

IS THE *GURU* A FEMINIST? CHARISMATIC FEMALE LEADERS AND GENDER
ROLES IN INDIA

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I: INTRODUCTION

Hinduism is a relatively modern term that is used to encompass a wide array of different doctrines and practices. While the diversity makes it difficult to define “Hinduism” as a clearly delimited category, the same diversity of expression also creates room for continuous reinterpretation of the tradition, and it allows a creative dialogue between contemporary *gurus* and the orthodox Hindu tradition(s). Hindu religious leaders like *gurus* can offer their own distinct perspective and organize their religious movements in their own way. While many *gurus* do refer to texts to support their views, they also shape and mold the existing tradition by their own charismatic authority. By allowing continual interaction and discussion, the Hindu “tradition” or “religion” in this sense becomes a dynamic rather than static process.¹

The role of the *guru*, a teacher of divine, ultimate wisdom, is of supreme importance in the Hindu tradition. Hindu devotees often see their *guru* not only as an enlightened teacher capable of leading others to self-realization, but also an *avatar*, a living manifestation of a deity. As a result, a *guru*’s words become as authoritative as scripture, and his or her prescribed *sadhanas*, spiritual practices, become divinely sanctioned techniques that can lead devotees to various mystical states and spiritual fulfillment. An individual who acquires the title of *guru* in the Hindu tradition consequently acquires a great deal of power. Many Hindu *gurus* have used their

¹In a way, all religious traditions are dynamic since current interpretations and evaluations are constantly influencing, creating, and formulating the practice, beliefs, and teachings for a given community. While written or oral texts can be considered more fixed and final, the interpretations and translations of these texts are always under review and discussion by the contemporary public.

influence in the last two hundred years not only to introduce new metaphysical teachings and religious rituals but also to shape social behavior and organization. In this study, I will investigate how the *guru*'s authority can help him or her shape the perception of gender in modern Indian society.

In the twentieth century alone, a number of new social and religious roles have become available to women. For instance, women are now able to study Sanskrit, a subject that was previously off limits to them for well over two thousand years. In her essay "*Shakti* Ascending", Nancy Falk argues that a number of men have led and supported this process of empowerment of women in the Hindu tradition for the past two centuries. She writes, "Contemporary research shows that women's emergence into public roles of religious prominence has been a by-product of a conservative and male-initiated process."² Male *gurus*, major Hindu reformers, and radical nationalists, who have personified Mother India as feminine, have all played a part in bringing about this change. What is particularly relevant to this study is that many of these groups were popular religious cults started and headed by male *gurus*.

Both Swami Dayananda, founder of the Hindu reform movement Arya Samaj, and Swami Vivekananda, a popular Hindu *guru* often deemed responsible for introducing the West to Indian spirituality and philosophy, initiated numerous programs that offered women better education and greater socio-religious participation.³ These leaders and their respective cults empowered women not only through actions but also through metaphysical teachings. Swami Vivekananda, for instance, justified his programs of

² Nancy Falk, "*Shakti* Ascending," in *Religion in Modern India*, ed. Robert Baird (New Delhi: Manohar, 1998), 301.

³ *Ibid.*, 311.

religious education for women through the Vedantic belief that the ultimate reality is sexless. He said:

Ultimately when the mind is wholly merged in the homogenous and undifferentiated Brahman, then such ideas as this is a man or that a woman do not remain at all. Therefore do I say that though outwardly there may be difference between men and women, in their real nature there is none.⁴⁵

While these viewpoints are somewhat limited to certain cults or sects, they have had a significant impact on Indian society and the world. The ideas proposed in these reform movements still influence the perception of gender roles in modern India today. Both Swami Vivekananda and Swami Dayananda motivated Hindu women to think for themselves and presented them with opportunities that were previously unavailable to them. They also relinquished patriarchal oversight by setting up organizations and schools run by women thus granting them complete control over their own education and religious practices.

It seems that these religious reform movements and cults provide a dynamic setting for individuals to engage with the orthodox, traditional religion. However, what should be understood at the outset of this investigation is that many of these "reform groups" are religious or spiritually oriented first. That is, their main aim is not to facilitate social change but to obtain specific spiritual goals such as higher knowledge or *moksha*, liberation.⁶ Nevertheless, it is obvious from their membership organization and teachings that the call for the empowerment of women is very much a consequence of

⁴ Ibid., 312.

⁵ Later in this submission, I will explain how Ammachi, a contemporary popular female *guru* uses a similar Vedanta metaphysical interpretation to support gender equality on a temporal, corporeal plain.

⁶ Of course, one could argue in a more orthopraxy-centered religion like Hinduism, ideology and right action are considered indivisible and often go hand and hand.

their worldview. Overall, these male *gurus* are not alone in their prescriptions for the empowerment of women considering this steady movement seems to have been gaining momentum since the nineteenth century.

Although Falk describes the empowerment of women as a “male-initiated process”, many influential women have recently become active agents in this process.⁷ In the twentieth century, we have seen a rise of female Hindu *gurus* and religious leaders entering the public sphere. Some of these women were successors to male *guru* cults, like the Mother and Sarada Devi, while others received authoritative religious standing on the basis of their own charismatic initiative.⁸ Both Anandamayi Ma and Ammachi, the two female Hindu *gurus* I will be investigating in this study, fall in the latter category. In my case studies depicting these two *gurus*, I will investigate the fine line they and their cults walk in order to critique traditional notions of gender and usher in socio-religious change while still remaining firmly rooted in the Hindu tradition.

Argument and Thesis

In this paper, I argue that Hinduism grants a great deal of religious authority to charismatic individuals, such as *gurus*, even when their views contradict the existing textual tradition. As contemporary charismatic leaders, *gurus* are able to evaluate cultural norms and stereotypes and present alternative viewpoints that hold significant sway over their own communities. Since the words of the *guru* are considered as true, or more so, as scripture, and the actions of the *guru* constitute examples to emulate, these

⁷ Ibid., 301.

⁸ The Mother refers to the *guru* or teacher who worked alongside Sri Aurobindo in Pondicherry, India.

religious leaders ultimately wield a great amount of power and receive a great deal of support. With a dedicated group of devotees, they are also able to popularize their viewpoints and support their socio-religious agendas.

Second, I argue that the Hindu tradition is currently going through a radical reformation in the realm of gender relations. Contemporary female Hindu *gurus* and their respective cults or religious followings are reevaluating the traditional, socio-religious position of women, especially with regards to motherhood. Ammachi and Anandamayi Ma, two twentieth-century female Hindu *gurus*, and their religious cults will stand here as case studies to ground these overarching claims. Through their respective cults, both Anandamayi Ma and Ammachi have empowered women by way of their metaphysical teachings and the socio-religious organization of the movements. They have engaged and changed traditional understandings of gender within the Hindu tradition and promoted gender equality on a social level through their religious cults' practice and social action. Through juxtaposing these two women's movements and teachings, I will clarify each *guru's* position with relation to gender and present two different authoritative voices involved in the debate.

Third, many scholars and feminists have debated whether the Hindu goddess can be considered a "feminist" symbol. While the "feminism" of a goddess ultimately rests on the interpreter of that specific religious symbol, I argue these *gurus*, as living goddesses, can be labeled "feminists" in the loosest sense of the word as those who value a more egalitarian society. Although their perspectives differ significantly from Western feminist ideals, there is great evidence to suggest that these *gurus* and their traditions are empowering women by granting them more opportunities and promoting more gender-

equal teachings. As leaders of major Hindu spiritual movements, these *gurus*' new interpretations and understandings are having significant consequences for the status and position of women in Indian society. As leaders of global cults with bases in multiple continents, these *gurus*' teachings will continue to have far-reaching influence that extend well beyond the borders of the Hindu tradition and India.

Conceptual Map

The second chapter of this thesis will discuss traditional ideals of women in Hindu society based on passages in ancient Hindu texts, including law books. These traditional gender roles continue to inform contemporary Hindu understandings and opinions today, which make them especially relevant. Since Ammachi and Anandamayi Ma through their own dialogues and practices critique and engage these traditional notions, it is necessary to begin by delineating these traditional views on gender and the roles of women in Hinduism.

The third chapter will explain the relation between the Hindu goddess and contemporary women by providing discussions and ethnographies relevant to the topic. Although my submission is primarily concerned with *gurus*, not goddesses, a summary of the debate is needed given that the *gurus* and *avatars* I present in this paper are considered undifferentiated manifestations of the Hindu goddess. By summarizing and presenting opinions that have emerged from this debate, I also intend to distinguish my own work from these previous submissions. While many women and feminists have looked to the rich tradition of Hindu goddesses and asked whether the goddess as a social symbol can be considered a feminist, I will be discussing a rather unexplored question:

can female Hindu *gurus* be considered feminists?

The fourth chapter will begin with a discussion of the role of charismatic figures in religious traditions followed by a summary of the role of *gurus* in the Hindu tradition. As discussed above, arguably the most important charismatic position in the Hindu tradition is that of a *guru*. The Hindu tradition differs from many other religions by investing this role through text and practice with the greatest amount of power and authority. I will draw from numerous texts and devotee responses to further boost this claim. Both Ammachi and Anandamayi Ma have used their charisma to gather a rather large community of followers that has aided them in creating their own organization with rules and practices. As a result, they can be labeled as both *gurus* and charismatics. Lastly, in this section, I will include a brief historical introduction to female Hindu *gurus* from the early twentieth century, outlining the general trademarks and themes that many *guru* hagiographies share.

The fifth and sixth chapters of this book will include case studies of Anandamayi Ma and Ammachi. Both of these case studies will begin with a brief hagiography of the saint followed by specific examples of how these *gurus* are leading the charge for empowerment of women and gender equality. In this chapter, I will present the evidence that will support my thesis that female Hindu *gurus* have initiated policies, which have lead to a more egalitarian Hindu tradition and Indian society, and can be considered “feminists” in the loosest sense of the term.

This study will conclude with a brief chapter providing some critical analysis of my argument. In this chapter, I will express the difficulty in projecting terms like “feminism” onto female Hindu *gurus* and deciphering the ambiguity that results from a

guru and disciple relationship. I will also summarize previous points and supply speculations concerning the future of this topic and debate.

II: WOMEN IN TRADITIONAL HINDUISM

The roles and rituals of Hindu women have recently become topics of numerous discussions for scholars. As in most scholarship on women in ancient religious traditions, many of these studies depend on reading in between the lines of patriarchal texts and extracting women's voices from the often limited and narrow scope presented. Most of the classical Hindu texts that have survived to present day were created by and for men. As a result, they express male opinions and perspectives. In this chapter, I will include a number of excerpts from Hindu sources in order to construct a "traditional view" of women. Although these major female stereotypes come from ancient sources, they are still relevant, since they inform public opinion today.

Many scholars of Hinduism use the terms "traditional", "orthodox", or "brahmanical" to signify perspectives based on strict adherence to scriptural evidence. It is impossible to define exactly what is meant by "orthodox" or "traditional" in Hinduism, given the great variety of views expressed in the sacred texts. However, scholars and practitioners alike often align "traditional" or "orthodox" views with more patriarchal, misogynist perspectives based on prescriptions given to women in early Hindu texts like the Vedas and *Dharmasastras*, Hindu law books. A brief discussion of these classical texts accompanied with some relevant textual passages will ground these assertions.⁹

⁹ I would like to preface this discussion by saying that the "traditional" or "orthodox" view does not give us a complete picture nor is it the only, definitive representation of the Hindu tradition. As I explained above, the "traditional" or "orthodox" position is supported by texts written by and for men. While they contain values and ideals that are relevant and important to members of both sexes, it is difficult to determine how much they reflected social realities. My point in offering these views is to not color early and

Hindu Women in Vedic times

While the *Dharmasastras* in particular include many passages in reference to the concept of *stridharma*, socio-religious law or prescription concerning Hindu wives, a history of women in the Hindu tradition must begin with the earliest period of the tradition, the Vedic period.¹⁰ The reason why *stridharma* can be defined and confined to the socio-religious law of Hindu wives, especially with regards to antiquity, is that there was simply no other lifestyle option for a Hindu woman, or man, during this time period. Marriage was one of the most fundamental, important institutions in the Vedic period, and its relation to women can only be described as paradoxical and ambiguous. The rite of marriage reduced a woman's status to an object or commodity while at the same time granted her an elevated position in society. Stephanie Jamison describes a Hindu daughter arranged to marriage as a "simple exchange token between two family groups" as well as a "gift" and "piece of property."¹¹ As a "gift" to a new household and family, a woman was seen as a link or mediator between these two families, which, according to Jamison, was a dangerous, "anxiety-inducing" position.¹²

Marriage ultimately led to the most powerful and important position allotted women in Vedic society: motherhood. Motherhood was considered the greatest function and most sacred quality of Hindu women given the ultimate duty of a wife was to bear a son. The birth of a son was more revered because it was a son that could perform the

contemporary Hinduism as a misogynistic religion, but to simply emphasize major ideals and stereotypes that were held in antiquity and are still relevant today.

¹⁰ Lisa Hallstrom, *Mother of Bliss* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 56.

¹¹ Stephanie Jamison, *Sacrificed Wife/Sacrificer's Wife* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 253.

¹² *Ibid.*, 253.

necessary funeral rites for their parents that would successfully lead them to their next life. Since a woman could not perform this function and would eventually be married into another family, the birth of a daughter was considered inauspicious and unwelcome. Much of a woman's status in Vedic society rested on *her* ability to produce a male heir, and her time spent as a mother was generally considered the most honored phase of her life.¹³

Another major position a woman fulfilled in Vedic society was that of a sacrificer's wife. Many of the major *śrautas*, or Hindu rituals, in Vedic times required the presence of a wife, who was understood as providing the ritual with an essential ingredient: her inherent, feminine power. While one could say her participation was therefore integral to the ritual, Jamison takes a more critical stance. She explains, "A ritual must have a wife, but it doesn't want too much of one."¹⁴ Jamison notes that a wife's participation in Vedic rituals was extremely limited since she was only involved in the opening and closing parts of the ritual. This restrictive role again suggests that a woman is merely a link rather than an autonomous subject in important public relationships, in this case, between the sacred and profane.¹⁵

The third major position a woman assumed in Vedic society was that of a housewife. As a housewife, Hindu women in Vedic India had great control over domestic life and the household goods, and played an important role in "knitting together her community." She was expected to give to beggars and treat guests with a reverent sense of hospitality often to extreme ends. In her study, Jamison quotes several texts that

¹³ Ibid., 254.

¹⁴ Ibid., 255.

¹⁵ Ibid., 256.

describe a wife being forced to endure humiliations, the most extreme being to have sex with a visiting guest at the request of her husband. From this one example we can gather that the ideal hospitable housewife was one who obeyed all instructions from her husband and treated all guests with the most selfless respect.¹⁶

Overall, a woman's chief duties in Vedic times consisted of participating in *srautas*, obeying her husband, producing sons, and providing hospitality to guests. As these duties relate, Hindu women primarily served as mediators between man and deity, family and family, and man and guest. They functioned as conduits in metaphysical and social relations, rather than as independent agents. While the participation of women was required and valued as an asset, it was not necessarily very influential or representative in the public or religious sphere.¹⁷

Women in the *Dharmasastras*

After the Vedic period, woman's role became even more restricted by evidence of Hindu law books, which contain some of the most patriarchal and misogynist passages found within the whole of the Hindu tradition. These laws had far-reaching influences on the Hindu tradition since according to Laura Denton, many contemporary proponents of orthodox, traditional Hinduism, in favor of a subservient role of women, often quote these passages on *stridharma* to support their position.¹⁸ These law books include the

¹⁶ Ibid., 255.

¹⁷ Ibid., 253-256.

¹⁸ While the misogynistic and patriarchal leanings of these passages are no doubt blatantly obvious, some scholars have argued that these laws are not particularly as binding as we would generally consider. Such an understanding seems to undermine a strict, literal interpretation of these laws. Again, we can only speculate the differences that no doubt existed between *satrik*, textual tradition, and *laukik*, popular tradition. This

Manusmṛti, *Haritaśmṛti*, and *Vyaśmṛti*, as well as later texts such as the more recent eighteenth century text, the *Strīdharmapaddhati*. The authors of these texts established two major issues regarding women, *strīsvabhava*, nature of woman, and *strīdharma*, duties of women in life.¹⁹ Classical authorities have given various opinions, some contradictory, concerning these aspects of women.²⁰²¹

Manusmṛti or *The Laws of Manu* is one of the most popular Hindu law books and is often considered the chief representative of the orthodox or brahmanical position. *The Laws of Manu* grants women a severely limited position as a wife and householder. In many ways, *The Laws of Manu* subordinates women, recommending that they should never obtain any kind of independence or autonomy similar to the Vedic perspective.

The Laws of Manu discusses to great length the relationship between a wife and husband. The text suggests that a husband should be considered the "god" for a wife, which consequently, in theory, would create a relationship based not on equal companionship, but on hierarchal dominance. The text (V.154) reads, "A virtuous wife should constantly serve her husband like a god, even if he behaves badly, freely indulges

is a crucial point especially relevant to this study since most of the texts that have survived to present day were made for men, by men. The fact that these laws were not seen as a binding contract or list of commandments, slightly undermines any call for complete obedience to their prescriptions.

¹⁹ Lynn Denton in her research noted a discrepancy between the arguments Hindus propose concerning female ascetics. Denton writes that those that argued for female asceticism often appealed to *strīsvabhava*, saying that it was within women's true nature that the search for liberation was engrained. Those who believed female asceticism was not appropriate for women argued for *strīdharma* saying that women had divinely sanctioned duties in life that conflicted with the ascetic lifestyle.

²⁰ Lynn Denton, *Female Ascetics in Hinduism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), 24-25.

²¹ Since I cannot include an extensive summary of each of these texts, I will include only select passages representative of the views and ideals these texts support.

his lust, and is devoid of any good qualities.”²² The religion or duty for a wife therefore does not primarily consist of worshipping a deity, but worshipping her “caretaker” and head of household who, as a male, is inherently closer to the gods. *The Laws of Manu* (V.155) further explains that, “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.”²³ Such a prescription severely limits the socio-religious participation of a wife, and makes the salvation and liberation of a wife dependent on her obedience to her husband.²⁴

In *The Laws of Manu*, a woman’s husband is not only referred to as her god, but her domestic duties are considered her religion. The text presents marriage as the culmination of all rites and rituals for a woman. The text (II.66-67) reads:

For women, this cycle (the *upanayana* ritual) should be performed without Vedic verses, leaving nothing else out, at the proper time in the proper order, to perfect the body. The ritual of marriage is traditionally known as the Vedic transformative ritual for women; serving her husband is (the equivalent of) living with a guru, and household chores are the rites of the fire.²⁵

By likening domestic duties to the sacred *upanayana* ritual, the law book separates women from public religious participation and clearly lays out the assumed gender role. This explanation clearly discourages women from taking any other position besides that of a domestic wife, and it creates a major division reducing religious practice to the public rather than private sector for men.

The Laws of Manu also limits female participation in ascetic religious orders. It

²² Wendy Doniger, trans., *The Laws of Manu* (New York: Penguin Books, 1991), 115.

²³ Ibid., 115.

²⁴ Lisa Hallstrom, *Mother of Bliss* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 57.

²⁵ Wendy Doniger, trans., *The Laws of Manu* (New York: Penguin Books, 1991), 24.

explains that women should not take up any such vow or other religious obligation without the husband's permission. Going even further, the text recommends that women should always be under the authority and supervision of male authority figures throughout every stage of her life.²⁶ *The Laws of Manu* (V.147-148) reads:

A girl, a young woman, or even an old woman should not do anything independently, even in (her own) house. In childhood a woman should be under father's control, in youth under her husband's, and when her husband is dead, under her sons. She should not have independence.²⁷

Such a prescription implies that women are expected to not obtain independence and are in need of control and supervision. A teaching like this seeks to keep women subjugated under patriarchal authority for all roles in their life.

The *Stridharmapaddhati* is an eighteenth-century text that is exclusively devoted to the topic of *stridharma*, or woman's duties. While this is not the most popular and circulated of Hindu texts, the fact that it is more recent, makes it worthy of consideration. The text states that women have no "natural inclination to *dharma*."²⁸²⁹ As a consequence of this impure nature, women are not seen as fit for spiritual knowledge and cannot hear or pronounce sacred Sanskrit mantras needed in Hindu orthodox rituals. Given this inherent, inferior, flawed status of women, Tryambaka, the author of the *Stridharmapaddhati*, prescribes certain rules of behavior that all women must follow. The *Stridharmapaddhati* like *The Laws of Manu* grants major importance to marriage and the duties of a wife. The greatest virtue of *stridharma* according to this text is *pativrata*,

²⁶ Ibid., 363.

²⁷ Ibid., 115.

²⁸ Lynn Denton, *Female Ascetics in Hinduism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), 25.

²⁹ *Dharma* is a difficult term to summarize, but it generally refers to correct socio-religious action or duty.

love and service towards the husband.³⁰ Tryambaka begins and finishes his text with the claim that the primary religious duty of a wife is to show great devotion and service towards her husband.³¹

The last major issue involving women that the Hindu law books comment upon is menstruation. Menstruation has barred women from much socio-religious participation since traditionally it has been known to carry great impurity, which had to be purged through ritualistic cleansing.³² Traditional Hinduism was dominated by ideas of purity and impurity. A male or female would have to refrain from any religious practice if they became impure, since such a state would inevitably corrupt or negatively influence a ritual. The fact that women, for a few days a month, would consistently be in this impure state greatly restricted their eligibility for such practices. Many law books address this topic and outline a general procedure of purification for menstruating women. Often women were expected to withdraw from their family and domestic duties for several days. The *Vyasasmṛti* explains that a menstruating woman was as impure as an untouchable on the first day, a Brahman murderess the second day, and a washerwoman on the third day. Following a bath on a fourth day, a woman would return to initial purity status.³³ The *Strīdharmapaddhati* explains that women's nature, *strīsvabhava*, is inherently impure due to the bodily processes of menstruation and childbirth. This natural process according to some texts automatically condemned the female in relation

³⁰ Ibid., 28.

³¹ Ibid., 26.

³² Stephanie Jamison, *Sacrificed Wife/Sacrificer's Wife* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996) 255-256.

³³ This topic is of some immediate concern and I will return to it in my discussion of Ammachi. Unlike the traditional perspective, Ammachi seems to not hold a negative view towards menstruation.

to the male to a less pure state.

Portrait of Traditional Hindu Women

This traditional, brahmanical portrayal of women paints an effective portrait of women's role and status in the Hindu tradition. Women in most circumstances were reduced to necessary and valuable commodities, assets, and objects for their husbands and societies in many public dealings. While women were essential ingredients in some key religious practices of the times, they were given a significantly limited role and not allowed too much participation. While women received some social power and recognition as wives and mothers, their duties were confined to the household in which the man was still considered the authoritative figure and overseer. At the heart of all of these prescriptions was the assumption that women are inherently inferior and impure, and therefore, need be controlled and suppressed. Even theoretically, the positive role of motherhood was a double-edged sword since the act of giving birth ultimately polluted women in the process.

Many years have passed since the creation of these texts, but their viewpoints continue to influence the general public today. *The Laws of Manu* is still considered one of the most revered law books in the Hindu canon. While the *Stridharmapaddhati* is not nearly as popular or influential as *The Laws of Manu*, the fact that it was created only two hundred years ago and asserts similar misogynist perspectives further supports the notion that these views are still largely prevalent. However, to say that Hindu society has not changed in the three thousand years since the composition of the majority of these texts would be misleading. My point in relating such a portrait is to simply lay the

groundwork for traditional Hindu ideas concerning gender. The female saints Ammachi and Anandamayi Ma address these traditional Hindu views through their own actions and organization of their respective cults and critically engage the presuppositions these portraits are founded upon. As I relate the specifics of their radical discourses, I urge the reader to keep this traditional, brahmanical backdrop fresh in their minds since I will be continuously referring back to it.

III: IS THE GODDESS A FEMINIST?

Goddess Worship And Gender Relations

Hinduism is one of the few major religions today with a long tradition of goddess worship. A divine feminine presence in Hinduism can be traced back to the origins of the tradition, the early Vedic period.³⁴ While many Hindus refer to an all-encompassing Devi, the goddess is known by thousands of different names and worshiped in thousands of different forms. These forms consist of living female *gurus* (Ammachi, Shree Ma, Mother Meera) and goddesses (Lakshmi, Durga, Sarasvati, Chamundi).

The connection between goddess worship and gender relations within cultures has been a major topic of concern for feminist scholars of religion. Western feminist scholars and Hindu women have recently been debating whether the Hindu symbol of the goddess empowers women and promotes gender equality. Women in both Western and South Asian cultures have criticized as well as praised the Hindu mother goddess symbol and tradition. Some scholars believe the symbols, texts, and ideas associated with the mother goddess can be used to empower women, while others believe they have only further supported the traditional patriarchal society already in place.³⁵

Carol Christ and Mary Daly have both asserted that religions centered on the exclusive worship of a male god lead to repression of women. Carol Christ writes,

³⁴ For example, *Vac*, speech, and *Usas*, dawn, or two feminine principles or forces that have many hymns dedicated to them in the *Rig Veda*. The fact that the earliest text in the Hindu canon contains feminine forces relates that the earliest group of Hindus believed some powers were inherently feminine and therefore divine.

³⁵ Kathleen Erndl and Alf Hiltebeitel, "Introduction: Writing Goddesses, Goddesses Writing, and Other Scholarly Concerns," in *Is the Goddess a Feminist? The Politics of South Asian Goddesses*, edited by Kathleen Erndl and Alf Hiltebeitel (New York: New York University Press, 2000).

“religious symbol systems focused around exclusively male images of divinity create the impression that female power can never be fully legitimate or wholly beneficent.”³⁶

Mary Daly writes:

The symbol of the Father God, spawned in the human imagination and sustained as plausible by patriarchy, has in turn rendered service to this type of society by making its mechanisms for the oppression of women appear right and fitting. If God in ‘his’ heaven is a father ruling ‘his’ people, then it is in the ‘nature’ of things and according to divine plan and the order of the universe that society be male dominated.³⁷

As Tracy Pintchman points out, the assumption underlying these assertions is that religious symbols influence social behavior. One could conclude from such an argument that in a tradition that has a strong goddess presence, women would be viewed as divine and treated as social equals or even superiors to men. Yet, this has traditionally not been the case regarding Hinduism. One of the strongest arguments against the innate correlation of goddess symbols and egalitarianism involves the traditional as well as current social position of Hindu women. As I related above, the traditional Hindu perspective based on the numerous law books have offered women a limited, subservient position. While India is home to numerous goddesses, it is also home to some of the greatest atrocities against the female sex including *sati*, the practice where the wife immolates herself on her husband’s funeral pyre, female infanticide, and dowry deaths.

Carol Christ and Mary Daly’s argument that male-centered theology necessitates male-centered society does not seem to apply to the Hindu tradition. The goal of much feminist scholarship is to influence public opinion and bring about the empowerment of

³⁶ Tracy Pintchman, “Is the Hindu Goddess Tradition a Good Resource for Western Feminism?” in *Is the Goddess a Feminist? The Politics of South Asian Goddesses*, ed. Kathleen Erndl and Alf Hiltebeitel (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 187.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 187.

women in the socio-religious realm. Scholars like Christ and Daly argue that by introducing certain religious symbols, emphasizing gender-neutral language, and creating a more female-oriented theology, their goal of a more egalitarian society will be actualized. Their argument assumes symbols, teachings, and language directly affect social behavior. In other words, if one is taught in a temple, church, or any religious institution that a masculine or feminine deity is inherently more powerful based on their sex, this belief will inevitably shape gender relations and opinions. Carol Christ writes, “the affirmation of female power contained in the Goddess symbol’ supports the power of women in family and society.”³⁸

Christ and Daly are not alone in their assertions, and indeed many feminists have taken up a similar version of this argument. Rita Gross for instance has noted that religions of South Asia like Hinduism and Buddhism with a strong goddess identification and presence have an ideological framework and structure more conducive for an egalitarian stance.³⁹ These scholars’ arguments are of course not completely void of validity. Many American women have turned to other religious traditions with central goddess figures in order to support their egalitarian views and theological persuasions.⁴⁰ Indeed, many women in America, out of curiosity and desire for a powerful female religious figure, first approached *gurus* like Ammachi and Anandamayi Ma. Lynn Denton explains that some women in South Asia do act as oracles or priestesses and

³⁸ Ibid., 188.

³⁹ Rita Gross, ““The Dharma... Is Neither Male Nor Female”: Buddhism on Gender and Liberation,” in *Women’s and Men’s Liberation*, ed. Leonard Grob, Riffat Hassan, and Haim Gordon (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1991), 107.

⁴⁰ Cynthia Eller, for instance, argues that many feminists have created a “myth of matriarchal history” in order to bolster their own arguments for socio-political change.

perform rituals especially to the goddess.⁴¹ Such an exception to traditional, prescriptive roles seems to demonstrate that women, in some circumstances especially related to a goddess, can in fact perform certain public functions not normally granted to them. Overall, there is evidence that a goddess symbol in Hinduism has shaped socio-religious practice and allowed in limited scenarios more opportunities of participation and practice for women. Yet, as a whole, the socio-religious institutions of Buddhism and Hinduism have not supported an interpretation that invests all women with a sacred, equal position.

Hindu Goddesses and the Empowerment of Women

Some scholars like Tracy Pintchman and Cynthia Humes sought to test this proposed correlation between the empowerment of women and goddess symbols through their own ethnographic research. Although their studies involved two separate groups of Hindu men and women, they surprisingly reached similar conclusions. Both Tracy Pintchman and Cynthia Humes argue, that within the Hindu tradition, women and goddesses actually inhabit exclusive realms that are not linked by a shared nature. While both the goddess and women share a common femininity, women do not share any of the divine status that a goddess assumes.

Cynthia Humes conducted research in Vindhyachal, a north India village, to explore the variety of interpretations related to the *Devi Mahatmya*, one of the most popular goddess texts, and the relationship between women and goddess. To her surprise, Humes found that male and female Hindu pilgrims believed women and goddess were not closely identified with each other and feminine spiritual principles like

⁴¹ Lynn Denton, *Female Ascetics in Hinduism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004).

shakti were not understood to apply to women. Forty out of the fifty-one males and nine of the fifteen females of her sample believed there was a “great difference” or “no comparison was even possible” between the two.⁴² According to these Hindus, women and goddess were so different in nature that no correlation or connection could be made between them.

In her interviews related to the *Devi Mahatmya*, Humes also discovered that many Hindus believe the *Devi Mahatmya* is essentially about Devi, the great goddess, not women or even other goddesses.⁴³ Concluding her analysis, Humes writes, “The Goddess is unlike nearly every woman who might read or hear her story; she is portrayed as an exception.”⁴⁴ This statement succinctly expresses separate identities for goddesses and women, which continues to be observed and understood by Hindus.

Tracy Pintchman came to similar conclusions through her field research in Benares involving Hindu priestesses serving at goddess temples. Pintchman explains, “I found that women acting as officiants in these temples made little connection between the powerful goddesses they serve and the empowerment of women.”⁴⁵ These women saw themselves more as “vehicles of the Goddess” or chosen vessels rather than active manifestations of a feminine spirit. They also continued to hold traditional, brahmanical viewpoints they most likely had been exposed to throughout their lives. One priestess

⁴² Cynthia Ann Humes, “Is the *Devi Mahatmya* a Feminist Scripture?” in *Is the Goddess a Feminist? The Politics of South Asian Goddesses*, ed. Kathleen Erndl and Alf Hiltebeitel (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 124.

⁴³ Ibid., 125

⁴⁴ Ibid., 146

⁴⁵ Tracy Pintchman, “Is the Hindu Goddess Tradition a Good Resource for Western Feminism?” in *Is the Goddess a Feminist? The Politics of South Asian Goddesses*, ed. Kathleen Erndl and Alf Hiltebeitel (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 190, 193.

named Madhavi asserted, much in the same vein as *The Laws of Manu*, that wives should continue to serve their husbands regardless of their husband's behavior and demeanor. She is quoted to have said, "Even if (the husband) is very bad, whoever he is, you must be with him... No matter how the husband is, one must serve one's husband."⁴⁶ Such a statement clearly expresses the division between the duties and natures of goddess and women. While female priestesses like Madhavi are granted a higher role in Hindu temple practice than many other women, they do not see the position as necessarily empowering for them as women.⁴⁷

What is striking about Pintchman's interpretation of the women's priestess position is the emphasis on passivity rather than assertiveness and activity. These priestesses saw themselves as passive vehicles rather than active, willing agents in their mediation. This view echoes the traditional idea of women acting as a mediator or link between people and the divine rather than as autonomous subjects. Feminists have often criticized passive representations of women arguing that they are images formed and supported by a dominant, patriarchal structure. In this example, while women are linked with the goddess and given more religious opportunity, they are still understood to be a chosen, but passive, being. Consequently, the locus of power in the ritual is reserved for the goddess alone, and women, as phenomenal beings, are not granted any sacred status. Pintchman carries the evidence of her fieldwork to an even greater extreme by arguing that a woman's priestess position should be understood as nothing more than an "extension of their service to their husbands and their in-laws."⁴⁸ Pintchman's research

⁴⁶ Ibid., 194.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 194.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 194.

further supports the argument that Hindus do not link the empowerment of women with the goddess or priestess positions.

Interpreting the Hindu Goddess

The argument between scholars like Carol Christ and Tracy Pintchman rests in the weight given to the symbol as a cultural artifact and the human interpretation of that symbol. Christ suggests the symbol is more important than the interpretation while Pintchman argues the interpreter plays a much greater role. Pintchman writes “There is no necessary correlation between a symbol and its interpretation: the goddess can be interpreted to empower women or to disempower them, or overempower them.”⁴⁹ Rita Gross echoes this assertion writing, “(The question concerning whether the goddess is a feminist) depends on how the term ‘feminist’ is defined. And it depends on who the Goddess’s devotees are.”⁵⁰ Gross explains that if the devotees are feminists, the goddess will inevitably be a feminist, likewise vice-versa. Both Pintchman and Gross leave the answer to the question concerning whether the goddess is a feminist up to individual interpretation. The main point of their argument is that a symbol cannot innately mean anything. Some symbols could be considered more conducive to specific interpretations, but the overall meaning of a given sign always involves a significant degree of human invention.

⁴⁹ Tracy Pintchman, “Is the Hindu Goddess Tradition a Good Resource for Western Feminism?” in *Is the Goddess a Feminist? The Politics of South Asian Goddesses*, ed. Kathleen Erndl and Alf Hiltebeitel (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 187.

⁵⁰ Rita Gross, “Is the Goddess a Feminist?” in *Is the Goddess a Feminist? The Politics of South Asian Goddesses*, ed. Kathleen Erndl and Alf Hiltebeitel (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 104.

Overall, through my own experience of the Hindu tradition, I concur with the argument presented by Pintchman and Gross. I see the Hindu mother goddess as a living symbol that is constantly being reinterpreted by contemporary followers. Interpretations change over time and vary from person to person. Religious symbols, texts, and ideas are not static entities because they are constantly being revisited and reinterpreted by the present generation. While symbols play their part, the issue of meaning and utility for the empowerment of women inevitably remains a question of human interpretation.

Hindu goddesses have been sources of empowerment for women in some instances, but such an understanding is still relatively new and not particularly popular. While the tradition does seem to have substantial ground for an egalitarian worldview based on its metaphysical beliefs, especially when compared to other religious traditions that have only recognized and emphasized one masculine godhead, throughout the long history of the Hindu tradition, such an interpretation has not greatly influenced social order and understanding. In the coming years it will be interesting to see, as trans-cultural and inter-religious dialogue continues to ensue, if an emphasis on goddess power and spiritual capabilities leads to an overall more positive and liberating consequence for women. Such an argument though, while relevant and important to my own, is not the main focus of this particular scholarly endeavor.

Most scholars when addressing the question of whether the goddess is a feminist have overlooked a rare but powerful role in Hindu society. This role is that of a Hindu saint or *guru*, who is known to physically embody or merge with the mother goddess. This unique socio-religious role allows women to deviate from the traditionally prescribed householder position and frees them from the restriction of social norms and

standards. The question of central concern to this study is whether Hindu female *gurus* can be considered feminists. From this brief summary, it seems apparent that a goddess as a symbol only has feminist utility if the devotees of that goddess carry feminist ideologies. Therefore, if a feminist goddess is to be found in the Hindu tradition, it can only come in the form of a living, breathing manifestation or incarnation who has the ability to communicate with an abundance of people and exact socio-religious change quickly and effectively. In order to understand the power and authority of this role for women in the Hindu tradition, a brief history and explanation of the position is necessary.

IV: CHARISMATICS, *GURUS*, AND SPIRITUAL MOTHERS

Charismatic *Gurus*

There has been much scholarly literature written on the religious phenomenon of charisma given that many religious institutions and movements are currently based on or were first founded by charismatic individuals. Every religion has had their share of charismatic figures, those that have emanated such a great level of power that they are regarded as the religious or spiritual authority for a given community. These terms and ideas have special significance to this submission since both Ammachi and Anandamayi Ma are contemporary charismatic *gurus* representative of the Hindu tradition.

Charismatic individuals are those that possess charisma, an ambiguous term. Max Weber defined charisma as a, "certain quality of an individual's personality by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities."⁵¹ According to Weber's definition, charisma is an extraordinary, powerful aspect of a leader's personality that is respected and particularly persuasive for a given community. A charismatic is, consequently, an individual who exudes this exceptional power. Douglas Barnes writes, in a manner similar to Weber, that charisma "originates from an inner, dynamic force of the leader's personality."⁵² Willner and Willner as well explains charisma as, "a leader's capacity to elicit from a following deference, devotion and awe

⁵¹ Max Weber, *On Charisma and Institution Building*, ed. S. N. Eisenstadt (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1922, 1968 reprint), 48.

⁵² Douglas Barnes, "Charisma and Religious Leadership: An Historical Analysis," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 17, no. 1 (1978), <http://www.jstor.org/> (accessed February 10, 2009), 1.

toward himself as the source of authority. A leader who can have this effect upon a group is charismatic for that group."⁵³

Although Weber's theory of charisma has been very influential, it has also sparked both criticism and debate. Many scholars have argued that Weber's concept of charisma is a personality trait, rather than a cultural defined, constructed, and designated, title. A purely sociological interpretation of charisma suggests that a charismatic individual as an authoritative figure is dependent on the recognition and acceptance of an established group of people. In order to receive the support of a community, a religious charismatic must embody or demonstrate certain sacred signs that are appealing to the followers of that particular religious tradition. In contrast to Weber's definition of charisma, this understanding of the term locates charisma in a communal and cultural context. It regards charisma as dependent upon and defined by a specific tradition and society and asserts that charisma is culturally defined, determined, and constructed. As a result, a general quality of a charismatic individual cannot be ascertained.

I do not think that a charismatic is a purely social construct that has no autonomous authority or distinct personality, nor do I find that a message or teaching given by a charismatic is always new and revolutionary. I find Douglas Barnes' definition and explanation of charisma most enlightening. Barnes writes that "charisma is... that authority relationship which arises when a leader through the dynamics of a set of teachings, a unique personality, or both elicits responses of awe, deference, and

⁵³Ann Willner and Dorothy Willner, "The rise and role of charismatic leaders," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 358, (Mar., 1965), <http://www.jstor.org/> (accessed February 10, 2009), 79.

devotion from a group of people."⁵⁴ Barnes' definition suggests that the charismatic individual may possess a "unique" and "dynamic" personality, while still asserting that his or her authority is dependent on the "awe, deference, and devotion" of a given community. This discussion has particular relevance to my own topic. I argue that these female Hindu *gurus* are advocating a change in gender roles and ideas concerning the feminine that is somewhat "new" and "revolutionary" since they differ significantly from the traditional opinions. I am arguing that the locus of charisma is to be found in the charismatic, and that their teaching is an individual response to an already established ethos. And yet, in order for a transformation of traditional gender roles to be possible, the audience must be open to new, alternative teachings.⁵⁵

As will be made apparent in my case studies, these female Hindu *gurus* are constantly mediating between their own personal, charismatic intuition and traditional standards. While these *gurus* are operating within a particular culture, which is reflected in their actions and words, they and their followers are propagating a perspective on gender that differs significantly from the traditional understanding. Whether these opinions and perspectives are products of a radical, reforming social awareness that have coagulated into these *gurus*, or are radical new perspectives personally inspired and made popular by the *guru*, is a complicated question.

It should also be noted that a strict sociological interpretation of charisma or charismatic would not find favor from the Hindu emic perspective. Many Hindu

⁵⁴Douglas Barnes, "Charisma and Religious Leadership: An Historical Analysis," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 17, no. 1 (1978), <http://www.jstor.org/> (accessed February 10, 2009), 2.

⁵⁵ I must again emphasize that I employ an understanding of religion that makes it a dynamic process rather than a static force. Religion is ever present in texts and rituals, but the adherents are continually evaluating its legitimacy and relevance.

devotees of the *gurus* I present in this paper believe that their religious leaders embody the divine and therefore emanate a kind of spiritual energy or power known as *shakti*. In the same way a Hindu *murti*, or image, contains sacred energy, devotees believe that Ammachi and Anandamayi Ma are invested with spiritual energy as well. For these Hindus, charisma is a sacred, divine, intimate force that is manifest in the female *guru* and can be felt by their devotees in close proximity. This definition of charisma is different from the two sociological interpretations I presented above, although it would be more closely aligned with Weber's and Barnes' since their definitions understand charisma as a special, unique "personality trait" that is important to a certain cultural context. The Hindu interpretation of charisma as a spiritual force simultaneously undermines the strict sociological position which states charisma is based only on social recognition and goes well beyond the idea of a "personality trait" that Weber presented.

***Gurus* in the Hindu Tradition**

Gurus have served a multi-faceted role throughout the history of the Hindu tradition. Joel Mlecko in his article "The Guru in Hindu Tradition," outlines two specific but not mutually exclusive roles a *guru* can serve. The first role is that of a teacher or instructor who leads their students and devotees to higher spiritual knowledge. In this role they instruct students and give wisdom and advice on how to correctly live a spiritually fulfilling life. The second role is that of an *avatar*, a divine incarnation of a god or goddess, who can be the subject of worship and guidance. In this interpretation, the *guru* represents a human manifestation of the divine. Both Anandamayi Ma and

Ammachi fulfill these two roles by providing religious instruction to their followers and being regarded as manifestations of the goddess by their devotees.

The Sanskrit term “*guru*” literally means “heavy”, and it refers to one who has great weight in spiritual and philosophical matters. Such a title clearly gives authority to a person and suggests that he or she has supreme wisdom and is able to aid others in realizing ultimate knowledge.⁵⁶ This spiritual knowledge is intuitive and experiential rather than intellectual in nature, and it is meant to be realized and manifest in the being or nature of the person. Once one has obtained this ultimate knowledge, one is supposed to undergo a transformation. The aim of most spiritual practice in Hinduism is to realize one’s true inner spiritual nature, achieve *moksha*, liberation, and break out of the cycle of birth and death, *samsara*. It is generally believed that one begins to actualize their perfect, divine potential only through *sadhana*, spiritual discipline and education.

The role of the *guru* in Hinduism has changed significantly over time. In Vedic literature, *gurus* were synonymous with *brahmins*, a member of the highest, priestly social class that taught the Vedas and *dharma*. The chief duties of a *brahman* included performing rituals and reciting the Vedas. The *guru* would instruct a student on the correct pronunciation of Veda recitation as well as aid him in correct knowledge and action. Here, the *upanayana* ritual holds special significance.⁵⁷ It was during the *upanayana* ceremony that a student was introduced and left to the care of a *guru* for the ideal length of twelve years. During this time, the student and *guru* were expected to live in close proximity and engage in discourses related to ultimate reality and the Vedas.

⁵⁶ Joel Mlecko, “The Guru in Hindu Tradition,” *Numen*, Vol. 29, Fasc.1, (Jul., 1982), <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3269931>> (9 January 2009), 33.

⁵⁷ The *upanayana* is a Hindu rite of passage in which a boy receives a sacred thread, becomes initiated, and begins his formal education.

The relation between *sisya*, student, and *guru* was supposed to be parental in nature.⁵⁸

The *guru* was responsible for molding the student into a mature individual and imparting proper spiritual knowledge. While the *guru* is mentioned in both the *Rig Veda* and *Yajur Veda*, which demonstrates the long-lasting prominence of the position within the tradition, the position is described in a manner that lends it even more prestige in the Upanishads.

The Upanishads contain multiple points of view on metaphysical issues, but one fundamental point in which many of the texts agree is that in order to obtain ultimate spiritual knowledge, one must be in the company of a *guru*. In the Upanishads, we also see the beginning of the idea that a *guru* can be an appropriate object of worship. The *Katha*, *Isa*, and *Svetasvatara* Upanishads all express a theistic view of the *guru*, and Mlecko writes that it “was not uncommon for the *sisya*, (student), to experience *bhakti* for the *guru*”, who was believed to be a living embodiment of *Brahman*.⁵⁹⁶⁰ The *Svetasvatara* Upanishad states, “These subjects which have been declared shine forth to the high-souled one who has the highest devotion for God and for his spiritual teacher (*guru*) as for God.”⁶¹ One ideal therefore was for a student to equate their *guru* with the divine.

There are numerous other examples from texts following the Upanishads that couple the *guru* with the highest form of divinity. Over time, *bhakti* began to overshadow strict adherence to the Vedas and ritualism, and the *guru* became an

⁵⁸ Ibid., 39.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 37.

⁶⁰ *Brahman* refers to the impersonal divine reality in Upanishadic thought that is both immanent and transcendent.

⁶¹ Ibid., 37.

acceptable and prominent object of devotion. *Bhakti* entails a distinct mode of Hindu religious worship and practice that focuses on devotion to a specific divine figure: gods, goddesses, or *gurus*. The two major Hindu epics, the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, teach that humans and divine beings need *gurus* to help maneuver their way through various trials and obtain ultimate wisdom. In the *Ramayana*, Rama lectures to a female ascetic in the jungle about the nine different forms of *bhakti* and explains that the third form of *bhakti* is service to the *guru*. In the *Mahabharata*, Bhishma in his “Great Discourse” expounds that the most auspicious virtue is respect for father, mother, and *guru*. Like the Upanishads, both of these texts emphasize a devotional reverence towards the *guru*, and the fact that the *guru* deserves as much respect as a father or mother greatly expresses his or her importance to a student. While neither epic gives a teaching that equates the *guru* with god, both explain how the aid of *gurus* can lead to correct living and knowledge.⁶²

In the Puranas, the ultimate reality is viewed as different from an impersonal force like *brahman* and given immediate, personal attributes and characteristics. Some Hindus found the idea of approaching the divine as an immediate, personal being much easier and fulfilling. This of course further developed the emphasis on *bhakti* to a *guru* because they, as physical, living beings, could be understood to be divine incarnations. In the *Vaisnavite* Puranic tradition especially, we see the emphasis on *avatars*, or divine incarnations in animal and human forms, as possible realities. Mlecko writes, “In the Puranic age, it was theistic and humanistic personality which permeated Hindu consciousness.”⁶³

⁶² Ibid., 41.

⁶³ Ibid., 43.

As indicated by this short overview of the socio-religious position of the *guru*, *gurus* have held an established position within the Hindu tradition since its early beginnings. They are venerated by devotees for being excellent spiritual teachers and can be considered manifestations of the divine. Not all Hindus will acknowledge a *guru* as their own personal deity, but many will show reverence and respect towards them. Historically, the role of Hindu *guru* was limited to men alone, which is why the word “*guru*” is actually a masculine term, which has no feminine form. Although female *guruhood* did previously exist, the position was often confined to esoteric traditions in private domains. Female Hindu *gurus* have only recently begun to enter the public domain and gain recognition among both men and women in India and abroad.⁶⁴

Some *gurus* in the Hindu tradition have used their position to wield political power and promote social change. Through personal interpretation and evaluation, they have come to distance themselves from traditional, orthodox constraints and expectations. Mlecko writes, “(*gurus*) form an alternative social hierarchy outside caste and class, outside inherited social limits, which provides not an entry into but an exit from traditional Hindu society.”⁶⁵ Antony Copley also discusses how many Hindu religious cults have acted as reform movements within the broader Hindu tradition, and Kenneth Jones actually refers to several *guru* cults as “socio-religious reform movements.”⁶⁶ Hindus have often been defined by their social practice rather than religious belief, so the fact that a religious movement associated with the Hindu tradition intrinsically spills into

⁶⁴ Karen Pechilis, “Introduction: Hindu Female Gurus in Historical and Philosophical Context,” in *The Graceful Guru* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 3-7.

⁶⁵ Joel Mlecko, “The Guru in Hindu Tradition,” *Numen*, Vol. 29, Fasc.1, (Jul., 1982), <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3269931>> (9 January 2009), 56.

⁶⁶ Antony Copley, “A Study in Religious Leadership and Cultism,” in *Gurus and Their Followers*, ed. by Antony Copley, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 3-4.

social and political matters is not particularly striking. Indeed, most of the aims of these movements extend well beyond the boundaries of the Hindu tradition and the religious realm altogether.

Both Anandamayi Ma and Ammachi's organizations can serve as examples of these "socio-religious reform movements." While neither makes a complete break with the orthodox Hindu tradition, their views, and goals are quite different than those posited by brahmanical Hindus.⁶⁷ For instance, both have introduced new, radical views with regards to gender that are not shared by the majority of Hindus and have organized their movement in a way that supports these views. Also, their movements have reached beyond the confines of the Hindu tradition. They are radically pluralistic and inclusive; that is, they allow and encourage participation from people of all religions and ethnicities.⁶⁸ Instead of drawing boundaries, these movements seek to include all. They do so by appealing to universal ideals and virtues that are clothed in Hindu religious rhetoric, but fundamental enough in nature to appeal to a wide audience.

Female Hindu *Gurus*

When approaching any kind of hagiographical material, it is difficult to extract strict historical and biographical data, since most of the information presented has a devotional intent. It is also not easy to discern whether some information has been

⁶⁷ Both have actually taken radical precautions to avoid being divorced from the Hindu tradition.

⁶⁸ This has become a hallmark of many of the large *guru* movements in India today, and we see this aspect reflected specifically in how the Ammachi Matriyanada cult deals with Christians. Ammachi's cult accommodates Western Christians on American soil: by providing Jesus mantras, incorporating Christian imagery in devotional objects, and teaching fundamental virtues and aspects relevant to Christianity.

fabricated or exaggerated to give spiritual cues since no other historical and critical biography usually exists. This is not unexpected, since the primary function of a female Hindu saint's hagiography is to present clues to their divine potential or inherent nature from the very beginning of their lives. For example, both Ammachi and Anandamayi Ma have miraculous birth stories. Ammachi is said to have been born laughing, rather than crying, and Anandamayi Ma claims to have been fully conscious and aware at birth. Supernatural details like these appearing at the very beginning of a hagiography immediately grants the woman an auspicious status. It dramatically divorces her from common, mundane experience and sets the stage for her eventual divine recognition. Many of the major religious figures in India have hagiographies that emphasize their miraculous powers as well. The inclusion of miraculous deeds suggests that the *guru* belongs in the company of the spiritual elite and that she is destined for spiritual fulfillment and authority.

Female *gurus* occupy a unique position in Indian society. As can be supported from multiple hagiographies, most Hindu female saints are first met with resistance due to their abnormal, unorthodox, erratic behavior. Many hagiographies of female *gurus* describe early skepticism and criticism, recounting initial resistance and non-acceptance of her special status by her parents, family, and local community. Timothy Conway, in his study of Ammachi, refers to her early life as a "Cinderella tale" in the sense that Ammachi had to overcome initial oppression from family and acquaintances in order to win the acceptance of society and receive the titles of saint and *guru*.⁶⁹ Ammachi in particular had humble beginnings as a low-caste, mistreated Hindu girl. While

⁶⁹ Timothy Conway, *Women of Power and Grace* (Santa Barbara: The Wake Up Press, 1994), 247.

Anandamayi Ma belonged to the Brahman caste, she had a similar poverty-stricken childhood as well. Selva Raj notes a number of characteristics and traits, which seem to be often associated with the hagiography of female Hindu *gurus*. These include “low-caste birth, life of poverty, abused childhood, unloved and misunderstood adolescence, resistance to domestic life and marriage, and rejection by family.”⁷⁰

Some caution towards emerging spiritual leader is traditionally embedded in Hinduism, since many over time have abused their privileges and been considered frauds. With the amount of authority and power granted to the *guru* and the potential that the role could be used for manipulation and selfish gain, it only seems natural that a community or tradition would be hesitant when dealing with claims of supernatural identity. While male *gurus* have met their share of discouragement and criticism, it seems to have been more difficult for women to be accepted as *gurus*. My discussion on the traditional, orthodox position on women demonstrated the stereotypes and expectations female *gurus* and saints often must combat in their ascent to be socially recognized religious or spiritual authorities. While there have been some limited opportunities for women to occupy positions of authority, the tradition has generally excluded women from such roles. Despite the prevalence and worship of the goddess, the concept of *shakti*, and the respect and reverence towards motherhood, traditional misogynist prejudices still hold most of the sway of public opinion. Women generally are still expected to conform to traditional gender stereotypes, fulfilling their roles as submissive and devoted wives. As this paper will demonstrate, however, female *gurus* have begun to challenge these

⁷⁰ Selva J. Raj, “Passage to America: Ammachi on American Soil,” in *Gurus in America*, ed. Thomas Forsthoefel and Cynthia Ann Humes (New York: State University of New York Press, 2005), 142.

traditional viewpoints.

Spiritual Mothers

Klaus Klostermaier remarks that in the twentieth century, Hinduism has seen a number of different "Mas" or Mothers that act as *guru* and spiritual advisers to their followers. This "spiritual mother" title has recently become an effective way for women to establish their reputation and authority in the Hindu tradition as religious, spiritual leaders.⁷¹ As evident from *The Laws of Manu* and other patriarchal ancient texts, women were stereotypically seen as not able to perform *sadhanas*, spiritual practices, which were necessary for higher, ultimate knowledge.⁷² By taking on the title of "spiritual mother", these female saints and *gurus* have undermined patriarchal authority and bypassed the whole argument that women should not "act" like men by taking on a religiously oriented agenda. They have also transcended the previously defined and limited role of motherhood by transforming it into an idealized, spiritual position. In doing so, they have created a revolutionary new socio-religious role that has become increasingly popular since the beginning of the twentieth century. Many women in the past century, including Anandamayi Ma and Ammachi, have claimed to be manifestations of the mother goddess and have assumed this role of "spiritual mother". While my study is largely focused on Ammachi, I have included Anandamayi Ma in this investigation

⁷¹ Klaus Klostermaier, *A Survey of Hinduism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 371-372.

⁷² The very acknowledgment of these female *gurus* and saints by the Hindu community today immediately refutes such a claim. That is, the fact that there are Hindus who believe women can be *avatars* or *gurus* gives the impression that these earlier opinions and viewpoints are debased and perhaps becoming obsolete.

because she seems to have been the first female *guru* in the twentieth century who fulfilled this role and developed a successful following from it.

Hindu religious leaders who share both the “spiritual mother” and *guru* titles have acquired a great deal of popularity in the twentieth century. This is hardly surprising given the importance the tradition has allotted both the roles. As I have demonstrated above, the role of mother was arguably the most powerful and influential social position for the traditional Hindu woman, since she received acceptance from her family and larger community by fulfilling this duty and bearing her husband sons. The fact that these charismatic female *gurus* are all assuming positions as “spiritual mothers”, demonstrates that there is a need or want for such a socio-religious position in Indian society, and by the universal appeal these *gurus* have had outside India, the world. In other words, the fact that “spiritual mothers” and female *gurus* are becoming increasingly more popular says something about Indian society since the community engages these charismatic figures and chooses to accept or reject them.

One thing that is important to acknowledge, however, is that this reinterpretation of motherhood does not simply have consequences for the female *gurus* alone. This will become more evident in my ethnography of Ammachi since she specifically engages the socio-biological conception of motherhood and endows it with spiritual implications. “Universal Motherhood” is one of her most prominent and recognized teachings, and this reevaluation of motherhood is having powerful implications for all members of society, men and women. I will include a more in-depth discussion of this concept within the case study below. Now that I have outlined the power and authority given to the socio-religious role of *guru* and “spiritual mother”, it is time to present the ethnographies and

case studies that will support my argument.

V: ANANDAMAYI MA

Anandamayi Ma Hagiography

Anandamayi Ma's hagiography follows a basic "Cinderella" motif and seems to include many of the details Selva Raj has identified as parts of the traditional narrative of female Hindu saints. Anandamayi Ma was born on April 30, 1896 in Kherora, a village in East Bengal to a *brahman* family. As I mentioned earlier, many miraculous events were believed to have surrounded her birth. First, her mother had several dreams of goddesses and gods that foreshadowed the birth of her coming daughter. Second, Anandamayi Ma herself proclaimed later that she had been aware since birth, indicating a form of omniscience.

While Anandamayi Ma belonged to the highest caste in the Hindu system, her family lived in a predominantly Muslim community, and subsisted on a low income. While Ma never had to deal with starvation, she was not able to sufficiently develop her education and attended less than two years of school. As Joseph Fitzgerald points out, this part of her story relates that spiritual wisdom is not dependent on book knowledge.⁷³ Throughout her childhood at inopportune times, Ma was known to suddenly be absorbed in trance, which again has been interpreted as signs of divine nature.

At age twelve, Ma was married to Ramani Mohan Cakravarti, later named Bholanatha. For the first five years of their marriage, the couple lived apart. At age fourteen, she was sent to her husband's family and taught by her sister-in-law how to satisfactorily perform householder duties. When Ma eventually was united with her

⁷³ Alexander Lipski, "Life and Teachings of Anandamayi Ma," in *The Essential Sri Anandamayi Ma*, ed. Joseph Fitzgerald (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2007), 4-5.

husband, it is said that their marriage was never consummated. As Ma's cult following began to grow and her spiritual nature became more pronounced and known, Bholanatha eventually became one of her disciples. Their marriage therefore reflected more a companionship or hierarchal *guru*/disciple relationship in favor of Ma rather than a traditional marriage.

Over time, Anandamayi Ma became more popular as others began to sense an exulted, divine presence in her. She soon began to gain a number of devotees who treated her much like a living goddess. They visited her home in order to experience her *darshan*, and commonly asked for some *prasad*, sacred food that has been accepted by a deity and returned to the devotee, to be distributed. Both these actions resemble standard Hindu temple worship involving *murtis*, images of gods or goddesses. During *kirtans*, devotional services usually involving singing and chanting, held in her presence, Ma began to publically enter into trances, which only further increased the religious fervor generating around her.⁷⁴

After gaining some popularity by overcoming a serious illness, Ma entered a six-year stage known in her hagiography as the "play of *sadhana*." It was in these six years that she devoted herself to strict spiritual practices, which included meditations, mantra chants, and difficult *asanas* or yogic postures. Through these practices, it is said she began to understand her spiritual nature and develop *vibhutis*, miraculous powers. Although born a *Vaisnavite*, at her husband's request, Ma began chanting the name of the great goddess as well, since she believed all deities were one. Her chanting was not recognized by some of her neighbors as particularly divine, however, and they accused

⁷⁴ Ibid., 3-12.

her of being possessed. On the night of *jhulan purnima*, the popular August festival celebrating Krishna and Radha, Ma simultaneously performed the roles of both *guru* and *sisya* or disciple by initiating herself as a *guru* who had ultimate knowledge and identification with the divine. A couple of years later, Ma initiated her husband as a disciple, which can be considered another break with Hindu standard practice.

In 1924, Anandamayi Ma and Bholanath moved to Dacca, a major city in East Bengal. It was here that Anandamayi Ma's movement really began to prosper, and many devotees began showing up to their home seeking *darshan*. In her first public appearance, she participated in the *Kali puja*. During the *puja*, she placed flowers and sandal paste upon her head, which signaled to the crowd that she was in fact a visible, human manifestation of Kali. Such an action, although deviant, was still considered acceptable given the authoritative power that history and tradition allots the *guru*.

By 1927, Anandamayi Ma had developed enough popularity to begin touring northern India. In 1930, she made her first tour to South India as well, where she was warmly received.⁷⁵ In 1932, she spontaneously left Dacca on account of her *kheyala*.⁷⁶ She traveled extensively in the years following her departure, never staying long in any one place. Anandamayi Ma became a nationwide celebrity when she became a friend and spiritual adviser to Mahatma Gandhi and Indira Gandhi. As the hagiographer Alexander Lipski relates, there were no major historical landmarks for Anandamayi Ma from 1932 to her death in 1982 since she stayed out of politics and rarely commented on world events. Lipski described these years as an "unending procession of religious

⁷⁵ Imdb., 29-36.

⁷⁶ *Kheyala* refers to the spontaneous impulse of the divine will that guides Anandamayi Ma's actions and behavior.

festivals, *kirtanas* and *satsangas*, religious gatherings.⁷⁷ Today, there are twenty-eight *ashrams*, a charitable hospital, a school, and dispensaries, dedicated to Ma, which are all still active.

Anandamayi Ma and Gender Equality

While many Hindus recognize the saint-like quality of Anandamayi Ma, only her disciples and devotees worship her as an *avatara*, a divine incarnation of God in the form of a woman, and a personal *guru*. Women were as a whole allowed greater access to Anandamayi Ma in a number of ways that were not offered to men. Early in her ministry, Anandamayi Ma developed a dispassionate attitude towards her body and relied on devotees to aid her in even the most meager and basic of tasks like feeding herself. This responsibility to provide for her basic bodily needs fell upon her devotees and followers, almost exclusively women due to their gender.

Although her devotees consider Anandamayi Ma to be ultimately divine and therefore beyond gender, it was believed by some that Ma took on a female body in order to aid those women who wanted to engage in *sadhana*, spiritual practice. Lisa Hallstrom explains that many devotees assume Anandamayi Ma was a God incarnate who “came for the ladies.” She writes, “The primary way in which Anandamayi Ma's being a woman particularly benefited and inspired women was in granting women intimate access to her divine presence.”⁷⁸ Therefore, the fact that Anandamayi Ma was a major religious, spiritual leader and a woman inherently helped other women because she granted them close proximity to an assumed divine being and provided them with a safe spiritual

⁷⁷ Imdb., 43.

⁷⁸ Lisa Hallstrom, *Mother of Bliss* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 180.

instructor who would keep them from male spiritual frauds that could potentially take advantage of them. Since the Hindu tradition has allowed women to be divine incarnations, their movements have granted female devotees an opportunity to develop a deep, personal relationship with the divine in a material, feminine form, a rare situation and circumstance not permissible in many other religions. Although this is only one example of how Ma empowered women, her devotees often considered it the most beneficial.⁷⁹

Another way Ma particularly brought about more religious opportunities for women was through her institution of *kirtans*, all night chanting and singing sessions, in Dacca. Hallstrom described this inclusion as a “radical idea for the time.” This practice had originally not been open to women, but Ma saw no reason to exclude women. While this practice was especially popular for householder women, Ma was subtle and not confrontational in initiating and supporting this practice. She allowed *kirtans* to be held only in the middle of the night so as to not conflict with the women’s daily duties. One could interpret this practice either as a concession to patriarchal social order or simply a practical consideration of social demands. In order to provide for their families and fulfill their duties, householder women could not be expected to devote all their time to religious pursuits. Anandamayi Ma, by scheduling *kirtans* outside this time frame, kept her practices from disrupting the socio-economic structure.

Another significant way Anandamayi Ma changed the socio-religious status of woman had to do with her teaching and practice of the Hindu ceremony of *upanayana*. Ma in a radical move allowed women in her movement to take part in the ancient practice

⁷⁹ Ibid., 201.

of receiving the sacred thread. By allowing women the opportunity to become invested with the sacred thread, Ma granted them socio-religious participation that had been denied them for almost two thousand years.

The *upanayana* initiation served a two-fold function for Ma. It not only granted women further religious participation, but it also supported Ma's authoritative position in the Hindu tradition. In Hallstrom's ethnography, devotee Keshab Bhattacharya relates a humorous story about how Anandamayi Ma "obtained" her sacred thread. One day while playing with a gold chain, she wrapped it around her neck and arm like a Brahman would wear a sacred thread and announced, "Look, I'm now a *dvija*, a twice born." As I mentioned in the preceding chapter and discussion on *gurus*, both Anandamayi Ma and Ammachi were self-initiated, that is, they did not take the normal, socially acceptable and constructed paths to becoming an identifiable, respected religious figure. This becomes obvious in this story since Anandamayi Ma seems to, on a whim, initiate herself and perform the sacred thread ceremony. The fact that she also began initiating other devotees and distributing threads through the ceremony further demonstrates her assumed status, authority, and position.⁸⁰

However, it is important to note that Anandamayi Ma seems to have first searched for scriptural support before instituting and allowing the *upanayana* practice for women. One *brahmacharini* under Anandamayi Ma named Didi recounts to Hallstrom that she and others were asked by Ma to travel to Banaras and converse with scholars as to whether the sacred thread was ever presented to women. After some debate with multiple scholars, her devotees came to the consensus that the practice was prevalent in

⁸⁰ Ibid., 207.

“ancient times,” but that no instances of it could be found in modernity. They then went to Pandit Sri Gopinath Kaviraj, on Ma’s recommendation, since he was very knowledgeable on matters of ancient Vedic religion. According to Didi’s recollection of the dialogue, the pandit responded to their inquiry saying, "If Ma so desires, she can give the sacred thread to women even now. Ma's will is scriptural. No other opinion is necessary." After receiving this decision from a notable scholar on the topic, Anandamayi Ma invested two of her female disciples with the sacred thread in 1935 and continued thereafter asking select disciples whether they wanted to take up the thread as well.⁸¹

In reference to another ritual and practice of Vedic times, Ma also asked a group of women personally picked by her to plan and construct a *yajnashala*, a sacred fire ritual, at her main *ashram* in Kankhal. The women who took on the project had complete control over the ritual. They consulted an architect to help with the construction design, handled the finances and accounts, and researched the topic in order to properly conduct the ritual. Again, Ma invested women with an authority and practice that was not commonly granted to them by the orthodox tradition.

While both the *yajnashala* and *upanayana* ceremony gave new and exciting opportunities to women they were not allowed to all devotees. The *yajna* construction and the sacred thread ceremony were only given to *brahmacharinis*, those that had taken religious vows and proven themselves competent to Ma. Consequently, these privileges were not just given to women for the sake of them being female but to help them develop spiritually. Nevertheless, Hallstrom recounts that Ma seems to have instilled a strong

⁸¹ Ibid., 207.

sense of independence in these women through her leadership and example. She writes, "Ma empower the women close to her to learn new skills and take charge of things which were normally within the male domain."⁸² While only a select few participated in such rituals, the public display of these rituals must have spoken volumes to women especially involved within the movement but also outside of it as well. The fact that Anandamayi Ma did not discriminate with regards to gender by actual practice and organization rather than simply through discourse no doubt set a standard for future female *gurus* and influenced gender relations within the larger Hindu tradition.

Most of my discussion thus far has been with regards to women who had taken religious vows and were particularly close to Anandamayi Ma. I would now like to turn my attention towards householder women, those who were devotees, but already invested with a family, and therefore, were not primarily concerned with the ascetic, religious life. Anandamayi Ma would often personally counsel these women when they approached her with questions and problems. While we cannot apply one teaching of Ma to all women, by taking specific discourses and recounting particular situations and stories, we can begin to generalize and highlight a basic attitude Ma seems to have had with regards to marriage and the duty of a wife.

What is interesting and slightly paradoxical about Ma is that she in no way embodied the ideal, traditional wife in her own marriage and did not particularly offer her model of behavior as an example to be followed. One of the more striking quotes from Ma was, "Do as I say, Not as I do." In doing so, she put herself in a place of ultimate authority and discouraged others from emulating her actions. This specific teaching is

⁸² Ibid., 209.

difficult to reconcile with the argument at the center of this study regarding the role of *guru* I presented before. *Gurus* seem to inherently embody the ideal, which is made apparent through their actions. If Ma was truly a living, breathing example of virtue, why did she not want her devotees to follow her example? I do not have a definitive answer to this question and can only present Anandamayi Ma's position through texts relating her words and action. Through these lenses, it seems Ma held many conservative views on how women, particularly householders, should live, but criticized the patriarchal, misogynist portions of the traditional views.⁸³

As discussed earlier, Hindu women have traditionally been expected to be subordinate to their husbands and to treat them as gods. While Anandamayi Ma condoned such a teaching, she also extended its application to the male partner in marriage as well. That is, according to Anandamayi Ma, husbands should treat their wives as goddesses as well. Such a teaching and recommendation denotes a sense of equality in a marriage relationship, and I believe it is this underlying assumption that we should keep in mind when we listen to Anandamayi Ma's demands to some women that they should continue to be a faithful, loving, serving wife.

From this teaching, I believe it is safe to assume that Anandamayi Ma did not condone any kind of unequal, abusive relationship. Her teaching was not to keep women in an oppressive domestic environment but to minimize conflict and encourage harmonious living conditions. Such a prescription also aimed primarily to improve a woman's relationship with the divine rather than a temporal human being like their husband. Ma believed that by cultivating an eternal state of service, a person would

⁸³ Ibid., 210.

naturally merge closer to the ultimate. This virtue was of course a major aspect of the monastic regimen found within Ma's ashrams, and so it seems obvious that in this particular case, the similar "spirit" of an ascetic, monastic ideal spilt into Ma's domestic, householder duty prescriptions. That is, the spiritual values she had hoped to foster in all humans, changed in surface function given a person's socio-religious status and conditions, but remained the same in the underlying point and intention. This sense of service was the broader, more general religious theme and attitude Ma intended to instill in all people regardless of social role or gender.

Anandamayi Ma like Ammachi also directly commented on gender equality through her discourse. Anandamayi Ma is reported to have said:

You are the Self of All, you are He. He is neither masculine nor feminine. Therefore here, too, there is no question of man or woman. In all men and women is He alone. The Self in everybody is genderless.⁸⁴

While it may seem confusing that Anandamayi Ma refers to the ultimate reality in this passage often as a "He" when she clearly sees the divine as genderless, to be completely preoccupied with proper semantics is to lose the greater significance of this teaching. Gender-neutral language may seem more appropriate given this description and understanding, but through this explanation by Ma herself it is easy to decipher the true meaning behind her words. From this statement, it is clear that Ma has no intention on relating the male sex as higher or more spiritual. Such an understanding would conflict with all devotees and Ma's own understanding. Therefore, we can assume that although Anandamayi Ma may use masculine pronouns to refer to the divine or ultimate reality,

⁸⁴ Lisa Hallstrom, "Anandamayi Ma, the Bliss-Filled Divine Mother," in *The Graceful Guru*, ed. Karen Pechilis (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 108-109.

she does not truly mean the ultimate reality is inherently male. We should keep this clarified understanding of gender specific language at the forefront of our minds in each quote from Ma we encounter.

My description above is by no means an exhaustive account of Anandamayi Ma's work and views regarding women. My intention in including such a brief summary was to first and foremost support my argument through multiple examples. Simply put, the more concrete, individual ethnographies I can present which relate a strong bond between the empowerment of women and female *gurus* or "spiritual mothers," the more my argument concerning this general socio-religious trend is supported. As I related above, Anandamayi Ma was one of the first popular female *gurus* or "spiritual mothers" in the twentieth century who acquired a substantial following. Although Anandamayi Ma passed away in 1982, in many ways, I see her work and role as paving the way for contemporary *gurus* like Ammachi. While these two *gurus* and their movements are not in agreement on every issue regarding the female gender, the general intention behind their teachings and practices seems to link them with one another.

VI: AMMACHI

To exemplify the unique nature of Ammachi's movement and signature religious practice I will relate two different experiences relating to the Hindu mother goddess I have had in India and the United States. The first experience involves the Chamundeshwari temple, a popular pilgrimage site for goddess devotees in South India. This example relates to the traditional, orthodox practice of Hindu mother goddess worship. The second experience is an Ammachi Devi *Bhava* program. By comparing and contrasting these two experiences, I hope to accentuate the numerous differences between Ammachi's *darshan* ceremony and traditional, orthodox Hindu practice.

Traditional Mother Goddess Worship

The Chamundeshwari temple is one of the most popular pilgrimage sites dedicated to a manifestation of the Hindu mother goddess in all of South India. It is located on a 3, 000 foot peak in the Chamundi Hills overlooking the Indian city of Mysore. The Hindu goddess Chamundi is believed to reside throughout the Chamundi hills as an omniscient force as well as in the form of a *murti*, a physical image of the goddess, found within the temple. I was able to visit the Chamundeshwari temple while studying abroad in India during the fall of 2006.

My visit began with a bus trip through the city of Mysore and the Chamundi hills bordering the city. The day was cool, and the sky was partly cloudy, hinting rain. As we zig-zagged our way up the steep mountain, I admired the view overlooking the city and breathed in some fresh mountain air, taking advantage of the refreshing change of

environment and atmosphere from the smog filled city below. I, like the many Hindu pilgrims accompanying me on the trip, was planning to pay my respects to the Hindu goddess Chamundi that day. When our ascent ended at the top of the hill, we piled out of the bus. Greeting us pilgrims was a sixteen-foot tall image of the demon Mahishasura, an important character in the Chamundi myth.

Standing directly in front of this image I could see the temple as well as the massive *gopuram* of the Chamundeshwari temple in the distance. *Gopurams*, large, intricately carved towers at the entrance of a Hindu temple, are a common addition to major Hindu temples. Raju, my temple guide, explained to me that *gopuram* comes from the root word “go”, which means “cow”, and “pura”, which means “town.” The horns curving inward found on the Chamundeshwari *gopuram*, as well as other temple *gopurams*, symbolize the sacred significance of the cow to the Hindu tradition. Most *gopurams* display images or reliefs associated with the major god or goddess of the temple and tell myths or tales through the carvings. Raju explained the Chamundeshwari temple *gopuram* showed the seven faces or images of the goddess Chamundi.

After walking through the numerous shops preceding the temple, I found myself before the great entrance. I removed my shoes, gave them to a shoe clerk, and received a “shoe token” which would help me retrieve my shoes later.⁸⁵ After handing off my shoes, I took a place at the back of the *darshan* line heading into the temple. A *darshan* line leading to the most popular *murti* of the temple is also a very common feature of Hindu temples. *Darshan*, a Hindi word, which is often translated as, “seeing and being seen by God”, refers to an experience of personal connection with the divine. The ultimate aim

⁸⁵ To enter a home or sacred place like temples wearing your shoes is considered ritualistically impure in India.

of any Hindu ritual revolves around this intimate exchange of glances and spiritual energy. *Darshan* is aided by *murtis*, physical images of a god or goddess, such as a picture or statue. Once a god or goddess is invoked in a *murti*, the statue is no longer simply an image; rather, it is the deity. The inner sanctum of the Chamundeshwari temple is home to a popular and powerful Chamundi *murti*.

Friday is an auspicious day to visit the Chamundeshwari temple, so there was quite a crowd waiting in the *darshan* line during my visit. The Chamundeshwari temple is a relatively small temple compared to other major pilgrimage centers throughout India. The temple houses only one supreme *murti* of Chamundi, and the *darshan* line leads almost directly to the inner sanctum which holds her. Standing in line, I viewed my surroundings. Some monkeys strutting on the *gopuram* and temple walls immediately attracted my attention as well as the brilliant architecture and intricate carvings lining the interior walls of the temple. As the line steadily crawled forward, I began to hear the chants of a Hindu *brahman* grow louder.

A typical Hindu *puja*, or worship ritual, involves one or more *brahmans*, Hindu priests traditionally reserved for men alone, performing numerous acts of worship of a *murti*. At the Chamundeshwari temple, I noticed that only male *brahmans* performed the ritual activities. Although this was a temple particularly dedicated to the goddess, no women were directly involved in the *puja*. There were many women in the *darshan* line with me, but none of them took in active role in the rituals directed towards the *murti*. As explained above, this is standard procedure for most Hindu temple practice. Throughout my temple visits in India, both those dedicated to gods and goddesses, I never saw one woman take the role of a *brahman* and perform *pujas*.

When I finally made my way to the *puja* room holding the *murti*, a bar positioned several yards from the image held me back from the image. The Chamundi *murti* was placed on a pedestal a little above my own eye level so devotees could see it from a distance. The goddess was highly decorated, dressed in a beautiful sari and wearing an impressive garland of flowers that covered most of her. Only the golden face of the goddess and her numerous weapon-wielding arms extending from her body remained uncovered. I had a few seconds at the front of the line before the *murti*. During that time, *brahmins* were ringing bells and offering fire to the *murti*. Hindu devotees, both male and female, circled me displaying sincere acts of devotion and reverence towards the goddess, which including murmuring chants, pressing their palms together, and bowing towards the *murti*. One of the priests near the *murti* was handing out holy water. After receiving some holy water, I was motioned to move to the left, out of the *puja* room, in order to allow other devotees the opportunity to be in close proximity to the *murti*.

As I look back on this experience in India, I realize how different this encounter with the divine mother was from the *darshan* I had experienced with a living Hindu goddess incarnate only a few months earlier in the United States. On July 8, 2006, I attended a Devi *Bhava* program held by Ammachi and her religious cult. Like the Chamundeshwari temple visit, the program incorporated many of the fundamental elements of a *puja* in the Hindu tradition, including *murtis* and *darshan*, but it ultimately differed in understanding and practice. For instance, the *puja* was directed towards Ammachi who, according to her devotees, is a divine manifestation of the mother goddess. She was the temple *murti* for the evening and the catalyst for the *darshan*.

There was also a significant difference concerning the influence of women, because female devotees in the *Devi Bhava* program actually had an integral part in the ceremony. They aided Ammachi in the ritual aspects of the *puja* and helped visitors and other devotees throughout the Ammachi *darshan* process. They acted as supervisors, managing the ceremony and heeding Ammachi's instructions.

As I related in my experience of the Chamundeshwari temple, the ultimate aim of any Hindu ritual revolves around *darshan*, an experience of personal connection with the divine. *Darshan*, translated as "seeing", is considered to be essentially a visual, mystical experience that involves seeing the deity and being seen by the deity. However, *darshan* to an Ammachi devotee entails a slightly different practice. Although the visual aspect of standard *darshan* is still present by simply gazing upon Ammachi, a physical aspect is included as well. To receive ultimate *darshan* from Ammachi is to receive one of her spiritual hugs, which is a significant trademark of Ammachi. Although other *gurus* may allow physical contact and affection in special circumstances, no *guru* has put quite the emphasis on hugging as Ammachi, which explains why to many she is called "the hugging saint."⁸⁶

Devi *Bhava* program

Ammachi *darshan* takes place within a religious ceremony entitled the *Devi Bhava* program. *Devi Bhava* can be translated as "the mood of the goddess." One interpretation of the program asserts that she is possessed by the goddess or used as a vessel for the goddess to communicate through her, making her a passive recipient of a

⁸⁶ Selva J. Raj, "Ammachi, the Mother of Compassion," in *The Graceful Guru*, ed. Karen Pechilis (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 215.

transcendent deity. Another understanding of the program makes Ammachi an active agent and relates that she consciously decides to manifest her innate goddess nature. There is no one, definitive perspective on this matter, and many devotees have their own interpretations of what metaphysically happens in the program. Nevertheless, while exhibiting this divine persona, Ammachi offers hugs to all those who approach her. According to the devotees, this is not simply a hug you would receive from a family member or friend; but rather, a hug from the mother goddess herself. Many devotees describe the hug as an intense, moving, mystical experience that results in feelings of overwhelming love, peace, and joy. Since Ammachi *darshan* is a significant part of this *guru's* religious practice, I would like to relate my own experience of the Devi *Bhava* program I experienced in the summer of 2006.

The Devi *Bhava* program I attended was held in a gymnasium on Wesleyan College campus in Mount Pleasant, Iowa. When I first entered the building, an Ammachi devotee handing out “*darshan* tokens” greeted me. She asked me and the other members of my group whether it was our first time to see Ammachi. I replied yes, and she handed me a “*darshan* token”. Those who have never attended a Devi *Bhava* program before are allowed into an earlier group for *darshan*. A letter and number were printed on each token to indicate which *darshan* group you belonged to, and later in the service, groups were called one by one to receive a spiritual hug from Ammachi.

After receiving my “*darshan* token”, I made my way into the gymnasium and found an open area on the floor to sit. The program began with a discourse by Ammachi followed by a short meditation. She was positioned on a stage and dressed in a plain white sari. After these two preliminary events, Ammachi retreated from the stage for

sometime. My companions and I used the intercession before the Devi *Bhava* program to walk around the college campus and eat a meal in the cafeteria. After sometime, we made our way back into the gym just before Amma reappeared. When Amma returned to the stage, I noticed her appearance had drastically changed. She was dressed like a Hindu deity, wearing a sparkling green sari and a crown on her head. After taking a seat on a throne provided for her on the stage, she immediately started administering her signature hugging *darshan*. Ammachi's dress and position greatly resembled the Chamundi *murti* I described above since both goddesses were dressed in elaborate saris and placed on a platform.

When my *darshan* group was called, I took a seat in a group of chairs bordering the stage, which was used as a preparation or loading station. A woman devotee walked around the group passing out Ammachi pamphlets and asking whether anyone wanted to be initiated into Ammachi's meditation practice. After slowly moving through the rows of chairs in front of me, I was finally allowed to climb onto the stage. Taking cues from the devotees that had gone before me, I took a kneeling position and began scooting my way on my knees in line up to Ammachi. The stage environment was bustling with activity. Ammachi helpers, both male and female, occupied most of the stage: giving instructions to visitors on proper *darshan* etiquette, attending to Ammachi, and facilitating the *darshan* procedure. Soon I was guided into a position right in front of Ammachi and found myself face to face with the female *guru*. With one quick, fluid motion, she kissed me on the forehead and wrapped me in a large embrace. While hugging, she brought her mouth close to my ear and chanted, "ma, ma, ma, ma, ma." After Ammachi released me from her embrace, she presented me with some *prasad*, a

sacred, blessed offering, in the form of a chocolate sweet. Since I was slightly dazed, an Ammachi volunteer slowly helped me off the stage. When I found an open space, I sat down for a few minutes and let the feelings and emotions of the encounter sink in.

My own Ammachi *darshan* experience relates the generic procedure of the ritual, but there were small variations to each personal encounter. Ammachi sometimes showered the individual with kisses or offered gentle caressing strokes. If the individual had a personal question for Ammachi, a translator was nearby to help with a brief question and answer session. The Devi *Bhava* ceremony usually lasts for many hours depending on the size of the crowd. At the ceremony I attended, Ammachi began hugging at seven P.M. in the evening and was still hugging when I left at three A.M. Her devotees claim that Ammachi does not refuse anyone and will hug everyone, regardless of class, ethnicity, or gender, who wishes to receive a hug.

The physical aspect of Ammachi's *darshan* is what separates it from the conventional notion of Hindu *darshan*. *Darshan* has always been referred to as a "religious seeing" or "visual perception of the sacred" which does not imply physical human contact. Ammachi's *darshan* on the contrary involves numerous physical acts like hugging, kissing, stroking, and whispering. Selva Raj, an Ammachi scholar, notes, "physicality, in direct contrast or defiance of Hindu ritual norms and prescriptions, is the hallmark of Ammachi *darshans*."⁸⁷ Although traditional Hindu rituals have always involved a vibrant, multi-sensory experience, Ammachi's *darshan* seems to take this notion further by emphasizing physical contact between the goddess and the devotee in the form of Ammachi hugging the person.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 214.

This physical nature of Ammachi's *darshan* is truly a radical invention considering the social and cultural context Ammachi and her practice belong to. Indian culture does not traditionally tolerate any physical forms of affection between strangers, especially women and men. In the time I spent in India, I rarely saw public displays of affection between members of the opposite sex. Such actions were at most hand holding, and usually done in the seclusion of a large park, far away from a public social setting. Publicly touching and kissing a person of another gender is a major taboo according to Hindu social expectations. As Raj points out though, "Amma embraces, hugs, strokes, and kisses her devotees in total disregard to their gender moral condition, and physical purity."⁸⁸ Only a Hindu *guru* who is outside the traditional social realms and has such social and religious authority could be allowed to institute such an action and continuously receive social support.

Ammachi Hagiography

Mata Amritanandamayi or simply Ammachi is one of the most popular female spiritual leaders to emerge in the late twentieth century. Her religious cult has grown significantly since its humble beginning in the early 1980's, and today, she has many male and female devotees in both India and abroad. Ammachi's hagiography reads as a testament to the prestige of the *guru* social position and the radical transformation the Hindu tradition is currently undergoing with regards to gender relations. As strict caste barriers are slowly being dissolved, women are beginning to occupy significant positions in the once patriarchal Hindu tradition.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 214.

As scholar Timothy Conway notes, Ammachi's hagiography, like many other female Hindu saints, reads like a "Cinderella" tale.⁸⁹ Ammachi was born on September 27, 1953 to a poor, low-caste family in a rural fishing village on the India coastal state of Kerala. Her birth and childhood are mythical, filled with miraculous events and occurrences. Ammachi's hagiography claims she was smiling at birth and had a "bluish" tint to her skin, which eventually turned to dark brown. She was able to walk within six months and was singing songs of devotion to Krishna, a god in the Hindu tradition, by age two.

As a child, Ammachi like Anandamayi Ma was known to fall into spiritual trances. She showed and expressed extreme devotion towards Krishna, a Hindu deity, through her praise and worship. Although nearby villagers soon recognized her divine potential, she was often mistreated by her family and was eventually forced to work as a servant girl in order to increase the income for the family. Ammachi's adolescence and early adult life was filled with long days of work. She also cautiously but defiantly avoided any marriage offers her parents attempted to subject her to.⁹⁰

Ammachi's public mission began on March 1975, when she was twenty-two. While attending a large Krishna festival, she fell into a spiritual trance. Many people witnessed this miraculous event and soon afterwards, Ammachi began to accumulate a small band of devotees. She gained a reputation for being able to manifest Krishna Bhava, or "the mood of Lord Krishna", and devotees believed Krishna communicated divine love through her. As a result, Ammachi's devotees began to hold several

⁸⁹ Timothy Conway, *Women of Power and Grace* (Santa Barbara: The Wake Up Press, 1994), 247.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 247-249.

ceremonies a week in which they dressed Ammachi up as Krishna, and praised her as the god. However, the masses did not immediately accept Ammachi in her humble beginnings. As her reputation began to grow and her number of devotees multiplied, Ammachi and her devotees came under attack from politicians and critics, which led to several attempts made on her life.⁹¹

Although in her early years Ammachi was more closely linked with Krishna, she later became devoted to the divine mother. Ammachi became fixated with the mother goddess after she received a dazzling vision of the goddess in one of her trances. Ammachi's hagiography claims she spent six months on a retreat practicing one-pointed mindfulness and other austerities that culminated in non-dual realization or enlightenment. That is, when she finished this six-month retreat, she was believed to have obtained complete union with the divine mother as well as a permanent non-dual perspective. After this experience, she became known to her visitors and followers as "Amma" or "Ammachi", and *Devi Bhava*, "the mood of the Divine Mother", replaced *Krishna Bhava* in her religious ceremonies.⁹²

Her formal ashram named "Amritapuri" was completed in 1981. Since the opening of the ashram, it has expanded significantly, including a temple and five-floor dormitory, to accommodate the ever-growing number of Ammachi devotees from around the world. In 1987, Ammachi made her first visit to the West and was warmly received. In 1989, she set up a new ashram in Oakland, California, which has become her headquarters in the Western hemisphere. Throughout the 1990's and 2000's, Ammachi visited numerous countries gaining more followers and believers with each visit. Today,

⁹¹ Ibid., 249-251.

⁹² Ibid., 252-253.

she is one of the most recognizable and popular Hindu female *gurus* in India, and her *satsang* groups, communities of Ammachi devotees, span across thirty-three countries.⁹³

Ammachi and Gender Equality

Ammachi has supported gender equality through her religious ceremonies, discourses, and social programs. Selva Raj describes Ammachi's practice as a "discourse of defiance", which involves "the departures, innovations, and reforms Ammachi has subtly introduced into the Hindu ritual tradition."⁹⁴ Ammachi seems to be a reformer, working within the Hindu tradition, rather than a revolutionary, completely rejecting the tradition, in the way that she has maintained a constant dialogue and affiliation with the tradition.⁹⁵ Her hagiography, filled with tales of Hindu god and goddess possession, relates this as well. Although Ammachi is radically changing ritual practice, social attitudes between the devotees in the tradition, and metaphysical notions and ideas of the feminine, she still seems very closely tied with the Hindu tradition.

Ammachi has been known to support the Vedanta school of Indian philosophy since she has encouraged her devotees and followers to specifically learn the classic Hindu Vedanta scriptures.⁹⁶ The Vedanta view rests on the presupposition of non-dualism, a world-view that claims that a dual mode of thinking is illusory. According to this philosophy, the divine is ultimately both spirit and matter. Ammachi has said, "The

⁹³ Ibid., 253-259.

⁹⁴ Selva J. Raj, "Ammachi, the Mother of Compassion." in *The Graceful Guru*, ed. Karen Pechilis (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 214.

⁹⁵ Karen Pechilis, "Introduction: Hindu Female Gurus in Historical and Philosophical Context," in *The Graceful Guru*, ed. Karen Pechilis (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 3-7.

⁹⁶ Timothy Conway, *Women of Power and Grace* (Santa Barbara: The Wake Up Press, 1994), 256.

goal is to reach the non-dual State, abandoning all imaginings born of plurality.”⁹⁷ The Vedanta philosophy conflicts with the Samkya philosophy, which proposes a dualism between *purusha*, spirit, and *prakrti*, matter. *Purusha* is considered masculine by nature and *prakrti* is considered feminine by nature.

In her essay “Is the *Devi Mahatmya* a Feminist Scripture?” Cynthia Ann Humes argues that followers of the Samkhya philosophy held an elevated view of *purusha*, and condemned *prakrti*. She writes, “Centuries before, as these polar principles were gradually adapted and adopted into Hindu orthodoxy, despite impulses toward unity, the material was progressively devalued and *purusha* was exalted as a true reality, apart from *prakrti*, and identical with absolute reality.”⁹⁸ Humes further explains, “The creators of the *Devi Mahatmya* envisioned the single, ultimate force of the universe to be fully resident within the phenomenal world.”⁹⁹ Humes later relates this as “divine materialism” and explains that the scripture’s authors “reject traditional philosophical explanation mired in dualism.”¹⁰⁰

Humes’ interpretation of the *Devi Mahatmya* is congruent with the Vedanta philosophy Ammachi seems to support through her own observations. By focusing on a non-dual theology, Ammachi raises the sacredness and holiness of *prakrti* or matter, the feminine aspect of the universe. Ammachi echoes this non-dual world-view by

⁹⁷ Ibid., 286.

⁹⁸ Cynthia Ann Humes, “Is the *Devi Mahatmya* a Feminist Scripture?” in *Is the Goddess a Feminist? The Politics of South Asian Goddesses*, ed. Kathleen Erndl and Alf Hiltebeitel (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 129.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 129.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 131.

explaining, “The creator and creation are not two.”¹⁰¹ She is also recorded as saying, “the creator is creation... It’s divine power we see in different forms.”¹⁰² Ammachi observes the phenomenal, corporeal world as a divine realm; the physicality of Ammachi's *darshan* supports this assertion as well. By employing bodily, physical contact with the divine through *darshan*, Ammachi seems to be reaffirming the divinity of matter, and such a statement seems congruent with the central theme behind the *Devi Mahatmya*.

Another interesting characteristic involving Ammachi’s gender equality is her teaching with regards to menstruation. The traditional, orthodox view of Hinduism based on the ideals outlined in *The Laws of Manu* sees menstruation as an impurity that bars women from participating in a number of religious functions. Ammachi seems to defy these traditional taboos by encouraging menstruating women to participate in chants and rituals and accept her spiritual hugs. This is clearly not the normal, standard mode of behavior allowed in most functions of the Hindu tradition. As I have indicated, Ammachi is the equivalent of a deity in her *Devi Bhava* ceremonies; yet, it would be considered extremely inauspicious for a menstruating Hindu woman to touch or come into any contact or vicinity of a Hindu *murti*. This special accommodation is not a characteristic or teaching shared by all *gurus* either. While I was in the presence of another popular Hindu *guru* in India, a devotee explained to all the women in the group that, if they were menstruating, they should not touch or come too close to the *guru*.

The traditional view towards menstruation has transplanted itself even to Hindu practice on foreign soil. While I observed and participated in a Hindu ritual in the United

¹⁰¹ “The Creator and The Creation Are Not Two: Amma in Kottakkal,” <http://archives.amritapuri.org/amma/2006/601kottakkal.php>, accessed March 14, 2007.

¹⁰² “Portrait of the Hugging Saint,” http://www.beliefnet.com/story/196/story_19681_1.html, accessed March 15, 2007.

States by a largely Caucasian group, women were advised to not participate directly in the *puja* if they were menstruating. This concession was made according to the supervisor of the ritual out of “respect for the tradition” and most likely at the request of the visiting *brahman* or Hindu priest. The festival that we were celebrating that evening was *Shivaratri*. It was a unique event in itself, because all guests were given the opportunity to participate in the ritual directly. In the performance hall in which it was held, a number of miniature Shiva *lingas* were positioned around the room. Small groups of four or five people would surround the *linga* performing the necessary rituals usually allowed only for a *brahman*. Women who were menstruating were allowed to meditate on the periphery of the ritual, but not to interact with the substances. From my own experiences with Hindu ritual, it seems this common request by most *gurus* and *brahmans* is simply disregarded by Ammachi. One of Ammachi’s chief *sannyasins* Swami Dayamrita related to me in a survey that, “Many masters do not allow women to touch them while the women are in periods. Amma compassionately hugs them all the time.”

The menstruation issue inevitably brings up purity issues concerning women within the Hindu tradition. By allowing women to receive Ammachi *darshan* even when they are menstruating, is Ammachi refuting the traditional notion that women are unclean and impure when they are in this state? There can be no definitive answer to this question since it involves Ammachi’s personal motives, and I have been unable to uncover any teaching by Ammachi on the matter. However, by allowing women who are menstruating to receive her *darshan*, Ammachi exhibits yet another sense of gender

equality. By not excluding these women, Ammachi allows all humans regardless of caste, gender, or “purity” to receive her *darshan*.

Ammachi’s most radical act of defiance against traditional, orthodox Hinduism directly involves the empowerment of women. Ammachi has significantly raised the position of women in Hindu ritual roles by implementing women as priests. Orthodox, brahmanical Hindu practice has always followed strict gender rules regarding *brahmins*, the priestly caste of Hindu men who perform *pujas* or worship of the deities. In most practices of the Hindu tradition today and by example from my Chamundeshwari temple experience, this gender discrimination has been upheld, but Ammachi has initiated a new convention. She has encouraged her female *sannyasins*, “renouncers” that lead an ascetic life, to study sacred Hindu texts and even perform *pujas* in her sponsored temples. In November 1997, Ammachi first appointed some of her female disciples as priestesses in her temples at Kaimanam and Kodungallur in Kerala.¹⁰³ Ammachi has also personally consecrated all the temples built by her organization. Such a bold, unprecedented motion did not escape criticism from those in favor of a more traditional Hindu perspective. Ammachi responded to these criticisms by explaining, “we are worshiping a God who is beyond all differences, who does not differentiate between male and female.”¹⁰⁴ This response displays Ammachi’s concern for gender equality in society and in the positions and practice of the Hindu tradition.

¹⁰³ “Women Priests – Reviving an Ancient Tradition”

<http://www.amritapuri.org/cultural/temple/wpriest.php>, accessed March 3, 2007.

¹⁰⁴ “Women are not potted plants”

<http://www.amritapuri.org/media/india/iexpress2000.php>, accessed February 27, 2007.

In her study of Ammachi and Hindu selfhood, Maya Warrier writes that Ammachi believes women are able to obtain spiritual knowledge easier than men.¹⁰⁵ We see this perspective emphasized by Ammachi in one of her major dialogue or scriptures series entitled *Awaken, Children!*¹⁰⁶ Ammachi is recorded to have said:

Spiritual realization is easier for a woman to attain than for a man, provided she has the proper discrimination and determination. But by nature, women are yielding and giving and this often results in being unsteady.”¹⁰⁷ She also includes, “Women are the repositories of infinite power. In spiritual matters they can surpass what many men attempt to do; therefore, do not think that women are lower than men.”¹⁰⁸ It is clear from these passages that Ammachi believes the female sex is more spiritually inclined and therefore able to obtain higher knowledge easier than the male sex. Ammachi's spiritual practice focuses on developing an emotional, devotional longing for one's *guru* or Ammachi. Ammachi assumes that women are as a whole more "emotional than men" and therefore are more in tune with their spiritual side of being.

Part of any call for socio-political change involves substantial rhetoric, and gender equality has been a major topic in Ammachi's public discourses as well. I have collected a few choice excerpts from her numerous public speeches to illustrate and clarify Ammachi's position on the female sex. In one of her more popular recorded discourses involving women, Ammachi said, “women should not be kept like potted plants. They

¹⁰⁵ Maya Warrier, *Hindu Selves in a Modern World*, (New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2005), 58.

¹⁰⁶ This multi-volume series contains numerous transcriptions of Ammachi discussions and teachings on a number of different topics. There are eight volumes published today chronicling her teachings up to 1986.

¹⁰⁷ Mata Amritanandamayi, *Awaken Children! Volume IV*, ed. Swami Amritasvarupananda (Kerala: Mata Amritanandamayi Mission Trust, 1992), 13.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 15.

should have the freedom to develop fully, reach their potential.”¹⁰⁹ It is clear from this recommendation that Ammachi does not support the suppression and subservience of women most commonly attributed to traditional Hindu society. In fact, this teaching sharply conflicts with the Hindu wife stereotype and prescription outlined in *The Laws of Manu*. One can assert from this statement that Ammachi wants women to be allowed to express themselves freely. Ammachi has even taken the gender equality argument to a metaphysical, spiritual plane. She has said, “In the eyes of God, men and women are equal. How can one possibly justify saying that a woman, who is the creator of man, is inferior to man?” Ammachi is ultimately appealing to a higher force and relating a higher code of ethics. By doing so, she is also raising the status of women by explaining that women and men are equally divine.

Universal Motherhood

In 2002, Ammachi received the Gandhi-King award for her non-violent policies and stance and was the keynote speaker at The Global Peace Initiative of Women Religious and Spiritual Leaders. In her address, entitled “Awaken the Universal Motherhood”, Ammachi discussed the role and position of women in the world today and supported “universal motherhood” as a compassionate, loving, spiritual virtue that should be cultivated by all regardless of sex. In one quote she outlines the role religion should play in supporting gender equality. Ammachi says, “No authentic religion belittles or denigrates women. For those who have realized God, there is no difference between

¹⁰⁹ “Women are not potted plants”

<http://www.amritapuri.org/media/india/iexpress2000.php>, accessed February 27, 2007.

male and female.”¹¹⁰ Sex is a temporal category and distinction, which does not last beyond this realm of existence according to Ammachi. Ammachi continues:

The realized ones have equal vision. If anywhere in the world there exist rules that prevent women from enjoying their rightful freedom, rules that obstruct their progress in society, then those are not God’s commandments, but are born out of the selfishness of men.¹¹¹

Such a powerful statement clearly divorces true “religion” and “religious virtue” from patriarchal domination and suppression and aligns Ammachi with a viewpoint and perspective that supports gender equality.

Later in the speech Ammachi says, “Which eye is more important, the left or the right? Both are equally important. It is the same with the status of men and women in society.”¹¹² By likening women and men to two complimentary sense organs Ammachi again reasserts her egalitarian values. She continues, “Both should be aware of their unique responsibilities, or dharma. Men and women have to support one another. Only in this way can we maintain harmony of the world.”¹¹³ This passage seems to clarify Ammachi’s understanding of sex and gender. For her, there are gender roles and general duties for each sex to play; yet, neither should be considered more privileged. She teaches that the two sexes in dealing with one other should adopt an attitude of complementation rather than promote a relationship based on an uneven hierarchy. In this way, Ammachi’s teaching greatly mirrors Anandamayi Ma’s call for harmonious, equal relationships between marriage partners.

Ammachi further explains her trademark teaching of “universal motherhood” by

¹¹⁰“Amma receives the 2002 Gandhi-King award”

<http://www.amma.org/amma/international-forum/geneva.html>, accessed January 9, 2009.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Ibid.

way of poetry in her popular devotee book “Messages from Amma.” As a mother goddess manifestation, this teaching does not seem too much of an extension, yet it relates a spiritual virtue which accentuates the feminine, but can be cultivated by all. I have included two poems to further clarify this notion.

Anyone-man or woman-
who has the courage to overcome
the limits of the mind,
can attain the state of *universal motherhood*.
The love of awakened motherhood
is a loving compassion
not only for one's own children
but for all people,
animals, plants, rocks, and rivers.
It is a love extended
to all nature's beings.
For one who has awakened to true motherhood,
every creature is his or her child.
Such love, such *motherhood*, is divine Love,
which is God.¹¹⁴

In this poem, “Universal Motherhood,” Ammachi likens “awakened motherhood” to “compassion” and “love” making the three ideas congruent or synonymous with one another. Both compassion and love are of course major religious virtues that numerous Indian religious traditions praise and encourage. According to Ammachi, a true mother exhibits and embodies these qualities. Ammachi also further explains that the love and compassion of an “awakened motherhood” extends beyond biologically related families and includes not only all people, but natural beings and features such as “animals, plants, rocks, and rivers.” A true mother develops an intimate, personal relationship with all of these beings to the point that they acknowledge them as “his or her child.”

¹¹⁴ Mata Amritanandamayi. *Messages from Amma: In the Language of the Heart*, ed. Janine Canan (Berkeley: Celestial Arts, 2004), 22.

In this poem, one of Ammachi's most telling on her idea of "universal motherhood," Ammachi endows the seemingly socio-biological function of motherhood, depending on the lens through which you peer, with spiritual connotations. She first extends the idea of motherhood beyond the boundaries of human relationships by including other natural beings in the sphere of love and compassion. She also in another sense extracts the gender specificity of motherhood by saying that "universal motherhood" is a state that any "man or woman" can obtain. She contrasts the basic socio-biological function of motherhood with her new presented interpretation. For Ammachi, "universal motherhood" is beyond a woman giving birth or showing affection and care towards a biological or socially designated child. It is equated with love and compassion and signifies a perfect state that demonstrates and exemplifies these attitudes and characteristics. According to Ammachi, "universal motherhood" is the ideal that all devotees should be aiming towards.

The greatest function such a teaching does with respect to gender is it makes motherhood, a feminine characteristic by language and social understanding, the highest spiritual endeavor. To be more divine or to move closer to the ultimate is to essentially be a "universal mother," but again as must be emphasized, not in a limited socio-biological way. While Ammachi uses motherhood to point to an ideal and virtue beyond gender distinctions, the fact that she still characterizes motherhood as a divine virtue, gives reverence to the feminine. This is in one sense empowering for women and femininity since it relates that all people should develop this essential feminine quality. While "universal motherhood" is clearly understood to be beyond the socio-temporal designation, it no doubt is modeled on it, and it is this initial, rudimentary tie that praises

women and the feminine. Through this recommendation, Ammachi essentially uses a model of compassion, a mother-child relationship, and presents it as a universal virtue extending to a larger audience. In doing so, she divinely sanctions this relationship, commenting that the core of this relationship is love, acceptance, and compassion, which are universal virtues that all should and can cultivate. The next poem, “When a Mother”, should solidify this link and make it even more pronounced.

When you are a mother,
carrying a child in your arms
or on your shoulder
is not a burden.
When your mind expands
as wide as the universe
and you experience *universal motherhood*,
even the entire world is not a burden.¹¹⁵

To understand the full repercussions of this teaching, we must first keep in mind Ammachi's viewpoint on the female sex. According to Maya Warrier, Ammachi believes women have greater success in spiritual pursuits than men.¹¹⁶ One can deduce then that, by nature, women are inherently closer to the divine, and feminine properties are intrinsically more divine like. Such an understanding is congruent with Ammachi's teaching on universal motherhood. If women are assumed to be better natural "mothers" given their inherent ties to this position and virtue, it should come to no surprise that Ammachi believes it is easier for the women to exemplify the divine.

What is important about this second poem is the way Ammachi links the mother-child relationship with the greater aim of “universal motherhood.” In a sense we see the

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 20.

¹¹⁶ Maya Warrier, *Hindu Selves in a Modern World*, (New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2005), 58.

micro level of a mother-child relationship representing and demonstrating a virtue on the macro level. The first part of this poem describes how a mother may carry her child with compassion and love. Ammachi juxtaposes this socio-biological relationship with how the mind expands to include the entire universe through “universal motherhood.” The micro level does in fact illustrate the macro, but the macro is greater in scope. As one develops “universal motherhood,” they develop a caring and compassion for the entire world rather than just for a related child. In this analogy, the micro is representative of the macro, so the socio-temporal role of motherhood is again glorified.

What makes this example of “universal motherhood” especially empowering compared to *The Laws of Manu* prescriptions is that, according to Ammachi, motherhood leads to ultimate knowledge. In *The Laws of Manu* and Vedic period, motherhood was praised as a socio-religious position, but it was divorced from what was true or necessary religious participation. A woman's "religion" was to be a mother and wife, but the man's "religion" included all the important rituals needed to appease the deities or obtain higher realization. For Ammachi, “universal motherhood” leads to ultimate knowledge, and this notion is presented as the most efficient way to obtain it. Unlike the viewpoints expressed in *The Laws of Manu*, Ammachi does not require women to be mothers and perform the constricting, limited duties of that position. On the contrary, Ammachi's reinterpretation of motherhood as "compassion" and "love" seeks to inspire and liberate women. It inspires by turning a natural feminine process into a spiritual ideal to be cultivated. It liberates by not restricting the socio-religious participation of women. A “universal mother” is one who greets all with compassion, not simply provides and produces sons. Ammachi's reinterpretation of motherhood is especially clever and

effective for her socio-religious context because it takes an already glorified state and social position engrained in Indian society and gives it a new understanding which breaks it free of the shackles that once bound women. She uses a socio-temporal designation that was once a hindrance for women and makes it a vehicle or means to obtain the highest state as understood by the Hindu tradition.

Voices of Devotees

As part of my research, I was able to contact some Ammachi devotees in the United States and ask them some general questions concerning Ammachi and the empowerment of women. I sent a questionnaire via email to two Ammachi Satsang groups: one in Fairfield, Iowa, the other in St. Louis, Missouri. Of all the recipients contacted, I only received five completed surveys so the data I have drawn from in this section is quite limited.

While my study is more focused on Hindu women and India, I believe the feedback in these surveys from both male and female American devotees is important and worth sharing because it presents the universal appeal Ammachi and her teachings have had for those outside India. It also gives us a window, although limited, into how a few devotees understand Ammachi and her work. Swami Dayamrita, one of Ammachi's top male *sannyasis*, was among the respondents as well. Receiving testimony from Swami Dayamrita was particularly enlightening since he had spent a considerable amount of time working intimately with Ammachi. In this section, I have included a few choice passages from a number of questionnaires that will help crystallize some of the ideas and arguments I have already presented.

One of the most pressing questions in my questionnaire involved how Ammachi has empowered women. Since my research dealt primarily with Ammachi's egalitarian motives and stances, I wanted to discover whether devotees recognized this aspect of her tradition as significant as well. All five of the surveys that were returned to me responded to the question, "In your experience, has Ammachi empowered women?" with an emphatic yes. A few respondents also included concrete examples to support their answers. One woman from the Ammachi group in St. Louis, Missouri explained:

Amma has shown that women and men are equals. In many of the temples she ordained women as priests. Her talk to the United Nations was filled with the wisdom of the equality of men and women and how this needs to be brought to the awareness of all. That men need to bring out more of their feminine side and women their masculine side.

Likewise, Swami Dayamrita wrote:

Many a time she has empowered women. The first is by showing women what their strengths are and also by showing what their weaknesses are. Secondly she considers them as equal to men in all respects. Many masters do not allow women to touch them while the woman are in periods. Amma compassionately hugs them all the time. Thirdly she has educated women and given them good jobs. Also the women in the ashram have been taught to do Puja or ritualistic worship in temples in Kerala, where women had been abstained in doing so.

To support their answers concerning Ammachi and the empowerment of women, both the devotee in St. Louis and Swami Dayamrita used public examples of practice and discourse. The devotee in St. Louis focused on a speech Ammachi delivered to the United Nations and her ordination of female priests. Swami Dayamrita chose to follow up his statement by including the example of female priests and emphasizing Ammachi's lack of concern with menstruation. These statements indicate that some devotees are aware of the practices Ammachi is instituting that are revolutionary for women.

Another female devotee from Fairfield, Iowa, in her explanation of how Ammachi

empowers women, mirrors my own understanding of "universal motherhood." She writes,

Amma has empowered women by making motherhood a position of honor. This applies not only to women who have given birth, but to all women. She is encouraging women to develop their maternal instinct, and not be ashamed of it, to consider it a strength and not a weakness. Amma makes it okay to express love compassion and selflessness in a society where it is otherwise discouraged. It is my observation that women who have exchanged their feminine ideals for masculine ideals are more capable of committing acts of cruelty. Although this capability does qualify women for combat, potentially doubling the size of the military, it also causes suffering.

This passage shows how one woman sees Ammachi strengthening the concept and role of motherhood. Halfway through her response she links "compassion" and "love" with motherhood in an almost identical manner as Ammachi's poems on "universal motherhood." By evidence from this passage, this devotee sees Ammachi empowering and idealizing motherhood, but not simply as a biological process. She says, "(motherhood) applies not only to women who have given birth, but to all women." This devotee sees motherhood or "compassion", "love", and "selflessness" as feminine ideals honored by Ammachi that should be cultivated by all women.

Another male respondent saw these ideals of motherhood as virtues that went beyond gender. He writes, "Amma's love and compassion completely transcend issues of gender, religion, society, etc. As an example of selfless love and devotion, she lives the ideal of service to all beings." Like my discussion on "universal motherhood", this devotee focuses on Ammachi's "love" and "compassion" and sees these as divine ideals. Even more, he sees these ideals as liberating and transcending "gender, religion, and society."

This particular male devotee also included another answer that was relevant to

gender relations. In response to the question, "How does Amma help to guide you? As a devotee, a woman, a human being?" this man wrote, "I am a man, but I would say Amma has given me more respect for women, and she has guided me to be of more service to all mankind/humankind." According to his response, this man believes Ammachi has led him to be more respectful of women, which also demonstrates empowerment on Ammachi's part, if her teaching and guidance has inspired men to treat women with more respect.

This is of course a very limited summary considering I only received feedback from a small number of devotees. What this small summary does show is how some of Ammachi's American devotees have internalized her message. Their testimonies support a similar interpretation on "universal motherhood" I have propagated in my own research as well, which lends credibility to the social reality of my argument.

Concluding Ammachi

From my interaction with Ammachi devotees and personal experiences in the *Devi Bhava*, it seems *guru*-worship and veneration puts less emphasis on traditional ideas, beliefs, and scriptures and more on the living example at hand, the *guru*. As a living symbol and a living mother goddess incarnate, devotees are led by example and taught from the position of ultimate authority, their *guru*. Ammachi reinterprets traditional notions of Hindu understanding not through theological discussion, but by her actions and speech, essentially, her way. Ammachi relates this herself. She says:

Children, first of all remember that attachment to the Master is an attachment to God. Your problem is that you try to differentiate between God and the true Master. Attachment to a true Master's physical form

intensifies your longing to realize the Supreme. It is like living with God.¹¹⁷

Devotees look to Ammachi, not to scriptures, ideas, philosophy, or traditional theology. Ammachi is their foundation, their ideal to strive for, their lens to view other religious ideas and texts through, and their example for moral action. Ammachi is the ultimate authority, and as a living symbol and mother goddess incarnated, she is the base for divine knowledge.

To conclude this investigation of Ammachi's teachings on gender equality, I will include one last quote from Ammachi that engages traditional notions of gender prevalent in Hindu society. Ammachi says:

Many people live with the misconception that women are only supposed to give birth and raise children. These same people might also think that men are the only ones who can rule and command. Both ideas are wrong. A woman can rule as well as a man if she brings out the dormant masculine qualities within her. And a man can be as loving and affectionate as a mother if he works on that unmanifested feminine aspect within him. But there is an important point to remember: while developing and even practicing patience and love, a man should retain his determination and self-confidence and woman should maintain her patience and love even after she has cultivated determination and self-confidence.¹¹⁸

This quote is extremely telling of Ammachi's views on gender in a number of ways. The first three lines bring forth gender stereotypes that are often assumed by multiple cultures. Ammachi first criticizes the reductionist nature of these gender assignments and explains they are as a whole ungrounded and debased. Women are not simply childbearers, but actually have the ability to publically take charge and lead as well as men. While

¹¹⁷ Selva J. Raj, "Ammachi, the Mother of Compassion," in *The Graceful Guru*, ed. Karen Pechilis (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 211.

¹¹⁸ Mata Amritanandamayi, *Awaken Children! Volume IV*, ed. By Swami Amritasvarupananda, (Kerala: Mata Amritanandamayi Mission Trust, 1992), 15.

Ammachi seems to believe in “masculine” and “feminine” distinctions, her ideal strikes a fine balance, noting that both males and females share “masculine” and “feminine” qualities. She calls women to become aware of their “masculine” qualities and nature and men to make manifest their “feminine” qualities and nature. However, she cautions that in this awakening and discovery, they should not let go of their more dominant nature.

Overall, Ammachi promotes social change but is not hasty in her recommendations. Like Anandamayai Ma, she engages in a dialogue with the traditional gender values, but she never prods or provokes to the point of great disruption. For instance, while she does not accept or discriminate with regards to *jati*, socio-religious class in Hindu society, she does not openly condemn it or demand for its dismissal. Likewise, while Ammachi does grant women greater opportunities, she is not radically adamant or forceful with her application. It is unclear Ammachi’s reasons for doing so. Perhaps, she does not want to completely sever ties with orthodox Hinduism, or she is trying to minimize conflict and promote a more gradual shift or change in attitudes and opinions. Finding a compromising balance is of course very difficult for all those seeking reform in an attempt to persuade people's opinions but not repel them from a movement. Ammachi could be maintaining ties with orthodox Hinduism for popularity or simply to maintain a level of stability and peace while she promotes changes in religious practices and understandings with regards to gender.

VII: CRITIQUE AND CONCLUSION

Critique

As I mentioned in my section on the goddess symbol and a feminist utility, Pintchman and Humes argue that the Hindu goddess and women exist in two different realms that are not related. Through my own research concerning Anandamayi Ma and Ammachi, I have realized that a similar assumption concerning Hindu *gurus* does seem to be held by some devotees. The charisma and authority that surrounds a *guru* greatly divorces them from ordinary social standards and distinctions, which can lead to an unequal, hierarchal relationship between *guru* and devotee. Hallstrom's research showed that many female devotees of Anandamayi Ma saw their *guru* as an ideal model that was "way, way up."¹¹⁹ Ammachi as well has instructed her disciples that they should view her as a god or goddess. According to their disciples, Anandamayi Ma and Ammachi are divine first, female second. This identification can create a greater gulf between devotee and women and keep them from being relevant models rather than transcendent instructors.

However, there seems to be an underlying belief emphasized by both these *gurus* that all humans are indeed divine in nature. While many devotees may assume they cannot obtain *moksha*, liberation, and therefore place their *guru* on a high pedestal, her nature and prescriptions no doubt still inspire these people. Ammachi's ethnography in particular demonstrates that the gap which once existed between women and the divine is

¹¹⁹ Lisa Hallstrom, *Mother of Bliss* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 217.

closing even more so.¹²⁰ Also, her notion of “universal motherhood” forms a link between devotees and divine by calling all to cultivate this divine ideal. As I have explained, this is particularly empowering for women since it spiritualizes a previously limited social position associated with the feminine. It endows a feminine duty with the greatest respect and reverence the tradition can offer by linking it with the ultimate pursuit of *moksha*.

Both these *gurus* greatly empower women as social beings by allowing them to participate in roles and rituals that were previously denied to them. While some devotees have inevitably placed their *guru* on such a high pedestal, making her into a force above and beyond their immediacy, the teachings of the *gurus* by my own interpretation seem to point all to inner awareness and validation, self-realization and liberation. Even with this criticism stated, my argument stands that these *gurus* have empowered the feminine and women by glorifying feminine virtues and giving them roles and rituals that were previously denied to them.

Conclusion

A submission such as this, which includes several inter-related but distinct arguments, no doubt requires a substantial conclusion that ties up any remaining loose threads and highlights the major points and arguments presented throughout the study. In response to my first argument concerning the prevalence of charismatic figures in the Hindu tradition, the socio-religious role of Hindu *guru* has been endowed with the utmost

¹²⁰ Since Ammachi is a contemporary Hindu female *guru*, and arguably the most popular in the world, her movement, while undoubtedly differentiated from Anandamayi Ma's, can be considered more illustrative of today. That is, her teachings may not only represent a given *guru* but also is more telling of contemporary community sentiments.

authority and respect by the texts and practices of the tradition through its equation with the divine. As a result, the position has proven to be an influential place for contemporary socio-religious power to be wielded as demonstrated by my case studies of the female Hindu *gurus* and saints Ammachi and Anandamayi Ma. Believed to be *gurus* and manifestations of the divine mother goddess, Ammachi and Anandamayi have built considerable movements, which have helped them project their voice and significantly influence the Hindu tradition. They have specifically been able to promote effective social and religious change by empowering women through several concrete examples.

Through the institution of *kirtans*, the *upanayana* ceremony, and *yajnashala* rituals, Anandamayi Ma allowed women greater participation in the socio-religious sphere of Indian society and culture. The organization of her movement aided especially those women who were dedicated to the spiritual pursuits. Her ethical and moral teachings benefited laywomen as well by challenging the traditional stereotypes of an obedient and subservient Hindu wife outlined in *The Laws of Manu*. Anandamayi Ma was one of the first, popular female *gurus* to have her message and teachings spread beyond the borders of India. As a leader of socio-religious challenge, she in many ways raked the path for future female *gurus* like Ammachi to take up a similar claim and call.

Ammachi in many ways has greatly challenged orthodox Hinduism through her teachings and organization of her movement. Her response to purity issues involved with menstruation, her institution of female priests in temples, and her teaching of “universal motherhood”, all provide substantial evidence that Ammachi is empowering women through word, action, and organization. The fact that she was awarded an international, inter-religious reward from the Global Peace Initiative of Women for her non-violent

teachings and responses vividly demonstrates her appeal and receptivity to an audience outside India and Hinduism as well.

With all of this evidence presented, I am still hesitant to quickly project a Western term like “feminist” onto these *gurus* due to the enormous amount of baggage that comes with such a term. However, if you define “feminist” in its loosest, most generic meaning, as a person who is attempting to bring about gender equality in a socio-religious environment, then these *gurus* do in fact fit such a description. While, like any collection of feminists, they may not concur on all issues relevant to women, neither of them supported the traditional, patriarchal structure and interpretation and sought different ways to engage and combat it. As more Hindu female *gurus* like Ammachi and Anandamayi Ma begin to enter the public domain, it will be interesting to see if the position of women in the Hindu tradition continues to change. If these *gurus* are any kind of evidence of this change, we can surely expect a radical transformation of the Hindu tradition within the coming years that leads towards a more gender equal society.

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