

Is the *Guru* a Feminist? Charismatic Female Leaders and Gender Roles in India

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Abstract

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*, will stand here as case studies to ground this overarching claim. Through their respective cults, both Anandamayi Ma and Ammachi have empowered women by way of their metaphysical teachings and socio-religious organization of their movements. They have engaged and challenged traditional understandings of gender within the Hindu tradition and promoted gender equality on a social level. 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. Although their perspectives differ significantly from Western feminist ideals, 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.