

Women Gurus in Hinduism

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HINDU FEMALE GURUS are highly visible in the contemporary world as spiritual leaders. Examples of well-known female gurus include Amma Sri Karunamayi, Ammachi Mata Amritanandamayi, Anandamurthi Guruma, Gangaji, Gurumatha Amma, Gurumayi Chidvilasananda, Ma Jaya Sati Bhagavati, Mother Meera, Sri Maa, and Sri Anandi Ma. All of these female gurus have worldwide outreach through their official websites on the internet, which provide information on their teachings and organisations, and sometimes biographical information.¹ Two of these gurus, Gurumayi Chidvilasananda of Siddha Yoga and Mata Amritanandamayi, Ammachi, are especially prominent in terms of number of global followers and ashramas. Many female gurus have received humanitarian awards; for example, Ma Jaya Sati Bhagavati, who attained mahasamadhi on 13 April 2012, has received numerous awards, including the Gandhi Foundation Award in 2007, in recognition of her service as an advocate for people living with HIV/AIDS since the 1990s, which involved caring for infected persons at her Kashi Ashrama in Sebastian, Florida. The international fame and authority of these female gurus stands in marked contrast to the long historical pattern in Hindu tradition, which restricts the role of authoritative guru who has a public presence to men.

History

'Guru' is a classical term and role in Hinduism. It has several meanings including 'weighty' and

'dispeller of darkness'.² In the corpus of the earliest scripture in Hinduism, the Vedas, the term is used in the philosophical Upanishads, where it describes a person who has ultimate knowledge. The earliest references are found in two Upanishads that probably date to about 300 BCE. In the Mundaka Upanishad, a 'great householder' named Shaunaka approached the Vedic sage Angiras and asked him: 'O adorable sir, (which is that thing) which having been known, all this becomes known?'³ The sage provided a detailed reply, which included a description of the necessity to become detached from the world and its swirl of action through teaching by a guru who is centered in the ultimate principle, Brahman.⁴ A second early reference is from the Shvetashvatara Upanishad, which refers to knowledge of Brahman as a 'supreme secret' that 'should not be given to one who is not at peace, nor yet to one who is not a son or a student.' The text also speaks of the necessity of devotion towards both god and guru.⁵ Thus, teaching, knowledge, initiation, and devotion are hallmarks of the guru in these early scriptures. Significantly, the scriptures presume that the guru is male.

Other classical texts apply these teachings to the life of an upper-caste boy. An upper-caste boy's student hood, which transitioned him from child to adult, was spent with a guru. Initiation, *upanayana*, took place for boys of the permitted castes between the ages of eight and twelve, as an important life cycle rite, *samskara*, that initiated the boy into three domains: human society, study of the Vedas, and the practice of

the fire sacrifice. It transitioned the boy from biological birth to social status, replacing the mother: 'Upanayana was thus a socio-ontological birth in opposition to a defective natural birth, and was designed to rectify biological faults and construct a more substantial existence for the young boy.'⁶ Thus, it transformed the boy through sacred knowledge imparted by a guru, with whom the child was said to have a more intimate relationship than with his biological father, as demonstrated by the resemblance of the initiation rituals to those of marriage, as well as the custom of the boy becoming a member of the teacher's family.⁷

Living with the guru highlights the seriousness of the relationship and the teaching for boys, while it indicates that this system excluded young girls. Girls only left their family homes after marriage and after puberty—marriage is the most important ritual for girls and it is the counterpart to the boys' *upanayana*. When we hear of educated women in classical Indian tradition, they are firmly located in the family context. For example, the female sage Gargi Vachaknavi, who acts as a guru to male disputants in a debate in one of the earliest Upanishads, the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* (ca. 700 BCE), is not represented as having studied with a guru; rather, she is in the family line of the renowned sage Garga. Later texts in which women are explicitly portrayed as gurus, such as the *Yoga Vasishtha* (*YV*) and the *Tripura Rahasya* (*TR*) (both ca. 1300 CE), represent them as wives who are gurus to their husbands, again joining women's knowledge with family location. This suggests that for women, family is equivalent to staying with the guru—one learns from a relative who is a sage, or one takes spiritual instruction together with one's husband from a guru.⁸

Stories of women acting as gurus in the public sphere, Gargi in the Upanishads, and

acknowledged as guru in the private sphere, Queen Chudala in the *YV* and Princess Hemalekha in the *TR*, suggest a new dimension to knowledge acquisition by joining spiritual knowledge to personal experience in the world. Within the dominant tradition of male gurus, personal insight is valued in the context of structures such as a guru lineage, received teachings, and emulation of a specific guru as practised in the intimacy of the *gurukula* system. In contrast, a prominent theme in the tradition of female gurus is personal experience both in the sense of independent spiritual realisation outside of initiation in a lineage—many female gurus are self-initiated—as well as a pragmatic orientation that relates experience of the world to spiritual knowledge. Personal experience was especially significant to women and served as a cornerstone of their authority since they were not originally included in the definition of guru. Thus, instead of relying on the de facto qualification by gender open to men, women who wished to have the authority of a spiritual teacher had to innovate with what was at hand.⁹

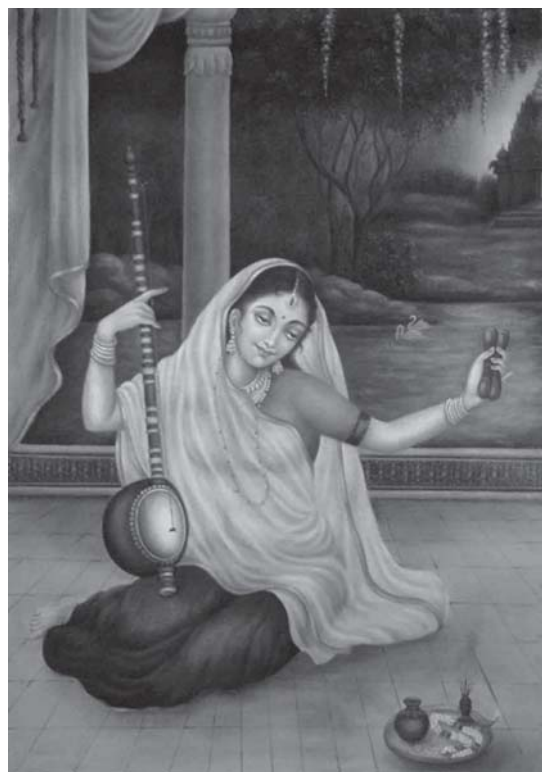
It is important to contextualise classical stories of female gurus with the wealth of literary references to exemplary spiritual women in Hindu history. For example, spiritual women are depicted in India's great epics, such as Sulaabha from the Mahabharata, who won a debate with the philosopher-king Janaka in front of learned brahmin scholars, and Shabari from the Ramayana, who was blessed with a vision of Rama at her ashrama. Historical female bhakti saints who authored devotional poetry, such as Karaikkal Ammaiyar (sixth century CE), Andal (ninth century CE), Mahadeviyakka (twelfth century CE), and Mirabai (sixteenth century CE), demonstrate that women have participated actively in Hindu tradition across the centuries.

There is a difference, though, between the categories of ascetic and devotee or saint on the one hand, and guru on the other. In the main, an ascetic or devotee can perform that role by adopting established cultural ways of behaviour, but a guru needs the recognition of an audience in order to be a guru. Of course in certain cases the ascetic does need to be perceived by others as authentic, such as if the ascetic is a member of an order, or if the ascetic plans to seek alms from householders. Also, devotees need to have public recognition in order to become saints. In addition, there is elasticity to the title of guru; in theory, anyone can be a guru to anyone, and this does not require public recognition. As well, there is an elasticity of content to the guru, which Jacob Copeman and Aya Ikagame have intriguingly discussed as 'uncontainability': 'Perhaps the quality most common to the guru across its manifold individuals, institutions and logics is that of uncontainability. Guru-ship is a suggestible form: as a principle-cum-model it affords movement between domains; the extension and transformation of modes of power; scaling up/down; the expansion/containment of persons.'¹⁰ However, even given these nuances the categories of ascetic, devotee or saint, and guru were defined distinctively in classical tradition. An ascetic and a devotee or saint are associated with autonomy. A guru requires a critical mass of followers or disciples to bestow that title. A guru cannot perform as a 'guru' without recognition as such by another; 'guru' is a third-person term, not something one calls oneself.

Stories of historical female gurus from the fifteenth through nineteenth centuries, such as Sita Devi (flourished in 1490), Bahinabai (1628–1700), Gauribai (1759–1809), and Tarigonda Venkamamba (popularly Venkamma, flourished in 1840) make it clear that it was exactly the issue

of the public recognition of a woman as a guru that was controversial; Bahinabai was a wife and the other three women were widows when they began to act as gurus, and they experienced resistance from husband and/or community.¹¹ This barrier was definitively dismantled by female gurus at the turn of and into the twentieth century, in part because their spiritual achievements were supported by men. For example, the Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi (1853–1920), the wife and spiritual companion of Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa (1836–1886), supported her companion Gauri Ma (1857–1938), a disciple of Sri Ramakrishna, in establishing the first women's ashrama in 1895 in Kolkata, which was inspired by Sri Ramakrishna and named Sri Sri Saradeshwari Ashrama.¹² The Mother (Mirra Alfassa, 1878–1983) was the appointed successor of Sri Aurobindo, and Anandamayi Ma's

Mirabai



(1896–1982) husband was her disciple.¹³ These important female gurus, who lived and served in India, achieved worldwide renown.

The contribution of Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902) to the internationalisation of the figure of the guru cannot be overstated. In his renowned speech at the 1893 World's Parliament of Religions at the World's Fair in Chicago, Swami Vivekananda presented Hinduism, in the form of neo-Vedanta, as a living tradition that is relevant to the contemporary West. His presentation, which emphasised that Hinduism taught the world tolerance and unity, was convincing and compelling to a diverse Western audience. In the year after his talk, he travelled in the US as an authentic teacher of Hinduism, lecturing to groups such as Christian Scientists, Spiritualists, and Theosophists. He also established the Vedanta Society in New York, which was the first Hindu organisation designed to attract American adherents;¹⁴ this center still flourishes today.¹⁵

Swami Vivekananda established a paradigm of guru that paved the way for others, including Baba Premanand Bharati (1858–1913), a Bengali follower of Sri Chaitanya, who lectured in the US for five years and established the Krishna Samaj at the turn of the century; Swami Paramananda (1884–1940), who spent two years as an assistant at the New York Vedanta Society before establishing his own Vedanta Societies in the Boston and Los Angeles areas and founded Ananda Ashrama, a mountain retreat in southern California in 1923; and Swami Paramahansa Yogananda (1893–1952), who 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 Satsanga Society, Self-Realization Fellowship.¹⁶ In the US context, the paths of these gurus resonated with a deep American stream of thought that emphasised direct spiritual awakening or

enlightenment. Arthur Versluis has recently termed this perspective 'immediatism' and has traced its path from Ralph Waldo Emerson through various twentieth-century literary religious movements to contemporary gurus, especially neo-Vedanta gurus.¹⁷ If Swami Vivekananda and other gurus in the first part of the twentieth century constitute a first wave of gurus in the United States, and gurus such as A C Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada (1896–1977) of ISKCON, Swami Muktananda (1908–1982) of Siddha Yoga, and Maharishi Mahesh Yogi (1918–2008) of Transcendental Meditation constitute a second wave of gurus, then female gurus constitute a third wave of gurus in the US.

While female gurus participate in the classical paradigm of guru as enlightened teacher, they are of course adapting the category as well, in both gendered and contemporary ways. We have already seen that in historical times female gurus were subject to issues of social acceptance, and that they brought an emphasis on personal experience as constitutive of authority to the role of guru; these factors continue to shape the female guru in today's world. What we also find today is female gurus' emphasis on community, especially in the sense of social service.

Female Gurus and Social Expectations for Women

The key to understanding female gurus' status with respect to social expectations is to acknowledge that as religious leaders they are in the public eye. As we saw, early female gurus from the fifteenth through nineteenth centuries experienced controversy on their social status, and female gurus in the twentieth century such as Gauri Ma, the Mother, and Anandamayi Ma made the transition into public acceptance at least in part due to the support from men. Today, public social expectations in Hinduism for both women

and men continue to enjoin them to marry and produce children, with a premium on sons. Thus, there are pressures on members of both genders who express an interest in becoming independent spiritual authorities. However, as Meena Khandelwal explains, for a variety of cultural reasons the pressures on women are greater:

Given the importance of heterosexual marriage and procreation in South Asian cultures generally, a man's decision to renounce householder life is likely to be met by opposition from family and society; this is especially true if he is either young and unmarried or married with dependents at home. Even so, there are scriptural, historical, and contemporary precedents for male renunciation at any age, and so it is considered a legitimate path for men even if discouraged by kin. Marriage is even more compulsory for women, and for this reason most research on South Asian women has focused on their domestic lives. While most women in South Asia aspire to obtain a good husband, kind in-laws, and healthy children, those who do not are likely to face intense pressure to conform.¹⁸

What Sondra Hausner and Meena Khandelwal say about female ascetics applies to female gurus as well: 'All have wondered whether to marry, remarry, or stay married, and have struggled with how to negotiate the unquestioned South Asian social value of having a husband and being a wife.'¹⁹

Thus, female gurus exhibit multiple models on the issue of marriage and childbirth. Some left their husbands and families to become gurus; for example, the Italian-American guru Ma Jaya Sati Bhagavati had a husband and three children but left them prior to becoming a guru,²⁰ and the guru Shakti Devi divorced her husband in order to marry her guru.²¹ Some are married; for example, both gurus Madhobi Ma and Sai Rajarajeshwari were compelled by their male gurus to marry, over their objections at first, the latter by

Sri Satya Sai Baba (73, 85–6). Anandamayi Ma was married but her marriage was said not to have been consummated and her husband was her disciple,²² Mother Meera is married but her husband does not play a role in her mission,²³ and Ganga Giri is married and has adult children but lives apart from her husband.²⁴ For some, their refusal to marry caused conflict in their families; for example, the gurus Gauri Ma²⁵ and Ammachi.²⁶ For some, the issue does not overtly arise in their biographies, such as the gurus Karunamayi Ma,²⁷ Gurumayi,²⁸ and Shree Maa.²⁹

The pattern in this diversity is that the female guru's primary identity is as a religious exemplar and not as a sexually-defined wife and mother. A major component from classical definitions is that a religious exemplar embodies autonomy and self-discipline, and we see these principles informing female gurus' diverse decisions on their personal identities, which in all cases marginalise their sexuality in favour of their spirituality. Part of the issue here is patriarchal culture's paradoxical image of women and sex—women are represented to lack sexual self-control, yet they are not supposed to take any pleasure in sex whatsoever, and so their sexuality must be controlled by a husband. Spiritual women decenter this image of 'woman' by refusing these terms.³⁰ Part of the issue is also the context of sex scandals concerning male gurus.³¹ For women in public and autonomous spiritual roles such as guru, it is important that if their sexuality is represented by marriage and children, it is subordinated to their spiritual mission.³²

Authority

Female gurus perform asceticism as in part constitutive of their authority. Drawing on classical paradigms, they signify their refusal of the partiality and dedication to ego valued by worldly social codes. As guru-ascetic, Baiji says: 'The

hardest thing is not to get stuck in the egotism (*ahamkar*) of I am, I am doing, and so forth.³³

A significant pattern in female leaders' authority is the presence or absence of initiation, and by whom. There does not seem to be a correlation between caste or class and initiation or its lack. For example, both Anandamayi Ma, a brahmin, and Ammachi from the fisherman caste were self-initiated. It is clear that upper-caste women may be self-initiated—another example would be the guru Karunamayi Ma, a brahmin—and when caste or class can be known or inferred, most women who receive formal initiation from male adepts in the classical mode are of high caste or class, and the initiation is in a specific tradition. For example, Gauri Ma from the Ramakrishna tradition, Meera Ma from Aurobindo, Gurumayi from Siddha Yoga, Baiji from Arya Samaj, and Ganga Giri from the ten monastic orders started by Acharya Shankara. There are also female gurus who locate themselves within a certain lineage, such as Shree Maa who locates herself within the lineage of Sri Ramakrishna, Anandi Ma within the lineage of Sri Dhyanyogi, and Gangaji within the lineage of Ramana Maharishi.³⁴ Many female gurus also link themselves to Hindu female spiritual leaders of history, such as evoking Mirabai.³⁵

While initiation provides an important credential, linking a guru to an authoritative tradition, authority is also constituted by performance. One way to perform authority is to engage with literate tradition as a central performance. For example, the gurus Gurumayi and Karunamayi Ma offer learned though accessible discourses on Hindu philosophical concepts. The ascetic-guru Ganga Giri is admired by her followers for her extensive memorised repertoire of devotional songs, *bhajans*, and stories. Distinctively, other gurus emphasise gesture at the center. For example, Meera Ma silently sits with

her devotees. Ammachi hugs hers. The gurus who centralise literate performance tend to embody the hierarchy of teacher to audience. Those who centralise gestures may more actively challenge such a hierarchy; for example, Shree Maa and her followers collectively perform *pujas* in which there is no one center.

Gendered patterns of authority include female gurus' frequent use of 'Ma' in their titles, signifying their stance as caring, loving, and nurturing mothers to their disciples as children. Some female gurus also relate themselves to the goddess. The gurus Mother Meera, Ammachi, and Karunamayi Ma are all perceived as *avatars* or embodiments of the divine. Ammachi performs ritualised enactments of her embodiment of the goddess, known as *devi bhava*, on the last day of her visit to any city; during this performance, she 'systematically and deliberately dons the garb of a goddess, in order to reveal her divinity to her followers.'³⁶

Community

Female gurus who take over the mantle in established lineages have an existing community and structure to which they can add. For example, Gauri Ma created a women's ashrama, Sri Sri Saradeshwari Ashrama; today, the Mother's Trust or Mother's Place, also known as Ramakrishna Sarada Ashrama, Lakeshore Interfaith Institute, in Ganges, MI, USA, is an affiliated branch of Sri Sri Saradeshwari Ashrama. Gurumayi of Siddha Yoga enhanced the major ashramas Gurudev Siddha Peeth in Ganeshpuri, India and Shree Muktananda Ashrama in New York State, and has centers all over the world.

Other gurus establish ashramas in their own right. This is in keeping with the classical model—the guru has a residence where she or he can be found and can instruct disciples. For example, Ammachi in Kerala and California,

Meera Ma in Germany, Ma Jaya Sati Bhagavati in Florida, Shree Maa in California, and Anandi Ma in Gujarat and California have established their own ashramas. In an intriguing inversion of the classical model, for contemporary female gurus there can be a tension between wanting to live in a solitary fashion and keeping up an ashrama, as illustrated by the guru-ascetic Baiji, who was initiated as a young woman into the Saraswati Order of the ten monastic orders formed by Shankara. She expressed longing for life at a remote ashrama in Uttarakhand, imagining it *easier* than her ongoing work to run the busy Rishi Ashrama in Haridwar.³⁷

Female gurus changed the male paradigm of guru through their emphasis on personal experience as constitutive of the spiritual path. Gurumayi, for example, consistently relates her philosophical discourses to ordinary life, and the everyday application of the teachings is promoted in ashrama workshops and in at-home courses. Ammachi's message is love, which she transmits through the gesture of individually hugging devotees.

International gurus transmit these experiences to their disciples both in person and through technology; Gangaji, Gurumayi, and Ammachi notably deploy technology, including the Internet, in transmitting their teachings.³⁸ There is an interesting dynamic between intimacy and distance in the paths of international female gurus. In terms of interaction with the guru there is an 'event intimacy' cultivated through defined moments of the guru's presence at scheduled gatherings, which often deploy technology to widen the reach; however, much of the spiritual work of the disciples is done away from the guru's embodied presence, in contrast to the traditional *gurukula* system. Yet the feeling of intimacy is profound. There are many examples of angry criticisms of gurus by ex-devotees; what

is significant is that recently, and specifically in relation to female gurus, such reflections have more the nature of a 'discourse of constructive disappointment', in which disciples reflect thoughtfully on their experiences.³⁹ Many female ascetics operate on a more local level, where they engage personal experience with their followers on a daily basis; they offer opportunities for 'everyday intimacy'. For example, Ganga Giri narrates stories of everyday encounters that illustrate themes of duty, destiny, and devotion that create a gendered 'rhetoric of renunciation'.⁴⁰ Prominent is the practice of female ascetics personally cooking for their followers, in contrast to male renouncers, who eat food cooked by others in front of an audience.⁴¹ The evocation of motherhood in caring for and nurturing the whole person in an everyday style is to the fore.


Many studies have mainly focused on the guru herself, but new studies are increasingly exploring the nature of the guru's community and provide sociological insights. For example, Amanda Lucia explores Ammachi's community in the US, analysing specific techniques of engagement by Indian-American devotees and by American devotees of other heritage.⁴² Oriane Aymard explores the continuation of the devotional community in the years since Anandamayi Ma's passing, analysing specific social and religious structures that enable its sustainability.⁴³

The performance of social service, *seva*, has a precedent in Swami Vivekananda's activities,⁴⁴ but female gurus have made it a centerpiece of their activities. Female guru-ascetics, such as Baiji, engage in charitable projects. On a larger scale, Ma Jaya Sati Bhagavati received numerous awards for her service to people living with HIV or AIDS; Ammachi and Gurumayi have established schools, hospitals, and prison programs. The challenge to the paradigm of other-worldliness that Maya Warrior describes for *avatara*-gurus applies as well to

female gurus who do not self-identify as avatars:

Their claim to have been incarnated on earth as avatars in order to fulfil particular divine missions serves most crucially to eliminate any tension between the ideal renouncer's otherworldly orientation and his/her engagement with the affairs of this world. As avatars incarnated in this world to fulfil particular missions, these gurus are not only justified in their engagement in worldly matters, they in fact derive their legitimacy from this engagement.⁴⁵

Spiritual growth is thus intimately linked both to personal experience in the world and public social service in the modern path of female gurus.

Judiciously adapting and challenging classical paradigms in the modern world, female gurus are important examples of a pragmatically-engaged spirituality that they embody, enact, and share with others. 

Notes and References

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 39. See Karen Pechilis, 'The Female Guru' in *The Graceful Guru*, 37.
 40. See *Real Sadhus Sing to God*.
 41. See *Women in Ochre Robes*, 187; *Women's Renunciation in South Asia*, 65; and 'Real Sadhus Sing to God', 128–9.
 42. See Amanda J Lucia, *Reflections of Amma: Devotees in a Global Embrace* (Berkeley: University of California, 2014).
 43. See Orianne Aymard, *When a Goddess Dies: Worshipping Mā Anandamayī after Her Death* (New York: Oxford University, 2014).
 44. See Gwilym Beckerlegge, 'Swami Vivekananda and Seva: Taking "Social Service" Seriously', in *Swami Vivekananda and the Modernization of Hinduism*, ed. William Radice (New York: Oxford University), 158–93.
 45. *Hindu Selves in a Modern World*, 37.