

Can a Woman be a True Guru? Female Hindu Gurus' Grassroots Religious Gender Activism in India, and the Performativity of Saintliness at the *Kumbh Mela*

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ABSTRACT

This article represents a departure from existing scholarship on women's political activism in Indian Hinduism. Women's gender activism in Hindu nationalism encompasses a range of approaches, from hard-line to emancipatory, and is motivated by different concerns, from religious xenophobia to religious power. Thus, female religious leaders (gurus) advocating Hindutva Hinduism exercise more than one style of leadership in the public sphere. Based on ethnographic research conducted at the *Kumbh Mela*, the article illuminates another style of activism, which is termed 'grassroots religious feminist-leaning activism.' Analysing the teachings and practices of two female gurus, it argues that one guru believes in a separate but equal approach (men and women have different skills and rights), and the other follows the approach that both genders should have the same rights and abilities to make choices because of their common humanity. Both gurus are unlocking opportunities for women's greater freedom within the male-dominated religious hierarchies of the Hindu ascetic orders (*akhārās*) at the *Kumbh Mela*. This article argues that, through performance of the 'rhetoric of saintliness,' the gurus heighten or reverse sex-role stereotypes embedded in mainstream representations of 'good' gurus in order to mobilise gender reform in patriarchal *akhārā* culture.

Keywords: South Asia, Kumbh Mela, feminism, female guru, gender activism

INTRODUCTION: PERFORMING 'SAINTLINESS' AND THE POLITICS OF GURU SPEECH

Existing scholarship examining the roles of gender and religion on identity formation and political activism among women religious leaders in India's public sphere, calls attention to female gurus in Hindu nationalism who are agitating against the fundamental rights of religious and ethnic minorities, such as Christians and Muslims. Generally classified under the umbrella term 'Hindutva,' right-wing Hindu nationalist movements espouse a political ideology that pushes for Hindu supremacy and aims to 'transform India, constitutionally a secular state, into an ethno-religious nation known as the Hindu Rashtra (Hindu nation) (*Hindutva Profiles*).'¹ Gurus such as Uma Bharati and Sadhvi Rithambara, two of the most famous women in the Hindu right in the 1980s and 1990s, have embraced Hindutva agendas, with Uma Bharati being an influential leader in the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), and Sadhvi Rithambara being vital to the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP). Both gurus have been at the centre of the Ram Janmabhoomi movement, inciting the Hindu masses to demolish a sixteenth-century mosque called the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya based on populist claims that it originally was a temple to the Hindu god Ram (van der Veer, 1994).

Since the inception of the Ram Janmabhoomi movement, other female gurus promoting the cause of the Hindu right have risen to prominence. For example, Yati Chetnanand Saraswati (also known as Chetna Devi) runs an *ashram* in Ghaziabad (near Delhi) and is a lawyer by profession. She not only leads the Akhand Hindustan Morcha ('Great India Front') in Meerut, but also heads a powerful goddess temple in Dasna. Furthermore, she is the disciple and successor of Yati Narsinghanand Saraswati, an outspoken male Hindutva leader who has been arrested for using hate speech against Muslims (Khare, 2022). Aside from making the phrase 'love jihad' famous, Chetnanand Saraswati has organised campaigns to 'rescue' (her words) Hindu girls in relationships with Muslim men and convert them back to Hinduism (Srivastava and Irani, 2020: 21). Her hatred of Muslims comes through in her speeches, as does her view of Hindu women and girls as 'vulnerable' and 'gullible' and easily preyed on by Muslim

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men. She castigates Muslim men, calling them ‘sensuous,’ and reasons that the fault for her perception of Muslim men’s being ‘better at satisfying a woman’s desire’ lies with Islam.

Female gurus at the forefront of the Hindu right in India such as these leaders engage in political gender activism that the cultural historian of South Asia Amrita Basu (1995) has referred to as ‘feminism inverted.’ Uma Bharati has spoken ‘vehemently against the exploitation of women’s bodies in the media and advertising’ (Basu, 1995: 166), while Chetnanand Saraswati has lobbied the Indian government to provide ‘compulsory military training for every woman’ and a weapons license to ‘families with daughters and sisters’ (Amar Ujala, 2019, Web Document). Both Hindutva leaders advocate for women and girls to protect themselves against sexual assault and gender-motivated violence.

In a similar vein, Sadhvi Rithambara has led the *Durga Vahini* organisation (‘Durga Vehicle’) since the 1990s. An independent and voluntary women’s-only branch of the VHP (the *Bajrang Dal* is the parallel men’s organisation), with twelve centers across India, *Durga Vahini* sponsors annual, month-long religious education camps for women between the ages of fifteen years and thirty-five years. Many of the organisation’s participants come from some of India’s poorest villages and socially marginalised castes. *Durga Vahinis* attending these camps learn life skills and receive training in martial arts and weapons use. While the gurus of the Hindu right support women’s and girls’ empowerment, education, and leadership roles within the movement, they nonetheless affirm gender social norms, emphasising the role of motherhood and women’s selfless sacrifice as heroic ‘soldiers’ fighting on the battlefield of the Hindu Rashtra.

This article represents a departure from the scholarship on women’s political activism in the Hindu right of India. Based on ethnographic research, it demonstrates that female gurus enact different styles of leadership in the public sphere. Indian women’s political activism, as the scholars Tanika Sarkar and Urvashi Butalia have discussed (1995), encompasses a range of approaches, from hard-line to emancipatory, and is motivated by different concerns, from religious xenophobia to religious power. The gurus advocating Hindutva Hinduism tend to exercise but one style of leadership.

Apart from claiming Hindu supremacy, right-wing movements espouse patriarchal, bordering-on-misogynistic visions of gender norms and roles (Basu, 1995). And yet, the Hindu right has provided a niche for women’s leadership and authority (Bedi, 2016; Menon, 2010). Its popularity among women across diverse identities is increasing in India (Bradley, 2017; Tomalin, 2015). Women are not only drawn to Hindutva, but also constitute some of its staunchest supporters and spokespeople (Sarkar and Butalia, 1995). Scholars studying the movement have asked why women would support a movement that reinforces their subordination to men (Bacchetta and Power, 2002; Bacchetta, 2002a; Bacchetta, 2002b; Sarkar and Butalia, 1995)?

While political ambition may be a factor, there are other reasons for women’s participation. Hindutva’s combining devotional and ascetic ideals such as ‘sacrifice, martyrdom, and selflessness’ through select use of Hindu religious symbolism, narratives, and texts, appeals to conventional cultural representations of respectable womanhood (Basu, 1995: 161). But unlike the convention that tends to equate feminine virtue with passivity, the movement encourages women to see themselves as ‘powerful agents rather than passive victims’ (Basu, 1995: 159). Hence, Hindutva actively supports women’s activism and leadership. Women who embody the movement’s ideals through diverse roles are highly respected and viewed as powerful. They may further be seen as spiritual mothers and, by implication, respected as gurus, saints, *yoginis*, *siddhas* (spiritual masters) based on religiously sanctioned ascriptions of motherhood with virtuous femininity. Importantly, female gurus in India and abroad are considered exemplars of feminine morality and revered *because* of their perceived symbolic motherhood. As I will show, pervasive cultural tropes embedded in discourses around ‘good’ women intersect with mainstream perceptions of female saintliness. Hindutva elevates these associations to its advantage and draws women into its orbit. Women participating in the Hindu right may increase their status and gain respect by heightening perceptions of their feminine virtue to convey their credibility as gurus.

Religious devotion and asceticism may lie at the heart of women’s attraction to the Hindu right. But its castigation of gender violence has also been a rallying point for women’s involvement. As Basu has said, ‘The BJP has made the raped Hindu woman symbolic of the victimisation of the entire Hindu community. What makes this symbol so effective is that it recalls the violence that women routinely suffer’ (1995: 165). That the movement has strategically (dis)placed the blame for violence against women on male religious and ethnic minorities indicates that religious bigotry may be as strong a motivation as devotion for women. While women join the Hindu right for various reasons, these examples illustrate that it offers women, especially those from the lower strata of the society, access to power and status.

This article illuminates another style of the gender activism in India, which I term ‘grassroots religious feminist-leaning activism.’ Analysing the teachings and practices of two gurus, I argue that one guru believes in a separate but equal approach (men and women have different skills and rights), and the other follows the approach that both genders should have the same rights and abilities to make choices because of their common humanity. These

female gurus are pushing for women's greater freedom within the male-dominated religious hierarchy of the publicly exposed Hindu ascetic orders (*akhārās*) at the *Kumbh Mela*.

For example, in July 2015, images of a female guru embroiled in a tussle with male religious leaders at the *Kumbh Mela* (literally, the festival of the 'water pot') flooded the national Hindi and English language news and print media. Celebrated every three years in one of four states on a rotating basis on the banks of a sacred river, this year's *melā* (*Trimbakeshwar Simhashta Kumbh*) was held on the Godavari River in Nasik city, Maharashtra.¹ The *melā* represents the largest fair in India, showcasing a context in which Hinduism, the country's majoritarian religion, manifests in the public sphere in politically polarising and politically gendered ways. As stations covered news of the millions of pilgrims arriving for the event, another *melā*-related incident captured the regional headline news on channels such as Aaj Tak and Zee News. It involved the guru named Trikal Bhavanta Saraswati (hereafter, *Mataji*, or 'Respected Mother') and the president of the All India Akhara Council (subsequently, 'Akhara Council'), Mahant Gyandas.

For context, the Akhara Council represents the governing body over thirteen established ascetic orders (*akhārās*) from across Hindu and Sikh sects, which, in the Council's view, form the legitimate saint society of India. Consisting of two representatives from each *akhārā*, the Council has twenty-seven leaders, including the president, who serves a four-year term and is elected through a democratic voting system. Only men hold leadership roles in the organisation. The Council also mediates between the *akhārās* and *Kumbh Mela* administration, handling decisions ranging from scheduling the dates and times of the ritual bathing ceremonies to assigning the bathing order of the *akhārās* to allotting them land, facilities and other resources.

Two days into the *melā*, Zee 24 Taas, a Marathi language news station in Maharashtra, broadcasted a video of Mataji on a stage holding a microphone as a group of men, one of whom was the chief minister of Maharashtra, surrounded her and tried to take it away. As the scene unfolds, Mahant Gyandas, the Akhara Council leader, faces Mataji, tapping her on the left shoulder and then pointing a finger at her. His behaviour suggests that he and Mataji have a heated confrontation. The rest of the news bulletin describes Mataji's going to the Mela administration office to file a police report (FIR) against the Mahant and others for physically 'abusing' her.

Mataji's interviews on national television depict her visibly distraught by the event. But she seems more upset by the media's questioning the credibility of her account of the experience, as well as her bombshell claim of the Akhara Council's mistreatment of female saints (*sādhus*). For instance, after Mataji presented her side of the story to a news station, the female anchor invited Mahant Gyandas and another Council spokesperson to respond to her 'allegations' of abuse and sex discrimination (Sarkar 2015). Both gurus denied the claims. Gyandas reframed the issue by emphasising that Mataji had abused him. He argued that he was the real victim, not her. He said that he had noticed that the microphone was turned off and wanted to switch it back on. Then he added that he told Mataji to give him the mic and he'd speak for her. However, he said that she had misread his actions and shouted 'all men are the same.' According to Gyandas, he showed Mataji respect, despite her disrespecting him. At the end of the interview, he clarified that Mataji had 'planned' the stunt for 'publicity,' thereby casting doubt over her being a 'real' guru at all.

While the broadcast aimed to delineate the boundaries between 'good' and 'bad' gurus, for this author, it illuminated a set of issues and problems concerning representations of 'saintliness,' by which I mean the attributes of authenticity and respectability ascribed to holy people, and especially to gurus as a class of religious teachers/leaders within Hindu society. More specifically, the station's privileging the patriarchal views of male gurus within the mainstream over those of a female guru challenging the religious establishment magnified the roles of gender and structural power on shaping the discursive parameters of saintliness in the public sphere.

'Women's speech,' as the feminist gender and cultural studies scholar, Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan has said, 'is often confined to the space of the home; their denial of and exclusion from public spaces—platforms, pulpits, courts of law, educational institutions, parliaments—limits the reach and scope of their words' (1993: 88). What is more, as Sunder Rajan argues,

... when women are allowed access to public forums, the very exceptionality of this entry may produce various kinds of linguistic excess. Though such 'speaking' does signify 'truth,' as lies, fantasies, desires and distortion do by other means than referentiality, they stand discredited when judged by the strict standards of veracity—and as a consequence the speakers often invite retribution by being subjected to containment, punishment, and backlash.

¹ In this article, proper names for people, places, and festivals do not appear with diacritical marks. In translating Indic language data into standard British English, the author provides the original Hindi language terms for selected concepts. Since the author conducted research in modern standard Hindi, only Hindi, not Sanskrit, transliterations of terms appear in the text.

This discussion connects Sunder Rajan's insights concerning negative representations of women's speech to discourses around saintliness in the public sphere. To spotlight the diversity and gendered politics of these discourses, I analyse the ways that the feminist-leaning female gurus featured in the paper resist attempts at being silenced by the dominant discourse while creating alternative spaces for the inclusion of women's roles in patriarchal *akhārā* culture.

Despite the mainstream leadership's claims to the contrary, sex matters for *who* gets to control public understandings of 'real' and 'fake' gurus, *how* those constructions unlock and restrict opportunities for women's leadership, and *where* those representations are deployed, such as on national television (mainstream channels including commercials). Because the power of controlling representation for public consumption is deeply political, revealing what's at stake for people's lives and identities, it warrants exploring the connections of sex and politics to what I term the 'rhetoric of saintliness.'

To that end, I will examine the roles of gender, religion, and politics on the rhetoric of saintliness at the *Kumbh Mela*. As the opening vignette suggests, multiple institutions collude and compete in shaping public knowledge about 'good' and 'bad' gurus (i.e., saintliness). In addition to the male power elite through the Akhara Council and the national media, the Indian government through the state-controlled *melā* administration is also decisively instrumental in producing the rhetoric of saintliness. The type of power that the Akhara Council wields over the media and the Indian state suggests its role as the 'vestigial' Hindu state in the public sphere. Developed by feminist legal scholar Naomi Goldenberg (2014: 254), the 'vestigial state' describes religious institutions acting as 'political formations' to plan and control the agenda of public policy and the public interests of the state.

This article offers empirical observations based on two months of ethnographic research with Hindu gurus at the 2019 *Kumbh Mela* held in Prayagraj (formerly Allahabad) in the northern state of Uttar Pradesh. Additionally, I provide analyses based on five years of fieldwork conducted between 2014 and 2019 with Mataji and her community in Prayagraj. Although I spent most of my time at the *melā* with Mataji and her devotees at her camp, I worked with seventeen other gurus, men and women, from all over India. I conducted participant observation with the gurus, interviewing them multiple times at their camps, depending on their schedules, and participating in their camps' festivities. Aside from this, my methods also included semi-structured individual and focus group interviews, video and audio recordings of the gurus' practices, and transcribing and translating the Hindi language data into English. To interpret the materials, I pair a performance studies-centred analysis of the gurus' narratives with a discourse-centred analysis of media representations of them for comparison.

For the following discussion, I have chosen to analyse ethnographic materials drawn from my research with two female gurus, namely Guru Ma Anandmai Puri (henceforth, Anandmai) and Mataji. They have taken initiation as renunciators (*sannyāsī*) into the Dashanami tradition, leaving behind the norms of marriage and family while adopting a life of simplicity by dedicating themselves to worshiping the divine and humanitarian service. Their teachings represent different perspectives on the spectrum of the rhetoric of saintliness, and revolve around three themes, namely, exemplary character (*sadācār*), mother power (*mātrī śakti*), and selfless service (*sevā*). In this analysis I am interested in the ways that the gurus interpret and apply these themes to their activism to forward an alternative rhetoric of saintliness to that of the Hindu mainstream.

While the dominant rhetoric foregrounds transcending gender, the gurus' teachings unravel the fallacy of this idea in two key respects. First, they emphasise the real-world impact of female embodiment on saint's lives in connection with longstanding institutional inequities and ingrained attitudes that obstruct women's realising their full potential. Second, they relate gurus' credibility to gendered ideologies of respectability. However, I will show that the gurus retool feminine ideals to include traits such as self-determination and heroism. Although the gurus speak about transcendence, they view it differently than the mainstream. They want to transcend patriarchal structures of gender discrimination, not gender identity.

I argue that the rhetoric of saintliness is 'performative.' It constructs saintliness based on not only, as one might generally assume, rigorous moral standards, but also, as is less known in scholarly and popular understandings, sex-role stereotypes. I will focus on the latter aspect. I suggest that saintliness 'performs' a contingent and dynamic status ascribed to gurus whose moods and motivations conform to patriarchal norms and who uphold the religious *status quo*. Violation of norms often leads to the mainstream labelling gurus 'fake' and 'hypocrites.' As significantly, through their rhetoric, the female gurus heighten or reverse sex stereotypes to actively push for substantive gender reform in patriarchal *akhārā* culture.

Determining the saintliness of men and women based on their behaviours fitting religious expectations is not new or unique to Hinduism. We find similar practices in the history of Catholicism (Bynum, 1992). This article illuminates how gender works in the rhetoric of saintliness. It shows that female gurus and male gurus lead with different conceptions of saintliness from each other, and delineates the alternative criteria of the female gurus concerning 'mother power,' which they say is unique to the female sex, to sanction that status for women.

'REAL SAINTS RESPECT WOMEN': GENDERING 'VIRTUOUS CONDUCT' IN ANANDMAI'S RHETORIC OF SAINTLINESS

Thousands of saints, many with esteemed titles (for example, Acārya Mahāmandeleśwar, Mandeleśwar, etc.), populate the 2019 *Kumbh Mela*. In this temporary city comprising over 3,200 hectares of land (approximately 7,900 acres), and divided into twenty-one sectors, the incredible number, diversity, and variety of holy people is striking.

Female gurus are not anomalies, however. Their camps, from the Sannyasini Akhara of the Juna Akhara to the Sadhvi Shakti Parishad, dot the *melā* landscape. One camp in sector 16 catches my eye. Its entrance bears the name 'Women Power Camp' with an image of Anandmai on both sides. Observing my interest, a guard motions for me to come inside. A table packed with Hindi language books written by the guru is placed in front of him. In the main tent of the camp is Anandmai speaking with another female guru who is seated in the lotus posture on the ground. When they emerge from the tent, Anandmai calls me over and informs me that she has just initiated the other guru as a *mabant* (director) of the Niranjani Akhara. The newly-made *mabant* travelled to the *melā* from Aligarh city in central Uttar Pradesh. Anandmai then tells me that she herself is a *mahāmandeleśwar* (literally, 'great lord of the region') in the same *akhārā*. Her title cues that she has been invested by the *akhārā*'s institutional hierarchy with the authority to teach and transmit a sacred tradition of knowledge to others. Her official title as written on her camp's banner reads, '*Anant Śrī Vibhūṣīt Śrī Śrī 1008 Mahāmandeleśwar.*' This garland of titles means that Anandmai is credentialed as a guru.

'I rule in this *akhārā*,' Anandmai says. Her statement comes in response to my fieldwork assistant Raj Kumar, a doctoral-level research scholar from Delhi University's Anthropology Department, explaining that I have journeyed to the *melā* from the USA to research female gurus. Anandmai mentions that she has left a university position as a lecturer in Sanskrit to serve women through her *akhārā*. Realising that Anandmai will soon lead the ritual coronation of the *mabant* (director or leader of an *akhārā*) at the camp, I steer the conversation in another direction. I explain that, based on the media reports I had read months before the fair began, the *Akhara* Council has been coordinating with the *melā* administration, the state's chief minister, Yogi Adityanath, and the media to block the entry of 'fake' gurus at the *melā*. So, I ask her, 'What makes a guru "real" or "fake"?'



Figure 1. Entry to Anandmai's Camp at the *Kumbh Mela*. Author's Collection



Figure 2. The entrance to the camp of the *Sannyasini Akhara* of the *Juna Akhara* in sector 16 of the *mela*. The poster board's image of the *akhārā*'s leader, Śrī Mahant Aradhna Giri Maharaj, greets visitors. Author's Collection.



Figure 3. Female *Sādhus* camping in the *Juna Sannyasini Akhara* Camp at the *Kumbh Mela*, Prayag. Author's Collection.

Anandmai responds candidly, emphasising that ‘India is a patriarchal society. Men are born from women’s bodies, but they want to dominate women. That’s why I made this camp, so women saints get respect.’ Her answer hardly surprises me. Six years earlier in 2013, Anandmai established her Women Power camp for the first time at the (*Mahā*) *Kumbh Mela* in Prayagraj. But she wasn’t the only guru creating alternative spaces for women saints to flourish. In 2013, at the same *melā*, the *Juna Akhara*, the largest of the *akhārās*, not only established a separate women’s *akhārā* for the *sādhus* of its order, but also a separate camp for them (the *Juna akhārā* heads called it the ‘*Mai Bādā*’ or ‘Mother Camp.’ It is also known as the ‘*Sannyasini*’ Camp’). Both developments made the headlines, with images of the *Juna* female *sādhus* celebrating the decision. By contrast, the media posited controversy occurring between Anandmai and the *Niranjani akhārā*’s leadership. I wondered if her forming a separate camp for women and initiating them with big titles, such as the *mahant* described earlier, were at issue.

Answering my question with more precision, Anandmai speaks at length about the character (*sadācār*) of ‘real’ gurus. She teases out aspects of *sadācār* related to guru behaviour, dispositions, and motivations. To her, *sadācār* is a fluid term, encompassing meanings such as ‘righteous conduct and courteous demeanour,’ along with respect for women (McGregor, 1993, 978). Her pressing on the term’s latter sense is not extraordinary. Recall that Mahant Gyandas raised this point in his media interview cited earlier. Discourse featuring the motif of ‘respecting women’ arises often in religious patriarchy’s rhetoric of saintliness.

But as Anandmai elucidates her perspective on *sadācār* as respecting women, the gendered implications of the rhetoric of saintliness become apparent. She says,

We believe that more and more women should read scriptures and do meditation. Women should focus on empowering themselves. We have made this camp because we believe that women are the mother-power (*mātṛ śakti*), and they should come forward in the society. We want more and more women to join the saint tradition. They will get more respect. India is a patriarchal society. See, the real work (*vāstik kārjā*) of saints is to do more and more for others. Through our trust, we take care of everything for women. Women shouldn’t have any problem, whether it involves ritual bathing at the rivers, doing rituals (*kalpavās*), walking around the grounds, and taking shelter at the *melā*.

In Anandmai’s narrative, the role of gender on the rhetoric of saintliness is salient. It is neither an empty signifier, nor an outer sheath for women to slough off in order to obtain guru credibility. Her narrative hints at what other gurus such as Mataji make explicit: the problem of women’s sexual exploitation, harassment, violence, and oppression in patriarchal *akhārā* culture. To Anandmai, these problems are real, serious, and urgent, and become heightened at the *melā*. In her view, “real” saints work toward making women’s lives better by providing them shelter, food, and cash (101 INR) to return home, and a female space away from the male gaze where women can give time to themselves and each other. Her ‘work’ aims to bring tangible benefits to women’s lives, and it illustrates the definitional parameters for what *sadācār* means to her.

More specifically, *sadācār* as ‘respecting women’ involves accepting their embodiment as real, not denying it as illusory or tangential to the human experience. To dismiss the materiality of (any) gender, as I understand Anandmai, undermines the idea of the female *sādhu* as normative. Likewise, it suggests a profound lack of awareness regarding the institutional power hierarchies that structurally disadvantage women’s relationships to the *akhārā* system.

Furthermore, Anandmai suggests that the Akhara Council’s official statements that ‘real’ gurus do not see gender, and more to the point, the female sex, conceals its refusal to accept women as ‘saints.’ Its denial of the relevance of gender appears to be rooted in the understanding that female bodies are intrinsically deficient and inferior to the (high-caste) male body as superior and universal. In the view of the mainstream leaders, then, women have gender, but men do not. Embodying saintliness requires women to renounce being female without renouncing femininity, and men to affirm Herculean masculinity as an element of spiritual transcendence. Accordingly, judging by its statements to the media, insofar as women’s behaviour upholds the patriarchal gender order, the Akhara Council accords them respect as mothers, daughters, and devotees. But not as saints. How ironic it is that the Council claims to ‘respect’ female saints, according them sanctity as mothers, but then chastises them for acting like women. It is a ‘catch-22’ that no *sādhu* across the traditions can surmount simply because of her sex.

‘WOMEN ARE MOTHER POWER’: CONSTRUCTING SELFLESS SERVICE AS FEMALE SAINTS’ PREROGATIVE

Another aspect of *sadācār* drawn out by Anandmai concerns having the ‘right knowledge’ about the quality of ‘mother power’ that she accords women. But what is mother power? Anandmai mentions this idea in her narrative. For her – and for Mataji – mother power is unique to women because of their sex. Simply put: women have it and men do not. In this context, ‘mother power’ and ‘power’ are not synonymous concepts (Humes, 2000: 141; Erndl

2000).² This means that while both men and women have *śakti* as the power that is ‘life force,’ women possess the physiological power to birth life. This power makes women different from men.

Therefore, in the gurus’ rhetoric and the dominant Hindu religious discourse, ‘mother power’ cues the procreant capacity associated with the female sex. Women’s material bodies through menstruation, childbirth, and lactation connect them to the generative female body of the goddess Shakti, whom many Hindus worship as the divine absolute mother of the world.

In Anandmai’s use of the term, mother power specifically refers to the innate socio-biological *potential* of women for motherhood. She explains her idea of the concept like this:

Women have a lot of power (*śakti*). They are mother power (*mātr śakti*), but they don’t know it. Women should know their mother power and work for change. Men are the form of knowledge, and women are the form of devotion. The meaning of the Hindu religion (*sanātan dharm*) is to work for everyone (*sevā*); to serve people selflessly and with love. There’s no use of being a guru without love. We have made this camp to increase women power. As I’ve already said, women can do anything, but they have to know themselves.

While, at one point, Anandmai tells me that she encourages women to marry and ‘build their houses,’ she leaves open the possibility that some women would rather serve the society than the patriarchal family. These latter classes of women are precisely whom Anandmai seeks to draw into her organisation and initiate as *sādhus*. Either way, she indicates that mother power equips women for both motherhood and saintliness. Likewise, stressing that ‘women must come forward’ relates her view of their innate capacity for self-assertion and self-determination (i.e., autonomy) as aspects of mother power. Mother power represents the perceived and ascribed source of ‘women’s power’ and the basis for their guru authority, and feminine virtue.

Anandmai’s rhetoric constructs women as ‘real’ saints, amplifying that mother power endows them with the ‘right’ stuff to be ‘good’ gurus. Her idea of mother power pushes beyond patriarchal views that hinge on obedience, subservience, and deference to elders, especially husbands and in-laws. Anandmai disconnects the concept from its predominant association and attaches it to a cluster of other traits that have been eclipsed in public discourses concerning feminine virtue. Releasing the ideology of ideal womanhood from the grip of sex-specific roles, she forwards the respectability of women becoming saints to serve the society.

In the late 19th century, Hindu saints such as Swami Vivekananda, the disciple of the renowned mystic Paramahansa Ramakrishna, repurposed the boundaries of sainthood by elevating the idea of *sevā*—selfless service to humanity—to redefine Hinduism in colonial India through a socially engaged lens. Cultural and political pressures and ideological shifts wrought by the encounter of ‘multiple modernities’ inspired and challenged Indian gurus to redefine saintliness (Eisenstadt, 2000). Since then, guru-centred movements in India and the Diaspora have plugged into some form of Vivekananda’s and other gurus’ models of socially engaged sainthood to forward public-facing Hindu (or ‘Hindu-inspired’) worldviews, practices, and organisations addressing diverse issues ranging from women’s empowerment, gender equality, caste discrimination, poverty alleviation, ecological stewardship, and rural development. To that extent, guru movements have morphed over time into engaged spiritualities for social change. Concurring on this point, the historian of religion Karen Pechilis (2018) has said that modern and contemporary female guru-centred traditions demonstrate a ‘pragmatically engaged spirituality’ that strives for ‘real-world impact’ on the lives of the people and communities whom they lead.

Pechilis’s analytical model of the ‘pragmatically engaged spirituality’ of female gurus provides a useful framework for understanding Anandmai’s and Mataji’s relationship to the idea of *sevā* and their encoding it with gendered meanings to increase female saints’ status. Anandmai’s rhetoric lauds the tangible impact of her organisation on Indian society. She says,

We have changed the lives of one *lakh* people (approximately 1500) who were alcoholics and drug and nicotine addicts. I gave them a prayer and told them to swear on the goddess Ganga that they would not consume these substances anymore. We have paid for the marriages of women from poor village families (referencing dowry). We are changing this society through women power. That’s why we want more and more women to join our organisation and adopt the *sādhu*’s way of life.

Anandmai’s narrative makes explicit the connection of *sevā* to women power. *Sevā*, according to Anandmai, is what women excel at. They were born to serve others, and, to her, they have the gendered constitution to do it. Working for others’ benefit externalises women’s (mother) power and makes it possible for them to be devotional and loving, focused and steadfast, indefatigable and self-determined. From this angle, Anandmai’s rhetoric

² The scholar of religion, Cynthia Humes (2000), has argued that in Hindu religious traditions the concept of ‘woman power’ (*stri ki śakti*), in particular, implies the idea of the characteristics and capacities culturally ascribed to women as a class, from which their feminine power (*śakti*), including the socio-biological potential for motherhood, is thought to derive.

constructs the idea of the female *sādhvī* as normative by emphasising that *sevā* constitutes the ‘natural’ extension of women’s bio-moral proclivities to the public sphere. Her selective gendering of *sevā* as righteous femininity encourages women across communities and life stages to step out of socially expected gender roles and, as she says, ‘adopt the *sādhvī*’s way of life.’

By the same token, Anandmaī teaches that female *sādhvīs* belong in the public sphere, challenging highly politicised representations that position them as volatile outliers. They are not exceptions to the upper-caste male norm of *sādhvīs*, occupying the margins of *akhārās* culture. In contrast, Anandmaī situates female *sādhvīs* at the grassroots of society, engaging in beneficent relationships with underserved identities and transforming lives. To her, *sevā* accomplishes more than only women’s uplift, which has been the operative focus of colonial and postcolonial applications of the concept in many guru-centred movements. It also aims to empower women by reforming the patriarchal structures that exploit them. In this way, she alters how people talk about female saints, changing the terms of the discourse, by clarifying that women’s becoming *sādhvīs* and claiming public space to change women’s worlds are the rights vested by Hinduism.

Returning to Anandmaī’s idea of the connection of *sādācār* to mother power, she says that a big problem within the saint society, from the *akhārās* to the monasteries, has to do with gurus’ ‘wrong’ knowledge (or lack thereof) about mother power. It forms the basis for their mistreatment of female saints by denying them the rights (*‘adhikār’*) that she says Hinduism entitles them because they embody mother power. Anandmaī attributes the majority of the problem to the combination of stupidity and misogyny and partially to the rapid spread of misinformation through communication technologies (e.g., television, mobile phone, computer) that denigrates women. Accordingly, then, ‘real’ gurus not only have the ‘right’ knowledge about mother power (and women power), but also teach it to others to increase women’s rights in Hindu cultures. A large component of Anandmaī’s *sevā* involves dispelling falsehoods and ignorance about the rights that, as she instructs, Hinduism recognises women as eligible for, beyond the prescribed norms of marriage and householding. To that end, she underscores the rights that empower women for leadership roles in the *akhārās*. Anandmaī says,

According to the Hindu tradition, when women become *sādhvīs* they have the right to sing *bhājans* (devotional songs), give *kāthās* (recitation of narrative traditions) and *pravāchans* (religious teaching), lead rituals for others, and they can train other *sādhvīs* and make them *mahants* (leaders of their *akhārās*). Women have more rights than men in the saint society. But female *sādhvīs* don’t know their rights, and they shouldn’t compete with male *sādhvīs* for their rights, as it might hurt men’s egos. They should complement each other. Women are waking up to their true power because of camps like this.

In promoting the dharmic rights of female *sādhvīs*, Anandmaī’s rhetoric is anchored to an ideology of gender complementarity. While some scholars have argued that religious models of complementarity camouflage embedded sexist values and do not substantively empower women (Humes, 2000: 139), Anandmaī uses the concept to acknowledge sexual difference and augment the primacy of female embodiment for saintliness. Without restricting female agency to the domicile, she invokes the ideology to increase *sādhvīs*’ autonomy within the *akhārās*, and she sanctions their engaging roles that harness their devotional and leadership capacities.

It is noteworthy that Anandmaī steers clear from using the language of ‘gender equality’ in her rhetoric. She never mentioned the term until I addressed it with her. Her understanding that men and women are ‘different but complementary’ may have made raising that point unnecessary. Importantly, I have found that many of the gurus with whom I worked rejected the notion that men and women are ‘equal,’ because, to many of them, it articulates the standpoint that men and women are ‘essentially’ the same. It seems that for the majority of the gurus, ‘equality’ connotes the Western post-Enlightenment idea of ‘natural equality.’ An 18th century political concept derived from the western legal tradition, natural equality posits the view that men and women share the same basic human nature and are essentially ‘equal.’ This idea would likely strike Anandmaī as incredible. To her, ‘women power’ identifies ‘who’ and ‘what’ women ‘naturally’ are, and distinguishes them from men, ontologically, socially, and so religiously.

Nevertheless, when I ask Anandmaī whether she sees political rights such as gender equality enshrined in India’s Constitution as a resource for increasing women’s dharmic rights in Hindu society, she draws a sharp line between ‘religion’ and ‘politics.’ She makes clear that the saint society has its own ‘Constitution’ that ‘gives women all the rights.’ Her use of term ‘woman power’ makes it possible to distance herself from political issues related to women’s rights and sexual equality. To that extent, she renders feminism moot for Hindu women.

‘Woman power,’ as a concept, invites enough ambiguity in its range of signification to allow for the dichotomies of ‘religion’ and the ‘state’ to become submerged in the rhetoric of saintliness. Additionally, it deflects potentially pejorative associations with feminism that the gurus I worked with have found it a potent motif around which to organise their religious gender activism, whether or not they align themselves with feminism. However, the mainstream rhetoric around ‘woman power’ positions it at odds with feminism. As Sunder Rajan has argued, media advertising has deployed ‘woman power’ to override feminism’s impact and nullify the term’s usage from public discourse (1993: 138).

Anandmai's rhetoric of saintliness constructs an adversarial connection between 'women power' and feminism, with the former occupying a superior position over the latter, fortifying the dichotomy between religion and politics. In attributing to female *sādhvis* some of the recent movements for gender equality and reform in India, such as women's protests against the bans preventing their (and menstruant women's) entry into the temple sanctums of Sabarimala in Kerala and Shani Shingnapur in Maharashtra, Anandmai overreaches herself. Her rhetoric articulates the mainstream view that concern for the legal and constitutional rights of women and other minoritised identities is 'political,' and therefore, anathema to being a 'real' guru. Anandmai's approach demonstrates one leadership style at the *Kumbh Mela*. Let us turn to another approach illustrated by Mataji's leadership to get a clearer sense of the different styles.

'BUILD CHARACTER FIRST, THEN READ VED-PURĀN-ŚĀSTRA': MATAJI'S PERFORMING EXEMPLARY CONDUCT AS ANTI-DISCRIMINATION

Mataji's leadership bridges the spheres of religion and politics. Her grassroots religious gender activism combines religion and rights norms to advance the political rights of women in Hindu society. Through her teachings and practices, Mataji positions her leadership as continuous with feminist objectives. She focuses her advocacy around empowering female *sādhvis* by advancing their fundamental rights to equality of opportunity in matters concerning their leadership as monastic heads (i.e., as *Śaṅkarācāryās*: lineage gurus identified with the teaching tradition of the 9th century leader Ādi Śaṅkarācārya), institutional autonomy, and economic sustenance. Advocating their right to equality of opportunity in these three overlapping respects, Mataji accomplishes her larger goal of institutionalising equality of status between female *sādhvis* and male *sādhvis*. By taking her gender activism to the legal courts, the media, and the Indian state, Mataji constructs the idea of the female *sādhvi* as normative (Hindustan, 2017).

In Mataji's formulation, 'normative' refers to the belief that the female sex is intrinsically important and is born with the same ontological value and significance as that ascribed to the male sex in Indic society. According to Mataji, the female, as one type of normative human, deserves to have the same rights and privileges (personal autonomy) and opportunities (education) as the male. This understanding of the 'female as normative' that underlies Mataji's religious feminist activism parallels that of western feminist scholars and thinkers such as Adrienne Rich (1986) and Winnifred Tomm (1991). As Rich has elucidated in her classic work, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, the view of the female as normative embodies the 'awareness of her intrinsic importance, her depth of meaning, her existence at the very center of what is necessary and sacred' (1986: 93). Mataji's feminist leadership reinforces the gender studies scholar Kamla Bhasin's point that while 'feminism' may be a foreign term, the concept has diverse cultural expressions and trajectories (2019).

At the 2019 *Kumbh Mela*, Prayag Mataji's camp appears in sector 19 over by the banks of the Jamuna River, roughly eight kilometres from Anandmai's Women Power Camp on the other side of the fair near the Ganges River. There are two main ways to reach Mataji's camp, from the Jamuna side in Naini city through heavily policed entry points, or by crossing the pontoon (floating) bridge accessed from inside the *melā* proper that connects the Ganga and Jamuna sides of the fairgrounds. While the Ganga-facing side is by far the more crowded and trafficked of the two areas, the Jamuna-facing side also draws heavy crowds and is densely populated.

Signs with the logo of Mataji's NGO (Śrī Gayatrī Mātā Jnān Mahāyagñā Sāmitī), along with glossy posters hanging from the camp's border wall with an image of Mataji holding a trident, mark the spot of her camp. The banner around the gate reads: 'Ānant Śrī Vibhūṣit Gayatrī Triveṇī Prayāg Pīṭhādīśwār Jagadgurū Ādyā Svayambhū Śaṅkarācārya Trikāl Bhavantā Sarasvatī Jī Mahārāj' ('The Eternal and Respected Lord of the Sacred Place Gayatrī Triveṇī Prayāg World Teacher the First Self-Made Śaṅkarācārya Trikāl Bhavantā Sarasvatī Great King/Lord') This garland of titles signifies Mataji's status as a *self-made* (*svayambhū*) *Śaṅkarācāryā*, and hence, her alternative authority as India's 'first' female *Śaṅkarācāryā*.

Inspired by what she has termed a 'divine vision,' in which she claims that the god Śiva and the goddess Śakti called her to the leadership, Mataji announced her status to the media and the *melā* authorities in 2008. She publicised the news following the 2007 Maha *Kumbh Mela* in Prayagraj. After receiving the revelation, Mataji put up a signboard at the gate of her camp for the Prayagraj *Magh Mela*, which is like the *Kumbh Mela* but on a much smaller scale. Six years later, at the Ardh *Kumbh Mela*, also in Prayagraj, Mataji announced the creation of India's 'first' Hindu women's *akhārā*. She established the order through her charismatic authority as the female *Śaṅkarācāryā*, naming it *Akhara Pari*,³ which I have translated as the 'Society of the Free Birds Escaping the Prison of Tradition.' Mataji's self-declared status and her founding a women's *akhārā*, which she currently leads, have sent the Akhara Council in an uproar.

³ The full name is *Sarveshwar Mahadev Vaikunth Dham Mukti Dwar Akhara Pari*. I refer to the *akhārā* simply as 'Akhara Pari.'



Figure 4. A Poster depicting Mataji as the female *Śaṅkarācāryā* at her camp's gate. Author's Collection.

In 2017, the leaders of the Akhara Council decided to form an internal peer-review system for India's saints (Hindustan, 2017). Narendra Giri, its (former) president and (former) the secretary of the Niranjani Akhara (the *akhārā* to which Anandmai belongs),⁴ who was elected in 2014, and again in 2019, publicly announced through the press that the Akhara Council would operate as the arbiter of saint society (*Wion Web Team*, 2017; *Scroll Staff*, 2017; Sharma, 2021). Claiming that role allowed the Akhara Council to fashion its identity as the vestigial Hindu state and leverage its power over the *Kumbh Mela* publics through the Indian state. Moreover, by investing itself with the political authority of the vestigial state, it could control perceptions of 'good' and 'bad' saints through its rhetoric of saintliness (Press Trust of India, 2017).

Between 2017 and 2018, the Council published four separate lists with the names of the so-called 'bad' gurus of India. Each iteration revealed more and more 'fake' gurus (Hindustan Times, 2018). The Council had no shortage of words for annihilating their credibility or respectability. Since then, the Council has made a concerted effort to provide its finalised list to the *melā* administration before the start of every *Kumbh Mela* (though it monitors gurus' behaviour and updates its list accordingly). By publicising the list, the Council sought the intervention and approval of the Indian state to block the entry of the 'fake' saints at the *melā*. It also demanded that the state prohibit the pronounced fakes from putting up boards with their 'fake' titles at the *melā* and elsewhere. According to media reports, Yogi Adityanath accepted the Council's request, and for the 2019 *Kumbh Mela*, ordered the *melā* administration to have all the signs and logos of 'self-styled' gurus, including *Śaṅkarācāryās*, removed from the fairgrounds (Jaiswal, 2017; Sikhaula, 2014; Shukla, 2018).

Through its strategic alliance with the state, the Akhara Council in its role as the vestigial state has attempted an all-out government takedown of the saints whom it accused of 'corrupting' Hindu society. In his media interviews and on Twitter, Narendra Giri said that the fake saints, many of whom were blacklisted because of their

⁴ On September 21, 2021, the media published news of the alleged suicide of Mahant Narendra Giri (Pandey, 2021). Based on the reports, the Mahant was found dead at his residence in Prayagraj. The police have launched an investigation into the incident.



Figure 5. Sector 16 of the *Kumbh Mela*, Prayag located nearest to the Ganges River. Author's Collection.

'self-styled' status, were not 'authentic' by the Akhara Council's criteria. Giri framed the Council's motives in redemptive terms, emphasising the need for 'saving the saints from disgrace' (Verma, 2017).

Mataji's name appeared on the Akhara Council's second list in December 2017, alongside those of alleged and convicted rapists, murderers, drug and sex traffickers, and a female guru named Radhe Ma scandalised for wearing make-up and mini-skirts. Self-proclaiming the *Śaṅkarācāryā* status and forming a women's *akhārā* (in 2014) led to Mataji being blacklisted. Her ascribed 'fake' guru status impacted her visibility and treatment at the 2019 fair, for the *melā* authorities placed her camp as far from *melā*'s centre as possible.

Wherever Mataji's activism lands, her leadership becomes the most public platform for overtly challenging male leadership and reclaiming the reigns of the rhetoric of saintliness from mainstream control. One of the ways that Mataji shifts the discourse is through her teachings on *sadācār*. She presses on some of the same meanings as Anandmai, such as moral conduct and respecting women *because of* their embodiment, rather than despite it. But she takes her rhetoric to another level by connecting *sadācār* to women's equal opportunity to lead as monastic heads.

Mataji understands that the historical exclusion of women from the *Śaṅkarācāryā* leadership is based on two deeply rooted and intersecting patriarchal streams of thought. The first concerns attributing an ontologically inferior status to the female; the second involves ascribing the female body a ritually impure status due to menstruation. Mataji reasons that uprooting these anti-woman worldviews requires reversing the normative gender/power hierarchies to raise women's status. Her interpretation of *sadācār* undercuts the ritually-based significance that the mainstream accords to ideas of gender/caste purity by heightening the alternate value of moral purity, achieved through dietary and religious practices, for the leadership. Here, I call attention to Mataji's relating *sadācār* with forms of moral conduct.

In the public lectures that I have attended, Mataji emphasises that moral purity, rather than the ritual purity associated with being born a Brahmin man, distinguishes the 'real' guru. 'Moral purity' denotes not only 'righteous conduct,' but more precisely, eliminating customary practices that discriminate against others based on their sex and caste. According to Mataji, moral purity is tantamount to embodying anti-discrimination attitudes and behaviours. *Sadācār* defined in this sense identifies the minimum criteria for being a 'real' guru to Mataji. She says,

Sadācār means to follow the path of truth in one's behaviour and mentality. The people who call themselves religious leaders do not have any of these qualities. They have not brought their knowledge of *Ved-Purān-Śāstra* [she means *Vedas*, *Purānas*, and *Śāstras*, authoritative texts in Hindu orthodox views] into their way of life. They are corrupting the religion by making distinctions between people based on their caste and sex. For them, the truth is knowing *Ved-Purān-Śāstra*. It has nothing to do with behaviour.

Mataji modernises *sadācār* in order to speak to contemporary social justice-based issues. By emphasising *sadācār* as anti-discrimination, she alters perceptions of saintliness to include concern for women's and other minorities' political-legal rights. She crafts her rhetoric of saintliness around the perception of women being morally superior to men and counters views of their second-class status. Moreover, by correlating the culturally ascribed feminine traits of self-control and self-discipline with celibacy (*brahmacārya*), a practice conceived as masculine in (some) Brahmanical texts (Khandelwal, 2001; Gross, 2001), she refutes the implied orthodox perspective that women are incapable of ritual purity during menstruation. Mataji amplifies the idea of female *sādhus* as inherently pure, powerful, and auspicious. Neither female embodiment nor an oppressed caste status accounts for the problem of impurity to Mataji. Rather, the problem lies with bad attitudes and behaviours. Hence, *sadācār* defined by Mataji's standards outweighs knowledge of ancient texts. Her reworking the dominant criteria for saintliness advantages groups whom the mainstream tradition has denied the right to study the Vedas based on their ascribed impure status. Thus, Mataji's emphasis on women's moral/socio-biological superiority to men reverses the status of women and men to claim women's right to equality of leadership.

'I AM BUILDING MY ARMY OF WOMEN!': PERFORMING FEMALE HEROISM AS WOMEN'S RIGHT TO EQUALITY OF STATUS

In nearly every media interview, public lecture or program, and personal meeting that she gives, Mataji accentuates some variation of the pronouncement that 'women are mother power [*mātr śakti*]. The mother is the best creation of God in this whole world.' She holds up the quality of mother power as the gold standard for attributing saintliness to other gurus. But Mataji is not unusual. I have yet to meet a female guru who did not draw on the concept in some way to authorise her role. As we saw earlier, Anandmai also uses it to raise women's status in the saint society. Mataji and Anandmai share similar essentialist views about mother power that idealise women's perceived maternal nature without restricting women to sex-role stereotypes. Both gurus conceive mother power as the potent female source of energy for women's ascribed traits of devotion, love, patience, self-control, selflessness, and endurance to withstand hardship. These traits are said to endow women with maternal instincts and produce female virtue. Additionally, the theologies of the gurus relate the inherent sacrality and purity of female embodiment and bodily processes to the divine materiality of the goddess as the creatrix of the manifest world.

There are important differences in their perspectives, however. Anandmai constructs her theology of mother power to teach the ideology of gender complementarity (the view that men and women are essentially different and inhabit roles that complement each other's differences), and Mataji crafts her theology to intensify the reversal of gender/power hierarchies. Through that status reversal, she constructs female *sādhus'* equality with that of male *sādhus* to push for their equal right to the leadership. Her rhetoric suggests that women's exclusion from the topmost tiers of institutional power is related to perceptions of them being inferior to male *sādhus*.

In her practices, Mataji associates 'mother power' with an attribute that is muted in Anandmai's rhetoric: female heroism. In Mataji's usage, the concept refers to the gendered feminine power of courage and strength, self-determination and self-discipline, and defiance against male domination over women. Mataji's theology constructs female heroism as women's insubordination against the male sex right.⁵ Likewise, her theology condones that female insubordination against the patriarchal right to women *is* virtuous. This is a crucial difference in perspective between the two gurus. Mataji's identifying mother power with/as the righteousness of women's resisting male control over the female sex widens the parameters of respectable womanhood to include traits that are often seen as dangerous to the patriarchal order.

Thus, Mataji's narrative attacks mainstream misogynistic thinking at its root, replacing such discourse with an emancipatory vision of the female as heroic. Her rhetoric of saintliness weakens religious patriarchy's structural monopoly over the leadership by reconfiguring the notion of heroism (that is to say, to women's resistance to forms of male control) as the female birth right. In claiming women's superiority over men based on the perception

⁵ In referencing the idea of female insubordination against the male sex right, I'm drawing on the feminist religion scholar, Winnifred Tomm's explanation of the concept (1991: 85-93).

of their naturally heroic nature, Mataji reverses gender hierarchies to push for the normativity and equality of female *sādhvis*.

Although women's ascribed second-class status is linked to perceptions of their bodily impurity, Mataji's rhetoric suggests that there's more involved than solely concerns with purity. Their perceived inferiority may also stem from widespread understandings, articulated discursively and symbolically in the *melā* sphere, that promote *akhārā* culture as an exclusively gendered context for heroic masculinity. Historically, *akhārās* were formed as paramilitary societies to protect the monastic heads, Hindu traditions, and Indians against British colonial forces (Gross, 2001). In practice, the *akhārās* place a premium on the male sex for entry into the saint society, in which martial imagery is prominent. Only five of the thirteen established *akhārās* accept women (Hausner, 2007). Even the meaning of 'akhārā,' which may be translated as 'wrestling ring,' 'sports,' and, as I learned, 'army' of saints, privileges male virility.

The implication is that mainstream discourse forwards the view that 'real' saints are 'essentially' men because of imputed heroic qualities thought to make male *sādhvis* capable of enduring the difficulties of *sādhvi* life and protecting religion and country against perceived enemies. That the Brahmanical texts elevate ideals such as control over the body, sensory suppression, and vanquishing desires to construct asceticism, suggest the idea of male virility as normative to saintliness. Patriarchal *akhārā* culture positions female *sādhvis* not only as 'anomalies' in the saint society (Khandelwal, 2004), but also as outliers to it. This is based on perceptions of their incapacity for virility, and by implication, their inferiority to male *sādhvis*.

Enlarging the idea of mother power to include and justify heroic femininity, Mataji advances women's monastic leadership. Like the term 'akhārā,' the title 'Śāṅkarācāryā' connotes the ascetic ideal of heroic masculinity. Based on fieldwork responses of the gurus, the Śāṅkarācāryā epitomises male virility. Many of them described the Śāṅkarācāryās as the 'leader of the army' comprising all the *akhārās*. Gender was not a factor in their responses. As many female gurus as male gurus made the comment. However, gender became a factor in their responses when discussing the issue of eligibility for the role. With Mataji and another guru (not Anandmāi) being the exception, the gurus said that women are ineligible to become Śāṅkarācāryās, citing the criterion of birth as a Brahmin male. But women's ineligibility is also a function of the perception of male virility as the essentially gendered basis for eligibility, which renders women categorically ineligible and ontologically incapable of leadership.

'WOMEN NEED THEIR OWN AKHĀRĀ!': CONSTRUCTING SELFLESS SERVICE AS WOMEN'S RIGHT TO INSTITUTIONAL AUTONOMY

Empowering women to see themselves as heroic through her teachings, Mataji unravels deeply ingrained attitudes and practices that condition them to be dependent on others, especially male kin, for their well-being. Some of the religiously-sanctioned gender ideologies featured in orthodox Brahmanical texts prescribe women's and girl's dependence on fathers, husbands, and sons as the condition of ideal womanhood (Shastri, 1990). But such prescriptions, apart from socialising women to be dependent on and obedient to men, send the message that they cannot protect themselves because of the ascribed weakness of the female sex. It instructs them to believe that their protection and happiness come from being dependent on others. However, Mataji disrupts this idea, emphasising women's innate capacity for self-protection. In a women's programme that she organised in 2019, she said,

No one ever tells a girl or a woman this knowledge, but she knows when a man is looking at her badly [with sexual intent]. A woman always knows. When they know that the person may harm them, they must protect themselves. Women must take action against sexual terrorism.⁶

Mataji backs her words up with activism. She offers women (and men) in the local community martial arts training sessions free-of-charge at her *ashram*. At the sessions, female and male instructors from around Prayagraj, whom Mataji has contacted, come and teach the women, including the women who live at her *ashram*, the art of self-defence. Importantly, as she makes clear, female heroism involves protecting oneself against what Mataji labels 'sexual terrorism,' which includes all forms of gender-based violence. A man ogling a woman qualifies as 'sexual terrorism' by Mataji's definition.

Thus, Mataji inculcates among diverse female audiences that independent female power is not only virtuous. It is also heroic, exemplifying Mataji's vision of respectable femininity. Recall Mataji's retrieving the microphone from Gyandas discussed earlier. It enacts her right to resist the patriarchal right to dominate women and speak for them. She teaches that women and girls deserve to live without 'sexual terrorism.' It is their human birth right. By the term 'independent,' I understand Mataji to mean the idea of women and girls empowered through knowledge

⁶ Mataji Trikal Bhavanta Saraswati, 27 July 2019, Prayagraj.

of their self-worth to take control of their lives and actively change their worlds. Her view is based on deeply valuing the female as normative and equal to the male.

While Mataji travels around the country altering perceptions of the boundaries of respectable womanhood to include the heroic elements of feminine identity as laid out above, she focuses her efforts on spreading the message of the virtue of independent female power to the female *sādhvis* whom she meets at the *melās*. She speaks to *sādhvis* who belong to an *akhārā* and to those who do not belong to any *akhārā*. In either case, through the rhetoric of saintliness, Mataji asserts their constitutional right to organise and lead *akhārās* of their own as they see fit.

Her activism combines Hindu teachings on selfless service (*sevā*) with rights-based discourses related to gender equality to advance women's equal right for institutional autonomy in Hindu society. To sanction that right, Mataji applies the concept of *sevā* retooled as working toward the universal *female* good through leadership, advocacy, and support for or collaboration with other organisations committed to changing lives. She says,

My *sevā* is to work for the women of this country and in the saint society. *Sevā* means doing good work for women. That's why I formed my *akhārā*. It's a women's *akhārā* because it gives priority to women. In my *akhārā*, every woman is equal (*barābar*) to every man. Through this *akhārā*, I can teach women about their rights. When I told some religious leaders that I wanted to make an *akhārā* for women, they all said, 'Why don't you start an NGO? Why do you need to start an *akhārā*? Don't make a separate *akhārā* for women.' So, I said, Wow! The women can work but only a man can sit on the throne? This is why I started my *akhārā*. So that women, too, can sit on the throne. This is my *sevā*. To make women sit on the throne and serve the society.⁷

Significantly, Mataji's and Anandmai's views of *sevā* illuminate the ideological fault lines in the rhetoric of saintliness. Although Anandmai pushes the boundaries of feminine virtue and alludes to heroic feminine traits such as self-determination and courage in her application of *sevā*, she discourages women's taking the initiative to form their own separate *akhārās*. Acting independently of male authority seems to go against her idea of heroic femininity. In her words, it might 'hurt men's egos.' Fighting for women's institutional autonomy amounts to 'competing with men' and is neither feminine nor virtuous. Thus, Anandmai does not openly challenge male-dominated power structures, but rather encourages women to work within the hierarchy.

By contrast, Mataji accentuates the beneficence of women's independent leadership as a form of selfless service. Female *sādhvis* can lead as the 'heads' of an *akhārā*. Or, they can work as its 'hands' in service to objectives conducive to women. Her rhetoric resists attributing saintliness based on sex-specific roles. In this way, Mataji creates an alternative way of conceiving *sevā* by emphasising women's institutional autonomy as an aspect of it. From her standpoint, female religious institutional autonomy is good for the society and models the *full* range of women's potential. Her rhetoric joins theology and gender advocacy to reverse the structural hierarchies that bring women under male control in *akhārā* culture. By reworking *sevā*, Mataji interrupts the gendered tropes woven into the rhetoric of saintliness that perpetuate essentialist perceptions of sex roles and protect high-caste male privilege.

Mataji is unyielding in her emphasis on the right to institutional autonomy for female *sādhvis*. Although over the last nine years other *akhārās*, such as Juna and Niranjani, have organised separate women's organisations or camps, Mataji remains largely unsatisfied with these efforts. Based on what she has told me, such *akhārās* represent semi-autonomous institutions. That is, the women's *akhārās* may be separate from the male *akhārās*, but they are not independent from them. This means that female leaders of the women's *akhārās* are subject to the institutional authority of the parent *akhārā*, and by implication, subordinate to the male leaders of those *akhārās*. Similarly, the women's *akhārās'* decision-making powers are limited by the predominant interests of the male-run *akhārās*, which wield the power to decide on the agenda of public policy (such as making lists of 'fake' gurus) that impact others in the saint society. Structurally, then, the practice of forming women's *akhārās* within the established (male-run) *akhārā* system, which some of the Akhara Council leaders seem to condone, confirms Mataji's suspicion that, despite Anandmai's statement ('I rule in this *akhārā*'), women do not substantively 'rule' in organisations that have been folded into the larger male power structure.

Creating an *akhārā* purposefully for the female saints, Mataji imparts the idea of the female *sādhvi* as normative by emphasising women's right to institutional autonomy. Through Akhara Pari, she is transforming previously blocked access points for women's leadership and dismantling inequities that keep them from moving up the power structure. Her leadership is creating substantive change for underserved identities. By Mataji's definition, *sevā* endeavours to make women's and girl's lives better by protecting their interests and their constitutional rights in a society in which they are slowly eroding under a government powered by Hindu nationalist politics. The retooled ideas of *sevā*, *sadācār* and mother power illuminate the alternative standards by which Mataji constructs her rhetoric of saintliness in the public sphere.

⁷ Mataji Trikal Bhavanta Saraswati, June 9, 2018, Prayagraj.

CONCLUSION: REAL GURUS, FAKE GURUS, AND THE GENDERED RELIGIOUS POLITICS OF SAINTLINESS IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE

This article has advanced the concept of the ‘performativity of saintliness’ to demonstrate how the grassroots religious gender activism of female gurus in the public sphere, constructs an alternative narrative to the dominant discourse to create outcomes that empower female saints in Hindu society. To this end, the article has illuminated the roles of sex and politics on the rhetoric of saintliness for controlling entry into and exit from the saint society, as well as the *Kumbh Mela*, the (temporary) world of saints *par excellence*. As we have learned, while religious patriarchy as the vestigial state, with the media’s cooperation, corners the market on the rhetoric of saintliness, the Indian state surveils the boundaries of *akhārā* culture by allowing or refusing entry to saints whom the Council labels ‘fake’ gurus.

However, religious patriarchy’s tightening the reigns of the rhetoric has provoked the proliferation of parallel discourses also attempting to reconfigure the boundaries of saintliness. At the *Kumbh Mela*, saints variously stake their claims to authenticity/virtue to support, ignore, or defy the dominant discourse. Based on media reports, the Akhara Council itself is not immune from being subject to the internal peer review system that it has implemented. It, too, has undergone disruptions concerning the leadership of the presidency, with different *akhārā* heads claiming their authority over others for the title. At the 2015 *Kumbh Mela*, during which Mataji went to the media and alleged women’s mistreatment in the *akhārās*, the Council became entangled in a bitter battle of words and wills between two prominent male gurus over the leadership. Debates over saintliness, over ‘real’ gurus versus ‘fake’ gurus and so forth, are not unusual in the saint society. Rather, as I have argued, they are performative.

But even as the mainstream rhetoric upholds transcending gender identity as the basis for attributing saintliness, the alternative rhetoric of the gurus described in the discussion suggests otherwise. They express the view that religious patriarchy conceals systemic sexism and misogyny from public scrutiny by emphasising transcendent saintliness. Likewise, they expose the hypocrisy of the mainstream leadership that, on the one hand, claims to ‘respect women’ and, on the other hand, attacks the credibility of gurus who ‘see’ themselves as female. As the gurus indicate, ‘transcendent spirituality’ articulates the discursive trope for universalising the male sex as normative. Hence, the gendered ‘catch-22’ on which the male rhetoric pivots bespeaks attitudes denigrating female saints based on perceptions that they are essentially incapable of virility, the *sine qua non* of saintliness, and by implication, lesser than male saints.

Despite religious patriarchy, the gurus are committed to improving the status of female *sādbus* within *akhārā* culture and changing lives. They use the same concepts as the religious mainstream, namely *sadācār*, *mātr śakti*, and *sevā*, but repurpose them to alter perceptions that subordinate women to male authority. Their rhetoric actively positions women at the helm of *sādhu* life, thereby constructing the female *sādhu* as normative to the male *sādhu*.

Nevertheless, the different perspectives of the gurus shape their relationship to the ideas of gender equality, women’s rights, and feminism, and to patriarchal *akhārā* culture. As I have argued, whereas Anandmai reworks *sadācār* to affirm female embodiment, Mataji forwards that premise to promote anti-discrimination and pro-woman worldviews that challenge dominant caste and gender hegemonies. Similarly, for Anandmai, mother power, as she interprets it, invests women with ritual and devotional authority, which includes initiating them into leadership roles, and ‘naturally’ qualifies them to engage with the male-dominated public sphere through selfless service. By contrast, in Mataji’s conception, mother power generates women’s capacity for heroism and makes it possible to protect themselves and others and govern institutions independently of male control. As a result, Anandmai’s rhetoric situates her squarely within the male-powered institution, though not without issue, while Mataji’s destabilises traditional hierarchies, thus, locating her outside the mainstream.

In sum, the gurus’ rhetoric of saintliness brings to the surface the largely neglected issues and problems affecting female saints in the public sphere and beyond it. To that extent, the gurus state that empowering women requires that religious patriarchy go beyond bestowing on them the religious bona fides of saintliness or highlighting their visibility in the saint society through media coverage. For these gurus, the increased visibility of female saints at the *melā*, in the news, and so on is not, as the mainstream asserts, synonymous with their holding a high status, or their receiving respect in the *akhārās*. Though it may be a convenient substitute for the religious establishment’s idea of gender equality, increasing women’s visibility cannot replace the hard work of reorganising *akhārā* culture to make it gender and caste inclusive. Initiatives to create *akhārās* for women suggest that female gurus are frustrated with the sexism that saturates *akhārā* culture and deprives women of realising their full human potential. At every turn, the gurus instruct that women deserve more. They deserve better. It is their birth right.

Just as significantly, though, while the gurus weave their rhetoric around the common language of ‘women power,’ Mataji performatively pushes the limits of that discourse by aligning her theology with advocacy for women’s equal rights in Hindu society. Through the intersection of her rhetoric and religious gender activism, she teaches that ‘until women get their rights, they will never get their respect.’ For Mataji, enforcing women’s constitutional rights, especially in religious spheres where those rights are flouted and dismissed as ‘foreign,’ must

accompany empowering women in India. Mataji is not alone. More and more gurus, both men and women, are echoing her sentiment. Whether Mataji's protecting the fundamental rights of India's most underserved identities by organising alternative traditions for them to flourish is enough to transform the internal power structures of institutions that have historically excluded them from the monastic leadership remains to be seen. However, both Mataji and Anandmai demonstrate through their feminist-leaning religious gender activism that real, gender-based change is not only possible. It is also imperative to creating hopeful futures for women.

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