothers and then tie a thread around on their brothers' wrists. The thread symbolizes a bond between them: the sister seeks prosperity and good fortune for her brother, and, once accepted, the brother ensures his protection of his sister. Usually brothers offer a gift in return, and it is believed that the thread they wear protects them from all evil. The Hindu mythological story relating to this festival tells us that when the gods suffered a terrible defeat at the hands of the demons and Indra lost his

kingdom, Indrānī, his consort, prepared a charm and tied a thread around Indra's wrist. Indra easily defeated the demons by virtue of this thread and won back his kingdom.

### **Asceticism, Celibacy, and Nakedness**

Sexual abstinence in India not only is commonly believed to bestow extraordinary power on human beings, it is also one of the paths to liberation. Indian mythology is replete with stories of sages who practise such extreme asceticism that Indra's throne in the heavens starts shaking. In these cases, the gods usually send some exceedingly attractive nymph to distract the ascetic from his meditation. The message is clear: women impede asceticism (*Śiva Saṁhita* 5.3, Bahadur 1981: 52 in Goldberg: 137).

Asceticism in India is a dominantly male pursuit (Sethi: 13). As a consequence, women who renounce the world are treated with ambiguity at best and mistrust and antagonism at worst. The female renouncer is dangerous because she is not bound to a male; she is outside the pale of social norms. As Sethi puts it:

By being wedded to a heavenly consort, the renouncer is like a prostitute, the eternal bride . . . who lives her religious life outside male control. In seeking union with God, she is also similar to the widow who displays loyalty to her marital ties even beyond the life of her husband. Her self-denying and ascetic lifestyle is similar to the widow (6). However such autonomy and agency was available only in relation to God. It is highly improbable that this had any significant impact on transforming gender relations among the laity. (14)

Further, the ascetic life is often symbolized by nakedness, and because of the strong social prohibition against nakedness for women, female renouncers are rare. Despite this, there have always been female sādhus (sādhvīs) who have been treated with a great deal of respect. Examples include Madhavi, Sulabha in the *Māhābhārata* (Van Buitenen 1978, III: 404–5, 410–11; Sorensen 1904: 657); Vedavatī in the *Rāmāyaṇa* (Shastri 1952: v. 3, 420–2); and older female renouncers such as Śabarī and Svayamprabhā in the *Rāmāyaṇa* (v. 2, 154–8, v. 2, 295–7). There is also evidence, as Rāmaswamy notes in her 1997 work, for the existence of nunneries and nuns in South India. Many of the most revered women in Hindu religious history opted out of sexual relations altogether, as, for example, Mīrabai, Akka Mahādevī (who walked naked), and Lal Ded, all of whom came to be treated as virtual goddesses.

Today, women account for a small percentage of the sādhu (renouncer) population of India. Some sects refuse admission to women, fearing their corrupting influence on the celibates; others, such as the Juna Akhara, are mixed,

and a few are all-female. To live the life of the female *sādhvī* (*sādhvī*) is one of the few ways women can escape the oppressive life of widowhood, and so it is not surprising that a large number of female renouncers take up this life after their husband's death.

## FUNDAMENTALISM

Hindu fundamentalism is a political movement, and the relevant political parties are the BJP (Bhāratīya Janatā Party), the RSS (Rāshtriya Swayamsevak Sangh), and the VHP (Viśva Hindā Pariṣad). Together, they make up the *sangh parivar*. In addition there is a range of organizations, institutions, and temple networks from which these parties draw their support. Their ideology is known as Hindutva, and their agenda is to transform India into a Hindu state.

### Backlash

An obvious example of backlash is to be found in what is sometimes described as Hindu fundamentalism. However, it is important to note that Hindu fundamentalism is distinct from fundamentalism in Christianity and Islam. Hinduism is a tradition of diversity evidenced by its great many sacred texts, personalities, deities, and paths to the attainment of liberation. Belief in a particular god is not even necessary in some sects of Hinduism. Hence, Hindu fundamentalism is not based on the claim of one true god, one true path to salvation, or a literal reading of sacred text. Indeed, one might argue that Hinduism is one of the most disorganized of religious traditions, and this characteristic makes religious and political solidarity difficult to attain.

An important feature of Hindu fundamentalism is its rejection of the West. Hindus of this persuasion see themselves as defending their tradition against the onslaught of Western colonialism and Western imperialism, against those Western traditions that claim an exclusive belief system and impose that belief system on others. Hindu fundamentalists are not missionaries and do not seek to convert others to their beliefs. Nor do they seek the creation of a Hindu state that prohibits the practice of other religions. The charge of intolerance is often used to discredit this movement, but its intolerance is not comparable to that exhibited periodically by Western religions. What Hindu fundamentalists do seek is to restore what they see as essential to the grandeur of the Hindu tradition, as understood in their particular way.

The impact of this ideology on women is significant. Basically Hindu fundamentalists seek to return women to traditional roles within the family (Robinson: 188). RSS and BJP literature is replete with images of Hindu mother and consort goddesses such as Sītā and Sāvitrī, which invoke the notion of the



good Hindu woman who is chaste, subservient to the needs of her family, devout, and pure. The fundamentalist position seems to be that, though women and men are equal, there are essential differences between them (Robinson: 188). As Ratna Kapur and Brenda Crossman remark in *Women and Hindutva*:

But what is this position to which women are to be returned? The BJP has stated that 'men and women are equal but they are not the same'. Since women are not the same as men, they are not to be treated the same as men. Accordingly, the BJP's policies emphasize the ways in which women are different from men, and in so doing reinforce sexist stereotypes that have contributed to women's inequality. For example, the BJP support policies that emphasize women's roles as mothers and wives (maternal health care), while rejecting policies that go too far beyond these traditional roles for women (compensation for housework). (1994: 42–3)

Hindu women are attracted to fundamentalism because it affirms their roles as mothers, wives, and daughters, and this is the cornerstone of the BJP's position. This movement is appealing to women who support Hindu fundamentalist movements also because it does not reject popular Hindu traditions (Robinson: 196)

There are numerous organizations and roles for women internal to the various fundamentalist political parties, including, for example, the female wing of the RSS, designed to promote 'virtues' such as physical courage and strength and devotional attachment to the ideals of Hindu womanhood. Like the RSS, the women's wing is given physical, intellectual, and spiritual training. Both the BJP and VHP also have special women's organizations. These spaces and roles offered to women in the sangh parivar affirm their social importance, though decision making in the sangh is dominantly male. Women's traditional roles in the family—as mothers, wives, and daughters—are here supported and celebrated (Robinson: 199). Much attention is paid to female members of parliament belonging to the VHP, including Uma Bharati. Female renouncers such as Rithambara also play an important role in the fundamentalist agenda. In keeping with the notion that the holy women are identified as goddesses and referred to as *matājis* (respected mothers; Erndl: 94), several modern female renouncers promote particular political agendas as embodiments of Śaktī.

On the devotional front, a primary image is the eight-armed Durgā, a female warrior who presides primarily over women. Important also is the female image of Mother India, an icon that visualizes the country as a great goddess. The Motherland as goddess was important during the independence movement and it continues to provide inspiration, focusing attention on the

importance of mothering and reproduction. The image of the Motherland is also that of the reified woman (Sarkar: 51) and it is not without violent overtones. In this regard, we note Tanika Sarkar's statement that 'the woman in this vision of Hindutva conceives and nurtures her sons as instruments of revenge; she gives birth to masculine violence; the space for this violence is reserved for men. . . .' (284)

Hindu fundamentalism represents a challenge to women's rights as well as to their individuality. Because women in these movements base their platform upon supporting women's traditional roles in family and home (Robinson: 189), they therefore must disagree with the women's movement in India and see it as contrary, selfish, and Western (non-Hindu).

## UNIQUE FEATURES

Several features of Hinduism are unique. The following sections focus on four: the manner in which the Indian subcontinent is sacralized by the goddess in the Śaktī Pīṭhas; the practice of satī, or widow burning; and the worship of Durgā and Kālī, both representing a living tradition of the worship of the feminine in the form of the goddess.

### **The Śaktī Pīṭhas**

The Śaktī Pīṭhas are sites in the Indian subcontinent that are believed to be sacralized by the goddess. One myth of the origin of these holy sites is as follows:

Satī was the daughter of Dakṣa Prajāpati and the consort of Śiva. Dakṣa decided to perform a great sacrifice and he invited all of the gods except Śiva. Satī was insulted by this slight on her husband and attended the sacrifice. She rebuked her father and threw herself into the sacrificial fire. When Śiva discovered what had happened, he became enraged and rushed to the sacrifice. Finding the corpse of Satī, he hoisted it over his shoulder and began to dance the Tandava dance, signalling the end of the world. Fearing the worst, Viṣṇu took his cakṛa and hacked off the corpse of Satī from Śiva's shoulder. The pieces of her body fell to earth and were scattered all over India. (paraphrased from Kinsley 1986: 37–8)

Each place where a piece of Satī's body fell to earth is considered sacred. The number of such sites varies, depending on the source, from 18 to 51. At many of these locations, temples have been erected to indicate the part of the goddess' body that fell there: her breasts, hair, tongue, arms, eyes, feet, brains, nose, lips, chin, and vagina, among others.

## Satī

The term *satī* means 'good woman' and it refers to a woman who serves her husband in every way. This term also refers to a woman who immolates herself on the funeral pyre of her husband. The practice of *satī* is sometimes understood with reference to the above myth of *Satī*, the consort of Śiva. Sometimes, we are referred to the immolation of *Sītā*, the wife of Rāma. Chilling images of *Sītā*'s fire ordeal show her smiling serenely as the blaze engulfs her. In more modern times our attention is directed to what are commonly referred to as dowry deaths—where women are set ablaze when their saris 'accidentally' catch fire from contact with a kerosene stove (Courtright 1993: 29).

The British banned *satī* in 1829 and they were supported in this endeavour by eminent thinkers including Raja Ram Mohan Roy, who argued that this practice was not intrinsic to Hinduism. Modern Indian laws on the subject include the Commission of *Satī* (Prevention) Act, 1987, which problematically equates *satī* to suicide and clearly speaks of it as a voluntary act on the part of women.

One of the most famous *satīs* of recent times is the case of Roop Kanwar in Rajasthan (see, for example, Oldenberg). More recently in 2002 in Madhya Pradesh, the widow Kuttu Bai committed *satī*. Shrines are built for the worship and glorification of women who have committed *satī* and some of these shrines are very popular. In the context of the religious life, Courtright has observed that wifely and ascetic duties are sometimes combined in the lives of the *jivit satīmātās* (living *satīs*) (Courtright 1995: 11). These living *satīs* are women who declared their intention to commit *satī* at their husband's pyre, but were prevented by their kinsmen for fear of criminal prosecution. Instead they follow a life of extreme asceticism. While the renouncers or ascetics are believed to be able to transcend sensory perceptions by the heat of their meditation, the *satīmātās* are kept alive by the heat of their *pativrata* dharma. Their detachment from the world led Harlan to comment that 'the living *satīmātā* remains in this world but is no longer of it' (see Courtright 1995: 12).

Whatever the case, the practice of immolating women is deeply troubling, especially from a feminist perspective. John Stratton Hawley (1993: 176) says that feminist treatments of *satī* are reluctant to reduce it to its lowest common denominator—misogyny—and dismiss it. The subject is difficult and women differ on how to evaluate it. He notes further that 'By thinking about this common, complex object, feminists speak not only to the world but to each other. While they push back the boundaries of external ignorance, they also establish boundaries that divide and clarify their own group' (Hawley: 1993: 176). In this way *satī* points to both the crudeness and the subtlety with which patriarchal mystification can operate (Hawley 1993: 176).

## Durgā

Durgā, the great heroine and warrior queen, is without question one of the most impressive goddesses and also the most popular deities of the Hindu pantheon. Durgā rides a lion into battle and uses her beauty to seduce her victims into a fatal confrontation. Durgā is unmarried and possesses dangerous power. In her most important role, she slays buffalo demon Mahiṣa (Kinsley 1986: 95f.).

The story of Durgā first appears in the sixth-century text, the *Devīmāhātmya*, which tells the story of the genesis of Durgā and her slaying of Mahiṣa. The myth can be summarized as follows:

The demon Mahiṣa is granted a boon that he will be invincible to all opponents except a woman, and he becomes intoxicated with pride, and challenges and defeats Indra in battle. He then takes over heaven and begins harassing the devotees of the gods. Angry and frustrated at their defeat and inability to avenge themselves, the gods gather and emit their collective energies, out of which emerges a beautiful woman who possesses the multiple characteristics of the gods. She wields eight different weapons, each representing one of the male deities, and she is given a lion as her mode of transportation.

Because Durgā is unprotected by a male deity, Mahiṣa assumes that she is helpless. Durgā challenges Mahiṣa to battle. Ultimately, he transmutes into a buffalo and Durgā decapitates him. On the battlefield, Durgā creates female helpers from herself, most notably Kālī and a group of ferocious goddesses called Matṛkās, or mothers. These goddesses are manifestations of Durgā's fury and they are wild, fierce, and bloodthirsty. (Coburn 1991 and Tewari 1988)

The creation of the goddess occurs as a direct result of a cosmic crisis that the male deities are unable to rectify. The situation calls for a female warrior. As such, Durgā violates the model of the Hindu woman. She is not submissive, she is not subordinated to a male deity, she does not participate in household duties, and her greatest talent lies in what is traditionally held to be a male function: fighting in battle. As an independent warrior, she can stand against any male on the battlefield. Unlike the usual female, Durgā does not lend her power or śaktī to a male consort but rather takes power from the male gods and uses it in her own heroic pursuits. By giving Durgā their inner strength and heat, the gods also surrender any power they have to control her. Although she is created by male gods and does their bidding, she fights without direct male support against male demons, and she always wins. And Durgā does not create male helpers, but female ones.

Durgā's relationship to Mahiṣa has some sexual overtones, though later Sanskrit texts downplay this element or omit it altogether, perhaps because she is the consort of Śiva.

Once the demon has been slain and world order has been restored, Durgā says that she is 'quick to hearken to the pleas of her devotees and that she may be petitioned in times of distress to help those who worship her' (Kandiah 1990: 23). Thus, she becomes a personal saviour as well as a cosmic one.

One of the most important festivals in the Hindu calendar is the autumnal festival of Durgā Pūjā, during which the story of her defeat of the buffalo demon Mahiṣa is recited. The festival lasts for nine days, commemorating the battle, and the tenth day marks Mahiṣa's final defeat. The central image of the festival is Durgā slaying the buffalo demon. She is generally depicted having many arms, each of which bears a weapon, standing on her lion and plunging her trident into the chest of Mahiṣa. Clearly the imagery promotes Durgā's central role as ferocious warrior and maintainer of the cosmic order (Tewari 1988).

The festival coincides with the autumn harvest in North India, and Durgā is considered to be the underlying force of the fertility of the earth. During the worship, the priest anoints the icon of Durgā with water from auspicious sources, including the major holy rivers of India. He also anoints her with agricultural products such as sugar-cane juice and sesame oil, and offers her certain soils that are associated with fertility. Animal sacrifice is a common feature of Durgā worship. Blood replenishes her powers and reinvigorates her.

Durgā is also worshipped in a domestic capacity as the wife of Śiva and the mother of several divine children. Durgā takes on the role of a returning daughter during her festival, and many devotional songs are written to welcome her home or to bid her farewell. These particular songs make no mention of her roles as warrior or cosmic saviour. Instead, she is identified with Pārvatī, the wife of Śiva, and as the daughter of Himālaya and Menā (Coburn 1991). During Durgā Pūjā, it is customary for daughters to return to their home villages, and their arrival is the cause of much celebration. At the end of Durgā Pūjā, the image of the goddess is removed by a truck or other conveyance and carried away for immersion in a local river. Many women gather around the image to bid it farewell and it is not uncommon to see them actually weeping as the goddess, their 'daughter', leaves to return to her husband's home (Coburn 1991: 153).

The various roles of Durgā remain distinctive and autonomous and do not readily blend into each other. Her ability to slay the powerful forces of evil does not seem to give her any authority over her husband, Śiva. Nor here is Durgā best known for her exploits on the battlefield. On the contrary, her position within the household as consort of Śiva does not seem to differ significantly from that of her female devotees. Still, Durgā is more powerful than the majority



of goddesses in the Hindu pantheon and serves as a reminder of that potential energy and ability within female deities. Hindu women can draw strength from her, but there is 'no inherent, invariable relationship between powerful goddesses and the advocacy of women's empowerment' (Pinchman: 191).

## Kālī

Kālī is one of the most interesting and popular goddesses in Hinduism. Kālī is strong, independent, ruthlessly violent, a threat to men and women alike. She is free and she is fierce. She is attractive because she embodies awesome raw power. For many Western women, Kālī represents the embodiment of the strength that lies unrealized in women generally. However, this is not necessarily the way she is viewed in India, and it is easy to lose sight of the fact that she, like the other goddesses in the Hindu pantheon, is the product of patriarchal thought.

Kālī's official genesis in the textual tradition is located in the *Devimahātmya*, which we noted above with respect to Durgā. In the *Devimahātmya*, Kālī emerges from the forehead of the warrior queen Durgā. Her appearance is terrifying: simultaneously horrifying and mesmerizing. Devotional images depict her as black in colour with a bright and gaudily painted red lolling tongue, red eyes, and wearing a very long necklace of human heads. She also wears a girdle of human arms and two dead bodies as earrings. She has three eyes and her hair hangs loose. In two of her four arms she wields a sword and the head of the demon she has just slain. With the other two, she motions her followers to fear not, and she confers boons. Sometimes she wears a tiger skin, but generally she is naked save for her girdle of human arms. She stands on the body of a figure, sometimes identified as Śiva. Her Śaktī, her female power, energizes the entire world, but she prefers to dwell in the cremation grounds where dissolution is the order of the day.

This image is rich and interpretations of it are many. The goddess's dark hue is often cited as representing depth and infinity, as, for example, the void of space, the fathomless depths of the dark vortex, the depth of the ocean. Black, in its absence of colour, is here understood to transcend all colours. 'Just as all colors disappear in black, so all names and forms disappear in her' (*Mahanirvana Tantra* 13.5 in Avalon 1972: 295). Her black colour also indicates the unknown and the unknowable, reminding us of our fear of the dark. Kālī's nakedness is a challenge and counterpoint to Hindu notions of nakedness. It represents a pure, untouched state, a state of innocence. But Kālī is a naked killer, strong and hot, unafraid of her body and uninhibited by ordinary rules of human society. Without the illusion of clothes to cover her up and protect her, she shows us exactly what and who she is. She challenges us, provokes us to confront ourselves directly.

Her dishevelled hair forms a curtain of illusion. Her red lolling tongue dramatically depicts the fact that she consumes all creatures. She tastes the flavours of the world, so to speak, and finds them intoxicating. Her sword cuts through ignorance, ego, and illusion; the severed head indicates the sum total of conscious knowledge, marking the separation of intellect, reason, and ordinary thought from true wisdom; the waistband of human arms represent work that hands and arms perform in the world and reminds us that all deeds produce karma and that the binding effects of this karma can be overcome—severed, as it were, by Kālī. She blesses her worshippers by cutting them free from karmic bondage (Kinsley 1997: 89).

In contrast to Śiva's sweet expression, plump body, and ash-white complexion, Kālī's emaciated limbs, angular gestures, and fierce grimace convey a wild intensity. Her loose hair, skull garland, and tiger wrap whip around her body as she stomps and claps to the rhythm of the dance. Kālī's boon is the boon of freedom. She teaches us to confront suffering, pain, our own inevitable decay and death. Kālī laughs mockingly at us when we ignore, deny, or try to explain away these facts of our existence. Kālī is the great swallower, though unlike the swallowing habits of deities like Gaṇeśa, her swallowing is depicted as terrible. She tastes and enjoys the world, and she is indiscriminate in her enjoyment of its flavours. She is all-devouring Time, the one who swallows the living and keeps their skulls around her neck, symbolic of her action, as trophies of battle or trophies of the ultimate victory of death over life.

There are numerous temples and images of Kālī throughout the subcontinent, but she is most popular in Bengal. Animal sacrifice is an indispensable part of Kālī worship, and goats, sheep, and buffalo are commonly sacrificed at Kālī temples (Banerji 1992: 175). One of the most famous saints of Bengal, Rāmakṛṣṇa (1836–86), devoted his life to the worship of Kālī, composing numerous poems in her praise. His predecessor Ramprasad Sen (1718–75) is also of note as a great devotee of Kālī. Ramprasad composed some of the most popular devotional songs performed in her worship.

Kālī's human and maternal qualities continue to define the goddess for most of her devotees to this day. Kālī's devotees form a particularly intimate and loving bond with her, but the devotee never forgets Kālī's demonic, frightening aspects or distorts Kālī's nature and the truths she reveals. Ramprasad Sen mentions these characteristics of Kālī repeatedly in his songs but is never put-off or repelled by them. Kālī may be frightening, mad, and a forgetful mistress of a world spinning out of control, but she is, after all, the Mother. As such, she must be accepted by her children. In the following the poet, Ramprasad Sen has to beg and cajole her to get what he wants. He often insults her, calling her stony-hearted and more. The relationship between deity and devotee here is a very personal one:

Can there be compassion in the heart of one who is the daughter of a mountain?

If she is not unkind, can She kick her husband in the chest?

Thou art called 'compassionate' in the world; but there is no trace of compassion in Thee, O Mother!

Thou wearest a necklace of heads cutting them off from mothers' sons

The more I cry 'Mother, Mother', the more Thou turnest deaf ears to my cries.

Prasada is used to suffering Thy kicks; yet he utters 'Durgā,' Durgā.

(Ramprasad 1966: 141)

It is also interesting to note that in Bengal, where Kālī is most popular, there is a tradition of female saints, some of whom are regarded as the embodiment of Kālī. One such teacher is Śrī Ānandamayī Mā (1896–1982), the blissful mother (see sidebar, page 28).

## NOTES

1. In this early period women may in fact have participated in Vedic rituals, There is some evidence that they were permitted to discourse on sacred texts (Young 1999: 62) and perform sacrifices (Altekar: 198f.).
2. It was Sir Jones who first translated *The Laws of Manu* and after having translated it, Manu became authoritative, perpetuating the notion that the British were simply enforcing traditional Hindu law (Kishwar: 2000).
3. See, for example, O'Flaherty who delineates these two types as goddesses of the breast and goddesses of the tooth.
4. In some cases a widow could escape this contamination by performing sati or ritual immolation which represents the final and the most perfect act of self-effacement and fulfillment of her duties and religious pursuit. Through sati a woman could achieve her greatest honour within orthodox Hinduism.

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## WOMEN AS LEADERS IN HINDUISM

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Gargi, the ancestress, was a woman who participated in philosophical debates in ancient India (Roy, 1995). In the 11th century several women saints embarked on spiritual journeys on their own in spite of strong social disapproval (Kishwar & Vanita, 1989). More recently, there are examples of women who are accepted as enlightened souls transcending the limitations of gender (White, 1980), and there are examples of women gurus with large followings of their own (Young, 1993). At present Amma the hugging saint is popular in India and internationally and has a large following (Amma.org). Because such examples are relatively sparse, one might wonder whether these are exceptions rather than the rule. In addition to the spiritual realm there have been leaders such as Indira Gandhi in the political arena, followed at present by women such as Mayavathi and Jayalalitha. As India modernizes, women are making a mark in science, medicine, technology, business, and finance. As Hinduism is the predominant religion in India, one has to wonder the extent to which it has influenced the role of women in all these endeavors. It is difficult to identify the precise nature of influence of Hinduism in these areas because of the impact of modernization, industrialization, and globalization. But one can assess the ethos of Hinduism in facilitating or retarding women's participation as leaders in these endeavors. Such an assessment necessarily has to be a general one.

The dominant ethos for gender relations in Hinduism is provided by the androcentric ideology of Pativratiya, which can be roughly translated as husband worship (Dhruvarajan, 1989). This ideology has scriptural sanction and has been widely popular among the upper castes through centuries. Due to this reason it has hegemonic status and is equated with civilized and cultured behavior. The presence of divinity in female form in the Hindu pantheon opens possibilities

for alternate conceptions of gender relations. This is particularly true among lower castes and tribal people who form a numerical majority (even though estimates vary in different parts of India, they constitute more than 50% overall) where folk tradition provides goddesses with unique virtues. It is conceivable that they play a role to hold their own in a democracy. But because the dominant upper castes privilege scriptural renditions, the alternate conceptions of gender relations are devalued and marginalized. Whether women are allowed to play leadership roles, and the kind of leadership roles possible for women, needs to be understood within these contexts.

### Dominant Tenets

Hinduism is a complex religion. There are considerable variations in the way it is practiced across geographical regions, among different castes. Urban and rural differences are also significant as forces of modernization and globalization spread, and there is no one organized structure. One can identify dominant tenets of Hinduism, but the way they are interpreted can vary in significant ways. It is often argued that Hinduism is more a way of life than a strict canonical religion. There is some truth to this argument, as different aspects of religion are stressed and sometimes the interpretation of some of these aspects also varies. Because of a long history, Hinduism has developed and changed over time, but it also has continuity in many aspects. The authority of the Vedas and the Upanishads (mostly composed by male rishis/saints with a few hymns attributed to women rishis/saints) as sacred scriptures is accepted. The epics and puranas/religious commentaries stir the imagination of Hindus everywhere as the stories

are written and rewritten and acted and sung in different languages by different groups. It is interesting to see how people are moved by these experiences extolling the enduring truths about human experiences as these stories are told and retold. A number of festivals and life cycle ceremonies celebrated throughout the year make this religion vibrant and alive. The rituals and symbolism accompanying these festivals and life cycle ceremonies help the followers to rededicate themselves to the tenets of the religion.

The dominant tenets of Hinduism do not allow leadership for women. Married life is considered mandatory for all women and all other options are considered unnatural, deviant, and unfulfilling. The ideology of *Pativratya* prescribes that women live out their lives as their husband's shadow. Women are to find fulfillment in this life and salvation hereafter by being devoted self-effacing wives. They are not allowed a separate identity. Structural arrangements that have evolved within this ideological context over time foreclose options for women to carve a different destiny in life. Even though there are some exceptions, for the most part the structural arrangement is patriarchal, patrilineal, and patrilocal. It is stipulated that women live as dependents all their life. Manu, the ultimate law giver in Hinduism, states that in young age women are under the control of their fathers, as adults they are under the control of their husbands, and in old age they are under the control of their sons. They are denied rights to be economically self-reliant and have an autonomous identity of their own. It is considered appropriate for the men in charge to decide what is best for women. Historically they were denied the right to read sacred scriptures and can participate in religious rituals only as wives. Women are also denied entitlements to offer oblations to their dead ancestors; only men are considered the rightful agents to discharge this spiritual obligation. Hence the preference for sons is justified, and daughters are considered as burdens because they cease to be members of their natal families once they are married. Some parents even grudge expenses to bring up a daughter knowing that she will go away to another family. Investment in her education is often considered a burden because the parents are not going to reap any benefits. These problems have become so acute in some areas that female feticide and infanticide are evident (Sen, 2003).

Various rituals and symbolism during the time of marriage, for example, reinforce these basic tenets of gender relations. The ritual of *Kanyadana*, giving the gift of a daughter, is essentially a transaction between the father of the bride and her husband. Women occupy marginal positions in the patriarchal family system and are socialized to accept that position as legitimate. Because of the unavailability of any possible alternatives, women cannot help but accept this position of dependence and marginality. Thus male dominance and female subordination are naturalized and routinized under these circumstances. The consequence

is that these belief systems, structural arrangements, and social practices become part of commonsense understanding and the way life is lived. Women are exhorted to become selfless, self-sacrificing, and service oriented. In an effort to endure a life of dependence, women devote considerable time and effort to various rituals to ensure health, prosperity, and long life for their husbands and families (Wadley, 1980). Mothers and mother surrogates provide support and encouragement to the female child to accept this state of affairs as legitimate and learn to navigate her life (Dhruvarajan, 1989; Kakar, 1988; Nandy, 1988).

In this patriarchal, ideological, and structural context, a woman's role is that of a facilitator for man's endeavors. Individuality for women is denied as she is conceptualized as the helpmate of the man in his pursuit of various goals in society. Women's right to spiritual fulfillment is not denied, but certain avenues are prescribed to achieve that goal in this context. Women are told that their salvation is contingent on their being good wives and mothers. They must concentrate on discharging those duties without thinking of their personal goals. In fact, they are told that such indulgence in personal goals is prohibited, as it is unwomanly. Service, selflessness, and sacrifice are considered the rightful path for women to achieve salvation. It is equated in a significant sense as a kind of *tapas*/spiritual austerity. These ideas have become part of a commonsense understanding along with systematic control of girls' upbringing. The patriarchal institutional structures ensure that women in fact cannot aspire for any other way of achieving their life goal but as wives and mothers. Whereas men had the option of venturing into new territories as societies modernized, women were kept in their place through diligent efforts and rigid institutional structures. What is even more pernicious is that women as mothers and mother surrogates are enlisted as frontline workers in the enforcement of patriarchal dictums. The consequence is that women are deprived of opportunities to develop solidarity to explore alternatives as their life goal is to serve the interests of men. Structural conditions foreclose independent autonomous arena for women for discussion and dialogue.

Male and female principles are defined in philosophical systems such as Sankya-Yoga as important and conceptualized to be mutually interdependent. These definitions also legitimize dominance of male principle, *purusha*, over the female principle, *prakriti*, as the former is conceptualized in positive terms whereas the latter includes negative connotations. Female principle signifies *shakti*, which includes power and activity without which *purusha* cannot function. It is supposed to empower, enliven, and strengthen *purusha*. But *shakti* is undirected energy that requires *purusha*'s consciousness to provide direction. Female principle is conceptualized as being close to nature with its unpredictable ever changing qualities, ephemeral nature, *maya*, and is susceptible to pollution intrinsic to matter. Thus control of female

sexuality is considered mandatory. Male principle on the other hand is conceptualized as being closer to the spirit and thus represents purity and steadfastness. Men and women who inherit these qualities because of their sex are assigned positions of dominance and subordination, respectively, to facilitate orderly life. Strong conviction is, if this pattern of relationship is tampered with, there will be disorder and chaos. Manu's code of conduct for men and women is to ensure such an orderly life. Female and male bodies are conceptualized as having unique characteristics that justify differential allocation of functions. Thus in this patriarchal setting, control and domination of women by men are the recurrent themes. Reverence toward female principle is accorded, but the need to control and dominate is stressed. Such control and domination are justified by attributing qualities to the female principles that invoke fear, contempt, and suspicion (Dhruvarajan, 1989).

The fond hope that, in a democratic political framework, economic development implemented since India became independent of colonial rule will provide opportunities to redefine gender relations in a fundamental way is becoming elusive (Agarwal, 1989; Desai & Krishnaraj, 1987). The basic idiom for gender relations provided by Manu's dictum has a stranglehold on women's lives. A dual legal framework—with personal law to govern private life and civil law to govern public life—has ensured that religion will play a pivotal role in private life. This facilitates the maintenance and perpetuation of male dominance and female subordination. Every piece of legislation passed to improve the position of women through struggles by many enlightened people passes through this filter, thereby often negating or neutralizing its effect on women's lives. For example, laws that have been passed entitling a daughter to an equal share in parental property are rarely implemented because daughters are considered outsiders of the patriarchal family. Policies in the context of economic planning and provision of rights to land have not helped women secure their rightful share (Agarwal, 1994; Azad, 2003). Laws prohibiting violence against women are rarely implemented in favor of women (Vindhya, 2003). Law enforcement personnel (who live in a similar familial arrangement) expect a woman to tolerate ill treatment as this is proper conduct of a good wife. In many cases womanly virtues of subservience, service, and selfless sacrifice are invoked.

Amendments to the Constitution of India (1993) stipulate that all local governance structures should constitute at least one-third women representatives. In one of the villages in Karnataka, the leaders of the village (all men) were convinced by agencies working for the empowerment of women to have an all-woman *panchayat* for at least one term. Even though these leaders agreed, there was widespread speculation that it does not work because the women simply cannot do the job. But to everyone's surprise, including the women in charge, they were successful in delivering the mandate. These leaders

worked across caste and religious lines supporting one another. They showed how under conditions whereby women have autonomy, they can promote one another's interests. Their achievements made headlines in newspapers and magazines, and many scholars from outside the country visited the village to meet these women leaders. There were many discussions as to how this panchayat, a unique experiment, can be a model for the country to empower women. When the 4-year term came to a close, these women expressed interest in leading for another term, as they had many other proposals to implement for the betterment of the village. But the leaders of the village refused, and the status quo was established with one-third women members as required by law. These women were chosen in such a way that they did not pose any threat to the men in charge.

A study was conducted (Dhruvarajan, 2006) to assess the achievements of the all-women panchayat and identify the causes for the refusal on the part of leaders of the village to let these successful leaders lead again. The results of the study revealed that the reason for the refusal was that the women leaders overshadowed the men. Besides, these women refused to take orders from the male leaders and acted independently, coming up with their own agendas for the welfare of the village. The fear of women taking over was so high that the leaders withdrew their support totally. The experiment was done to prove that men were indispensable. But when that could not be proved, they did not want to continue with something considered unnatural. Without the support of the leaders of the village, the women leaders could not do anything.

No one was surprised with the decision. The argument was that, as always, men decide what women can or cannot do. There is nothing women can do to change this situation. The conviction was that if women try to cross the line, referred to as *Laxman Rekha*, there will be problems. Sita, the heroine of the epic Ramayana known for her unconditional and total dedication to her husband, is often thought of as the perfect model for a Hindu woman to emulate. By crossing that line Sita is believed to have caused problems. Therefore these women accepted the decision. Even within their own households, many of these women lost support. In the patriarchal family system, women do not support other women if it alienates men who are in a position of control. Thus development of friendship support among women is almost impossible because their interests do not coincide; all of them have to cater to the interests of patriarchal families and act in the interests of men, be they fathers, brothers, husbands, or sons. Fraternity among men keeps women under the control of men both within and outside the family. Most of these women argued that even though they are capable and competent to do whatever needs to be done, without the support and approval of men, they are totally powerless. Conclusions one can draw from these observations is that it is possible for women to play leadership roles,



but whether it is probable or not depends on those in charge—namely, men.

### Presence of Goddess in the Hindu Pantheon

Even though Hindu scriptures prescribe the codes of conduct for women, essentially foreclosing opportunities to choose particular leadership roles, there are still some avenues open to them. In the Hindu tradition, worship of divinity includes feminine forms. These goddesses can provide models for women to explore different types of leadership roles. These goddesses range from being docile supporters to godheads to being autonomous self-directed deities (Babb, 1975; Hawley & Wulff, 1982; Kinsley, 1986). The conception of the nature, disposition, and power of many goddesses in the Hindu pantheon varies on the basis of region, caste, and tribe. Even though there are exceptions, in general, goddesses that tend to be docile and compliant and wives of godheads who accept their position of subservience as legitimate are more popular among upper castes and enjoy a privileged position in North India to a greater extent. Parvathi, goddess of love, Laxmi, goddess of wealth and prosperity, Saraswathi, goddess of knowledge, arts, and learning are some examples.

Parvathi's major role is to entice Shiva, who, with his other worldly disposition, is preoccupied with transcending this life to become more involved and interested in this world by participating in creation of life and taking interest in domestic responsibilities of day-to-day life (Kinsley, 1988). Shiva considers this mundane and does not want to be bothered. But Parvathi never gives up because her interest is to promote life in this world. She adopts whatever strategies necessary, including playing the role of temptress to lure him to take interest in this world. This stance has led to a belief that women are impediments to men in their quest for spiritual enlightenment. Popular songs and essays are replete with references to women as impediments to men's spiritual enlightenment. Saints from Bhakti tradition, such as Purandara Dasa, preach to men to stay away from women if they desire salvation. A modern Hindu sect, Brahma Kumaris, is questioning the conceptualization of women as being such impediments in a unique way. Their solution for this problem is celibacy for women (Babb, 1988). In the 11th to 13th centuries several women chose to become saints, relinquishing domestic responsibilities. Instead of worshipping husbands as gods, they considered gods as husbands and led an autonomous ascetic life defying societal stipulations. But most of them could not develop and maintain a large following as many male saints did because of strong disapproval of such behavioral patterns on the part of women (Kishwar & Vanita, 1989).

Goddess Laxmi stands for prosperity and plenty in this world. She bestows auspicious status for the pursuit of wealth and prosperity for maintaining dharma or ethical life

paving the way for eventual salvation. Thus these goddesses bestow a sacred quality for embodied ethical life as paving the way for eventual salvation. These goddesses, such as Parvathi and Lakshmi, give women meaning and purpose by making them feel that they are answering a higher calling. Goddess Saraswathi stands for art, culture, music, and learning in general, which is spiritually uplifting. In a significant sense she stands for all of human creativity and accomplishment that helps women feel particularly blessed and auspicious. All of these goddesses are worshipped ardently at least once a year to seek their blessings.

Goddesses relatively more popular in South India in general are more complexly imbued with multiple characteristics and capabilities. For example, Durga, with her pre-Aryan origin with affinity to tribes such as the Sabaras, is primarily conceptualized as a warrior with great courage and valor, ready to vanquish any enemy (Buccetta, 1993; Kinsley, 1988). She is usually enlisted for support and help by gods in times of trouble. She either acts alone or with the help from goddesses she creates. Once her job is done she retreats to the Vindya Mountains for tapas and meditation. She is accessible to any devotee and comes to their aid when propitiated. She is ever ready to give them boons and solve their problems. She is believed to take many Avatars (incarnations), just as Vishnu does, whenever there is injustice in the world to be set right. Her role is described as being very similar to that of Vishnu, which is to maintain order, stability, and justice in the world by being creator, protector, and destroyer of the world. She establishes the moral order and maintains it. She is the source of salvation. She is both imminent and transcendent. This means that she personifies the here-and-now, thereby infusing meaning and purpose to life in the material world and at the same time providing opportunities to achieve salvation. She is thought of as Adishakti, the primal cause and universal mother. Such lofty interpretations elevate the female principle to primacy, thereby creating possibilities for women to claim a position of honor and reverence. This alternate reading of the scriptural interpretations of gender relations includes definite possibilities for women to play leadership roles in Hinduism. She acts within the established religious orthodoxy and therefore commands great respect and legitimacy all over India but is more popular in Bengal and South India. Her being a model to womankind has the potential to inspire women to take leadership positions within the existing framework. It is common to depict women leaders such as Indira Gandhi in the form of Durga, particularly in contexts where national defense is at stake. Some women leaders in politics are cast in Durga's image and are asked to defend the Hindu faith against alleged Muslim onslaught. Thus women are sometimes being asked to play leadership roles to maintain and perpetuate the existing patriarchal system.

Kali, the savior (Gupta, 1991; Kinsley, 1988), is a fearless warrior always ready to fight injustice and ill treatment and is also all powerful, brave, kind, and caring. She also is

ever ready to help godheads in their times of need, but she does not always follow their orders to the letter. She decides what to do and when to do whatever she decides to do. She consorts with social outcasts, such as untouchables, and lower-caste people. She seems to maintain that any kind of hierarchy is unacceptable. She does not tolerate injustice and ill treatment and is always ready to help those who suffer injustice. She seems to provide alternatives to the existing social and cosmic order. She often appears at times when women are ill treated. This has led to the interpretation that she represents the anger and frustrations suffered by women under the patriarchal yoke. She is believed to represent the dark side of goddesses such as Parvathi and appears when they feel that they are treated unfairly. If she does not pay much attention to her grooming and attire, it is because she is distraught and focuses on setting things right. She displays her autonomy by dancing with abandon and eating whatever she likes, including meat and intoxicating substances. She wanders alone and does not try to entice men. She does not seem to care what they think of her. Because of her conduct, dress, mannerisms, and the kind of company she keeps, she is considered as being outside the pale of civilization. She is feared much more than revered. Shiva, one of the important godheads, is believed to be her husband and is often invoked to calm her down. In the company of Shiva she does seem to tone down her unacceptable behavior, but there are also occasions when she cajoles Shiva to join her in her exploits and he complies. These instances indicate that her relationship with Shiva is one of give-and-take and not one of unquestioned obedience to him as proper wifely behavior demanded by Hindu orthodoxy. Kali offers scope for women to consider themselves autonomous individuals in charge of their destinies. She opens new vistas for different readings of women's position and potential in Hindu cosmology. But she is in the periphery of Hindu orthodoxy. Many village goddesses in South India have many of her qualities.

A study of a South Indian village (Dhruvarajan, 1989) records a big celebration during the annual worship of the gramadevata, the village goddess who is conceptualized as protector of the village. In addition to the annual celebration, the villagers also propitiated the goddess in times of various misfortunes such as draught, famine, disease, or any perceived threat from forces external to the village to invoke her protection. It was believed that the goddess is wise, brave, kind, and caring and would do anything to help the villagers. The villagers also believed that the goddess will be displeased if the villagers had misbehaved in any way and would not hesitate to punish them just as a mother would for the good of the children. Thus she reinforced good conduct and took care of their well-being and therefore there was deep reverence toward her. The villagers as a whole, irrespective of caste, class, or religion, participated in the celebrations. But the nature of involvement differed with those of lower castes taking the leadership role while the followers of Islam remained as spectators. In addition the kind of worship offered by

upper castes differed since they focused on worshipping shiva to control gramadevata and direct her in the right path to do the needful. On the other hand, people from lower castes worshipped her to be kind and generous with various offerings including animal sacrifice.

The general belief is that there is one supreme goddess, Mahadevi, and all other goddesses are her various manifestations emphasizing different aspects of her power and grandeur. *Devi Mahatmya*, *Devi Purana*, and *Lalith Sahasranama* (written in Sanskrit and available in English translation) are examples of sacred scriptures that elaborate on these issues. The goddess is conceptualized as imminent, pervading all creation including spirit and matter; her existence is considered self-evident. The goddess is imbued with auspiciousness and spirituality and therefore is life affirming. Life here and now is part of the larger spiritual realm, and one can redeem oneself and achieve salvation by leading a good meaningful spiritual life. Interpreted this way, women's lives are elevated to spiritual heights as they perform their mundane duties in daily life. Their bodies (which are conceptualized as closer to nature and therefore polluting) are transcended to assume auspicious qualities because of the imminence of the goddess. Women's entitlements to activities in the spiritual realm are unquestioned in this context. Such interpretations open possibilities for women to be participants in spiritual matters, such as giving oblations to ancestors, officiating in rituals and ceremonies, becoming saints and gurus, and so on. Instead of being identified with maya, which is ignorance and self-delusion, women become capable of enlightenment and are able to open these paths to others.

Some of the manifestations of the goddess reveal significant possibilities for the treatment of male and female principles on a par providing a congenial context to argue for gender equality. Hindu women learn to believe that the goddess is present in all women and manifests herself as, and when, needed. Such reading of the goddess attaches importance to the female principle. She is auspicious, all-knowing, and all-powerful. She is benevolent and can be fierce and daunting if a situation calls for it. She decides what is appropriate in given situations. Thus female principle is autonomous and self-regulating. It is integration of such autonomous female principle with that of the male that creation ensues. Such conception of goddess and the belief that she resides in every woman creates conditions for women to become self-confident, self-reliant, autonomous persons in charge of their own destinies. Development of women's leadership under those conditions is not only possible but highly probable.

### Future Directions

The ground realities at the present time reveal that on a symbolic level female principle is worshipped, honored, and revered in various forms (Uberoi, 2006). Conceptualizing

the country of India in goddess form has become commonplace, giving the feminine principle a symbolic place of honor and reverence. Women as mothers are respected. Even the lawgiver Manu considers that honoring mothers should take precedence over honoring fathers and teachers. But to be deserving of such honor, women have to exude all the feminine qualities prescribed by the patriarchal regime. Their conduct needs to be in keeping with the interests of patriarchal families. Thus women are co-opted into a patriarchal regime and become frontline workers in reproducing the system. In other words women play leadership roles within families to maintain male dominance and female subordination. In the public realm women are used as and when necessary, as men in charge see fit. For example, during the independence struggle in the earlier parts of the 20th century, women were exhorted to come out of seclusion from within their families to liberate India. But once that job was completed, they were asked to retire to family life. Goddess imagery is used to exhort women to play a leadership role but only within the framework drawn by men. This is clearly evident among many female politicians, particularly in the Hindu right parties, such as the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP). Women were called upon to play leadership roles during the late 1990s, when BJP was the ruling party, to address the Hindu-Muslim conflict.

Kali provides an alternate framework that is antihierarchical with a new culture that provides freedom and autonomy to women to define their lives as they see fit. Through her dress, demeanor, and behavior, she challenges gender, caste, and class hierarchy. There is strong resistance to her acceptance, particularly among the privileged castes. The lower castes that are historically underprivileged had accepted her. But as these castes become economically better off and were given new opportunities, the popularity of Kali wanes as men in these castes adopt behavior and mannerisms of upper-caste men with regard to gender relations (Dhruvarajan, 1996). Women in these groups have not been beneficiaries of government initiatives to address past injustices toward lower castes as men were the preferred beneficiaries as gender discrimination is all-pervasive in enforcement practices. Thus traditional gender hierarchy is maintained and the gender egalitarian aspects in these castes are abandoned. But in cases where women in these castes have been able to take advantage of the opportunities, they have done better in redefining power hierarchy. Mayawathi, a Dalit woman chief minister of one of the most populous states in India, Uttar Pradesh, is one famous example of this phenomenon. In the recent general election (2009) she played a significant role in defining coalition politics and is considered by many as a possible prime minister of India in the near future.

Goddess tradition in Hinduism provides opportunities to explore possibilities for women's leadership in Hinduism. It is true that at the present time only those goddesses that play a supportive role to male gods and promote and maintain patriarchal order occupy a privileged

position. Nevertheless there are occasions when these goddesses are conceptualized as equal to male godheads working within the framework of Hindu cosmology. It is true that there is cause for concern for ushering in gender equality while political parties such as the BJP are trying to implement the Hindutva project in all earnestness. They are using goddess tradition in Hinduism strategically to shore up masculinity and reinstate subordination of women by essentializing gender differences (Subramaniam, 2006). But the fact that there is growing awareness of these intentions is encouraging (Rajan, 2004; Sarkar, 1995). The need for greater vigilance cannot be exaggerated.

Scholarly critique of antiminority stance of Hindutva philosophy is very important in this context to raise awareness among the public to the implicit goals of this project. Nevertheless rejecting religion is not a viable option for anyone interested in making sure women occupy their rightful position in society with equal entitlements since for a substantial majority of women, religion is an important source of solace and support (Falk & Gross, 1980). Recouping woman-friendly aspects of religion and carefully reinterpreting woman-friendly traditions to women's advantage are necessary. It is true that going the secular route might help some women, but that option will not make a significant impact on women's advantage in general since religion will continue to be used by those interested in perpetuating male gender privilege. Experience of the past several decades clearly suggests that it is not enough to pass laws and amend the Constitution to bring about gender equality. Unless the ideological climate is altered, these changes will not be implemented for the benefit of women (Dhruvarajan, 1996, 2002). Instead they actually can make things worse for some women as the discourse of choice is put in place to avoid addressing the underlying problems in the process of implementation.

The practice of blaming the victim is very much in evidence with popular statements like "women are their own worst enemy" and "women have no one to blame but themselves." The assumption seems to be that once legal reforms are in place it is up to the women to make sure that they are implemented to their benefit. No attention is paid to the insurmountable impediments women face within the family and larger society where pressure to conform to the traditional model of gender relations is very strong. It is easier for women to exercise choice if they have supports and an environment that provides legitimacy for those choices. If women continue to receive mixed messages such as "a true woman is a tyagi/unselfish server, a pativrata" and then is told that it is her responsibility to claim her rights, choosing an option becomes problematic for any woman.

It is also true that those goddesses that provide alternate visions of a social order where mutuality in gender relations is promoted and hierarchical relations (both in terms of gender and caste) are rejected and where differences and diversity are accepted as normal and natural are devalued. In addition these goddesses are feared and believed to

cause disorder and chaos. But what is not carefully articulated is that the alternate visions they provide are not taken seriously and discussed to delineate their potential for human welfare. Recouping the power of the goddess from the folk tradition and conferring legitimacy to this tradition that is lacking at the present time have the potential to create conducive conditions for ushering in gender equality and rejecting both gender and caste hierarchy (Ilaiah, 1996). Dalit scholarship in this area is an asset to strengthening feminist scholarship. Collaborative work among these scholars will go a long way in questioning knowledge monopolies of the scriptural tradition by bringing to public awareness equally valid knowledge systems historically ignored and marginalized.

It appears that those who are in a privileged position at the present time do not like to consider alternatives that may change such an order of things. Within this context the belief that these goddesses are a threat to the existing social order makes sense (Thapar, 1987). But that should not deter those who promote a social order that is just and caring for all. A reading of Hinduism in which these goddesses are given their rightful place has the potential to provide opportunities for women to play a meaningful leadership role. If the positive interpretations of these goddesses are woven to the social fabric, one can visualize possibilities of changes in the belief systems regarding the nature and capabilities of women. If social practices become consistent with these changed beliefs, doors will open wide to change the destinies of our daughters and granddaughters in a positive direction (Dhruvarajan, 1996). They no longer will be considered a burden and a nuisance but people to be cherished, as they will have all the entitlements in life as their male counterparts. Under these conditions they can use all the available economic and legal advantages as a matter of right rather than as a concession given to them by those who are considered to have entitlements endowed by nature.

The strands in Hinduism that seek to redefine gender relations in egalitarian terms are not very strong at present. These strands are there but they are ignored, marginalized, or neutralized by those who interpret them within patriarchal framework. Among lower castes where these autonomous goddesses are popular and revered, women, in fact, have relative autonomy. But the scriptural tradition of Hinduism popular among upper castes has hegemonic status. As lower-caste people are considered inferior to upper castes, their belief systems and social practices are also considered inferior. The consequence is as lower-caste people elevate their status through economic means and political participation, they adopt the upper-caste belief systems and behavioral patterns to the detriment of women in these castes. If instead ways and means are found to elevate the status of the popular belief systems and social practices in the lower castes, the hegemonic status of scriptural tradition can be meaningfully questioned. If the commonsense understandings of women's status in the folk tradition are

privileged and integrated into the mainstream, the hegemonic status enjoyed by the scriptural tradition can be questioned. Under these conditions it becomes easier for women to exercise their options and claim their rightful entitlements in society.

Possibilities exist for such an eventuality because lower castes are a numerical majority and in a democracy they can make a difference. But the patriarchal bias in modernizing and globalizing India are very strong, and this has led to men in almost all castes to gain better advantages. Under these conditions, retrieving woman-friendly strands in Hinduism is an uphill task. This is particularly true in a context where there is no unity among women since they have divided loyalties because of their caste and family status. Women's first allegiance is to their families and then to their castes. Arranged marriages, the most popular type of marriages in India except for a few pockets in big urban centers, keep the caste divisions intact, and patriarchal families isolate women within these families. Thus even though possibilities for retrieving woman-friendly strands within Hinduism exist, it is difficult to say whether it is in fact probable.

It is conceivable that women will play leadership roles within Hinduism if they have support and encouragement within their families. Systematic studies are needed to find out the family background of many women who are in important positions in India and playing a leadership role. An informal reading of the situation leads one to conclude that these women have supportive husbands, fathers, sons, or brothers. Even though the current structural arrangement privileges men and steers women into supportive positions, enlightened parents and husbands can create conditions for women to achieve leadership positions since such a reading of Hindu belief system is possible with the prevalence goddesses with all their glory and beneficence. I still remember as a child being told that I could study, read, and write because Saraswathi (the goddess of learning) resides in all of us women too, making us brave and courageous. Kali helps us to stand on our own and fight inequality and injustice all over the world. All of these goddesses who are transcendent and imminent make us pure and auspicious, thereby making us entitled to all spiritual endeavors, including the right to give oblations to our ancestors. We no longer are inferior beings with polluted bodies and fickle minds needing control and direction; rather, we are owners of pure auspicious bodies and minds that are capable of acting courageously and making wise decisions. Such a belief system gives women a psychological edge to venture forth into position of leaders with courage and confidence. But this is one important asset that needs to be supplemented with supportive structural environment where economic self-reliance and meaningful political participation are possible. Reforming the family system to become democratic and woman-friendly can create conditions to make use of opportunities available in a modernizing


India. This process is further facilitated in a legal framework that does not differentiate private and public life and treats our sons and daughters equally. Thus possibilities for women to become leaders exist within the Hindu

belief system. Whether it is probable that it will come to pass depends upon ushering in a gender-egalitarian religious ideology with concomitant changes in social policies and practices.

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## Introduction: Hindu Female Gurus in Historical and Philosophical Context

*Karen Pechilis*

With thousands of followers, leadership of translocal organizations, and power that is constituted by both authority and spirituality, Hindu female gurus have a noticable and meaningful presence in religious life today. For many people, the topic of Hindu female guru is intrinsically interesting, especially as it relates to women's religious leadership, globalization, spirituality, and cultural contact between India and the West. For these same reasons, the topic is also of interest to scholars, who have recently begun to publish detailed analyses of Hindu female gurus, especially from the twentieth century. In this volume, all of the contributors are specialists in the study of Hinduism who have been studying Hindu female gurus for several years. The focus of the volume is on one category of leadership within Hinduism, and a diversity of women in this leadership role is represented. These factors distinguish the approach of this volume from recent books on women in new religions, in which a wide variety of traditions—Western, Asian, African, and so on—and modes of women's participation in them are covered.<sup>1</sup> This volume is also distinguished from book-length studies of a single female guru.<sup>2</sup> In addition, the academically critical stance of the articles sets this volume apart from studies that profile female gurus in an adulatory tone.<sup>3</sup>

The public visibility of current Hindu female gurus, through Web sites, world tours, ashrams and devotional groups across the globe, and devotional publications and videos is a significant development in a tradition that historically defined the public role of guru as exclusive to men. There is historical evidence of women guru in the esoteric traditions of tantra, and there are traditional stories of women who acted as gurus to their husbands, but these

examples locate women's guruhood in private domains.<sup>4</sup> Women have held public religious positions in Hindu tradition: women saints are well represented in scholarly studies, and recent studies have illuminated female practitioners of Vedic rituals, philosophers, and religious reformers.<sup>5</sup> The variety of roles for women in Hindu tradition is influential in the emergence of women as gurus.

In terms of their status as public gurus, the female gurus of today are participating in a very established category of Hindu religious leader; however, their assumption of this leadership role also stands in contrast to that same established category. As gurus, they complicate the facile equivalence between women and tradition promoted by some nationalists and fundamentalists of yesterday and today. Katheryn Hansen identifies and refutes this equivalence: "‘Traditional’ in reference to women is widely employed to translate ‘normative’. It is my aim to show that non-normative as well as normative models of gendered conduct have ‘traditions.’ . . . These paradigms are continuously being redefined as the representation of woman is contested anew in each historical period."<sup>6</sup>

The title of this volume, *The Graceful Guru*, signals the participation of women in the modalities of continuity and change in Hindu tradition. "Grace" has both aesthetic and theological connotations. Aesthetically, it is a feminized term that is used to evaluate a woman's perceived embodiment of, or distance from, an ideal standard of beauty. This feminization of the term is perhaps linked to the Greek mythology of the Three Graces; the Greek term is *charis*, and it is also notable that a primary mode of women's religious leadership in history is through charismatic, or noninstitutional, avenues. Theologically, the term carries the connotation that one embodies the favor of the divine. This volume explores how Hindu female gurus respond to social expectations of femininity and how they are understood to embody the divine; how these two modes intersect in the personae of the gurus; and how their leadership is constituted by the negotiation of the two in distinctive ways.

➔ "Guru" is a category of religious leadership in many traditions of Indian origin, including Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism. In Hindu tradition, there are several characteristics that preeminently define a guru. The first is that a guru is understood to experience the real continuously. Most often, the real is defined as brahman, which, among many possible meanings, denotes the subtle, sacred essence that pervades the universe. Hindu philosophical tradition tends to characterize ordinary consciousness as pervaded by duality; in contrast, the experience of *brahman* is a pure, unmediated unity.

The experience of the real is expressed in diverse ways in biographical stories of gurus, although it is always represented as contrasting with ordinary experience. For example, the contemporary female guru Anandi Ma is said to have experienced such a high concentration of energy that "she wasn't functional at all on our level, so [her guru] had to work with her, bringing down the energy constantly so that gradually it would be more in her control."<sup>7</sup> As a young woman, the internationally famous female guru Anandamayi Ma, then known as Nirmala, was able to experience various modes of consciousness

from her grounding in the experience of the real, which she described as follows: "What I am I have always been, even from my infancy. . . . Nevertheless, different stages of *sadhana* [spiritual practice] manifested through this body. Wisdom was revealed in a piecemeal fashion, integral knowledge was broken into parts." Linda Johnsen, who has authored a book on female gurus, comments: "Nirmala—born experiencing the unity of all creation—found it astonishing to experience the world in bits and pieces, as the rest of us do."<sup>8</sup> Another example is June McDaniel's discussion of "full fusion" as Jayashri Ma's self-description of her spiritual state, in this volume. I further discuss the nature of the real, or *brahman*, in Hindu tradition in the section of this introduction entitled "The Nature of the Self."

The guru's access to the real is at least in part understood by tradition in terms of initiation. Many of the female gurus, such as Gauri Ma, Jayashri Ma, Meera Ma, and Gurumayi, participate in the classical guru tradition by taking instruction and initiation from a male guru. Other female gurus challenge the traditional male guru lineage (*parampara*) mode by taking initiation from a woman, or by being self-initiated. For example, one contemporary female guru, Anasuya Devi, took initiation from an older female guru.<sup>9</sup> The gurus Anandamayi Ma, Ammachi, and Karunamayi Ma are understood to be self-initiated.

Initiation is not only a credential in the female guru's past; it also forms a link with her present and future disciples. The guru is able to inspire the experience of the real in others, for the purposes of spiritual advancement, total self-realization, or evolution as a human being—there are many ways in which tradition describes the necessity and the effects of such an experience. The gurus are interactive teachers. As with the experience of the real, the female gurus represent a diversity of initiation and teaching methods. For example, the contemporary female guru Swami Chidvilasananda was initiated by her guru, Swami Muktananda, in a formal ceremony; following her guru, she initiates devotees en masse through the bestowal of shakti (spiritual power) at formal intensive meditation sessions, and her teachings are verbally rendered at formal lectures and events as well as through her prolific publications. In contrast, the contemporary female guru Ammachi was self-enlightened; she initiates devotees en masse demonstratively and individually, by physically hugging each one and whispering a mantra in his or her ear, and her teachings are primarily verbally rendered at gatherings, although there are some books of her teachings available.

Female gurus thus participate in an established, traditional category of Hindu religious leadership: "Essentially, the role of the female guru is not different from that of a [male] guru." Their feminine gender does challenge the traditional association of guruhood with the masculine gender, however, as reflected in the Sanskrit terminology. Unlike other terms for religious adepts which, like the guru, are in the ascetic mode, including *brahmachari*, which has the feminine form, *brahmacharini*, *yogi*, which has the feminine form, *yogini*, and *sadhu*, which has the feminine form *sadhvi*, there is no feminine form of *guru*: "[the expression 'female guru'] does not correspond to any Indian term. The simple reason for this is that the *guru's* role having been traditionally

a masculine one, the word *guru* does not accept a feminine form. The closest Sanskrit term to our 'female *guru*' is *gurumata* but, as anyone acquainted with the classical religious literature of India knows, this means the wife of the *guru*. . . . The *gurumata* was no doubt a highly respected person but never one entitled to impart any kind of philosophical instruction."<sup>10</sup>

Is there a feminine way of being a guru, as there may be feminine ways of leadership and feminine ways of participating in religious organizations?<sup>11</sup> Elizabeth Puttick challenges us to divide contemporary female gurus along feminist lines. In her thematic approach to the study of women in religions new to North America, she identifies bhakti (devotional participation) as a feminine mode, and associates the female gurus Ammachi, Anandamayi Ma, and Mother Meera with this mode; in contrast, she views the female gurus Nirmala Devi and Gurumayi as "explicitly anti-feminist" leaders of patriarchal traditions that promote sexist teachings.<sup>12</sup>

On one level, Puttick's comment seeks to classify female gurus on the basis of their behavior. As the quotation from Catherine Clémentin-Ojha, as well as my earlier discussion of the major traits of a guru, demonstrate, as a general rule female gurus follow established, male behavioral modes for guruhood, even if they did not take initiation from a male guru. In the ideal category of the guru, the female gurus have the following major characteristics in common with each other, and with male gurus. First, they are understood to experience and to embody the real, and are thus understood to be divine or perfectly spiritually self-realized; second, the message of the guru is the divinity of the inner self, and the necessity of her or his devotees' own self-realization, to which the guru guides the devotee; third, the guru is an ascetic, and is thus assumed to be pure in body and in spirit, especially in the sense of purity of motive through lack of self-interest.

It is important to understand that female gurus self-consciously associate themselves with received tradition because of the compelling belief that traditional methods are considered efficacious, and that their continuity in the present day carries with it all of the spiritual power accumulated over time. In self-consciously linking themselves to tradition, the female Hindu gurus do not have to be understood as patriarchal, for, as historian of religions Rita M. Gross argues, there are multiple models for practicing feminism and religion. What is required is a nuanced approach to tradition and innovation in women's religious leadership. Female spiritual leaders who work within their tradition can be radical, as Gross acknowledges in her discussion of feminist theologian Carol P. Christ's terminology of reformers and revolutionaries in reference to explicitly feminist leaders in religion:

[Although there has been criticism of the terms "reformer" and "revolutionary,"] the distinction named by that terminology is real and basic, and the critical difference between the two positions is disagreement over how feminist vision is best served. The degree to which feminists retain personal links and loyalties with traditional religions, rather than how "radical" they are, is the dividing factor.



In fact, some reformists are exceedingly radical in the changes they want to make in their traditions, but they maintain dialogue with their tradition and recognize kinship with it. Revolutionaries, though they sever links with the conventional religions, can be quite conservative in the way in which they identify with the rejected ancient traditions.<sup>13</sup>

The female gurus discussed in this volume “maintain dialogue with their tradition and recognize kinship with it,” but they are also innovative within that context, by their distinctive contributions to tradition and by distinguishing themselves from each other. For example, Sita Devi was recorded and remembered as a guru by members of an orthodox, established Hindu guru lineage (Gaudiya Vaishnavism); Gauri Ma established spiritual and social work centers for women; Anandamayi Ma was self-initiated; Jayashri Ma is independently employed in the working world alongside her religious activities; Mother Meera has no ashram; Shree Maa has self-consciously attempted to synthesize her Bengali tantric heritage with the Christian background of many of her followers; Ammachi was born into a low caste, yet she physically embraces all devotees; Ma Jaya Sati Bhagavati is from a Jewish background; Karunamayi Ma performed spiritual austerities alone in the forest for fourteen years; and Gurumayi has initiated new teaching methods, including the yearly message. In these and many other ways, the female gurus in this volume locate themselves within tradition, yet they interpret tradition in their own ways.

The most radical challenge of the female gurus is not directed toward the received guru tradition but rather the received social expectations. Their asceticism is in keeping with the guru ideal, but it challenges the Hindu social norms of womanhood, which are marriage and bearing children. In the case of female gurus, there are multiple models of asceticism. Several of the female gurus are or were married: Sita Devi’s husband passed away before she became a guru; Anandamayi Ma was married but her marriage was not consummated, and her husband was a disciple; Meera Ma is married but her husband does not play a role in her mission; and Ma Jaya Sati Bhagavati was married and has three children, but withdrew from her family prior to becoming a guru. Some of the female gurus were never married, though their desire to remain unmarried caused conflict in their families; these include Gauri Ma and Ammachi. In the case of some of the female gurus who were never married, the issue does not seem to have created conflict in their families; these include Jayashri Ma, Karunamayi Ma, Gurumayi, and Shree Maa. In all cases, their status as guru is in large part constituted by their present asceticism; thus, if a guru was or is married, this relationship is subordinated to her status as guru.

In subordinating or avoiding marriage, female gurus deemphasize their sexuality. “Mysticism is *not* morality,” argues Jeffrey Kripal, urging “that we not lock mystical experience away in some airtight categorical safe (like ‘purity’ or ‘perfection’),” and yet morality is constitutive of authority over others, through trust and loyalty.<sup>14</sup> Biographies of female gurus do stress that they are pure and



perfect, ontological claims that are made in the context of social pressures that define and malign women on the basis of their sexuality, either real or imagined. Further, the purity and perfection signaled by asceticism permit women to have a public religious status; for example, Anandamayi Ma went from purdah to appearing before thousands with her head and face uncovered, framed by her long unbound hair.<sup>15</sup> An assumption of purity had to accompany such a gesture, in order that it not be viewed as shameful. The purity of the female gurus is constituted by and expressed through their nature as perfected embodiments of the divine as well as their performance of personal morality. Both of these elements contrast with the inherited ritual purity of caste. None of the twentieth-century female gurus emphasize—or in many cases, even mention—caste in their self-descriptions or in their teachings. This omission of caste identity is more a function of the female gurus' mode of purity than it is a modification of Hindu tradition for a Western audience.

Through their asceticism, the female gurus reject key aspects of socially defined womanhood. This has implications for another dimension of Puttick's comment, which speaks to the nature or essence of the female gurus. What is feminine about the female gurus? Is bhakti feminine, as Puttick suggests? Although bhakti (devotional participation) can be a prominent mode of a female guru—for example, bhakti for her guru Muktananda is prominent in the teachings and demeanor of Gurumayi—the more relevant concept for understanding female gurus is shakti.<sup>16</sup>

*Shakti* is a classical term in Hinduism meaning spiritual power. It is explicitly associated with the feminine in classical texts; for example, the philosophy of Samkhya, in which the feminine principle *shakti* (energy) swirls the masculine principle *purusha* (stasis) into action, thereby initiating creation. Shakti is also understood in Hindu tradition as a description of the spiritual and moral power inherent in women and in goddesses.<sup>17</sup> Many of the female gurus are explicitly associated with feminine imagery; ironically, this association also supports the paradigm of renunciation and the rejection of socially defined womanhood. For example, all but two of the female gurus profiled in this volume use the appellation Ma (Mother) in their titles. As Madhu Khanna notes, citing June McDaniel: "In *Śākta* circles, all women—be they young maidens or mature women—are addressed as *Mā* or *Devī* or *Vīrā*. This title protects women from being looked on in sexual terms. As it is rightly pointed out, 'To call a woman "mother" is a classic way for an Indian male to deflect a woman's hint at marriage or a courtesan's proposition.'"<sup>18</sup> The deflection, of course, works in both ways. In related examples, Sita Devi's male followers "became" female in order to become her students, whereas Gauri Ma and Anandamayi Ma established institutions exclusively for women to engage in spiritual practices, especially renunciation, thus providing women with a legitimate alternative to the culturally mandated roles of wife and mother.

All of the female gurus are associated with the Goddess through the concept of shakti, for they, like the Goddess, are paramount embodiments of shakti. In Hindu theory and practice, the Goddess comes to life in a variety of ways. For example, the Goddess transforms a stone, bronze, or painted image

with her presence during ritual worship (puja), so that worshipers may express their honor and devotion to her. Or, to take another example, the Goddess appears to people who meditate on her; they construct a mental image of her in order to train the mind to realize the fundamentally shared identity between the divine nature of the self and the divinity of the Goddess. In addition to these more formal, ritualized modes, the Goddess may spontaneously appear to devotees, and even possess them, transforming them into active and often ecstatic instruments of her divine will.<sup>19</sup>

Female gurus are understood by Hindu tradition and by their followers alike to be manifestations of the Goddess; that is, as perfect embodiments of shakti. Biographies of the gurus will often stress both their special nature at birth and their spiritual practice toward self-realization. Some gurus may distance themselves from such understanding of their identity; in this case, they stress their bhakti for their own guru. As gurus, they distinctively blend the formality and authority of classical tradition with the spontaneity of interactive encounter. Further, many of the female gurus profiled in this volume are understood to embody the essence of specific goddesses, either through their self-interpretation or the interpretation of their followers. For example, Sita Devi is identified with Lakshmi; Jayashri Ma is identified with Adya Shakti Kali; Meera Ma is identified with Adiparashakti; Ma Jaya Sati Bhagavati is identified as the "daughter of the black mother Kali"; Karunamayi Ma is identified with Saraswati, Bala Tripurasundari, Lalita (Parvati), and Lakshmi; Ammachi is identified with Devi. In addition, Ammachi and Jayashri Ma engage in performances in which they become the Goddess (*devibhava*).

Female Hindu gurus are thus distinguished from female Hindu saints through the distinction between shakti and bhakti; through the gurus' identification with the Goddess; and through the gurus' explicit connection to teaching and to students, involving initiation and philosophical instruction. I shall further discuss the emergence of the female guru in Hinduism with respect to these relationships, to bhakti and tantra theology, and to the ongoing social conflict in the "Wives, Saints, and the Goddess" and "Early Female Hindu Gurus" sections of this introduction, but I emphasize here that the special nature of Hindu female gurus as embodiments of the divine has implications for feminist interpretations of them. As journalist Linda Johnsen notes, there may be a gap between Hindu tradition and Western feminism in understanding the significance of the female gurus: "Power, self affirmation, and celebration of earth energy are not the goal: conscious immersion in a reality that precedes earth and ego is more to the point. Because of this divergence of emphasis the teachings of India's women of spirit are to some degree out of sync with the present evocation of Goddess energy in the West."<sup>20</sup> Largely, this fault line exists between the two traditions of Hinduism and Western feminism. Is there a way of making feminist sense of the female gurus that acknowledges values in both of these traditions? A complicating factor, as Johnsen's comment suggests, is that traditional Hindu teachings promote abandoning dualistic thought (such as, I and you, male and female) in favor of experiencing unqualified divine unity. For example, in her book-length study

of Anandamayi Ma, Lisa Hallstrom discusses both the guru's and her disciples' ambivalence toward viewing Ma as a woman, in favor of viewing her as Ultimate Reality.<sup>21</sup> Thus, at the most profound level, these Hindu teachings reject gender considerations. The focus of the teachings of Hindu female gurus is not specifically expressed as "empowering women," although many women devotees participating in their spiritual paths do experience them as empowerment.<sup>22</sup>

This ultimate teaching of Hindu female gurus contributes the premise that female is universal to a feminist understanding of women's religious leadership. The guru is both divine and universal, as with the Goddess, and she is an embodied, religiously devoted woman, as with the saints. The female guru is both, and in that capacity the demonstration that female is universal belongs most appropriately to her. As Western feminists have discussed, the operative formula in patriarchal societies is to view male as universal, while female is limited. Hindu female gurus challenge this paradigm. The nature, presence, and teaching of the Hindu female guru is universal. As gurus, they distinctively blend the formality and authority of classical tradition with the spontaneity of interactive encounter, harmonizing personal experience and the ultimate. Although the actual status of guru is attained only by a few, the guru instantiates the goal for many.

This volume highlights the translocal aspect of the female gurus' universality, especially their presence in the West, primarily in the United States. That Hindu female guru frequently visit, or reside, in the United States is a post-1965 development, occurring in the context of the abolition of immigration quotas; in the context of profound social criticism through the antiwar, civil rights, and feminist movements; and in the context of popular interest in Asian religious traditions, especially meditation. As I discuss in the section of this introduction on "Female Hindu Gurus in the Twentieth Century," current female Hindu gurus are a "third wave" of gurus in the West, globalizing, harmonizing, and naturalizing Hindu-inspired tradition. The case studies of the female guru in the individual chapters are arranged chronologically up to the contemporary gurus, who are then presented in terms of their degree of establishment in the United States. In the case of Mother Meera, her international reputation and popularity are established in the United States; she has visited the United States but resides in Germany. Ammachi and Karunamayi reside in India but are well known in the United States. The final chapter, on Siddha Yoga with its highly developed network of centers and ashrams, discusses what is in a real sense the "Establishment" of traditions headed by a female guru.

Toward enabling the reader to recognize, understand, and appreciate the nuanced relationship between tradition and innovation in the nature and leadership of female guru, I devote the remainder of this introduction to providing philosophical and historical information that contextualizes the female gurus profiled in this volume, in a discussion that is primarily addressed to nonspecialists. My selective discussion identifies influential factors involved in the emergence and public recognition of Hindu female gurus, including philo-

sophical theories of a unity beyond duality, the validation of personal experience, women's consistent participation in the development of Hinduism through a variety of exemplary roles, the rise of the Goddess as a universal teacher, and the mass popularity of twentieth century male gurus and their initiation of female devotees, who then became gurus in their own right.

## The Nature of the Self

*Namaskar* is a traditional greeting in India, said while facing another and bowing with palms pressed together. It is understood to mean, "I salute the divinity within you." This greeting is emblematic of a worldview that sees a profound commonality in the midst of diversity, and one that understands that fundamental commonality to be a sharing in the divine essence that is foundational for life. In this theory, the true nature of humankind is divine, yet this does not mean either that everyone is equal in social terms or that people in general are deified; instead, the direct experience of the divine source is a category of honor that is bestowed only upon special religious adepts, including gurus.

In Hindu tradition, the earliest explicit and sustained discussion of the nature of the self as divine (rendered as "Self" in many translations) is in the Upanishads, a genre of oral texts—the name of the genre is understood to mean "to sit beside," and indeed the texts have a dialogic structure—that were composed during the period from the seventh century B.C.E. to the beginning of the Common Era.<sup>23</sup> Hindu tradition views the Upanishads as part of the revealed (*shruti*) canon of oral and written texts, and minimizes the distinction between them and the earlier hymns of the Vedas. For example, the Upanishads are known as Vedanta or "the culmination of the Vedas," in the sense of expounding truths already contained in the Vedic hymns. One translator boasts that the Upanishads represent the first time in history that the knower became the focus for the inquiry of knowledge.<sup>24</sup> Another translator singles out the Upanishads as preeminently authoritative in Hinduism: "Even though theoretically the whole of the vedic corpus is accepted as revealed truth, in reality it is the Upanishads that have continued to influence the life and thought of the various religious traditions that we have come to call Hindu. Upanishads are the vedic scriptures *par excellence* of Hinduism."<sup>25</sup>

The texts themselves use the term *upanishad* in the sense of "hidden teaching." The oral nature of the texts gives the impression of a face-to-face encounter between a teacher and a student; in this intimate transmission of knowledge, the hidden or esoteric nature of the knowledge is preserved through its passage only to qualified hearers. In general, the qualified hearers would be male brahmans, members of the traditional priestly caste. However, in the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, which is one of the two oldest Upanishads (the other being the *Chandogya Upanishad*), this sacred knowledge is imparted to two brahman women. Both of the women, one of whom is named Gargi Vacaknavi and the other Maitreyi, challenge the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*'s central character, a learned man named Yajnavalkya, though they do so in



different ways, for Gargi is a learned woman and thus his colleague, whereas Maitreyi is his wife. That the two women, colleague and wife, share in sacred knowledge may suggest that in Vedic times women were partners to men both in terms of religious practice and marriage, and that they had access to education.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, there were women seers associated with the earlier Vedic hymns, including Ghosa, Apala, and Lopamudra.<sup>27</sup>

The context of Gargi's challenge to Yajnavalkya is a formal philosophical debate staged by a king, who offered prize money to the brahman who could demonstrate the greatest knowledge of *brahman*. At first, a teacher named Yajnavalkya assumes that he is the best and tries to claim the prize. Other brahman scholars, including Gargi, the one woman scholar, rise to challenge him. In the first of their two meetings as represented in the text, Gargi questions Yajnavalkya. The text makes it clear that Gargi truly presses the sage, she describes herself as like "a fierce warrior . . . stringing his unstrung bow and taking two deadly arrows in his hand, would rise to challenge an enemy." In front of a group of male brahman scholars, she elicits from Yajnavalkya the answer that *brahman* ("the imperishable") is the foundation of all things: "This is the imperishable, Gargi, which sees but can't be seen; which hears but can't be heard; which thinks but can't be thought of; which perceives but can't be perceived. Besides this imperishable, there is no one that sees, no one that hears, no one that thinks, and no one that perceives. On this very imperishable, Gargi, space is woven back and forth."<sup>28</sup>

Yajnavalkya's answer is that *brahman*, or the "imperishable," is the real; the source and the vivifyer of all, yet beyond human conceptualization. Gargi publicly indicates that his answer is correct: " 'Distinguished Brahmins!' said Gargi. 'You should consider yourself lucky if you escape from this man by merely paying him your respects. None of you will ever defeat him in a theological debate.' "<sup>29</sup> Her status as a learned person in the public domain (in the rarified sense of a group of learned brahmans) has implications for the understanding of guru as teacher. Yajnavalkya is the most learned of the group, which would make him the guru; yet it is precisely through Gargi's challenging questions (as well as those of other scholars) that his status is established. Moreover, Gargi is also represented to be in the position of evaluating his answers, as she does when she commends him to the others. Who is the teacher in this case? Ellison Banks Findly argues that Gargi challenges Yajnavalkya through "regressive questioning," which violates the guru model operative in the Upanishads:

Instead of meditating upon the scriptures of ancient tradition or affirming the new tradition by consulting a forest teacher, Gārgī does the obvious thing: she asks a series of straightforward questions using the relationships she observes in the world. . . . If taken to their extreme, then, Gārgī's questions would violate the sanctity of *guru*-knowledge as currently formulated by Upaniṣadic society—secret wisdom not personally discovered from one's own experience, but



understood and accepted (with personal insight, to be sure) as given by the master.<sup>30</sup>

Findly intriguingly asks, "what better way to introduce slightly off-beat elements than through the character of a woman?"<sup>31</sup> Gargi contributes a novel approach in the domain of the public discussion of philosophy by emphasizing the role of personal experience in the context of learning, as opposed to rote repetition of received tradition. Although her methodology challenged the understanding of guru in her time, in fact her understanding came to dominate subsequent understanding of the guru path, which came to be viewed and is understood today to combine both received teaching and personal experience.

The relationship between *brahman* as the universal essence and as the inner self is explored in Yajnavalkya's discussion with his wife, Maitreyi.<sup>32</sup> As the scene opens, Yajnavalkya is preparing to leave his home for a life of renunciation, in which he will more deeply contemplate spiritual matters in a context unburdened by householder responsibilities. He has two wives, but he chooses to address Maitreyi, for "of the two, Maitreyi was a woman who took part in theological discussions, while Katyayani's understanding was limited to womanly matters."<sup>33</sup> When he tells Maitreyi that he wishes to settle his estate with both of his wives, she immediately asks him whether material wealth will make her immortal. Yajnavalkya of course answers that one cannot expect immortality through wealth; one can only expect to live as a wealthy person. "What is the point in getting something that will not make me immortal?" retorts Maitreyi. "Tell me instead, sir, all that you know."<sup>34</sup>

He explains that it is only through the inner self that one can make a connection with others: "One holds a husband dear, you see, not out of love for the husband; rather, it is out of love for oneself (*atman*) that one holds a husband dear. One holds a wife dear not out of love for the wife; rather, it is out of love for oneself that one holds a wife dear." Thus one must contemplate the nature of the inner self as a window unto ultimate reality: "You see, Maitreyi—it is one's self (*atman*) which one should see and hear, and on which one should reflect and concentrate. For by seeing and hearing one's self, and by reflecting and concentrating on one's self, one gains the knowledge of this whole world."<sup>35</sup>

The advantage of understanding this deep-structure commonality of all things as *brahman* is twofold. In the first place, one will be able to discern the true nature of the world and its relationship to reality. In the second place, this knowledge (again, in the sense of higher knowledge beyond the duality of knower and known) of *brahman* will propel one beyond the ordinary human condition—including the cycle of birth and rebirth, which Indian traditions presuppose as a fundamental condition of humankind—toward an unmediated experience of identity with ultimate reality. Yajnavalkya illustrates this experience, using one of the most famous images in the Upanishads: "It is like this. When a chunk of salt is thrown in water, it dissolves into that very water, and it cannot be picked up in any way. Yet, from whichever place one

may take a sip, the salt is there! In the same way this Immense Being has no limit or boundary and is a single mass of perception. It arises out of and together with these beings and disappears after them—so I say, after death there is no awareness.”<sup>36</sup> Traditionally, this liberation (*moksha*) from the human condition through identification with *brahman* is understood to be salvation.

Like Gargi, Maitreyi challenges Yajnavalkya to tell her the “hidden teaching”—to articulate the nature of *brahman*. In both cases, the women know to ask the right questions; Gargi, from the perspective of being learned in classical tradition, and Maitreyi, from the perspective of being “theologically minded,” as well as her suspicion that an opportunity is about to be missed. Neither woman is content to let Yajnavalkya walk off without sharing his knowledge, whether he is departing with material wealth (in the case of the prize money) or without it (in the case of his worldly possessions). In the domestic realm, Yajnavalkya’s two wives accept his guidance; Katyayani, who is “limited to womanly matters,” seemingly accepts her husband’s departure and his provisions for her mutely, while Maitreyi, who “took part in theological discussions,” challenges her husband but then accepts his teaching (she is not represented as following him into the forest). In contrast to Gargi, who assumes a gurulike status, for Maitreyi Yajnavalkya is her husband and her teacher, or guru.

The three models of women in the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* capture tensions in the linking of women to sacred knowledge during Vedic times. On one hand, women were not precluded from having an affinity for sacred knowledge (Maitreyi) or solid education in it (Gargi). On the other hand, the text explicitly contrasts “womanly matters” with sacred knowledge; thus, Katyayani, whose concerns are “limited” to such matters, is mentioned only in passing as one of the two recipients of Yajnavalkya’s worldly possessions when he departs for spiritual contemplation in the forest.

Although granting women access to sacred knowledge in varying degrees, the Upanishads in some sense prefigure the marginalization of women in later periods: “Gradually, however, the position of women declined and by the time of the Dharmaśāstras [treatises on dharma or duty], in the early centuries B.C.E., women were looked upon as equal to men of the lowest caste as far as formal education was concerned.”<sup>37</sup> A philosophical rationalization of the seeming paradox between the spiritual axiom that all people are essentially the same (*atman*) and the social fact of numerous distinctions made on the basis of gender, caste, and duty, was provided by the revered philosopher Shankara in the late eighth century. Shankara founded the school of Advaita Vedanta, which designated the theory of nondualism as the “culmination of the Vedas”; he understood the unity of *brahman* to be the key teaching of the Vedas and especially the Upanishads. Within his sophisticated philosophy, a key principle is that *brahman* alone is real, while everything else—especially individualized forms—are illusion, or *maya*. Although these forms are not real (that is, they are not permanent and thus not of ultimate value), however, they do exist, and thus impose themselves as a condition of existence for all save those few who have experienced the unity of *brahman*.<sup>38</sup>

Worldly distinctions of gender and caste were therefore simultaneously

justified as markers of spiritual inferiority in the social realm and undercut as illusions in the brahman male-dominated domain of higher philosophical education. For example, since *maya* is a feminine noun in Sanskrit, it could be understood as an emblem of women's essential nature. In the Advaita Vedanta system, *maya* is ambiguous: it is the power (*shakti*) of *brahman* by which the world of forms comes into existence, and it empowers both ignorance (*avidya*) and knowledge (*vidya*). Ignorance is equivalent to not realizing that ultimate reality is the unqualified unity of *brahman*; it is the delusion of taking the world of forms as reality. Yet *maya* is also knowledge, not only because it is a power of *brahman* but also because it produces an illusion that can be known and critiqued. Reviewing the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* through this philosophy, Katyayani is a symbol of spiritual ignorance, Gargi is a symbol of spiritual knowledge, and Maitreyi is a combination of the two, like *maya*.

### Wives, Saints, and the Goddess

Diverse Hindu texts from the sixth century through the medieval period, including stories of wives who are gurus, devotional poetry authored by women, and treatises on the Goddess, challenged the classifications of women in the Upanishads and their marginalization with respect to sacred knowledge in subsequent shastras and philosophy.<sup>39</sup> This period was an important era in the development of paradigms of women's religious leadership, with the religious perspectives of tantra and bhakti being particularly important in promoting authoritative images of women adepts and goddesses. Generally speaking, bhakti contributed the poetry and hagiography of women who were and are recognized as saints, whereas tantra contributed an ideal of the feminine as divine. In this very selective discussion, I seek to highlight main themes in the historical emergence of the Hindu female guru.

Bhakti and tantra texts are especially concerned with the relationship between wifehood as a social duty for women and the compatibility or incompatibility of sacred knowledge with that duty. Two medieval texts, one framed by bhakti and the other framed by tantra, present stories of women who were gurus to their husbands; thus, the women teachers are safely located within domestic marriage relationships. Although their stories are publicly told in the texts, their activities as gurus are imagined to take place in the private, domestic realm. In both cases, the wives are queens who are knowledgeable of the higher wisdom according to Vedanta (the unity of *brahman*). The queens are praised as gurus by their husbands, reversing the story of Maitreyi, and their teachings are efficacious; through them, their husbands are assured of being able to rule justly during this lifetime, and of salvation at the conclusion of this lifetime. In contrast, the biographies and poetry of women bhakti and tantra saints portray them as being in conflict with worldly duty, forsaking marriage to a mortal man in favor of the spiritual quest and dedication to God. The women saints left the domestic realm and authored poems that can be viewed as teachings. However, they are remembered as saints, not gurus, perhaps because

teaching is an inherently social act; yet the saintly paradigm for women tends to emphasize a rupture with the social world.<sup>40</sup>

An unambiguously public feminine guru, who has the ability to teach any and all seekers, is represented in medieval texts by the great Goddess. I turn at the end of this section to consider the promotion of the great Goddess as a teacher in the important tantric text, the *Devi Gita*.

Both the *Yoga Vasishtha* and the *Tripura Rahasya* present nonbrahman women (they are queens, and thus from the warrior or kshatriya caste) who teach their husbands spiritual principles compatible with Advaita Vedanta.<sup>41</sup> Arguably, the unconventional elements of these stories, including the women as gurus and their nonbrahman status, signal the alternative perspectives of the texts, for they both frame the Advaita Vedanta teachings by different, and distinctive, religious perspectives; the *Yoga Vasishtha* is framed by bhakti, and the *Tripura Rahasya* by tantra.<sup>42</sup> In both cases, the texts explicitly challenge the idea that married women are cut off from spiritual knowledge; both female protagonists are represented as gaining spiritual knowledge through the personal experience of self-realization, which echoes the character of Gargi from the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, and then they teach their husbands, in the process relegating the idea that married women are cut off from spiritual knowledge to the realm of illusion.

The *Yoga Vasishtha* presents the story of a married royal couple, King Shikhidhvaja and Queen Chudala.<sup>43</sup> In this story, marriage itself is a symbol of the Advaita Vedanta teaching on unity: "Śikhidhvaja and Cūḍālā were so greatly devoted to each other that they were one jīva [individual aspect of *brahman*] in two bodies." In a poignant corollary, two married people who are truly in love are understood to encounter each other and be married even in successive lives, as were Shikhidhvaja and Chudala.<sup>44</sup> This king and queen do everything together, including studying spiritual texts, from which "[t]hey came to the conclusion that self-knowledge alone can enable one to overcome sorrow."<sup>45</sup>

However, the queen alone continues her contemplation and proceeds deeper into self-discovery, achieving an awareness of pure consciousness (*brahman*) beyond the illusions of duality and ego. "Day by day the queen grew more and more introverted, rejoicing more and more in the bliss of the self. She was utterly free from craving and attachment. Without abandoning anything and without seeking anything, she was natural in her behavior and spontaneous in her actions. All her doubts were at rest. She had crossed the ocean of becoming. She rested in an incomparable state of peace."<sup>46</sup> King Shikhidhvaja recognizes Chudala's state of radiance and peace, and he asks her to explain to him how she has attained that state. Her response, given that she is in a different state of consciousness, is rather opaque: "I remain rooted in that which is the truth, not in the appearance. Hence I am radiant. I have abandoned all these, and I have resorted to something other than these, which is both real and unreal. Hence I am radiant."<sup>47</sup> Unfortunately, the king does not understand that her words are signifiers of a higher consciousness, so he paternalistically dismisses her teaching: "You are childish and ignorant, my dear, and surely you are prattling!"<sup>48</sup>



The king sets off into the forest to pursue the attainment of higher knowledge in the way he deems appropriate, which is to become an ascetic. Knowing that his methodology is flawed, the queen remains at the palace and conducts the affairs of state, although she surreptitiously checks on him from time to time with powers she has achieved through her self-awareness, including divine vision and the ability to fly through the air. After the king practices vegetarianism, mantra repetition, and meditation for eighteen years—in contrast to the queen's immediate results by focusing directly on the teaching and personal experience—the queen divinely sees that his mind is finally “ripe” to achieve self-awareness, and she goes to him, though in disguise. “Afraid that Śikhidhvaha might once again spurn her teaching, considering that she was an ignorant girl, Cūḍālā transformed herself into a young brāhmaṇa [brahman] ascetic and descended right in front of her husband.”<sup>49</sup>

Disguised as the young male brahman ascetic, Chudala teaches her husband the truth through many discourses, parables, and patient response to his questions. When it appears that he has achieved the higher consciousness, the “brahman” decides to test the equilibrium of his mind; interestingly, the tests primarily involve situations that will inspire lust and jealousy. For example, the “brahman” discloses that he has had a curse placed upon him, so that he becomes a woman during the night only; would the king mind marrying him so that he could be fulfilled as a woman by living as a wife at night? This does not bother the king, and he marries “her” and then consummates the marriage. The “brahman” devises another test: he creates an elaborate pleasure-garden, complete with a beautiful bed and a handsome young man. Then, the king’s “wife” makes love to the young man when she knows that the king is surreptitiously watching. When confronted, the “wife” hurriedly makes excuses for herself, by denigrating the nature of women: “They are wavering in their loyalty. They are eight times as passionate as men. They are weak and so cannot resist lust in the presence of a desirable person. Hence, please forgive me and do not be angry.” The king does not dispute this characterization, but his response indicates that he is free from anger: “It is appropriate that I should henceforth treat you as a good friend and not as my wife.” This is the right answer, “Cūḍālā was delighted with the king’s attitude which conclusively proved that he had gone beyond lust and anger.”<sup>50</sup>

Chudala immediately reveals to him that she had created illusionary forms, including the “brahman,” in order to teach him. In terms of Advaita Vedanta teachings, this story is an example of how maya (illusion) can be a power (shakti) that brings one to the consciousness of *brahman*. In this story, the illusions are patriarchal, including the supposed ignorance of women and the seeming necessity of a brahman male to teach the king. At the conclusion of the story, the king recognizes the true nature of illusions, and he praises his queen as the greatest among wives, for she has led him to liberation. When Chudala challenges him to describe his state, however, he recognizes the limits of language—which he had failed to notice when she spoke earlier from the enlightened state—and transforms the praise of his wife into the praise of his guru: “What I am that I am—it is difficult to put into words! You are my guru,



my dear: I salute you. By your grace, my beloved, I have crossed this ocean of samsāra [birth and rebirth]; I shall not once again fall into error.”<sup>51</sup>

The *Tripura Rahasya* also presents a story of a princess who teaches her husband awareness of the divine self. The tale of Princess Hemalekha and Prince Hemachuda is introduced in the context of a teaching on the importance of associating with wise people; as a means to realization of the truth, such association is known as *satsang*. The prince’s association with Hemalekha is an illustration of this lesson, for he becomes enlightened by her. Hemachuda meets Hemalekha at a forest hermitage, whereupon he is immediately attracted to her and marries her with her foster father’s permission. During the course of married life at the palace, Hemachuda notices that his princess does not seem to take pleasure in anything, especially his advances.<sup>52</sup> Hemalekha reveals to him that she is pondering an important question: “It is not that I do not love you, only that I am trying to find what the greatest joy in life is which will never become distasteful. I am always searching for it, but have not attained it yet.”<sup>53</sup>

She claims that though she has been looking for it for quite some time, she has “not reached any definite decision, as is a woman’s way,” and requests his help. Amplifying her self-deprecating manner, her husband remarks that “women are indeed silly,” and then asserts that the answer should be obvious to her, just as it is known to any living creature—including a crawling insect: “That which is pleasing is clearly good and that which is not so, is bad.” At first, Princess Hemalekha appears to adopt his perspective, as she accepts him as a teacher: “True that women are silly and cannot judge rightly. Therefore I should be taught by you, the right discerner.” However, she proceeds by radically deconstructing his answer:

The same object yields pleasure or pain according to circumstances. Where is then the finality in your statement? Take fire for example. Its results vary according to seasons, the places and its own size or intensity. It is agreeable in cold seasons and disagreeable in hot seasons. Pleasure and pain are, therefore, functions of seasons; similarly of latitudes and altitudes. Again, fire is good for people of certain constitutions only and not for others. Still again, pleasure and pain depend on circumstances.<sup>54</sup>

Through a related discussion of beauty, the princess makes the point that pleasure is in the mind’s eye; she teaches that the mind must be steered from such partiality toward pure consciousness. She illustrates this point further through a series of parables, in which she teaches about the bondage of the inconsistent mind in contrast to the liberating bliss of pure consciousness; the importance of having faith in the words of a worthy person; the necessity of contemplating the Absolute Being, who is the Goddess Parameshwari (Tripura); and the role of God’s grace in maturing a soul so that it is “ripe” for enlightenment.<sup>55</sup>

After these teachings, the prince is convinced that he can experience the bliss of the divine self, though only if he sits in meditation with his eyes closed. Again, the princess deconstructs his perspective: “Your small measure of wis-

dom is as good as no wisdom, because it is not unconditional, but remains conditioned by closing or opening your eyes. Perfection cannot depend on activity or the reverse, on effort or no effort."<sup>56</sup> On hearing these words, the prince at last reaches a state of equanimity, and becomes a *jivanmukta* (one who reaches liberation while still alive in the material body), who actively rules the kingdom through promoting this higher wisdom. The further dissemination of the teachings is represented in the text as following gender lines: The prince teaches his father, brother, and ministers; and Princess Hemalekha teaches her mother-in-law.<sup>57</sup> Ultimately, everyone in the kingdom—including mothers, servants, professors, children, older people, artisans, ministers and harlots—acts in an enlightened manner befitting true realization of the divine self, rather than from selfish motive.<sup>58</sup> Thus, from Princess Hemalekha's original act of teaching—being a guru to—Prince Hemachuda, the entire kingdom becomes enlightened, a giant *satsang*.

Both Chudala and Hemalekha are represented as behind-the-scenes partners to their husbands who quietly yet dramatically change for the better the lives of many people. Paradoxically, the texts publicize the private role of these women as wives to royal men, but the message to be taken from the texts remains a private, though influential, role for women. This private role contrasts with the very public role of female saints of India, who authored poems that have been preserved and who were the subject of hagiographies in medieval times; today their works and stories are widely known in India, and these female saints have become a main field of academic inquiry into women in classical Hinduism.<sup>59</sup> Generally, these female saints are associated with *bhakti*, a religious path that promotes active participation in the worship of God. The poetry of the female saints, as well as traditional accounts, represent them as devotees of the male gods Vishnu and Shiva. Historically, women whose voices were raised in praise of male gods were the ones who were themselves elevated by tradition as exemplars.

In contrast to the female gurus presented in the *Yoga Vasistha* and the *Tripura Rahasya*, medieval female saints were not represented as partners to their husbands. The female gurus were *sahadharmini*, "an intellectual companion to her husband in issues of the mind, who still exercised a good deal of independent judgement."<sup>60</sup> In contrast, the ethos that formed the context for the poetry and biographies of the female saints was one of *parivrata*, in which a wife's duty was primarily to bear and raise sons for economic, social, and ritual reasons.<sup>61</sup>

The feminine challenge of this ethos involved alternative strategies. Unlike Advaita Vedanta, which is dismissive of duality, *bhakti* and *tantra* tend to explore this pervasive modality of human consciousness through sophisticated philosophies on the dynamic interplay among aspects of human life and thought. The worldview is that of a unity, but one that is in motion. *Bhakti* explores the tension between higher consciousness and action in the world, as well as the oscillation of human emotion in sensing both identity with and separation from God, of which a corollary is the imagination of God as both formless and with form.<sup>62</sup> As recently described by Ram Dass, "The essence

of the Bhakti path is to use dualism to go beyond dualism by way of the heart.”<sup>63</sup> Tantra is a religious path that has been influential in both Hinduism and Buddhism; thus, it has many permutations and vicissitudes. In Hinduism, tantra has been characterized by a contemporary scholar as “interpenetrating”:

Tantra perceives reality as an interpenetrating set of physical, verbal, mental, psychological, and spiritual elements and forces. These elements and forces, manifesting on both macrocosmic and microcosmic levels, constitute through their interidentification the one absolute reality that is both the nondual Brahman of Advaita and the supreme God or Goddess of the theists . . . [Tantric] practices include various meditative visualizations aimed at purifying the body and transforming it into the divine body of God or the Goddess, special forms of yoga, most notably the Kuṇḍalinī Yoga, and special forms of worship that emphasize the interpenetrating unity of worshiper, worshiped, and the worship service itself.<sup>64</sup>

It is this perceived and practiced identity between the particular and the whole—for example, between the Goddess and *brahman*—that enabled the feminine aspect to be elevated to a supreme status in tantric spirituality.

Tantra contributed a feminine spiritual principle to sacred knowledge; one of the prominent schools of tantra, called Shakta, emphasized worship of the Goddess.<sup>65</sup> Bhakti contributed a feminine approach to the divine (usually a male God), through the poetry of women saints. In emphasizing the feminine, tantra and bhakti self-consciously involved an interplay of dualistic and non-dualistic theories of the sacred. As a corollary, both of these paths valorized embodiment as an approach to the sacred and thus regrounded traditions of renunciation, making it justifiable for women to dedicate their lives to spiritual pursuit.<sup>66</sup> Their approaches were a controversial critique of social expectations for women, expressed in a tendency toward secrecy in the case of tantra and in explicit rejection of women’s social roles in the case of bhakti. Through these paths, women were able to express their own views of the nature of spirituality, and, on the basis of their expressions, to achieve recognition as religious adepts.

Lalla Ded, also known as Lal Ded, Lalli, and Lalleshwari, was a brahman woman born in Kashmir who probably lived from 1320 to 1391 C.E.<sup>67</sup> She is claimed by both Hindus and Muslims as a religious exemplar; within Hinduism, she is most often considered to be a voice within Shaiva tantra.<sup>68</sup> Characteristics of her poetry, which is in the form of four-line stanzas called *vakh*, that encourage the identification of her perspective with Shaiva tantra include her frequent reference to God as Shiva, her praise of the guru (sources tell us her guru was named Siddha Mol) and the persistent image in her poetry that her religious quest is for the unity, and reality, of the divine self within.<sup>69</sup> Using the contrast between cold and heat as a metaphor, two of her poems illustrate this experience of divine unity:

101

Just as intense cold  
 freezes water into ice,  
 so the water of Consciousness  
 contracts into three different forms:  
 the individual, the world, and God.  
 But when the sun of Consciousness shines,  
 once again everything,  
 both movable and immovable,  
 melts into the one Supreme Principle.  
 Lalli herself dissolved like that  
 into Consciousness.

102

I entered the blazing furnace  
 of the practice of yoga.  
 Like ice, I melted  
 in that fire of love.  
 My inner impurities burned away,  
 leaving pure gold.  
 When the sun of knowledge rose,  
 the dew of ignorance disappeared.  
 When I realized my oneness  
 with the name of God,  
 my "I"-ness was obliterated  
 and Lalli found peace.<sup>70</sup>

These two poems of Lalla Ded are representative in that they describe the experience of unity, especially the melting of the self into the universal consciousness, and the concomitant releasing of the mind from the dualistic thinking with which conventional society operates. In Lalla's heightened state of awareness, there are no distinctions between subject and object, between self and other, and between female and male. When she speaks of Shiva in other poems, she does not describe his masculine persona, which is celebrated in mythology and iconography; instead, she speaks of God as a reality to be experienced. This reality is none other than the unity of the self with the subtle divine.

Mirabai, whose historicity is complicated by the lack of "a corpus of poetry that can convincingly be associated with an historical person," is believed to have lived in the sixteenth century in Rajasthan.<sup>71</sup> Although she means many things to many people, she is definitively claimed by the north Indian Hindu tradition of bhakti saints, as evidenced by her inclusion in Nabhadās's anthology, the *Bhaktamal* (Garland of *Bhaktas*), composed around 1600 C.E. Her hagiography was later greatly elaborated upon by an influential commentator of the *Bhaktamal*, Priyadas, in 1712 C.E. In most of the poems attributed to



Mirabai, it is clear that the poetic voice is that of a woman longing for her Lord. Significantly, although Mirabai is the sole woman poet included in this north Indian bhakti canon, she is not alone in assuming a female poetic voice, for the male poets Kabir and Surdas do so, as well. "They understood a woman's gift for feeling to be a *bhakti* virtue and willingly stripped themselves of the status that went with their male rank to learn what true feeling meant. . . . The image of the tenacious woman whose strength is learned in love and suffering was the one that seemed most relevant to the religious needs of male figures in the *bhakti* world."<sup>72</sup> Through bhakti, the female poetic voice became a legitimized religious expression, as in the following poems from Mirabai:

153

Go to where my loved one lives,  
 go where he lives and tell him  
     if he says so, I'll color my sari red;  
     if he says so, I'll wear the godly yellow garb;  
     if he says so, I'll drape the part in my hair with pearls;  
     if he says so, I'll let my hair grow wild.  
 Mira's Lord is the clever Mountain Lifter;  
 listen to the praises of that king.

117

Oh, the yogi—  
 my friend, that clever one  
 whose mind is on Siva and the Snake,  
 that all-knowing yogi—tell him this:  
 "I'm not staying here, not staying where  
 the land's grown strange without you, my dear,  
 But coming home, coming to where your place is;  
 take me, guard me with your guardian mercy,  
 please.  
 I'll take up your yogic garb—  
 your prayer beads,  
     earrings,  
     begging-bowl skull,  
     tattered yogic cloth—  
     I'll take them all  
 and search through the world as a yogi does  
 with you—yogi and yogini, side by side."<sup>73</sup>

In these poems, Mirabai brings together the seemingly contrasting images of a married woman in society (the red sari, pearls in the hair) and a woman ascetic who has left society (the yellow robes, the unkempt hair). In poem 153, these images are juxtaposed to suggest the inclusive spectrum of possibilities that she will undertake for her Lord at his bidding. In poem 117, they are brought together to imagine two inseparable male and female ascetics wandering the earth. In combining these images, Mirabai's poetry is distinguished



from the poetry of her male contemporaries. For her, the rich symbolism of gender roles is not a canvas on which to apply the experience of bhakti as a trope; rather, she insists that women's participation in bhakti stems from a spiritual discipline within, which challenges social categories by juxtaposing categories ordinarily deemed opposites.<sup>74</sup> This paradigm of intense love and desire for spiritual union with a male God is shared by other female bhakti poets, notably Mahadeviyakka and Andal of south India.

The hagiographies of Lalla Ded and Mirabai have in common stories of the hostility expressed toward them as they sought to realize their spiritual aspirations—especially from their in-laws, for they were both married. They overcame various harassments through a combination of their own spiritual dedication and divine occurrences. A prominent pattern in stories of the lives of Hindu classical saints is that the mind is problematized in stories of male saints, while the body is problematized in stories of female saints. This is a patriarchal formulation that conveys the social concern for the bodily purity of women, which is grounded in caste ideology.<sup>75</sup> Eventually, Lalla Ded extricated herself from society and became a wandering ascetic who eschewed even clothing. Mirabai left her in-laws' home and attempted to study with a famous theologian at Vrindavan. At first he refused, but then he relented when she pointed out that all of the world is female before God. Mirabai is also represented in the hagiography as staying in Vrindavan for some time, "as the focus of a large circle of devotees who gathered around her in song."<sup>76</sup>

Mirabai's association with followers, and indeed the public acceptance of these women saints, which made possible the survival of their works (although this is problematic in the case of Mirabai) and generated stories about them, connect these women to religious communities. The problem is in defining their influence within those communities, for it is intrinsic to the nature of a saint that the figure overlaps with the ordinary social world, yet stands quite apart from it; this is why saints cannot be uncritically considered as models for the rest of us. It seems all too human that both Lalla Ded and Mirabai are represented as female embodiments of serious spiritual discipline, yet they experienced hardship and lack of control over their own lives in their realization of that discipline due to social norms. It seems all too set apart from human experience that Mirabai drank unscathed an offering to Krishna that had been poisoned by her in-laws, and that Lalla Ded wandered around Kashmir without wearing any clothes. The women saints present poems and stories that we can admire and learn from, but they themselves are not remembered as teachers; although their works are in approachable regional languages (rather than Sanskrit), they lack a dialogic, instructional quality, and the saints' relationship to the social world is arguably too controversial to place them in the inherently social role of teacher.<sup>77</sup>

In the medieval period, there is an ultimate feminine guru represented in a classical text: the Goddess. It is she, not a wife or a saint, who assumes the public role of teacher and is capable of teaching all of humankind, which is the perspective advanced in the *Devi Gita*, composed during the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries. The text belongs to one of the dominant streams in Hindu

tantra, Shakta, or worship of the Goddess. This path views shakti as more than an ancillary power of *brahman*: shakti is the Goddess, and the Goddess is *brahman*. The *Devi Gita* is the culmination of earlier stories of the Goddess found in the puranic mythological stories and in early tantric texts, precisely because the *Devi Gita* raises the Goddess to the level of Supreme Ruler.<sup>78</sup> In the *Devi Gita*, supreme cosmic power is unambiguously female: she is a beautiful goddess, her power is the feminine shakti, and she is not linked to a male god, being most frequently referred to as Mother.<sup>79</sup> In the text, she first appears as a blazing light, symbolizing *brahman*, then transforms into a womanly figure, who is the Supreme Ruler (Bhuvaneshvari):

It blazed like ten million suns, yet soothed like ten million moons.  
Flashing like ten million streaks of lightening tinged with red, that  
supreme lustrous power shone forth unencompassed above, across,  
and in the middle. Without beginning or end, it had no body, no  
hands, no other limbs. Nor did it have a woman's form, a man's  
form, nor the two combined.

The dazzling brilliance blinded the eyes of the gods, O King.  
When again their vision returned, the gods beheld that light appearing  
now in the form of a woman, charming and delightful. She was  
exceedingly beautiful of limb, a maiden in the freshness of youth.<sup>80</sup>

The Goddess is independent yet benevolent in the *Devi Gita*, in contrast to the portrayal of goddesses in mythological stories, where they tend to be consorts of male gods, while the rare independent goddesses tend to be ferocious. Thus, in the mythology, the benevolence of goddesses is directly linked to the presence of a god. Not so in the *Devi Gita*, where the Goddess is envisioned as "the embodiment of compassion," a gracious and knowledgeable teacher, and the ultimate goal of religious contemplation. Himalaya, the mountain king, speaks to the Goddess: "As you have already granted me one favor through your loving compassion, would you please describe for me your true nature as explained in all the Upanisads. And further describe the paths of both yoga and knowledge combined with devotion, as approved by scripture. Explain these, Supreme Ruler, so that I may become one with you."<sup>81</sup> And indeed the Goddess does teach him about all subjects, including knowledge of creation, of the divine self, of illusion (*maya*) and pure consciousness, the yoga of knowledge, the yoga of devotion, the practice of kundalini yoga, and methods of worshiping the Goddess, including internal and external, Vedic and tantric. Bhuvaneshvari is the Supreme Ruler, and the supreme guru.

Importantly, the *Devi Gita* posits an equivalence between the categories of mother and guru, thus recasting the dominant image of women's duty: "As a mother feels no lack of compassion whether indulging or chastening her child, just so the World-Mother feels when overseeing our virtues and vices. A son transgresses the limits of proper conduct at every step: Who in the world forgives him except his mother? Therefore go for refuge to the supreme Mother without delay, with sincere hearts. She will accomplish what you want."<sup>82</sup> Here, "mother" is both an intimate, familial figure, and a universal one who guides

any and all seekers in the world. Private and public realms merge in the *Devī Gita's* image of mother as guru.

This recasting of the category of mother raises the issue of whether women were involved in the text as creators, compilers, or audience. It is unclear whether women had anything to do with the creation and compilation of the *Devī Gita*; the identity of the author(s) is occluded, perhaps because the text purports to be the teachings of the Goddess herself.<sup>83</sup> Also problematic is whether the text is directed to women. Translator C. Mackenzie Brown addresses the issue of whether women are included in the Goddess's teachings, exhortations, and soteriological benefits. Although evidence that suggests women are generally excluded from them is sprinkled throughout the text, Brown states that it is the inclusive nature of devotion (bhakti) that led him to understand the text to be directed to women as well as to men, and to translate it using gender-inclusive language. He says that the author of the *Devī Gita's* use of androcentric language "seems largely undercut by his much greater emphasis on the necessity for true devotion to the Goddess on the part of the recipient. Nowhere does the author of the *Devī Gītā* suggest that such devotion is restricted to males only."<sup>84</sup>

What is unambiguous in the text is that all of humankind is essentially female. The *Devī Gita* asserts this axiom in two ways. On one level, the Goddess is *brahman*; thus, humankind's true inner essence, the divine self, is the Goddess. On another level, the *Devī Gita* explicitly connects the Goddess to the concept of kundalini from yoga theory. The theory of kundalini yoga is known from other texts, on which the *Devī Gita* draws in presenting the Goddess's teaching on the subject.<sup>85</sup> Basic concepts in this theory of yoga include the understanding that humankind possesses a "subtle body" alongside the material body. This subtle body is homologized to cosmic entities (such as Mount Meru, rivers, the sun, and the moon) and their corresponding cosmic energies. The power center is the kundalini, imagined to be coiled like a serpent at the base of the spine. Uncoiling this shakti energy through disciplined activities, including controlled breathing, correct posture, and meditation, is the goal, for it is only through the release of the kundalini that humankind can reach its full potential in sharing the fundamental essence of the universe. With its emphasis on the Goddess as the Supreme Ruler, the *Devī Gita* can make a further connection not possible in other texts: The kundalini is the essence of the Goddess.<sup>86</sup> The Goddess is the source, and the force, of life; everyone has the feminine within, and must embrace it, then release it, in order to achieve liberation. The feminine is universal, through the female bhakti poetic voice, and through the Goddess.

### Early Hindu Female Gurus

*Guru* is a relational, third-person term; it is a title by which one person acknowledges the wisdom of another. Within this general framework, there are two prominent ways of understanding the guru. As the term *guru* suggests,

the guru is “weighty”—one who is invested with the capacity to give philosophical instruction to others, which leads to their salvation. In this more formal sense of the term, the guru is the path. On the popular level, the term *guru* is understood to denote one who is a “dispeller of darkness”; this sense of *guru* involves someone pointing out the way. For example, the guru could dispense an important piece of advice, or lead another to the truth. In this latter sense, for example, the Jain guru who leads the hero and heroine to Madurai in the Tamil *Cilappatikaram* epic is a guru; similarly, the sister of the Tamil Shiva-bhakti saint, Appar, who led him back to Shaivism from Jainism, is a guru in this sense. The stories of Chudala and Hemalekha are also examples of female gurus acting on a personal, familial level. In the popular sense, the title *guru* can be bestowed on anyone, by anyone, in the context of personal meaning.

On the more formal level, the guru is a representative of a specific religious tradition, has a publicly recognized status, and has a universal authority to teach. The status of the guru as a transmitter of salvific teachings permits the formal sense of the term *guru* to encompass both the informal sense of the term, which tends to privilege personal assessment, and the category of saint, which tends to signify a virtuoso devotional achievement. As Lisa Hallstrom notes, “It seems that almost all Hindu gurus are considered saints, but that not all saints are considered gurus.”<sup>87</sup>

Was it an option for Hindu women to become gurus in the formal sense of the term prior to the sixteenth century? From the *Yoga Vasishtha* and the *Tripura Rahasya*, we saw that women were represented as gurus in the private realm of family; specifically, they acted as gurus to their husbands. In contrast, the stories of the tantra and bhakti saints celebrated the women as public exemplars—but this involved severe tension with their families, since an individual woman known publicly was perceived to threaten the authority and status of her husband and parents. Esoteric tantric traditions seem to have celebrated women gurus prior to the sixteenth century.<sup>88</sup> Only the Goddess, who was independent of a male God, however, is uncontroversially represented as a public, universal teacher.

These medieval texts provided images of female religious adepts that served to establish women’s capacity for leadership; further, they defined a set of characteristics and issues specific to women religious leaders, especially the relationship of religious commitment to women’s wifely duty or dharma. These images and issues coalesced in the emergence of publicly recognized female gurus in the sixteenth through nineteenth centuries. These early female gurus had both public roles and public recognition; yet their stories preserve a sense of conflict between women’s pursuit of the religious path and her duties as wife. This volume includes a case study of Sita Devi, a sixteenth-century Vaishnava woman who is represented in seventeenth- and nineteenth-century hagiographies as a guru in a defined lineage. The hagiography of Sita Devi concerns both her wifely dharma and her role as teacher to disciples. Sita Devi balanced the two modes: She was a dutiful wife while her husband was alive, then reluctantly accepted the solicitation of sectarian members to be their guru



after his death.<sup>89</sup> As we shall see, stories of three subsequent female gurus from the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries revisit the tension between public and private, as well as the tension between exemplary spirituality and marriage. These historical tensions resonate with modern feminist analysis; while it is problematic to view historical religious women as feminists, it is very possible to suggest that their struggles contribute to modern feminist consciousness.

The story of Bahinabai (1628–1700) directly explores the conflict between devotion and dharma that permeates the poetry and biographies of female bhakti saints; the context of this conflict in the story of Bahinabai, however, is her devotion to a guru. We know about Bahinabai from her autobiographical verses as well as her verses that, rather like the Goddess's teachings in the *Devi Gita*, expound religious themes, including the *satguru* (true guru), bhakti, repentance, sainthood, morality, God's names, the nature of a "true brahman," the sacred place of Pandharpur, the bhakta Pundalik, and wifely duties.<sup>90</sup>

The first chapter of Bahinabai's autobiography locates her in a guru *parampara*, or unbroken lineage of gurus, which is defined in the text as originating in a mantra that Shiva bestowed on saints, who transmitted it through their bhakti.<sup>91</sup> Bahinabai received the mantra from Tukaram (1608–1649), a famous low-caste (shudra) saint from Maharashtra: "Because Bahiṇī placed her undivided devotion at the feet of Tukobā [Tukārām], she received (the mantra through him)."<sup>92</sup>

According to her autobiography, Bahinabai was a profoundly spiritual woman who persisted in the devotional path in spite of the obstacles of poverty and a jealous and violent husband. Born to brahman parents in the town of Devagaon, some fifty miles from the Ellora Caves in the region now known as the state of Maharashtra, even as a child she demonstrated special interest in places of pilgrimage, images of God, and songs and stories of the saints. When she was eleven years old, she had visions of the then-living saint Tukaram and his chosen deity Panduranga: "Says Bahiṇī, 'Tukā is my good guru, and my brother. Could I but meet him, it would be supreme happiness.'" <sup>93</sup> In successive visions, the saint gave her a mantra as well as spiritual instruction (v. 25.7).

Her husband responded violently to her spirituality. In contrast to the *Yoga Vasishtha* and the *Tripura Rahasya*, in which the husbands and wives had been from the royal, warrior caste—although revealingly, Chudala had taken the form of a male brahman to in order to teach her husband—Bahinabai's own caste and that of her husband was brahman. What happens when the wife of a brahman—a man who is skilled in the Vedas—seeks to teach him about the devotional path, taking a low-caste saint as her guru? He resents it, and a backlash occurs. She represents her husband as responding thus:

The people thought all this [her visions of Tukaram in dreams] as very strange, and came in crowds to see me. My husband, seeing them, gave me much bodily suffering. He could not endure seeing the people coming to see me. And moment by moment his hatred increased. He exclaimed, "It would be well if this woman were dead. Why do these low people come to see her?" . . . My husband now be-



gan to say, "We are Brāhmanas. We should spend our time in the study of the Vedas. What is all this! The *shudra* Tukā! Seeing him in a dream! My wife is ruined by all this! What am I to do? . . . Who cares for saints and *sādhus*! Who cares for the feelings of *bhakti*?"<sup>94</sup>

Their conflict has many levels, including the disobedience of a wife toward her husband; the tradition of the brahmanas as knowers of the Vedas, in contrast to the path of *bhakti*; the low-caste status of Tukaram; and the gathering of people to witness Bahinabai's spiritual experiences.

When her husband threatens to leave her, she reflects on her wifely dharma: "My duty is to serve my husband, for he is God to me. My husband himself is the Supreme Brahma[n]. . . . The Vedas in fact say that it is the husband who has the authority in the matter of religious duties, earthly possessions, desires, and salvation. . . . My husband is my *sadguru*. My husband is my means of salvation."<sup>95</sup> Bahinabai unhappily remains with her husband for many years, conflicted by the disjuncture between her overwhelming *bhakti* and her life circumstances, including the fact that her husband and his family are learned in the Vedas yet devoid of *bhakti* (vv. 59.1-2, 65.1-3); that she is a woman, and thus closed off from the Vedic orthodoxy (vv. 63.1-4, 64.1-6); and that it is against the Vedas to neglect one's husband for any reason, including devotion.

Even though she indicates that she prays to the Lord that she will be able to accomplish devotion to both her husband and the Lord (v. 68.4), she does not represent such a reconciliation as occurring. The last event in her life that she describes, which probably occurred midway through her life, is her experience of the god Pandurang at a temple in the small village of Dehu on the banks of the Indrayani River. She and her family are staying at a pilgrims' rest house there, and, when her husband goes to Poona on business, she receives permission from her mother to go alone to the temple (vv. 74.1-4, 75.1-8, cf. v. 98.26). Contemplating Tukaram's feet, she remembers the mantra he had given her, and she feels him placing his hands on her head (v. 76.1-4). She experiences total joy and immersion in God, and she says that she is driven to silence, which is understood to mean that she observed a vow of silence for the rest of her life.

In the concluding section of her autobiography, which immediately follows her description of her experiences at Dehu, Bahinabai is seventy-two years old, and, certain that death will be upon her soon, she writes a letter to her son, urging him to leave his work and come to her (vv. 79-81). Her son, understanding his mother to be his guru, comes to her. Bahinabai recounts her twelve former lives in order to teach her son the path of *bhakti*; in all of them she exhibits profound spiritual discipline, as does her son, who appeared in many of her previous lives (her daughter is left out of the conversation). As her lives progressed, she had educated husbands who were supportive of her spirituality, until the present, thirteenth birth, in which: "My husband was simply the image of rage" (v. 98.25). Yet in this last birth, she is told by "someone in the form of Tukaram" that she should worship her husband (vv. 98.30-

32). In eight of her former lives she was unmarried; in two of them she was able to harmonize her religious activities with her wifely dharma.<sup>96</sup> Serving her husband is not a dominant theme in her verses that are teachings on religious topics; the section on wifely duty constitutes merely seven verses out of 473. Although her autobiographical verses directly address the conflict between devotion and wifely dharma, with the aim to reconcile them, ultimately they serve to reinforce dharma, even when the woman is a guru.

Stories of female gurus from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries approach the controversy in a different way: Echoing the story of Sita Devi, they have the husband die earlier than the wife. Gauribai (1759–1809) was an upper-caste woman from Giripur, on the Gujarat and Rajasthan border.<sup>97</sup> When she was just a child, her betrothed died from disease. As a widow, she learned to read and write and spent her time singing and composing devotional songs in Gujarati, as well as reading sacred literature. Her spiritual discipline became known, which attracted the attention of a holy man, who compared her to Mirabai in a way that distinguishes guru from saint: “You are an incarnation of Saint Mīrābāī. Mīrābāī, though a great devotee, had not so much knowledge as one would desire in a saint. You are born to correct that defect. I have come to instruct you and give you the necessary knowledge.”<sup>98</sup> Acting as a guru to her, he taught her about *brahman* and *atman*, and gave her an image of Krishna as a baby. Subsequently, she would frequently become absorbed in *samadhi*, or periods of deep meditation.

A prominent theme in her story is that many maharajas, or royal rulers, honored her as a spiritual adept. Raja Shivasimhji, who ruled the region in which Giripur lay, built a temple in her honor. The maharaja of Jaipur tested her by asking her to describe the ornamentation of an image of Krishna behind the closed doors of his private shrine; when she correctly told him that the crown had fallen off, he offered her a palace, which she declined. The maharaja of Benares accepted her as his guru. Her contact with these royal figures demonstrates the public acceptance and legitimation of her spirituality (although not necessarily by the brahman community), and it permits demonstration of her purity of motive, for she used the riches they insisted on giving her for charity. She expressed her spiritual insights in poetry in the Gujarati language, as well as a few songs in Hindi.

Tarigonda Venkamamba (popularly Venkamma; fl. 1840) was a brahman woman from Tarigonda on the Andhra Pradesh and Tamilnadu border.<sup>99</sup> In contrast to the story of Gauribai, her widowhood is problematized in her story. When her betrothed died early on, the villagers insisted that her head be shaved, as was the custom, to signify publicly the inauspiciousness of widowhood. Venkamma refused, however, drawing a distinction between outward signs and internal purity: “So long as our inclinations are pure, the merciful Lord will not be offended with us even when we set aside worldly customs and manners. And if our inclinations are impure, though we may pay all homage to customs and manners, the Lord will not spare us. So please leave me alone.”<sup>100</sup> Challenging authority, she refused a brahman religious leader’s demand that she shave her head. He had it shaved by force, but when she sub-

sequently bathed while praying to Krishna, she miraculously recovered her full head of hair.

Venkamma received spiritual initiation from a renowned male guru, Rupavataram Subrahmaniya Shastri, whom she reverently mentions in one of her texts. After several years of solitary religious practice, she began to write. "Venkammā found that for the regeneration of both men and women in her homeland, Āndhra-dēśa, the spread of ethical religious and philosophical teachings in a simple style was of paramount importance."<sup>101</sup> Claiming that she had never been educated but instead drew on God's grace and her own devotion, she wrote poetry, songs, and accessible compendia of Sanskrit originals, including the *Bhagavata Purana*, the *Venkatachala-mahatmya*, the *Raja-yoga-sara*, and the *Vasishtha-Ramayana*; in the latter, she tells the story of Chudala and Shikhid-vaja from the *Yoga Vasishtha*.

The early female gurus from the sixteenth through nineteenth centuries advanced women's religiosity by becoming publicly recognized gurus. Like earlier female religious adepts, these gurus demonstrated steadfast commitment to the spiritual path. Indeed, two of these early female gurus self-consciously related themselves to previous female religious adepts; for example, Gauribai was compared to Mirabai, and Venkamma reiterated the story of Chudala. The two others, Sita Devi and Bahinabai, were connected to guru lineages. Like earlier female religious adepts, the female gurus of the sixteenth through nineteenth centuries are portrayed as experiencing the real and challenging authority, and their purity is highlighted.

Unlike earlier female adepts, however, the early female gurus are understood to have publicly assumed the role of teacher; for example, Sita Devi taught two disciples; Bahinabai taught her son directly, plus many others through her expository verses on religious topics; Gauribai taught members of the royal class; and Venkamma taught others through moral stories. This public role invokes the conflict of female bhakti saints, for it is deemed threatening if a woman views God, much less another man, even a guru, as a greater guide than one's husband, as is illustrated in the story of Bahinabai. If the guru role had been kept private, between husband and wife, as in the cases of Chudala and Hemalekha, then the husband could have been brought around to realize his wife's superior knowledge. This is not the case in these later stories, however, which are more like the stories of female bhakti saints in that the women's spirituality is publicly recognized. However, unlike the bhakti saints, there is a great diversity in the ways in which the female gurus approach the conflict between wifely dharma and spirituality, which suggests that the category of publicly recognized guru provided a new creative space to address inherited issues of women's spirituality. Sita Devi was a loyal wife for many years, and then was reluctant to assume her husband's mantle of guruship upon his death; Bahinabai was in constant conflict between her devotion to her husband and her devotion to the Lord; and Gauribai and Venkamma were widowed early in their lives. The authority of female gurus, which rested on the authority of teaching as well as the authenticity of their religious experience, allowed for

multiple models in addressing the deeply rooted conflict between devotion and duty.

## Female Gurus in the Twentieth Century

In contrast to earlier periods, the twentieth century was an era in which the phenomenon of female gurus became widespread. Female gurus were appointed in many distinctive traditions within Hinduism, and they played public leadership roles. Linda Johnsen provides a list of female gurus in the twentieth century:

Early in the 1900's the controversial tantric adept, Upasani Baba, reinstituted the Vedic tradition of *kanyadin*, a sort of Hindu supervision of male priests. He taught that women are capable of faster spiritual evolution than men, and that male devotees needed to cultivate "feminine" qualities like egolessness and purity in order to progress. He passed his lineage to the late Godavari Mataji, who presided over the Kanya Kumari Sthan in Sakori.

Ramakrishna (world renowned devotee of the goddess Kali) passed his spiritual authority to his wife, Sarada Devi; Paramahansa Yogananda (who carried the Kriya Yoga lineage to the West) to the American-born Daya Mata; Shivananda (yogi and prolific author of Rishikesh) to the Canadian Shivananda Radha; Swami Paramananda (the first swami to settle in America) to his niece, Gayatri Devi; Swami Lakshmana (one of the peerless Ramana Maharshi's premier disciples) to the rebellious young Mathru Sri Sarada; Dhyanyogi Madhusudandas (long-lived exponent of kundalini yoga) to Anandi Ma; and Swami Muktananda (world travelling ambassador of Siddha Yoga) to Gurumayi Chidvilasananda.

Papa Ramdas, one of the most homey of the popular Indian saints of this century, shared his mission with his spiritual consort, Krishna Bai. Sri Aurobindo, the influential philosopher/saint of Pondicherry, deferred to the French woman Mirra Alfassa Richard, whom he called "The Mother" and who administered Auroville, the community he founded in India, after his passing. Meera Ma (born in 1960 in Chandepalle, Andhra Pradesh), who had visions of Aurobindo since her childhood, has moved to Germany where European students have given her a warm welcome. Her legend continues to grow. And to everyone's surprise, the arch conservative shankaracharya of Sringeri empowered a woman (Lakshmi Devi Ashram, Jewish by birth) to found the first American temple to the Divine Mother in Stroudsburg, Pennsylvania.<sup>102</sup>

In the early decades of the twentieth century, very traditional rationales were used in support of women's leadership. For example, Upasani Baba empha-



sized "feminine" spiritual qualities (echoing male bhakti poets); Ramakrishna shared power with his wife, and appointed Gauri Ma as a leader of female-directed activities and services. The social context of these power transfers was the attempt by some elite males, including Mahatma Gandhi, to promote women as an emblem of virtue in the construction of an authentic "Indian" national identity, and to encourage their participation in selected nationalist agitations and events. Women were invested with a conservative meaning, which enabled, or even permitted, them to engage in significant and current struggles and positions of power.<sup>103</sup>

A fascinating example of this dynamic is Sri Aurobindo's validation of a foreign woman as a guru through his appeal to the traditional religious idea of shakti:

In my own case it [the coming together of him and Mirra, the Mother] was a necessary condition for the work that I had to do. If I had to do my own transformation, or give a new yoga, or a new idea to a select few people who came in my personal contact, I could have done that without having any Shakti. But for the work that I had to do it was necessary that the two sides must come together. By the coming together of the Mother and myself certain conditions are created which make it easy for you to achieve the transformation. You can take advantage of those conditions.<sup>104</sup>

Sri Aurobindo's extension of the paradigm to a foreign woman parallels his expansion of the traditional teachings to the international community. Yet in this statement, he emphasizes not her foreignness but her femininity as necessity to promote his teachings beyond himself and personal acquaintances. Although her leadership was not uncontroversial in the early years, the Mother was the sole guru for many years following Sri Aurobindo's passing away. Both the Mother and Anandamayi Ma are important examples of early- to mid-twentieth-century women in India who definitively expanded the public role of guru to women, and who greatly internationalized the following of the guru.

Female gurus have been instrumental in bringing Hindu-based traditions to the West and maintaining them there. Hinduism has become established in the United States through a series of encounters over the past 150 years.<sup>105</sup> The nature of these encounters includes Americans' exposure to and increasing familiarity with Indian cultural traditions; contact between Americans and Indian immigrants; and relationships forged among cultural traditions in a society that is self-consciously pluralistic.

Two distinct forms of Hinduism have contributed to these encounters. In recent public lectures, Vasudha Narayanan of the University of Florida has classified Hindu institutions in America today into two categories from Hindu tradition: organizations that promote self-help practices (such as yoga and meditation), and organizations that provide the means for formal ritual worship (such as temples).<sup>106</sup> In Hindu Indian tradition, the paths of self-help and ritual worship are coexisting classical paradigms and present-day realities. The path of self-help is traditionally realized in the intense relationship between the guru



and disciple; the path of ritual worship is traditionally realized in liturgical activities in temples performed by priests on behalf of worshippers. These are not mutually exclusive ways of worship; for example, there is often a temple at a guru's ashram, and temple priests have personal client relationships with worshippers. In India, what has separated the two paths until very recently is the participation of women as gurus in contrast to their exclusion from the priesthood in temples. Over the last ten years however, women have been studying to become priests, and achieving that status, at the Dyanaprabhodhini Centre in Pune.<sup>107</sup>

Today, the streams of self-help and temple coexist in America; however, the historical establishment of Hinduism in America reveals a distinctive pattern. For the first hundred years of Hinduism in the United States, its followers have mainly practiced the self-help approach; during the last thirty years, building Hindu temples in the United States has become a dominant focus.

"Self-help" describes well the paths of yoga, meditation, and the guru in Hindu tradition; however, it is one that is likely to be confusing in the American context. For example, there are a number of "self-help" organizations that deal with people who are trying to overcome specific problems, making the phrase something of a codeword for people in trouble. In addition, as I discussed in the first section of this essay, the meaning of "self" differs radically in the American and Hindu contexts. However, the designation "self-help" does apply to specific Hindu methods that emphasize that the participant herself must engage in activities of intensive discipline in order to achieve self-awareness, or the realization of the divine within.

Writing in 1977, Harvey Cox suggested that it is this participatory mode that distinguishes the guru traditions of the 1960s and 1970s from earlier Hindu formulations in the United States:

The influence of Oriental spirituality in the West is hardly something new. . . . But there is something new about the present situation. In previous decades, interest in Oriental philosophy was confined mostly to intellectuals and was centered largely on ideas, not on devotional practices. There is no evidence that Emerson ever sat in a full lotus. Today, on the other hand, not only are large numbers of people who are in no sense "intellectuals" involved, but they appear more interested in actual religious practices than in doctrinal ideas. The recent wave of interest in Oriental forms of spirituality seems both broader and deeper than the ones that preceded it.<sup>108</sup>

In the 1960s and 1970s, the context of the mass marketing of the guru was the veritable marketing of the mystic East, with India and Indian gurus as a dominant product. Young Americans traveled to India in search of alternative lifestyles, some more spiritually inclined than others.<sup>109</sup> In the United States, Indian male gurus embraced mass-marketing techniques to promote their spiritual paths, including Maharishi Mahesh Yogi of Transcendental Meditation, A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), and Swami Muktananda of Siddha Yoga.

Their emphasis on mass appeal represented a new, and conflicted, direction for the guru tradition. Traditional stories from India attribute two main vices to false gurus: the acquisition of money and sexual exploitation.<sup>110</sup> Past and present male gurus in India have been criticized and labeled as "false guru" precisely on the issue of purity of motive, a critique that emerges from many corners, including those suspicious of "new religions" and gurus who maintain a rivalry with other gurus, as well as people involved in a "rationality movement" and those who attribute political and economic motives to gurus.<sup>111</sup> This suspicion appears within gurus' teachings as well. For example, Ma Jaya says that Swami Nityananda (of Siddha Yoga) warned her: "There is always a chance that one will use the serpent power—as shakti is sometimes known—for personal gain, thus limiting oneself to the feeling of power instead of bliss" (see Narayanan article in this volume). Since the gurus in the United States would have been aware of "the healthy cynicism maintained by anti-ascetic folklore in India" toward gurus who gather wealth, it is important to note what steps they took to counteract this criticism.<sup>112</sup> Generally speaking, their response included their assertion that a greater number of enlightened people improves our world, and that their methods are based on established, traditional practices, including chanting, vegetarianism, and gatherings of enlightened people (*satsang*); notably, social service works are prominent in the biographies of twentieth-century female gurus.

The current female gurus profiled in this volume are basically a "third wave" of gurus in the United States, with Ma Jaya Sati Bhagavati spanning the second and third waves, since she and her disciples had thirteen ashrams in Queens, New York, by 1975. These female gurus are a youthful group: Ammachi, Meera Ma (in Germany), Karunamayi Ma and Gurumayi are all in their forties, and Shree Ma, Ma Jaya Sati Bhagavati, and Jayashri Ma are slightly older. Gurumayi is the only one to have inherited an established ashram complex in the United States; the others fashioned their own centers, in their own styles (including the decentering tendencies of Shree Ma, Meera Ma, and Jayashri Ma). All of them are understood to be ascetics: Ammachi controversially declined to be married; Meera Ma is said to have married a German, but her husband does not play a public role in her mission; Ma Jaya Sati Bhagavati was married and has children; the issue of marriage arose in Shree Ma's life, but it was quickly dropped because she was a gifted student; and the issue seems never to have arisen in lives of Karunamayi Ma, Jayashri Ma, and Gurumayi.

All of the gurus attract followers who seek to experience the real for themselves, under the guidance of one who has experienced the real, and who can effectively lead others. The effectiveness of their leadership is often described as a transmission of shakti to the students, which awakens powerful cosmic energies in the subtle body. In this way, female gurus are also distinguished from the earlier male gurus, for as women they are the classic embodiment of shakti. Like their male predecessors, however, the female gurus of today are established enough to incur the criticism of some former followers; one can find such criticisms in discussion groups on the Internet.

In the United States, by far the largest group of followers of current female gurus are affluent, educated Euro-American women. A number of factors pertain to this group's dominant presence, including their value and validation of a woman leader; the fact that women traditionally participate in religion in higher numbers than men; and the chance to participate meaningfully in a welcoming spiritual path, based on the female gurus' tendency to avoid calling their paths "Hinduism" in favor of a path of spirituality open to all. An additional factor may be the approach captured by John Updike in his novel *S.*, in which the protagonist is attracted to Indian traditions because they give her a language through which to understand her emotions and experiences; they are an important analytical tool in her commitment to self-growth.<sup>113</sup> It is also possible to understand this space for self-growth and self-awareness on feminist terms, for the majority profile of the women followers of female gurus matches the profile of women involved in feminist spirituality groups.<sup>114</sup> In addition, the "social expectation of the equality of women" in the United States may be a key factor in "legitimizing [women's] presence in religious leadership roles," and thus their acceptance in those roles.<sup>115</sup>

The female Euro-American following of female gurus, as well as the gurus' inclusive perspective on the path, both serve to highlight the distinctive context of this "third wave" of gurus in contradistinction to the "second wave." For today in the United States, there is a new claim to Hindu spiritual authenticity in the American context: Hindu temples. As noted earlier in this section, the path of the guru and the path of temple liturgy are not mutually exclusive in India, nor are they necessarily in the United States, for early Hindu temples in the United States were constructed by guru-based organizations. For example, the Vedanta Society is credited with building the first Hindu temple in the United States, in San Francisco in 1906; others followed, such as the Hollywood temple in 1938, and the Santa Barbara temple in 1956. In keeping with the image of Hinduism Vivekananda had presented to Americans, the focus in these temples tended to be on understanding scripture. In addition, ISKCON built temples in cities across America, with the most famous being the elaborate Palace of Gold in New Vrindaban, West Virginia. Prabhupada's vision included both the guru-disciple relationship and temple worship, combining the personal spiritual quest, embodied by the guru, with traditions of ritual worship. However, the phenomenon of building temples in America that reproduce temple styles in India, including a full-time staff of brahman priests to conduct the worship services, began in the 1970s and was directly related to the presence of Hindu Indian immigrants in America.

In 1965 the Immigration Act liberated the long-frozen immigration of Asians to America by removing the national origins quota system and permitting the immigration of foreign professional people to the United States. In addition, the act's "family reunification" policy facilitated a second wave of Asian immigration. In the 1970s, the older generation of successful Indian professionals in the United States began to devote their wealth to building Hindu temples, which they viewed as cultural and spiritual centers for the education of the younger generation. The earliest temples of this type are the

Sri Ganesha Temple in Flushing, New York, and the Sri Venkateswara Temple in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, which were both dedicated in 1977.<sup>116</sup> In contrast to the ISKCON temples, which were built for a specific devotional community that includes both Euro-Americans and Indian-Americans, the Indian-style temples, most of which were built in the 1980s and 1990s and continue to be built, are by and for the Hindu immigrant community, and tend to incorporate diverse ways of worship as they attempt to bring ethnic Indian Hindus together as a cultural community.

It seems clear that currently gurus and Indian-style Hindu temples have marked off very different spaces in the United States. The guru path tends toward inclusivity, with its emphasis on self-power in relation to the guru's guidance, acceptance of participants from all ethnic and religious backgrounds, congregational modality of worship, and a tendency to dissociate itself with organized religion. As such, the guru path in the United States displays characteristics of the globalization of Hinduism. In contrast, the Indian-style Hindu temples tend toward specificity, with an emphasis on the ritual worship of a distinctive and often sectarian-defined God, ethnic Indian Hindu clientele, priestly modality of worship, and explicitly Hindu self-identification. As such, the Hindu temples in the United States tend to represent themselves as directly related to Hindu orthodoxy. Contributing to the tension is the tendency among followers to understand the female guru to be the Goddess, with whom they can interact directly and personally; their spiritual path toward self-discovery opens when the Goddess comes to life as the graceful guru. Still, there remains much common ground between the guru path and the way of temple worship, which could provide a basis for the interaction and mutual understanding among people of different backgrounds, for those who would commit themselves to such an endeavor.

#### NOTES

1. For example, Catherine Wessinger, ed., *Women's Leadership in Marginal Religions: Explorations outside the Mainstream* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993); Susan Starr Sered, *Priestess, Mother, Sacred Sister: Religions Dominated by Women* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); Susan Jean Palmer, *Moon Sisters, Krishna Mothers, Rajneesh Lovers: Women's Roles in New Religions* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1994); and Elizabeth Puttick, *Women in New Religions: In Search of Community, Sexuality and Spiritual Power* (New York: St. Martin's, 1997).

2. For example, Lisa Lassell Hallstrom, *Mother of Bliss: Ānandamayī Mā* (1896–1982) (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); and Catherine Clémentin-Ojha's study of a contemporary female guru in Varanasi, Shoba Ma (b. 1921), *La divinité conquise: carrière d'une sainte* (Nanterre: Société d'Ethnologie, 1990). Besides this volume, other scholarly studies of several female gurus are in progress, such as Marie-Thérèse Charpentier's study of forty-five female gurus, with a focus on five of them, for her dissertation, tentatively entitled "The Thousand Faces of the Divine Mother," at Åbo Akademi University in Turku (Finland).

3. For example, Linda Johnsen, *Daughters of the Goddess: The Women Saints of India* (St. Paul, Minn.: Yes International Publishers, 1994); Timothy Conway, *Women of*



*Power and Grace: Nine Astonishing, Inspiring Luminaries of Our Time* (Santa Barbara: Wake Up Press, 1994); and Marcus Allsop, *Western Sadhus and Sannyasins in India* (Prescott, Ariz.: Hohm, 2000).

4. Miranda Shaw found evidence of women gurus in Indian and Tibetan tantric Buddhism in Sanskrit and Tibetan texts from the eighth to twelfth centuries; see her *Passionate Enlightenment: Women in Tantric Buddhism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994). I discuss stories of Hindu wives as gurus later in this introduction.

5. I discuss female saints later in this introduction. On the other types of participants, see the diverse articles in Laurie L. Patton, *Jewels of Authority: Women and Textual Tradition in Hindu India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

6. Kathryn Hansen, "Heroic Modes of Women in Indian Myth, Ritual and History: The Tapasvinī and the Virāṅganā," in Arvind Sharma and Katherine K. Young, *The Annual Review of Women in World Religions*, vol. 2: *Heroic Women* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), p. 4.

7. Johnsen, *Daughters of the Goddess*, p. 61.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 48.

9. Conway, *Women of Power and Grace*, p. 192.

10. Both quotations are from Catherine Clémentin-Ojha, "The Tradition of Female Gurus," *Manushi* 6 no. 1 (1985): 2–8; p. 2. Monier-William's Sanskrit Dictionary indicates that "guru" works for both genders, and it also lists a feminine form for "guru" as "guruvi" (thanks to Rebecca Manring for our personal discussion of these terms). Note that the contemporary guru, Gurani Anjali of Yoga Anand Ashram, uses the terms "gurani" and "Guru Ma" as titles to indicate "female guru," on the Web site <http://www.santosha.com/dhyana/meditation.html>. See also Katherine K. Young's mention of the terms *ācāryaṇī* and *upadhyaṇī*, "Om, the Vedas, and the Status of Women with Special Reference to Śrīvaiṣṇavism," in Patton, *Jewels of Authority*, pp. 84–121; p. 115, n. 35.

11. Catherine Wessinger's edited volume "is primarily concerned to discover if there are factors supportive of the routine, noncharismatic religious leadership of women"; *Women's Leadership in Marginal Religions*, p. 2. Susan Starr Sered identifies characteristics of women leaders of women-dominated religions in her *Priestess, Mother, Sacred Sister*. Susan Jean Palmer presents case studies of women participants in religions new to North America in her *Moon Sisters, Krishna Mothers, Rajneesh Lovers*.

12. Elizabeth Puttick, *Women in New Religions*, esp. pp. 74–100, 175–95.

13. Rita M. Gross, *Feminism and Religion: An Introduction* (Boston: Beacon, 1996), p. 108.

14. Jeffrey J. Kripal, "Inside-Out, Outside-In: Existential Place and Academic Practice in the Study of North American Guru-Traditions," *Religious Studies Review* 25 no. 3 (July 1999): 233–38; p. 237.

15. See Hallstrom, *Mother of Bliss*, pp. 32, 70, 74, 80, and photographs between pages 106 and 107. See also the articles on Sita Devi and Gurumayi in this volume on the theme of hair.

16. See Vasudha Narayanan's discussion of bhakti, shakti, and women: "Brimming with Bhakti, Embodiments of Shakti: Devotees, Deities, Performers, Reformers, and Other Women of Power in the Hindu Tradition," in Arvind Sharma and Katherine K. Young, eds., *Feminism and World Religions* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), pp. 25–77; esp. p. 65.

17. For example, on shakti and goddesses in Hinduism, see John Hawley and Donna M. Wulff, eds., *Devī: Goddesses of India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996); Elisabeth Bernard and Beverly Moon, eds., *Goddesses Who Rule* (New



York: Oxford University Press, 2002); C. Mackenzie Brown, *The Devī Gītā: The Song of the Goddess* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998). On shakti and women in Hinduism, see Nancy A. Falk, "Shakti Ascending: Hindu Women, Politics, and Religious Leadership during the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries," in Robert D. Baird, ed., *Religion in Modern India* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1995), pp. 298–334; Julia Leslie, ed., *Roles and Rituals for Hindu Women* (Rutherford, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1991); and the classic, Susan S. Wadley, ed., *The Powers of Tamil Women* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1980).

18. Madhu Khanna, "The Goddess-Women Equation in Śākta Tantras," in Mandakranta Bose, ed., *Faces of the Feminine in Ancient, Medieval, and Modern India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 109–123; p. 116. Khanna cites June McDaniel, "The Embodiment of God among the Bauls of Bengal," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 8 no. 2 (1992): 36.

19. Current studies of women's empowerment through possession by the Goddess include Mary Hancock, *Womanhood in the Making: Domestic Ritual and Public Culture in Urban South India* (Boulder, Col.: Westview, 1999); Kathleen Erndl, "The Goddess and Women's Empowerment: A Hindu Case Study," in Karen L. King, ed., *Women in Goddess Traditions* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), pp. 17–38; and Lindsey Harlan and Paul Courtwright, eds., *From the Margins of Hindu Marriage* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

20. Johnsen, *Daughters of the Goddess*, p. 26. The nature and role of feminism in third-world countries, especially in the context of power relations among nations and the cultural applicability of perspectives that have had their genesis in the West, is an ongoing discussion in India and elsewhere. See Madhu Kishwar, *Off the Beaten Track: Rethinking Gender Justice for Indian Women* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999); Uma Narayan, *Dislocating Culture: Identities, Traditions, and Third World Feminism* (New York: Routledge, 1997); Irene Gedalof, *Against Purity: Rethinking Identity with Indian and Western Feminisms* (London: Routledge, 1999); Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Ann Russo, and Lourdes Torres, eds., *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991). For a scholarly critique of Western feminism's construction of the Goddess, see Katherine K. Young, "Goddesses, Feminists, and Scholars," in Arvind Sharma and Katherine K. Young, eds., *The Annual Review of Women in World Religions*, vol. 1 (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), pp. 105–179.

21. Hallstrom, *Mother of Bliss*; discussion is throughout the book, but see especially chapter 7, "Ānandamayī Mā and Gender," pp. 199–222.

22. In her study of American feminist spirituality, Cynthia Eller has observed that women who left traditional religions often turned to "alternative religions," including Asian traditions; *Living in the Lap of the Goddess: The Feminist Spirituality Movement in America* (New York: Crossroad, 1993), pp. 32–33.

23. See Patrick Olivelle's discussion of dating in *Upaniṣads, Translated from the Original Sanskrit by Patrick Olivelle* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), xxxvi–xxxvii.

24. Eknath Easwaran, trans. *The Upanishads* (Tornales, Calif.: Nilgiri Press, 1995), pp. 65–66.

25. Olivelle, *Upaniṣads*, p. xxiii.

26. This is convincingly argued by Ellison Banks Findly, "Gārgī at the King's Court," pp. 37–58, esp. pp. 38–42, in Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad and Ellison Banks Findly, eds., *Women, Religion, and Social Change* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1985).

27. Vasudha Narayanan lists the Vedic poets in "The Hindu Tradition," in Willard G. Oxtoby, ed., *World Religions: Eastern Traditions* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 26. Sushil Kumar De adds Vishwavara, Godha, Shashwati, and Romasha to the list in "Great Women in Vedic Literature," in Swami Madhavananda and Ramesh Chandra Majumdar, eds., *Great Women of India* (Mayavati, Almora: Advaita Ashrama, 1982), pp. 129–139; p. 130.

28. *Bṛihadaranyaka Upanishad* (hereafter *Br Up*) 3.8; Olivelle, *Upaniṣads*, pp. 44–45. The words for imperishable are *akshara* (m), "non-transitory," and *akshayan* (m), "without depreciation." Hereafter, page numbers accompanying references to *Br Up* will refer to Olivelle's translation.

29. *Br Up* 3.8.12 (p. 46).

30. Findly, "Gārgī at the King's Court," pp. 49–50. In her discussion, Findly draws on the evaluation of Gargi by the famous philosopher Shankara, whom I discuss in the next section.

31. *Ibid.*, p. 45.

32. This important discussion is located in 2.4 of the text (pp. 28–30) and is repeated with slight variation in 4.5 (pp. 69–71).

33. This qualification occurs only in *Br Up* 4.5 (p. 69).

34. *Br Up* 2.4.3 (p. 28) and 4.5.4 (p. 69).

35. *Br Up* 2.4.5 (p. 28), 4.5.6 (p. 69).

36. *Br Up* 2.4.12 (p. 30).

37. Findly, "Gārgī at the King's Court," p. 40.

38. Eliot Deutsch provides an accessible discussion of the philosophy of Advaita Vedanta on this issue in chapter 3 of his *Advaita Vedānta: A Philosophical Reconstruction* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, [1969] 1973), pp. 27–45; esp. pp. 30–32.

39. For example, one of the Dharmashastras mentions "female guru" as the wife of a guru, in the context of discussing a "fallen man": "That man falls who has connection with a female friend of a female Guru, or with a female friend of a male Guru, or with any married woman"; *Apastamba Prasna I*, patala 7, khanda 21 of Georg Buhler, trans., *Apastambadharmasutra, or Apastamba's Aphorisms on the Sacred Law of the Hindus*, Bombay Sanskrit Series nos. 44, 50 (Poona: S. K. Belvalkar, 1932); reproduced on the Web at <http://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/sla/apao121.htm>.

40. "Social" does not necessarily mean that the teaching is verbal; for example, the first Siddha Yoga guru, Bhagawan Nityananda, was a great teacher of few words. See Swami Durgananda, "To See the World Full of Saints: The History of Siddha Yoga as a Contemporary Movement," in Douglas Renfrew Brooks, et al., *Meditation Revolution: A History and Theology of the Siddha Yoga Lineage* (South Fallsburg, N.Y.: Agama, 1997), pp. 3–161, esp. pp. 15–22.

41. The *Yoga Vasishtha* (hereafter, YV) has been dated as early as the sixth or seventh century C.E. and as late as the fourteenth century. T. G. Manikar has convincingly argued that the text was composed in Kashmir between 1150 and 1250; see Christopher Chapple's introductory comments in Swami Venkatesananda, *The Concise Yoga Vāsiṣṭha*, with an introduction and bibliography by Christopher Chapple (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984), pp. x–xi. The *Tripura Rahasya* is possibly contemporaneous, or slightly later. Swami Sri Ramanananda Saraswathi, trans., *Tripura Rahasya or the Mystery beyond the Trinity* (Tiruvannamalai: T. N. Venkataraman, 1971).

42. As Christopher Chapple notes, the main protagonists of the *Yoga Vasishtha* are Rama, familiar as the kingly hero of the Ramayana epic and incarnation of Vishnu, and Vasishtha, a sage whom Shankaracarya referred to as the first sage of the

Vedanta school; Vasishtha, who teaches Rama in the YV, thus links the text with the Vedanta tradition. However, Chapple also remarks upon the diversity of traditions in the text: "Threads of Vedānta, Jainism, Yoga, Sāṃkhya, Śaiva Siddhānta, and Mahāyāna Buddhism are intricately woven into the *Yoga Vāsiṣṭha*; it is a Hindu text *par excellence*, including, as does Hinduism, a mosaic-style amalgam of diverse and sometimes opposing traditions" (p. xii). I tend to put the emphasis on bhakti, because the YV insists that Rama, enhanced by higher knowledge, then resumed his royal duty of ruling; thus, the text's emphasis on action in the world makes what the YV does for the epic Ramayana parallel with what the *Bhagavad Gita* does for the epic *Mahabharata*.

The *Tripura Rahasya* text is in praise of the Goddess, which associates it with the tantric Shakta theology, which I discuss in greater detail below. The frame story is that a sage named Dattatreya teaches Parashurama higher wisdom; tradition views both of these characters as incarnations of Vishnu.

43. Venkatesananda, *The Concise Yoga Vāsiṣṭha*, pp. 333–383. The YV has other stories that involve women who attain higher knowledge; for example, Queen Lila, who is taught by the goddess Saraswati (pp. 51–77); the demoness Karkati, who attained higher knowledge by her own meditation ("She had gained direct knowledge of the supreme causeless cause of all by her own examination of the intelligence within her. Surely, direct inquiry into the movements of thought in one's own consciousness is the supreme guru or preceptor, O Rāma, and no one else," p. 80), then heard teachings by a king and his minister (pp. 77–87); and a very interesting take on the Ahalya story (pp. 89–96).

44. *Ibid.*, p. 333. In Hinduism, marriage is sacramental, as it is in Christianity; on a general level, this means that the ceremony metaphysically joins the two participants as one, which is the reason that divorce is controversial in both religions.

45. *Ibid.*, p. 334.

46. *Ibid.*, p. 336.

47. *Ibid.*

48. *Ibid.*, p. 337.

49. *Ibid.*, p. 349.

50. The series of quotations is *ibid.*, p. 380.

51. *Ibid.*, p. 381.

52. Saraswathi, *Tripura Rahasya*, 3: 47–59, pp. 24–26.

53. *Ibid.*, 4: 1–3, p. 26.

54. This section of the story is found *ibid.*, 4: 4–15, pp. 26–27.

55. *Ibid.*, chaps. 5–8, pp. 34–62.

56. *Ibid.*, 10: 15–27, p. 73.

57. On the prince, see *ibid.*, 10: 43–61, pp. 75–76; on the princess, see *ibid.*, 4: 96, p. 33.

58. *Ibid.*, 10: 43–61, p. 76.

59. There are numerous studies of female bhakti saints; many I have listed in the bibliography. Female bhakti saints existed in all regions of India; it is not my intention here to represent all of them in this selective discussion of issues relevant to the emergence of Hindu female gurus.

60. Findly, "Gārgī at the King's Court," p. 39.

61. *Ibid.*, pp. 40–41.

62. For a further discussion of bhakti, see Karen Pechilis Prentiss, *The Embodiment of Bhakti* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), especially the introduction and chapter 1.

63. Ram Dass, *One Liners: A Mini-Manual for a Spiritual Life* (New York: Bell Tower, 2002), p. 63.

64. C. Mackenzie Brown, *The Devī Gītā: The Song of the Goddess. A Translation, Annotation, and Commentary* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), pp. 18–19.

65. Douglas R. Brooks, an expert on tantra, discusses “Śākta forms of Tantrism . . . [as] Hindu Tantrism par excellence,” in his *Secret of the Three Cities: An Introduction to Hindu Śākta Tantrism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), p. 72; cited in C. Mackenzie Brown, *Devī Gītā*, p. 21.

66. Rita M. Gross discusses the validity of embodiment as a major theme in feminist understandings of religion in *Feminism and Religion*, pp. 237–40.

67. See “A Second Rabia: Lal Ded of Kashmir,” in *Manushi* 50–52 (January–June 1989): 103–108. The unnamed author says that the account of Lal Ded’s life discussed therein, as well as the translations of her poetry, are from Jayalal Kaul’s *Lal Ded* (Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1973).

68. “There is a great deal of controversy regarding Lalla’s philosophy. Some call her a follower of Shaivism; others claim that she was influenced by hatha yoga, Buddhism, or Shankaracharya. There are also long-standing legends, recorded in Persian chronicles, that she accepted Islam, and was a follower of Shah Hamadan, who had taken refuge in Kashmir from the persecution of Timur. Many remember her as a sufi and a *wali*, and she is often called a second Rabia. In 1885, Pir Ghulam Hasan summed up the argument in his *Tarikh-i-Hasan*: ‘The Hindus say that she is one of them. The Muslims claim that she belongs to them. The truth is that she is among the chosen of god. May god’s peace be upon her’”; *ibid.*, p. 106.

69. In Jayalal Kaul’s translation from the Kashmiri, one of her poems explicitly mentions Shaiva tantra: “Whatever work I did became worship of the Lord;/ Whatever word I uttered became a *mantra*/Whatever this body of mine experienced became the *sadhanas* of Saiva Tantra”; *ibid.*, p. 107.

70. From *Lalleshwari: Spiritual Poems by a Great Siddha Yogini, Rendered by Swami Muktananda* (South Fallsburg, N.Y.: Gurudev Siddha Peeth, 1981), p. 47. According to the preface by Swami Prajnananda, “In this book, the verses have been collected from different sources, arranged and rendered into Hindi by Baba [Muktananda], and translated into English by Yoginī Shri Malti Devi [today, Gurumayī],” p. xi.

71. See John S. Hawley’s thorough discussion of Mirabai’s historicity in Hawley and Mark Juergensmeyer, *Songs of the Saints of India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 122–29.

72. *Ibid.*, p. 119.

73. *Ibid.*, pp. 138–39; translated from Parashuram Caturvedi’s *Mīrābāī kī Padāvalī* (see *ibid.*, p. 205). There is a final verse to poem no. 117 that I have omitted here.

74. I am drawing on Hawley’s insight: “Rather than accepting the loving profligacy that official *saguna* theology designates as the appropriate avenue of escape from mundane, domestic involvements—a theology, of course, designed by men—she may try something new. She may attempt to forge categories that give new bite to *bhakti* from a woman’s point of view. This is what Mira did in demanding for herself a marriage with the world’s most eligible and unmarriageable bachelor and in imagining this marriage as taking a form the world regards as impossible: the coupling of two yogis” (*ibid.*, p. 133; for other distinctive features see pp. 130–32).

75. See A. K. Ramanujan, “On Woman Saints,” in John Stratton Hawley and Donna Marie Wulff, eds., *The Divine Consort: Rādhā and the Goddesses of India*



(Berkeley: Graduate Theological Union, 1982), pp. 316–24; and Uma Chakravarty, “The World of the Bhaktin in South Indian Traditions—the Body and Beyond,” *Manushi*: 50–52 (Jan–June 1989), pp. 18–29, esp. pp. 26–27.

76. Hawley and Juergensmeyer, *Songs of the Saints of India*, p. 126. In the case of Mirabai, there is tension along caste lines in her biography and among communities in Rajasthan today, with some communities rejecting Mirabai though she is lauded all over the country; see Parita Mukta, *Upholding the Common Life: The Community of Mirabai* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994). See also Nancy Martin’s remarks on caste and Mirabai, “Mirabai,” in *Encyclopedia of Women and World Religion*, edited by Serinity Young (New York: Macmillan Reference, 1999), pp. 664–665.

77. In her balanced and interesting discussion of the application and meanings of the term *saint* in Hinduism, Lisa Hallstrom notes that many of Anandamayi Ma’s devotees do not choose to refer to the guru as a “saint” because they view her as the embodiment of God rather than a human being; see her *Mother of Bliss*, pp. 87–92. See also two comparative studies of sainthood: John Stratton Hawley, ed., *Saints and Virtues* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987) and Richard Kieckhefer and George D. Bond, eds., *Sainthood: Its Manifestation in World Religions* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

78. Brown, *Devī Gītā*, pp. 8, 26. Note Brown’s discussion of translating Supreme Ruler into English.

79. *Ibid.*, p. 54 n. 5.

80. *Ibid.*, pp. 58–59, 62 (vv. 1.26, 1.31).

81. *Ibid.*, p. 81 (vv. 1.72–73).

82. *Ibid.*, pp. 52–53.

83. Brown, *ibid.*, p. 7, characterizes the authorship of the text as follows: “Sometime after the eleventh century, one ardent follower of the Goddess, or he and a small group of like-minded friends, decided to rectify the situation [of mythological texts devoted only to male gods] and compose a great Purāṇa dedicated solely to the object of their devotion, conceived of as the supreme power (*śakti*) of the universe, consort of none, subject to none.”

84. *Ibid.*, pp. 35–7.

85. In chapter 5, *ibid.*, pp. 179–96; Brown’s copious notes explain the connections with other texts.

86. “Above that is the Coiled Serpent appearing like a flame, blood-red in color. She is said to be the very essence of the Goddess, expanding with rapturous passion, O Mountain Chief” *ibid.*, p. 184 (v. 5.33).

87. Hallstrom, *Mother of Bliss*, p. 92.

88. See Paul Muller-Ortega, *The Triadic Heart of Śiva* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989). See also the translation of a Kaula Tantric text, which offers a meditation to a female guru (*stri guru*), by Mike Magee, at <http://www.clas.ufl.edu/users/gthursby/tantra/guru.htm>.

89. In addition to her article in this volume, see Rebecca J. Manring, “At Home in the World: The Lives of Sītādevī,” *International Journal of Hindu Studies* 2 no. 1 (April 1998): 21–42. In this latter article, Manring notes the leadership of two women in Gaudiya Vaishnavism: “Sectarian records mention no women among the leaders of the first generation. However, in the next generation, leadership shifted to (among others) two women who were so close to the founders that in retrospect their roles seem obvious, although at the time the community itself could not have anticipated their rise to power. These were . . . Sītādevī and Jāhnavī, primary wife of Nityānanda (one of Caitanya’s closest associates)” (p. 22).



90. Sources in English for the study of Bahinabai include: Piroj Anandkar, "Bahinābāi," in Swami Ghanananda and John Stewart-Wallace, eds., *Women Saints East and West* (Hollywood, Cal.: Vedanta, [1995] 1979) pp. 64–72; Anne Feldhaus, "Bahinā Bāi: Wife and Saint," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 50 (1982): 591–604; and Justin E. Abbott, trans., *Bahinā Bāi: A Translation of Her Autobiography and Verses*, The Poet-Saints of Maharashtra No. 5 (Poona: Scottish Mission Industries, 1929). The numbering and order of verses differs in Felhaus' article from that presented in Abbott's translation.

91. The mantra originated with Shiva, who gave it to his wife Parvati; Matsyendra heard it from within the belly of a fish, "thus through him the supreme *mantra*, that Shiva held in His mind, became effective through *bhakti*"; he passed to it Goraksha (Gorakhnath), who passed it to Gahini, then Nivrittinath, then Dnyaneshvar, then Satchidananda; then Vishvambhara gave it to Raghava (Chaitanya), then to Keshava Chaitanya, who passed it to Babaji Chaitanya, to Tukoba (Tukaram), and through him to Bahinabai. See Abbott, *Bahinā Bāi*, p. 1 (vv. 1.1–9).

92. *Ibid.*, chapter 1, 1.8.

93. *Ibid.*, p. 18 (Autobiography v. 21.12).

94. *Ibid.*, pp. 23–23 (vv. 31.1–4, 32.1–2, 4).

95. *Ibid.*, p. 25 (vv. 35.4, 7, 11).

96. Verses 90–98. In the first seven births she was unmarried, in the eighth her husband died ["but that was an advantage to me" (v. 94.7)], in the ninth she was unmarried, in the tenth she was married with three children, in the eleventh her husband was a *siddha* skilled in yoga who became a guru to her, and in the twelfth she served her husband "while constantly in the act of contemplation" (v. 96.18).

97. Sarojini Mehta, "Gaurībāi," in Ghanananda and Stewart-Wallace, *Women Saints East and West*, pp. 73–79.

98. *Ibid.*, p. 75.

99. Swami Chirantananda, "Tarigoṇḍa Venkamāmbā," in Ghanananda and Stewart-Wallace, *Women Saints East and West*, pp. 86–93.

100. *Ibid.*, pp. 86–87.

101. *Ibid.*, p. 90.

102. Johnsen, *Daughters of the Goddess*, pp. 22–23.

103. See, for example, Lou Ratté, "Goddesses, Mothers, and Heroines: Hindu Women and the Feminine in the Early Nationalist Movement," in Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad and Ellison Banks Findly, *Women, Religion, and Social Change* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1985), pp. 351–376. See also Tanika Sarkar, *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation: Community, Religion and Cultural Nationalism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001). A famous fictional exploration of the theme of woman as an emblem of the nation is Rabindranath Tagore, *The Home and the World*, translated by Surendranath Tagore (London: Penguin Books, [1915] 1985).

104. Sri Aurobindo, *On Himself*, Sri Aurobindo Birth Centenary Library 26: 455. Cited in Georges van Vrekhem, *The Mother: The Story of Her Life* (New Delhi: HarperCollins Publishers India, 2000): 205.

105. Research in this section is drawn from an essay entitled "The Pattern of Hinduism and Hindu Temple Building in the U.S." that I wrote for my affiliates Web page on the Harvard Pluralism Project site, <http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~pluralism/affiliates/pechilis-prentiss.html>. An excellent resource is the CD-Rom "On Common Ground," a lucid discussion of religious pluralism in America from research conducted by the Pluralism Project at Harvard University under the direction of Diana L. Eck.

106. Dr. Narayanan presented these ideas at a keynote lecture during the annual Conference on Religion in South India held in Toronto, June 12–15, 1997. She has continued working with these ideas on her affiliate Web page for the Harvard Pluralism Project <http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~pluralism/affiliates/narayanan.html>.

107. Lovejit Dhaliwal, "Hindu Women Spread the Word," BBC News Online, Thursday April 26, 2001. The Dyanaprabhodashini Centre in Pune is headed by Jayavantrao Leile; he began the course for training priests about ten years ago, and estimates that a third of the students are women. Web address: [http://news.bbc.co.uk/hi/english/world/south\\_asia/newsid\\_1298000/1298208.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/hi/english/world/south_asia/newsid_1298000/1298208.stm).

108. Harvey Cox, *Turning East: The Promise and Peril of the New Orientalism* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1977): 9. A notable exception to the early emphasis on textual study promoted by Emerson and Thoreau, as well as Vivekananda's Vedanta Society, would be Swami Paramahansa Yogananda's emphasis on the practice of Kriya Yoga. Paramahansa came to America in 1920 as a delegate to the International Congress of Religious Liberals held in Boston, then settled in America and founded the Yogoda-Satsang (Self-Realization Fellowship), which surpassed the Vedanta Society as "the most influential Hindu movement in the country" in the 1930s. See Thomas A. Tweed and Stephen Prothero, *Asian Religions in America: A Documentary History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 161–62 and 182–83 (on Paramahansa), and surrounding chapters on other gurus.

109. Interesting trade books on this phenomenon include Gita Mehta, *Karma Cola: Marketing the Mystic East* (New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1979); and Cleo Odzer, *Goa Freaks: My Hippie Years in India* (New York: Blue Moon Books, 1995).

110. Kirin Narayan, *Storytellers, Saints, and Scoundrels: Folk Narrative in Hindu Religious Teaching* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989), p. 156.

111. On the establishment of new religions, note that the Buddha is said to have rejected the wisdom of Hindu gurus, which led up to his self-enlightenment; Sikhism accepted the guru ideal, but applied it very distinctively. On the rivalry among gurus, see Kirin Narayan's humorous telling of the "Nose-Cutters" story, and its application to Swami Dayananda and the Swami Narayan sect, in her *Storytellers, Saints, and Scoundrels*, pp. 132–59. On the Indian Science and Rationalists' Association, self-described "guru busters," see "India's 'Guru Busters' Debunk All That's Mystical," by John F. Burns, *New York Times*, October 10, 1995, International Section. For a political and economic analysis of contemporary male gurus in India, see Lise McKean, *Divine Enterprise: Gurus and the Hindu Nationalist Movement* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

112. Narayan, *Storytellers, Saints, and Scoundrels*, p. 158.

113. John Updike, S. (New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1988). The protagonist uses language from Indian traditions throughout the book, but seems most self-conscious of it when she says that her experience with yoga "gave me a vocabulary" (p. 11), and when she says that through her stay at the ashram she has achieved "a whole new vocabulary to frame the perennial problems in, and a way of looking at them that makes them almost vanish" (p. 235).

114. Eller, *Living in the Lap of the Goddess*, pp. 18–23.

115. Wessinger, *Women's Leadership in Marginal Religions*, p. 140. The other factor she deems important are images of the divine: "The history of Hinduism and Buddhism demonstrates that androgynous, neuter, or female conceptions of the divine are not sufficient in and of themselves to promote equality for women. But once there is a social expectation of the equality of women, conceptions of the divine that de-

emphasize the masculine prove attractive to women and support them in legitimating their presence in religious leadership roles"; pp. 139–40.

116. For a discussion of these two temples, see Tweed and Prothero, *Asian Religions in America*, pp. 289–98. See also the Web sites of the temples: The Ganesha Temple Web site is [www.indianet.com/ganesh/](http://www.indianet.com/ganesh/) (including a section on "Temples On-line" with links to other temples); the Sri Venkateswara Temple Web site is [www.svtemple.org/](http://www.svtemple.org/). Also relevant is a fascinating film, "Pilgrimage to Pittsburgh," by Fred Clothey and Ron Hess for the Department of Religious Studies, University of Pittsburgh. These earliest temples were built during the "second wave" of gurus in the United States; for example, at that time Swami Muktananda developed the Siddha Yoga ashram in South Fallsburg, New York. The widespread practice of building Indian-style temples across the United States in the 1980s and 1990s is the context of the "third wave" of female gurus in the United States.

#### SUGGESTED READINGS

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