



Indian Women through the Ages

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The diversity in Hindu religious beliefs and practices and the multiplicity of doctrines and worship rituals, make it difficult to generalize on most aspects of the Hindu way of life. Similarly, the Hindu discourse on womankind is vast. In fact, there are contradictory images of women, at once wielders and subjects of authority. The glorification of goddesses as forms of Shakti and the subordination of mortal females to male rule coexist in the Hindu discourse. On the one hand, we have misogynist judgements passed by Hindu sacred texts on women's nature and roles, and on the other the veneration of dissident female ascetic poets. Thus to grasp the place of women in Hindu thought and conduct is a grave challenge.

The issue of women in the Hindu tradition was discussed by Susan Wadleyⁱ in an early article. Katherine K Youngⁱⁱ, in a much cited scholarly article, offers a chronological survey of women in Hinduism from the earliest times to the modern period. In her account, Mandakranta Boseⁱⁱⁱ examines a range of texts, poetry by women poets in regional languages as well as brahmanical texts and commentaries to both show the dominant male discourse and women's articulation of their aspirations and devotion.

This article first looks at textual material that reflects the views of Hindu thinkers on women. Then it also comments on the intriguing matter of female divinities in Hinduism. While the normative prescriptive texts suggest a marginal role of women, women's actual religious lives have been rich and varied throughout history. Women usually control their own and their family's religious observances through performances of domestic rituals in the household. Hence the significance of home-based worship and rituals is discussed in the next section. However this does not exhaust women's religious quests. While, the earliest recorded poetry was by Buddhist nuns of the Sixth century BCE, and was known as *Therigathas*, we hear



women's voices, expressions of their creative labour as well as spiritual outpourings from all over the country especially in the medieval period. The position of these iconoclastic women mystics/ *bhaktins* in Hindu tradition is of special interest to feminist scholars, and has also been commented upon here. Finally, this article also briefly dwells upon the position and presence of female ascetics in the Hindu tradition.

The role of Hindu texts

The Hindu texts range from the earliest period of written records in India (Vedas) to compendiums of law and general conduct (*Dharmasastras / Smritis*) composed even upto the nineteenth century.^{iv} These texts are generally regarded as constituting the foundation of Hindu ideas and ideals. Though there is some evidence of a feminine intellectual tradition through the compositions by the legendary Gargi and Maitreyi in Vedic times, these texts have been wholly produced by men of the Brahmin caste. They make normative statements on all aspects of female life- right from the desirability of the birth of girl children, to roles of mothers, position of wives, women's education, inheritance, rights to wealth, remarriage on widowhood, ritual rights, responsibilities as women and, in particular, the essential nature of women. What characterizes these texts is contradiction between different authors on the nature and roles of women, also sometimes within the same text. Despite this, they are the best sources for Hindu tradition from a historical point of view, and continue to be drawn upon for settling debates on ritual, custom and practice even to the present day.

To cite an example, Manu, perhaps the best known and most reviled lawgiver, at once adulates and condemns women^v

3.55 Those fathers, brothers, husbands and brothers-in-law who desire much prosperity should esteem [these]women and adorn them.

3.56 Where women are respected, the deities rejoice, but where they are not respected, all rituals become fruitless.

In other chapters,

9.3 In childhood, her father shield her; in youth, her husband shields her; in her old age her son shields her: a woman never earns independence.



9.15 They are like harlots, fickle- minded and by nature uncaring. Even when they are well guarded by their husbands, they are unfaithful.

9.16 Realizing that [women] are by nature like this as created by the Lord of Creatures, a man must take special effort to watch over [them].

Bose (2010) identifies the underlying themes- women to be protected and guarded, are fickle by nature and have enormous sexual appetite, which resulted in an axiomatic understanding of women's nature. When repeated in several other texts, it slowly became a part of communal common sense about their inherent nature.

An enormously influential body of historical scholarship, argues for a growing restriction on women's right to education, emphasis on early marriage and imposition of several sanctions on women and their confinement to domesticity, though only certain property rights improved from the Vedic times to the medieval period.^{vi} The image of women that comes across from later Hindu texts is that of a subservient wife, selfless mother and tireless housekeeper, and women are rarely envisioned in non-familial social relationships. Yet the texts never speak in one voice, or cannot be compiled into a neat homogenous package and labelled as the 'Hindu View of Women'. The heterogeneity of the views, the presence and readiness to consider alternate viewpoints are a proof of the vigour of the discursive tradition in India. Bose(2010) concludes that for Hindu thinkers, then, women, definitely remained a subject of endless concern.(p. 150)

Female divinities : Goddesses

Powerful goddesses are not unknown in many ancient religions, but their survival through several thousands of years into modern times is a striking feature of Hindu culture. So their longevity demands close scrutiny, plus their power to mobilize vast numbers of supporters invites comment from scholars. A related question that we consider here is whether the worship of goddesses has implications for women on the human plane.

In the Hindu metaphysical tradition, the goddess figure is viewed as the active principle of creation and source of all power, *shakti*. In fact, the concept of the goddess has never been static. The forms and functions as well as worship of goddesses have evolved from the Vedic



to the Classical era, to the addition of the north Indian goddess, *SantoshiMata* to the pantheon as recently as the late twentieth century. Hindu goddesses were imagined as nurturer, protector, purifier, life giver, mother(with a maternal instinct) and yet some were imagined as malicious, fierce or even malevolent.(Bose 2010:15). At one level, Hindu goddesses were also idealizations of mortal women. So just as mortal women are seldom single, goddesses are also attached to a male figure as his mother or wife or daughter or sister which suggests that her very identity rests on her relationships with males.

Vedic goddesses, in their benevolent forms, Usas(dawn), Prithvi(earth), Aditi(mother of gods/kings), Sarasvati(river) Vac(speech),Sri (glory/ prosperity) and malevolent forms Nirrti and Ratri (darkness, associated with gloom and obstacles), were worshipped, though were peripheral divinities. Around 500 BCE most Vedic goddesses declined, newer goddesses arose and more importantly goddess worship became an essential institution of Hindu religious life. We have ‘Wife Goddesses’^{vii}- Laksmi (wife of Vishnu) and Sati-Parvati (wife of Siva), Sita (wife of Rama) and Radha (Krishna’s consort). Sita and Radha were born mortals but elevated into the list of goddesses. Primarily benevolent, and domesticated, all wife- goddesses are idealized as perfect wives *pativratya*. Radha though is eulogized for her *bhakti* (devotion) and *prappati* (surrender) to male God. Young argues that Wife – goddesses represented an ascetic sexuality (p12) (that is a sexuality controlled by their husbands). These goddesses in fact are clear models for human wives.

However, the most powerful female figure in the post -Vedic pantheon, is Durga.^{viii} Durga nurtures and protects the universe and destroys its enemies. *Kali*, a menacing dark goddess is an aspect of Durga, and first appears as an unattached figure terrifying potential for annihilation. Durga interestingly has also been transformed into Siva’s consort and reigns over a family that is idealized as the model of domesticity, loving and nurturing mother and is popularly worshipped in this form. In some traditions Kali is also ‘tamed’ through marriage to Siva.

In this intriguing conception of femininity, women’s perceived life giving as well as potentially harmful powers coexist in the same persona.^{ix} This reflects and at the same time arises from the



devotees simultaneous love and fear towards the object of worship. Imagining powerful goddesses is a recognition of the destructive potential assigned to women, fully realized in Kali but implicit even in the Mother Goddess. Thus as a response to this feminine power both women and goddesses are contained within domesticity and familial relationships under the patriarchal systems.

Goddesses have been cast into archetypal roles :

- mother/ nurturer
- wielder of power/ protector
- wife/helper/daughter
- destroyer

And it is from these perceived identities of goddesses that models of conduct for women are drawn. ^x

Tantra and goddess worship(900-1600CE)

Kali worship has resulted in two traditions within Hinduism- Tantrism and devotional *shakta* tradition popular in eastern India. Tantrism asserted that *sakti* or primal energy was the at the core of all phenomena, spiritual, intellectual and material, the only reality. The supreme manifestation of *sakti* was the divine female in all her forms. In tantrism, all mortal women are identified as goddesses. In a major departure from brahmanical religion, tantrism celebrates the sacredness of women's body. Tantrism is an independent tradition with its own corpus of texts, rituals and deities, and expanded the pantheon of goddesses. Though mainly oriented to elite men's quest for liberation, its general support of feminine values did have some influence in society at large. Kinsley (1995) however states that no clear relationship between goddess-centred worship and an egalitarian society can be discerned. (pxii)

Role of rituals and home-based worship

In mainstream Hinduism, women's role in religious rituals was eroded from being equal partners to their husband during early Vedic period to that of assistants in cooking food serving priests, etc. in later times. A systematic exclusion from ritualistic religious duties was a



consequence of their inherent ‘impurity’.

Yet women were and remain central to home based worship. The daily *puja* as well as special *pujas* along with ritual feasting on important days of the Hindu calendar remains the preserve of women.

Vratas, religious rites, exclusively practised by Hindu women have invited attention of feminist scholars as central to women’s experience of religion. *Vratas* undertaken as vows are practised by women all over India, each region having its own popular *vratas*. They have certain common features: total or partial fasting for the period, voluntary restriction of certain daily habits of food and dress, rigorous purificatory rites, and abstention from sexual acts, and their completion involves recitation of a story/ ballad, and involve participation of the community. Most *vratas* are undertaken to ensure pragmatic gains- well- being of the family, material gains or even for securing a good husband, etc rather than for abstract goals of spiritual liberation/ *moksha*.

Though not invented by women, women are the principal actors. Sanjukta Gupta^{xi} argues that this area of Hindu religiosity demonstrates autonomy of women. But since all *vratas* revolve around family and involve the prioritization of males, it is difficult to characterize performing *vratas* as an empowering experience for women. However Hindu women are socialized into upholding ideals of self- abnegation and sacrifice, and thus they do perhaps bring in a sense of fulfilment.

In any case, they are central to what is referred to as ‘popular Hinduism’ and constitute parallel religious culture followed by women.

Women poets and *bhaktins* :Religious quest

Bhakti was a multifaceted movement which moved in continuing waves from one region to another. It began in the south in the sixth century, first in Tamil then in Kannada and then spread all over western India and north India, and shaped the social, cultural and religious life of people of all religions in the subcontinent. *Bhakti* introduced the idea of ‘devotion’, an intimate relationship between god and devotee, and found expression in devotional verse composed in regional languages.



Ramanujan^{xii} speaks of *Bhakti* (and he envisions not one but several movements) as a counter system, opposed to classical and orthodox systems, say, in their views about caste, gender, or the idea of god. *Bhakti* movements enlisted people from all castes and occupations. Every regional *bhakti* movement had at least one outstanding woman, considered on par with, and often superior to the men, both in her devotion and in her poetry. The *bhakti* traditions through an amalgam of the written and the oral, have preserved not only the names and life stories of many women *bhaktas/ bhaktins* but also their compositions.

Most *bhaktins* led unconventional lives—some rejected matrimony and their husbands, to lead a life of learning. A few became wandering teachers, though they never founded sects. Most of them, however, had to make exceptional sacrifices — leave home, bear indignities, die young. Most of them were not bound to a man though Maharashtrian saints were an exception.^{xiii} Kishwar^{xiv} calls them as ‘extraordinarily courageous and creative’ while Jasbir Jain(2011: 122) evocatively conveys the challenge levelled by the *bhaktins* as ‘Getting back at men through God’.

Surprisingly, these women were revered in their lifetimes and incorporated into living traditions, are loved and their poetry recited till date. Ramanujan (p14) notes in an insightful comment that once their unconventional values and deeds are accepted, they are also contained. If they were not accepted, they might have become *real* alternatives. The acceptance, the worship, also co-opts it, takes the sting out of it. Needless to add, the social acceptance of the *bhaktins* did not result in expanding options for ordinary women.

Some *bhaktins* employed the traditional imagery of Indian love poetry (AkkaMahadevi, Mirabai, Janabai, Andal), others indulged in philosophical speculations (LalDed, Muktabai, Bahinabai) and still others voiced domestic concerns (Soyrabai, Nirmala). The religious path was, perhaps, the only legitimate path available to women as an escape from the narrow confines of domesticity. However in poetry we see a possibility for self-assertion and an effective mode for attaining both spiritual and social autonomy.



Here is an imaginative song of the Marathi *bhaktin* Janabai

Jani

i eat god

i drink god

i sleep

on god

i buy god

i count god

i deal

with god

god is here

void is not

devoid of god

jani says:

god is within

god is without

and moreover

there is god to spare

[This translation by the modern poet ArunKolatkar is without capital letters or punctuation to stay close to medieval Marathi script, cited in Eleanor Zelliott, 'Women Saints in Medieval Maharashtra' in Bose(ed)*Faces of the Feminine in Ancient Medieval and Modern India* (OUP:2000) , pp192-200 , p 194]



Female ascetics/ renunciates

In normative Hindu tradition, women are *householders*, devoted to the home and family. Yet historically there have been female sadhus or renouncers who have embraced ascetic lives.^{xv} Generally referred to as *sannyasinis*, there are several varieties of female ascetics. Their primary goals are liberation, enlightenment and freedom from the cycles of *samsara*, the wheel of birth and death. Though theoretically imagined as leading perpetually mobile and solitary lives, the actual practice of renunciation has several manifestations, and contacts with the lay world are maintained in varying degrees.

However what unites all ascetics is a renunciation of a householder's (*grihastha*) life- marriage and family and voluntary celibate existence. While chastity, a properly regulated expression of sexuality has always been seen as a feminine virtue, celibacy, a purposeful state of complete sexual abstinence is usually seen as a male pursuit. Female celibacy, then is in fact a political choice that challenges at once patriarchal assertions that women are unable to control their sexuality and also demonstrates the ability to withdraw reproductive labour from familial control. Hence it is seen as doubly threatening.^{xvi}

However in the last century renunciation has become more accessible to women.^{xvii} (Khandelwal et al 2007:38) In fact many male *gurus* (heads of monastic establishments) have transferred their spiritual mantle onto women. For example, Ramakrishna Paramahansa appointed Sarada Devi, his wife as his successor, Aurobindo appointed the Mother, Yogannada (Daya Mata) Paramananda (Gayatri Devi), etc (Young p29) The Sankara of Kanchipuram initiated Jnanananda as a *sannyasini* and a *guru*.

Some women, however, have attained spiritual leadership on their own, for example, Anandmayi Ma, a Bengali from a poor *Vaisnava* Brahmin family, her power emanating not from mastery over scriptures but spontaneous ecstatic visions and mystical states. Anandmayi Ma was in every sense a 'modern' guru preaching social equality at times even breaking caste and gender norms, though she herself practised orthodoxy. Also known for her friendship with political leaders, she paved the way for Hindu women to emerge as spiritual *gurus*.



The guru as a mother figure is a familiar theme in Hindu devotionalism. Mata Amritaanandmayi (Born Sudhamani, 1953, Kerala), is an *avatar-guru*, many devotees worship her as the goddess herself. Mata Amritaanandmayi's message of universal love is communicated by enfolding individuals in her 'divine' embrace. Though herself not belonging to any renunciant orders, she has initiated several of her disciples into asceticism, including female disciples. Interestingly the Mata claims to have experimented with the rituals she prescribes and hence rewards are guaranteed, indicating a 'modern' instrumental-rational approach.^{xviii}. The Mata Amritaanandmayi Math and Mission was established in 1981 and is a global organization today, and runs several service oriented activities.

As a transnational spiritual leader, the *Mata* thus is an important figure in the new women-centred religions.

In Closing

We reiterate that Hinduism does not speak of women with one voice. While most women are sought to be contained through domesticity, even most Hindu goddesses are cast in the mould of mortal women and caught in the same web of familial relationships as wives, daughters and mothers, defining their power in terms of their family roles. While the Great Goddess is supremely important in Hindu theology, women's position is still rather uncertain in a basically patriarchal and caste-oriented society where caste is transmitted through the male line of a family. Yet, Hindu thought has also made room not only for domesticated women, mortal and divine, but also women who leave the mundane world for a spiritual life as well as those who critique social conditions. *Bhaktins* and female ascetics wrested freedom by rejecting any human authority over their lives, and tradition has accommodated them as well. And this paradox lies at the heart of the enduring debate on position of women in Hinduism.



ⁱSusan Wadley, “Women and the Hindu Tradition” in Rehana Ghadially (ed) *Women in Indian Society A Reader* (New Delhi, Sage:1988), pp23-43.

ⁱⁱ Young, ‘Women and Hinduism’ in Arvind Sharma(ed) *Women in Indian Religions* (, New Delhi:Oxford University Press:2002) pp3-37.

ⁱⁱⁱMandakranta Bose, *Women in the Hindu Tradition Rules, roles and exceptions* (New York, Routledge New York:2010)

^{iv} Rig Vedic period(1200-800 BCE)- *Rig Veda*, Middle and late Vedic periods(1200-400BCE)-*Yajurveda*, *Brahamansa*, *Grihyasutras*, *Srautasutra* and *Mimansa* texts, Classical period(400 BCE-400CE)Sutras,Epics, and early *Puranas* constitute the main corpus of texts, though Sanskrit texts and commentaries were composed till the early modern period.

^vCited in Bose (2010), p66

^{vi} For a classic exposition see, A S Altekar, *The Position of Women in Hindu Civilisation: From Prehistoric times to the Present Day* (Delhi:Motilal Banarasidas reprinted 1973) (First printed 1938) For a thorough critique of the ‘Altekarian paradigm’ see Uma Chakravarti , ‘Conceptualising Brahmanical Patriarchy in Early India Gender, Caste, Class and State’ ,*Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol XXVIII, No 14, 3 April, 1993, pp.579-85.

^{vii}This is a term used by Young, see p12

^{viii}*DeviMahatmaya* of *MarkandeyaPurana* ch 81-93 is the key text .

^{ix}Pintchman observes that in the tradition, there is a strong tendency to portray *sakti*, *prakriti* and *maya* (all there of which she identifies with the goddess) on one level as positive and creative at the same time inherently ambiguous and potentially dangerous. Therefore monitoring and controlling these ensures that they manifest their positive tendencies rather than negative ones. Pintchman, Tracy, *The Rise of the Goddess in the Hindu Tradition* (Delhi:Sri Satguru Publications 1994), p18

^x Bose(2010:13)

^{xi}Samjukta Gombrich Gupta, ‘The Goddess, Women, and their Rituals in Hinduism’ in M.Bose(ed) *Faces of the Feminine in Ancient, Medieval, and Modern India* (OUP:New Delhi: 2000) pp87-109

^{xii} A K Ramanujan, ‘ Talking to God in the Mother Tongue’ , *Manushi*, Number 50-51-52 (January-June1989), pp9-14, see pp9-10

^{xiii}Madhu Kishwar, ‘Introduction’ *Manushi*, Number 50-51-52 (January-June1989), pp3-8, see p. 3

^{xiv}An ascetic is a person initiated into the tradition of asceticism by a recognized preceptor/ teacher (guru) . Typically the ritual of initiation into asceticism marks three things: the rejection of or separation from householdership; a commitment towards spiritual liberation, and the entry into a community of fellow aspirants. , Lynn Teskey Denton ‘Varieties of Hindu Female Asceticism’ in Julia Leslie(ed) *Roles and Rituals for Hindu Women* (Delhi: Motilal Banarasidass: 1992), pp211-231, p214.

^{xv} Khandelwal, Meena, Sondra L Hausner and Ann Grodzins Gold *Nuns, Yoginis, Saints, and Singers Women’s Renunciation in South Asia* (New Delhi: Zubaan, 2007), pp23-29

^{xvi}An interesting case is that of the Brahmakumaris. Brahmakumaris, which means daughters of Brahma or more appropriately virgins of Brahma is a Hindu sect founded in Hyderabad, Sindh (present day Pakistan) by Lala Lekhraj Kripalani in mid 1937. In 1950, the headquarters were moved to Mount Abu (Rajasthan). The sect accords preference to females in its central doctrines and attracts women as its main followers. In the complex theological system developed by Lekhraj, sexual intercourse was seen as ‘dirty’, impure’, and sexual passion and the downfall of womankind was linked together, and members were encouraged to lead celibate lives.The early teachings of the movement, directed at Sindhi Worki merchant castes, focused on the hypocrisy of marriage: while Hindu orthodoxy proclaimed that the husband was to be worshipped, contemporary husbands were violent and insensitive. Unmarried women and young wives took vows of celibacy against the wishes of their families/ husbands. This voluntary renunciation of sexuality was seen as threatening and hence violently resisted.The movement, however, now presents itself as a "divine university" (*ishvariya vishva-vidyalaya*) and offers classes in doctrine and meditation at hundreds of local centers in India and overseas. The core doctrine of celibacy has remained and its advocacy of female sexual control continues to find receptive echoes among followers.

^{xvii} Maya Warrior, *Hindu Selves in a Modern World Guru faith in the Mata Amritaanandamayi Mission* (RoutledgeCurzon :Oxon and New York 2005) , p61