

Editorial

Introduction: Gurus, Priestesses, Saints, Mediums and Yoginis: Holy Women as Influencers in Hindu Culture

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This Special Issue is dedicated to Hindu holy women past and present and the ways that they have influenced society. Some have been devotees of gods and goddesses; some have worked for social causes; some are gurus and trance mediums; some are priestesses, poets, and writers. We have queens, warriors, heads of ashrams, social media *bhaktas*, holy mothers, and religious teachers. They have all shown varieties of female leadership in a culture where this can be a challenge.

Applying the “influencer” concept to the study of religion, this issue explores some of the strategies that holy women use for gaining and expressing power. It includes different concepts of holiness and leadership for men and women, the role of religious experience, and the arenas of activity and accomplishment for holy women in India and abroad.

Two of our influencers who were most famous for organizing devotees who followed male gurus were Mirra Alfassa, who headed Shri Aurobindo’s ashram after his death, and Sarada Devi, who initiated devotees in the lineage of Ramakrishna Paramahansa of West Bengal during and after his death. Thus, we have the spiritual companion, the wife, and our third figure, the mother of Sri Aniruddhadeva. These are perhaps the most well-known paths for female empowerment—association with a male authority.

As Patrick Beldio writes, Mirra Alfassa’s influence, power, and authority were very important to the development and organization of the integral yoga tradition, begun by Aurobindo Ghose. Aurobindo saw her as the incarnation of the divine mother, or *Mahāśakti*, and said her spiritual growth “followed the same course” as his, which adapted Rāmākṛṣṇa’s teaching of *vijñāna*, which he translated as “supermind”, while Mirra expressed “the domain of love”. While sections of Aurobindo’s writing were left incomplete, Mirra completed them with new revelations during what Beldio calls the “Descendant *Manonāśa* Period” of their practice. He links the state of *Manonāśa*, or “mental annihilation”, to Yoga Advaita practice. He notes that Mirra’s revelations include: a future form of humanity beyond gender that is now evolving; the difficulties of this evolution that can harm the mind and vital natures of humankind; the chaos evoked by this process on what Mirra called “the psychic being” or evolving soul, stimulating it to materialize into what she has called “the glorified body”. Aurobindo noted that she perfected their spiritual practices along with him, that they helped each other, and that Integral Yoga itself was a joint creation by both of them. Together they embodied both nirguna brahman and saguna brahman, with his emphasis on knowledge and hers on Mahashakti, or divine power and realization. Together, they could restore humankind’s ‘glorified body’. Mirra came to be known as the Mother of Aurobindo’s ashram. However, her role as visionary and theologian has been overlooked, a situation which Beldio helps to change in this article. While she is popularly known only as an ashram organizer, Beldio emphasizes her role as Aurobindo’s spiritual successor.

Sarada Devi, wife of the Bengali saint Ramakrishna Paramahansa, is also popularly known as an organizer of Ramakrishna’s devotees after his death. However, her role was much more significant. She supported and organized Ramakrishna’s disciples into a monastic movement, and, as Jeffery Long notes, as Holy Mother, she initiated more members than he did. Ramakrishna literally worshiped Sarada Devi as a goddess, an



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incarnation of Kali, and many disciples described visions of her as Kali. Along with Ramakrishna's disciple Swami Vivekananda, she emphasized the role of social service, which was not popular in Hindu monastic communities at the time. Thus, she supported both the Ramakrishna Mission as a social service group and the Ramakrishna Order as a religious lineage. She was also understood to be capable of transmitting spiritual energy to Ramakrishna's disciples after his death, and she had disciples of her own. Her spiritual power inspired the founding of the Sarada Math as a monastic order for women and also the founding of many schools for girls. However, Long notes the lack of female leaders in the Ramakrishna Order and the lack of women's ability today to give initiation by mantra, despite the fact that many of their members trace their own initiation back to Sarada Devi. Thus, Sarada Devi's importance has been overlooked by both writers and practitioners.

As Arunjana Das writes, the mother of a famous male guru has her own devotees in Assam. Ajali Ai was the mother of Sri Aniruddhadeva, the founder of the Mayamara sect of Vaishnavism. She has come to be understood as a loving mother who watches over and protects their community. While her guru son is understood as a manifestation of the god Vishnu, her *mahima* or glory comes from a variety of sources, including miracle stories, the guru's obligations to his mother, and the taming of regional goddesses. Ajali Ai sanctifies the land and represents positive female power for the sect.

Some female influencers have higher profiles as political activists. Under this category, we can include Sukanya Sarbadhikary and Dishani Roy's article on female warriors of the Matri Sena and Koushiki Dasgupta's article on modern ascetic sadhvis in the Ram Janmabhoomi movement. There have been various individual women in Indian history who have been warriors, but these articles describe entire female martial movements.

Sarbadhikary and Roy's article focuses on the Matua Matri Sena, the 'army of holy women' that belongs to the Matua sect of West Bengal. The role of mother here requires heroism, endurance, and fighting against the prejudice and caste inequality they have experienced as low-caste people. Mothers transform families, holy people transform followers, and the Matua people want to change their situation of being marginalized and ignored. This situation is especially difficult for those Matua members who migrated from Bangladesh and still have the refugee status of displaced people; they are having trouble gaining citizenship. The Matua female gurus are claiming religio-political power, encouraging women into political and public roles, thus becoming mothers of the ideal family, community, and nation. The female gurus become political actors through their roles as mothers and wives and also seek to cleanse the corrupted political sphere based on their moral status of nonattachment, in contrast to self-seeking masculine politics. With Vaishnava origins, Matua women take the importance of Radha and women's greater ability at love and devotional service as an argument for their role in changing society. They emphasize work over ritual and the importance of education for both men and women. Defense of the community becomes part of regular religious life for Matua women, and the household becomes an important place for Matua organizing; public and private realms are linked together. They join themselves to the dominant Hindu groups by a claim of shared belief in divine motherhood, an approach we might view as appropriate for Bengal due to its strong presence of religious Shaktism.

Dasgupta's article describes a particular female branch of the Hindutva movement in India. This is a movement of the Hindu right wing, following the sanctity of India as Bharat Mata, the mother of the Hindu people, and emphasizing the necessary separation of Hindus from perceived enemy minorities, especially Muslims and Christians. The self-portrayal of the Hindu nationalists emphasizes heroic male soldiers and male dominance, but there are women who wish to participate in this movement who have created a group of militant female warriors. Their emphasis on chastity contrasts with the claim of widespread immorality in society, and they become a group of heroic celibate women and righteous mothers defending their sons and land. Like the goddesses Kali and Durga, they are strong and protective. These Hindutva women become speakers and politicians as well as fighters, and they have branched out into many sects and orders. Many are from the lower castes,

and they are concerned enough about safety to learn self-defense techniques. Dasgupta notes that, though they are reversing traditional ideas of *stri-dharma*, the traditional passive role for women, they are fighting for a traditional idea of what India should be. The author notes how they have re-interpreted the role of Hindu women in India into a narrowly political form of empowerment, ignoring other problems that women face. The article also includes some useful background on the Hindutva movement.

Then, we have three articles that explore religious experience: one by Karen Pechilis on female *bhakti* poet-saints, one by Nancy Martin on Indira Devi, and another by June McDaniel on female trance mediums.

Pechilis' article examines the inner experiences of female devotional writers, contrasting their own poetry with the writings of later biographers. These include Karaikkal Ammaiyar, Antal, Mahadeviyakka, Lal Ded, and Mirabai. Their poetry shows both confidence and vulnerability on the part of these women, who are often understood to be *bhakti* saints. The article discusses the difficulties of translation and even access to the original poetry, which has sometimes been changed over the years. Such poems try to express these women's feelings and sensibilities, though often their structure and terminology have been altered by *bhakti* communities. These poet-saints express a variety of emotions, and the writing imagines situations in which women might feel intensely. The poems include classical and vernacular styles of revelation. Rather than being satisfied with their religious identities, these poems show striving towards further religious goals and ways of gaining both sensory and spiritual knowledge.

Martin's article describes the female guru Indira Devi, who had visions of the *bhakti* saint Mirabai shared with her own guru, Dilip Roy. Indira Devi grew up Sikh, but she had visions from several religions as a child. She was a dancer who had involuntary psychic and spiritual experiences. She was accepted as a disciple by Roy, who was himself a disciple of Aurobindo and the Mother. Her visions of Mirabai included her songs and music, and she had an ongoing relationship with the saint. Her experiences were validated by Aurobindo, and she and Roy would travel to share the revealed songs, with him singing and her dancing. This relationship with the saint created an atmosphere of spiritual revelation, which attracted both disciples and yoga practitioners.

McDaniel's article on trance mediums and other female practitioners in rural areas of West Bengal discusses the challenges that such women must face. Santal tribal women must deal with accusations of witchcraft when they express religious experiences or claim to be priestesses, unless their actions are narrowly limited by ritual. They may also be associated with *bonga* goddesses who are harmful to men. While witchcraft claims have come to have a more political focus, they are still acted upon by many communities. Holy women in the Shakta tantric tradition must deal with accusations of black magic and immorality, with their major defense as celibacy and visionary experience. In villages, the *ayes*, or female elders, teach girls the ritual *bratas*, which express the moral ideals of the community. A modern challenge for this is the urban male brahmin priests who have taken over the teaching of *bratas* from the rural women in towns that are becoming Westernized. The article examines the way women may become influencers: through supernatural adoption, by ancestral heritage and divine call, by carrying on a folk tradition, and by becoming an accepted guru or head of an ashram.

Then, we have powerful women who claim an alternative status normally associated with men. Thus, Antoinette DeNapoli writes about two modern women claiming the status of a Shankaracharya (monastic head), Sundari Johansen describes two influential women, sometimes called queens by later writers, and Claire Robison describes women in the ISKCON movement who have been creating alternative teaching and leading spaces on the Internet.

In DeNapoli's article, two female gurus gain charismatic authority on the basis of their revelations, becoming leaders and 'religious feminist influencers'. They have challenged the male monastic hierarchy of the Shaktaracharya tradition, arguing for gender equality and higher standards of morality. The guru Mataji left her householding life for renunciation

and *diksha* into the Dashanami order and worked with women who were poor and survivors of domestic abuse. Her status came from a vision of Shiva and Durga, who ordained her into her Shankaracharya status. The guru Swamini also renounced housewife status, and she entered the Juna Akhara order. She lost an election for Shankaracharya status in India and later claimed that Shiva in his form of Pashupatinath wanted her to be Shankaracharya in Nepal (outside of the Indian monastic system). Both gurus understand themselves to be empowered by Durga, an independent goddess who protects and defends the gods. They have received the ability to create a women's army to reclaim religious status from males who have taken it away, bringing back 'women's glory'. They are both religious influencers rather than commercial ones, taking on a male-dominated institution and attempting to change it from the inside. For these female Shankaracharyas, religious goals should not be only transcendent but immanent as well, with human rights as important as religious status.

In Johansen's article, Rani Rasmani Dasi and Bar-raja Phuleshwari Kunwari both gained high status while young, though the author notes that narratives about their lives are inconsistent. Both were born into poor, low-caste families, lost parents at a young age, and were married as children to much older, wealthy, and powerful men. Both are associated with the worship of powerful goddesses and patronized major goddess temples. However, while Rasmani has been idealized in public opinion as a saintly figure, Phuleshwari has been villainized as a power-hungry figure who brought down a dynastic empire. Rasmani was known for her religious visions, and she was the first woman to found a Kali temple in colonial Bengal (for Ramakrishna Paramahansa) as a wealthy widow in a zamindar family. Her elaborate Durga Puja and Kali Puja ceremonies spread Shaktism in Kolkata, and they gave her the title of a 'royal' zamindari. Phuleshwari married king Shiva Singha of the Assamese Ahom dynasty, who made her his regent to rule in his place. According to Ahom histories, she took on male privileges, such as riding elephants, and later developed new religious rules for the country. She oversaw the destruction of beloved temple statues, and she replaced them with statues of her own design. She forbade the Ahom burial traditions and insisted on cremation for all. As a Shakta, she demanded that Vaishnava priests participate in blood sacrifices to Durga and wear garlands sprinkled with buffalo blood. This violated the Vaishnava rules against animal sacrifice and vegetarianism. These stories took precedence over her support for literature, education, and the arts and gave her the reputation of a religious fanatic.

Robison's article focuses on 'urban devis,' women who are becoming spiritual teachers and public speakers outside of the official ISKCON organization, which generally does not accept female *diksha* gurus. They are giving religious teachings about Krishna devotion on social media and on personal websites, and they reach a wider audience than many formal male guru lectures. These 'urban devis' are influencing children's education, Vaishnava web development, preaching techniques, and modern devotional music through virtual lectures, *satsangs*, and *bhakti* rituals. There are Vaishnava equivalents for Dear Abby columns on moral and religious questions, especially on etiquette and ideal roles for men and women. There are options for cooking, wellness, counseling, entertainment, and 'love in action'. They are also creating female-led Vaishnava communities, creating innovations in the tradition Gaudiya Vaishnavism of India.

As we look at these examples, we can see some major ways that holy women have gained their status. There is affiliation with a male guru, becoming a female warrior in a martial Hindu tradition, having dramatic and evocative religious experiences, and developing an alternative path to religious status. In all of these cases, women have taken their personal religious faith and experience into society, influencing the world around them.

While most of these holy women have their focus on India, some have an international influence. We can see this in the case of Dr. Chris Chapple, who was inspired by his guru Anjali to create the first graduate program in Yoga in the United States, in California. As he says of her:

Gurāṇi Añjali Inti (1935–2001) established Yoga Anand Ashram in Amityville, New York, in 1972 as a nonprofit organization for the teaching of Pātañjala Yoga. She had studied yoga during the 1940s and 50s in her native Calcutta. She encouraged her students to have lives of yoga in action, and they created several businesses, including Santosha Vegetarian Dining, the Amityville Art Gallery, and Moksha Bookshop and Community Education Center. Many of her students supplemented their practice of yoga by learning Sanskrit and Indian philosophy at Stony Brook, Columbia, and Fordham Universities. She lectured and taught several times each week for thirty years, conveying the teachings of Sāṃkhya, the Upanisads, and the Bhagavad Gītā, as well as assigning rigorous spiritual practices that included a weekly day of silence, weekly fasting, and daily āsana, prāṇāyāma, and meditation. Gurāṇi Añjali encouraged the comprehensive approach to learning yoga that inspired the creation of the nation's first Master of Arts in Yoga Studies, which began in 2013 at Loyola Marymount University, an important legacy to her good work. Her students maintain a website that includes many of her talks and segments of the many songs she composed: www.guranianjali.org (accessed on 21 June 2022) (personal communication).

Thus, we can see that the influence of Hindu holy women is not limited to India, but it has echoes in other places around the world. While there are some holy women who have a very high profile in the world, such as Mata Amritanandamayi (Ammachi), Shree Ma, and Gurumayi Chidvilasananda, there are many more whose voices are not heard as often. In this Special Issue, we hope to let readers learn something more about them.

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