

Women and Spirituality in the Hindu Tradition

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WHEN WE LOOK AT the contemporary Hindu spiritual scenario in India we notice that there are a number of spiritual women with large followers both in India and abroad dedicated to awakening the hidden spiritual essence within oneself.¹ Names such as Nirmaladevi, Amritanandamayi Ma, Anandamayi Ma, Brahmakumaris, and numerous others crowd the landscape. While the message of each of them is to realise the real 'self' in oneself, the means each one adopts is slightly different. As these saintly women work selflessly for the upliftment of society at large we could classify their activities under the rubric of '*lokasaṅgraha*, welfare of the world' which gained prominence during Swami Vivekananda's time. The coining of the motto '*ātmanah mokṣārtham jagaddhitāya ca*' by Swami Vivekananda for the Ramakrishna Mission meant working for the welfare of the people at large—*lokasya saṅgrahaḥ* or *jagaddhitāya*—by the *sannyāsins* whereas earlier the emphasis for the *sannyāsins* was solely on the attainment of individual moksha for oneself. Thus we find spiritual organisations today running universities, hospitals, and other charity activities all under the banner of *lokasaṅgraha*. Modern women spiritual leaders have also factored in *lokasaṅgraha* in their own different ways as one of their main activities.

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In the first part of this paper, as an introduction, I would like to look at the history of spiritual women from the times of the Rig Veda down through the centuries to understand how this phenomenon has been a constant presence in the spiritual landscape of India over time. I will not be just listing names of the spiritual leaders but am more interested in trying to understand the underlying broad socio-cultural dimensions of the different manifestations of spirituality in the Vedic, medieval, and modern periods in the course of the history of Hinduism.

The Vedic Period

The Vedic period is uniformly considered to be more kind to women and affording equal opportunities for their creative expressions. Thus it is natural to find the mention of at least twenty-seven Vedic *ṛṣikās* in the Rig Veda and the hymns of some of them like Ghōṣā have come

Sage Agastya Drinking the Ocean



down to us. One of them called Lopāmudrā, the wife of Agastya, is also hailed as an erudite scholar. She is reputed to have preached many *sūktas*, hymns, of the first book of the Rig Veda along with Agastya.

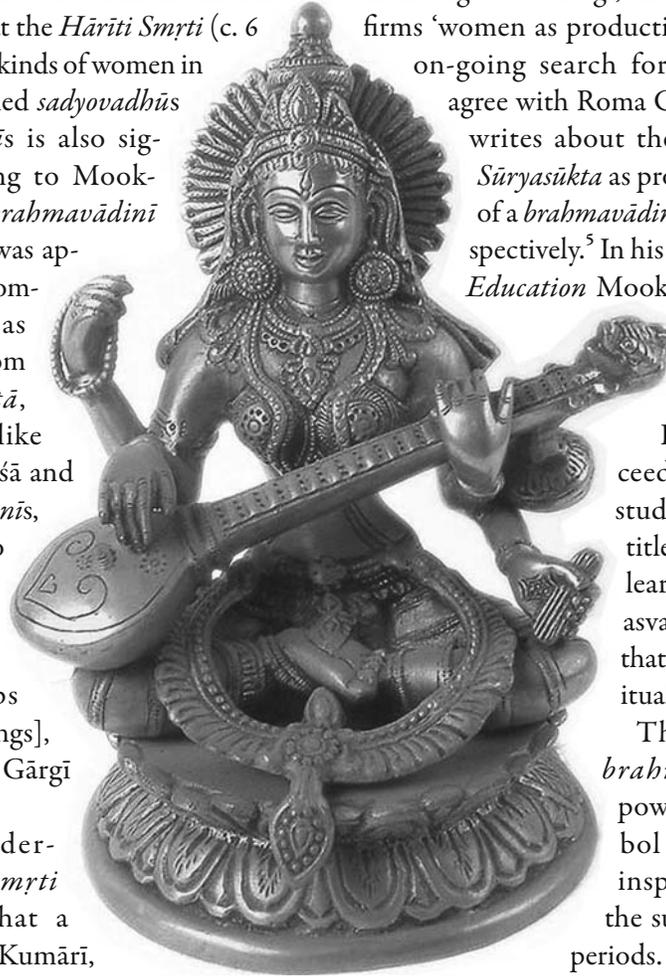
We also have the famous Maitreyī and Gārgī who have been immortalised in the Indian psyche. The fact that the *Hārīti Smṛti* (c. 6 BCE) mentions two kinds of women in the Vedic times called *sadyovadhū*s and *brahmavādinīs* is also significant. According to Mookerjee, 'The term *brahmavādinī* looks as though it was applied to both the composer of hymns, as one can surmise from the *Byhad-devatā*, classifying *ṛṣikās* like Lopāmudrā, Romāśā and so on as *brahmavādinīs*, as also to those who chose to remain unmarried, pursuing a life of learning [and perhaps their spiritual leanings], to which category Gārgī would belong.'²

Mookerji understands *Hārīti Smṛti* 21.23 to imply that a *brahmavādinī* is a Kumārī, 'who does not marry.'³ But even if the Vedic *brahmavādinī* was married, and yet chose to continue a lifelong devotion to study and also spiritual pursuit, that would again indicate her own spiritual choice voluntarily. Similarly, when Maitreyī opts for being educated in the Upanishadic lore, she is exercising her choice, as there is no indication whatsoever

that Yājñavalkya tried to dissuade her from her decision. This also indicates a modicum of independence for women to pursue their chosen path through lifelong learning combined with spiritual inclinations as in the case of Gārgī for instance. According to Ellison Banks Findly, in the figure of Gārgī, the Indian tradition affirms 'women as productive colleagues in the on-going search for truth.'⁴ We could agree with Roma Chaudhury when she writes about the *Vāksūkta* and the *Sūryasūkta* as proclaiming the virtues of a *brahmavādinī* and *sadyovadhū* respectively.⁵ In his book *Ancient Indian Education* Mookerji also calls attention to *Kauśītakī Brāhmaṇa* 7.6,

where a lady called Pathyāsvasti proceeded to the north for study and obtained the title of Sarasvati for her learning.⁶ The title Sarasvati could also suggest that Pathyāsvasti had spiritual leanings.

The image of the *brahmavādinī* was a powerful cultural symbol and continued to inspire women during the subsequent historical periods. I would like to argue and agree with both Findly and Mookerji that a *brahmavādinī* is one who has devoted herself to a quest of the highest truth taking Gārgī as the model. I cannot agree more with Flood when he says, 'Although in one sense tradition is constructed in a shared imagination, this is not to say that tradition is made up and unreal, but is in a constant process of (re)



construction in the flow of temporal continuity from the past.⁷ Thus the *brahmavādinī* image is part of the tradition and lives in the imagination and continues to reconstruct itself in different periods of history. Thus even when a male offspring is generally wished for in Vedic society it is significant that the *Brhadāranyaka Upaniṣad* has a *mantra* for the birth of a *paṇḍitā*.⁸ If we look at the Mahabharata, the Ramayana, the Puranas, and *kāvya* literature we again find examples of the *brahmavādinī* model even though they may be few and far between. Sulabhā is a *brahmavādinī* who has found mention in the Aśvalāyana Gṛhyasūtra and Acharya Shankara makes reference to her in connection with her yogic *siddhis* in his commentary on the *Brahma Sutra*, 3.3.32. She was a *yogī* or *yoginī* who, on a visit to Janaka's court, was able to surpass him in yogic feats and outclass him in spiritual discussions and who also defeated him in his own court.⁹ Chudālā in the *Yogavāsiṣṭha* is again a *brahmavādinī* and was responsible for leading her husband Śikhidhvaja in the path of wisdom.

The Classical Period

The Vedic period is generally considered an age when women had a lot more independence to pursue their preferred choices. As time went by and we come to the classical period (500 BCE–500 CE) the picture is bleak. This phase ushered in the composition of sutras for the six schools of Vedic thought and the compilation of the Ramayana and Mahabharata, and the early *Dharmasūtras* like that of Āpastamba, Gautama, and Baudhāyana as well as *smṛtis* like that of Manu, Yājñavalkya, and so on.¹⁰ These texts make it plain that by this time the position of women had fallen, her education was affected, child marriages became the norm and all in all women were inferior members of a patriarchal society. On the religious front

during this medieval period (c. 300 CE–1000 CE) we find a number of Puranas being composed and their ideology of bhakti was replacing rituals and knowledge as the spiritual means for attaining moksha.

One positive aspect of bhakti was that it was open to all without discrimination and there was thus a spiritual place for women and lower castes within the ideology of bhakti. In South India meanwhile at about the same time a new genre of literature in the form of devotional songs in Tamil were popularised by Vaishnava and Shaiva bhaktas or devotees called the Ālvārs and Nāyanārs respectively which soon gained popularity amongst many followers. Since the bhakti ideology opened the doors to all people as a path for moksha we find women and lower caste members represented both amongst the Ālvārs and Nāyanārs and some of these Tamil women spiritual leaders have also found a permanent place in temples by being cast as bronze icons and placed in centres of worship in Tamil Nadu. This was the time that Sri Rama and Sri Krishna were raised to the status of avatars, God descended on earth, and worship centered on them was gaining importance and popularity. The building of temples dedicated to these deities as well as to other *devatās* also picked up momentum at this time. Vedic deities like Indra had also lost their importance in the social sphere by now and bhakti had overtaken the Vedic sacrifices as a path to the divine.

At this time we find a proliferation of spiritual women throughout the country though we do not have full biographical sketches of such women from all parts of the country. But we do find such powerful women devotees in Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Kashmir, and Maharashtra and their works have come down to us as well. It was in the Puranas, those manuals of



Anandamayi Ma (1896–1982)

popular Hinduism, that the doctrine of bhakti was vociferously advocated and the local bards who carried the message of bhakti to the masses must have played a great part in disseminating the glories of Sri Rama and Sri Krishna and thus attracted people, especially the women who had been deprived of all means of expression of spirituality in this medieval age.

Thus though the women spiritual practitioners of this bhakti age were different from the Vedic *brahmavādinī*, I would argue that the *brahmavādinī* model was a perpetual memory of that Vedic period and never faded from the cultural scene and it is reasonable to assume that the women bhaktas of this period also drew inspiration from the earlier Vedic examples to come out of the shackles of social oppression. Women such as Meera Bai, Akka Mahadevi, Lal Ded, and others gave up their families and adopted the

lifestyle of a *sannyāsini* or *parivrājikā* wanderers in search of the divine. They were spiritual women who were dedicated to a theistic personal God and sought union with their chosen deity. Thus we have Meera Bai devoted to Sri Krishna, Akka Mahadevi devoted to Shiva, Mukta Bai, Bahina Bai belonging to the Varkari *sant* lineage following a *bhakti* modelled on Advaita lines, Lalla Devi or Lalla Ded devoted to Shiva, and may be many more whose lives have not been recorded in the history of the times.

One however needs to also note that the socio-religious atmosphere also determines the kind of spirituality that these women in the medieval period were engaged in, especially in South India, though the Varkari model was more in the Advaita paradigm. By this time the position of women being degraded, her only dharma was considered as following what is known as *pativrata* dharma wherein the husband is considered a god and complete devotion to him was the one that ensured her moksha. So when women like Meera Bai, Andal, and Akka Mahadevi abandoned their homes and family life they only substituted their chosen deity, be it Sri Krishna, Shiva, or the like, to take the place of their worldly counterpart and continuously served that deity as one would serve the worldly husband. It is a strange internalisation of one's own social status that even intrudes in the religious and spiritual spheres. One needs to also look at the paucity of bhaktas devoted to the worship of Shakti in this period to be able to assess the impact of the ideology of the *pativrata* syndrome at the time.

The Modern Period

Let us now come to the modern period. I would consider the modern period in general as starting with the opening of the doors to the Western world. We could reckon the start of women's

emancipation in a broad sense in India during these times even though feminist ideas took some more time to make their presence felt in India. We can even concede that India's colonial period which though exploitative in many ways also enabled reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy and others gain some benefits like English education that opened up their mental horizon. Exposure to ideas of social equality and political freedom practised at least in theory in countries like the United Kingdom also helped the efforts of reformers such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy at attempting some of those social reforms to the Indian context as well. Raja Ram Mohan Roy, thus, besides founding the Brahmo Samaj, also worked tirelessly against polygamy, child marriage, the caste system, and so on.

There came many reformers in this phase, especially in the nineteenth century, such as Swami Dayananda Saraswati, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Swami Vivekananda, Keshav Karve, and many more who dedicated their lives towards improving the lot of women. Each of them addressed issues such as women education, widow remarriage, and abolition of child marriage. The Arya Samaj in particular aimed at the abolition of caste and opened up Vedic education for women as well. Swami Vivekananda also did a lot to improve the lot of women. His great achievement was sowing the seeds of the future establishment of a separate monastic order called the Sarada Math for women *sannyāsinīs*, which is managed and controlled only by women monastics. Thus there was a flurry of activities to ameliorate the social inequities from which women suffered in Indian society. It was with Mahatma Gandhi, however, that women really attained dignity and recognition as equals. He made it possible for women to participate in both social reforms as well as in political activities and women have not looked back after

that. Even though the progress of women has not been equal in all classes and strata of the society the movement was begun in earnest during his time and continues to the present.

The question we have to ask ourselves in this context is how have these reforms and progress affected the spiritual world of women. It is here that one also notices that the medieval bhakti model has yielded some space to the *sannyāsinī* paradigm in the modern age and the goal was increasingly being transformed into that of seeking to realise the truth and thus going back to the *brahmavādini* ideal that was the earlier Vedic model exemplified by Gārgī and Maitreyī. Today *sannyāsinīs* like Amritanandamayi Ma and others stress on the seeking of mental peace and realising the truth. According to Anandamayi Ma, 'The supreme calling of every human being is to aspire to Self realization. All other obligations are secondary.'¹¹ She says: 'Only actions that kindle man's Divine Nature are worthy of the name of action' (ibid.).

A senior disciple of Amritanandamayi Ma, also known as the hugging saint, writes about her: 'The path inculcated by her is the same as the one presented in the Vedas and recapitulated in subsequent traditional scriptures such as the Bhagavad-Gita. ... *Karma* [action], *jñāna* [knowledge] and *bhakti* [devotion] are all essential. If the two wings of a bird are devotion and action, knowledge is its tail. Only with the help of all three can the bird soar into the heights.'¹² She stresses the importance of meditation and selfless service. There are 'some of the virtues to which Amma gives special prominence—namely, the cultivation of patience, innocence, humility, awareness and compassion' (112). 'Amma's only identification is with the True Self—the blissful consciousness that serves as the substratum to the thoughts and physical universe' (37). She also

accepts the Upanishadic concept of *jīvanmukti*, liberation while alive, and says: 'Jīvanmukti is not something to be attained after death, nor is it to be experienced or bestowed upon you in another world. It is a state of perfect awareness and equanimity, which can be experienced here and now in this world, while living in the body. Having come to experience the highest truth of oneness with the Self, such blessed souls do not have to be born again. They merge with the infinite consciousness' (185).

These statements echo the Upanishadic concept of moksha and its inquiry into the ultimate truth and thus one can see how the trend has changed from emphasis on bhakti in the medieval age to the modern emphasis on the quest for the ultimate truth. It is not as if the *brahmavādinī* image ever faded out from the Hindu cultural scene and memory throughout its chequered history. There are references to women *bhikṣuṇīs* or *sannyāsinīs* in the epic literature, in literary works of Kālidāsa, Bhavabhūti, and texts like the Arthaśāstra. Even though there are presumed to be some exclusive women *sannyāsinī* organisations from the time of Shankara, the general non-acceptance of *sannyāsinīs* in the tradition especially by the traditional Shankara *mathas* was not conducive to women adopting *sannyāsa* and it was therefore muted. It needed an impetus to come to the fore again and it came in the form of Swami Vivekananda who inspired the setting up of an independent women monastic order, the Sarada Math. Other factors like the emancipation of women in the post-independence period, the influence of social reformers, and Gandhiji's personal involvement in bringing women into the political struggle—all combined to enable women to choose their spiritual destiny as well. The figure of a renouncer—whether man or woman—has always gained

respect in Hindu circles and in her image of a *sannyāsinī* a woman has been able to regain the dignity and agency she is supposed to have enjoyed during Vedic times.

Thus Hinduism has had its share of women spiritual leaders, preachers, and exemplars of spiritual life from the earliest Vedic times to the present. It is only bound to increase as the thirst for inner peace and tranquillity is a constant spiritual need. 

References

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7. *The Blackwell Companion to Hinduism*, ed. Gavin Flood (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 8.
8. See *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, 6.4.17.
9. See Mahabharata, Shanti Parva, 320.
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