

## Hinduism and Gender: Past and Present

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**Introduction:** - The proposed study will examine aspects of the relationship between ascetics and the long surviving philosophical tradition of Hinduism in India from the perspective of Gender.

The term asceticism is derived from the Greek word, 'askesis', meaning a kind of exercise or proactive training in which athletes engage. The main ascetics practices are fasting, sexual Continence, living in seclusion, living in voluntary poverty etc. The practices relatively common in Jainism. Jainism, branches of Hinduism and early Christianity. But the present study will be confined itself to Asceticism under Hinduism. Bhagwat Geeta's recommendation of renunciation of the fruit of action but not of action is a fine example of Asceticism. In Hinduism it is believed to be both morally and ritually Asceticism is a kind of ideology which are the spiritual status and daily religious activities of Hindu society. It is well known that the practices of celibacy and fasting are the required elements of various religious rituals in Hindu society.

The present study will examine the process of the institutionalization of Asceticism. In this study will focus upon professional and specialist ascetics who have acquired and identify and considerable recognition in the society. The most important way of being ascetics is sanyas or renunciation. In becoming a Sanyasi or a renouncer a person renounces the ritual duties which are incumbent on the legally, socially, properly married householder.

The life of traditional religious Hindu is divided into four 'Ashrama' and each ashrama is a ritual status. For men and women alike marriage is the rite that initiates householder ship and allows them to shoulder the responsibilities in the society. However according to 'Manusmriti', male marriage required a previous former ritual of studentship but the same is not applicable for a

female. Initiation of studentship is known as upanyan and Manusmriti states that for women marriage is equivalent to upanyan.

In traditional Hindu society, a woman's place is in home and her life is ideally governed by 'Stri-Dharm' according to which householder ship is the only mode of life for a woman. But in Hinduism no distinctive or specific is prescribed for a woman in ascetic's society which shows that there is this disjunction between an ascetic woman and householder women. A close reading of text of stridharmapadhati shows that most important 'dharma' is pativrata, self-abnegating love for devotional, service to the husband, the 'pati'. It contains a specific section in praise of pativrata.

Until recently, very few studies were made of the Hindu householder women's daily religious life. There is a great paucity of literature related to the householder Hindu women's religious life. M.S. Stevenson in his book 'The Rights of the Twice Born' conceptualized the religious belief of Hindu women as the 'fifth Veda', but so far no specific study about this 'fifth Veda' has been done. In recent years our knowledge of Hindu women's religious or belief has greatly been increased through the major studies by Susan Wadley, Doranne Jacobson, Veena Das, Sylvio Vatuk, Line Frucety etc. through study of available literature Urdu allow us to say in everyday life for Hindu women's religious vrata and Hindu women's rituals of Pooja.

So far as vratas are concerned ethnographic evidence overwhelmingly supports the textual for portraying Hindu women's religious life as central on the family. Namrata is a type of religious function that has fasting as its chief features. The vrata is a 'votive rite' in that it begins with a desire of some specific goal. A number of are pursued for the benefit of husband and sons.

But in non-householders women also performs vrata and Pooja. Widows and girls and women several regions are un-marriageable for under this category. Early sociologists like 'Oman' and 'Ghurye' suggested that there is a direct link between widowhood and their entry into asceticism. Birthday failed to consider the socio-religious factors behind this. Social history reveals that widowed girls and women suffered physical and emotional violence for beyond anything confined by dharmik authority. Reform movements like Brahmo Samaj actively encouraged remarriage of widow but the inhuman treatment of widowed at the hands of their laws still continues. Still many families hold their young widowed daughters-in-law responsible for their son's death. Even today remarriage of young widow is not permissible.

In present in the society every man without husband suffers various difficulties. Of them the first is their economically precarious situation and another is sexual exploitation. Just to escape from this situation widows or unmarried girls enter in an ascetic establishment where they acquire social and ritual status both. They became official disciples of an ascetic women, their guru. Again it is worth mentioning here that religiously male and female asceticism are not much different with respect to their object, their origins and factors that sustain them differ. Normally women and girls both enter in the ascetic's life by the same process as man and there is no specific doctrine that it is exclusively applicable for one sex. It will be interesting to see about the similarity and dissimilarity between female ascetics of Allahabad, Banaras, Mathura, Tirupati and Brindavan.

In classical Hindu text asceticism is predominantly associated with men. The prescribed renunciation primarily for upper cast men emphasizing withdrawal from household life after fulfilling social duties. Women were largely expected to follow the path of devotion (bhakti) rather than renunciation.

However historical records show the

presence of female ascetics such as Gargi and Maitri who engaged in philosophical debates and were punished.

Gargi Vachakanvi was one of the most notable female figures in the Brihadarnyaka Upanishad. Gargi participated in spiritual debates and dialogues, questioning the nature of universe and ultimate reality. In the strictest sense, Gargi represents women who engaged deeply in spiritual and intellectual practices, challenging the gender norms of the time.

In the Brihadarnyaka Upanishad Maitri is depicted as a philosopher and ascetic. When offered material wealth by her husband, sage Yajnavalkya, Maitreyi rejects it, choosing instead pursuit of spiritual knowledge. This act of renunciation is a form of asceticism that demonstrates her commitment to spiritual wisdom over worldly desire.

In the Bhakti movement (7<sup>th</sup> -17<sup>th</sup> CE), which focused personal devotion to God, female ascetics found new expression. The Bhakti movement emphasized devotion over ritualistic practices and encouraged personal connection with the divine, which made spiritual practice more accessible to all genders.

One of the most famous female figures of the Bhakti movements Mirabai was a Rajput princess who renounced her real life to devote herself entirely to Krishna. While Mirabai is often seen as a devotee and not a traditional ascetic, her life of renunciation and devotion to Krishna can be seen as a form of spiritual asceticism. She rejected the constraints of marriage and social conventions to live a life of single-minded devotion, often living in solitude away from the distractions of worldly life.

A Kannada poet and devotee of Lord Shiva, Akkamahadevi (12th century) was a prominent figure in the Lingayat movement. She is known for her Vachanas (spiritual poetry) and is said to have renounced clothing as a symbol of detachment from the material world. Andal (8th century) - A Tamil poet-saint of the Alvar tradition in the Vaishnavite Bhakti movement, Andal (8th

century) composed passionate devotional poetry dedicated to Vishnu, particularly in the form of Ranganatha of Srirangam. A devotee of Vithoba from Maharashtra, Janabai (13th century) was a household servant who composed Abhangas (devotional songs) reflecting her devotion to God despite her low social status

14th-century mystic and poet from Kashmir, Lal Ded is another example of female asceticism in the Bhakti tradition. She embraced a life of intense meditation and mysticism, following a path of self-discipline and renunciation, all while expressing her thoughts through poetry.

The tradition of asceticism and renunciation in Hinduism has been prevalent since ancient times. While historically, this tradition was largely male-dominated, women have increasingly embraced ascetic life, presenting a new perspective to society. In contemporary times, female ascetics have played a crucial role in promoting spiritual, social, and humanitarian values. This article explores the contributions of contemporary female ascetics in detail. Notable Contemporary Female Ascetics.

**1. Mata Amritanandamayi (Ammā)** – Mata Amritanandamayi, known as the 'Hugging Saint,' is renowned for her spiritual consciousness and humanitarian service, not just in India but globally. She founded the 'Amritanandamayi Math,' which provides education, healthcare, and social assistance to the underprivileged. Millions of followers take inspiration from her teachings and engage in humanitarian service. She actively contributes to disaster relief and rehabilitation efforts.

**2. Sadhvi Rithambara** – Sadhvi Rithambara is a well-known Hindu ascetic who plays a vital role in religious and cultural awareness. She founded 'Param Shakti Peeth,' which supports orphaned children and the rehabilitation of women. She is dedicated to nationalism, religious awareness, and social service.

**3. Anandamayi Ma** – Anandamayi Ma was a renowned 20th-century female saint whose life

was a testament to devotion and meditation. Her teachings continue to inspire millions. She was deeply immersed in meditation and yoga, spreading the message of divine love and self-realization. Her followers are spread across India and the world.

**4. Brahma Kumari Shivani** – Brahma Kumari Shivani is a leading spiritual guide, advocating positive living and mindfulness. She is one of the prominent spokespersons of the 'Brahma Kumaris' organization, offering mental peace and spiritual guidance to millions. Her teachings on meditation and spirituality help people attain inner harmony.

**5. Sadhvi Bhagawati Saraswati** – Sadhvi Bhagawati Saraswati is a key leader at Parmarth Niketan, dedicated to spirituality, yoga, and environmental conservation. She leads initiatives for women's empowerment and social reforms. Her teachings inspire young people towards spirituality and ethical living.

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#### **Roll and contribution of ascetics in society:-**

Female ascetics have played a significant role in various societies, contributing to spiritual, social, and cultural life in profound ways. Their impact can be seen across different traditions, including Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, and Jainism. Here's an overview of their role and contributions:

**1. Spiritual Leadership and Guidance** – Female ascetics serve as spiritual guides, preachers, and mentors, offering wisdom and moral guidance to their followers. Many have established religious institutions, written spiritual texts, and led

communities in devotion.

**2. Social Welfare and Philanthropy** – Many female ascetics dedicate themselves to serving the underprivileged by running orphanages, schools, and hospitals. They promote charitable activities such as feeding the poor and caring for the sick.

**3. Education and Knowledge Preservation** – Some female ascetics have contributed to the preservation and transmission of religious and philosophical teachings. In various traditions, they have composed hymns, scriptures, and discourses that continue to inspire generations.

**4. Advocacy for Women's Rights and Social Reform** – Historically, some female ascetics have challenged societal norms, advocating for women's rights, gender equality, and the upliftment of marginalized groups. Their independent lifestyle has served as a model of empowerment.

**5. Cultural Influence and Arts** – Female ascetics have contributed to literature, poetry, and music, often expressing deep spiritual insights through artistic means. Their works inspire devotion and reflection in society.

**6. Environmental Awareness** – In modern times, many female ascetics are actively involved in ecological conservation, promoting sustainable living, vegetarianism, and the protection of natural resources.

Overall, female ascetics contribute to society by fostering spirituality, compassion, and positive social change. Their presence challenges conventional gender roles and inspires people to live meaningful and ethical lives.

Challenges in Gender Asceticism

**Despite the increasing visibility of gender ascetics, numerous challenges persist:-**

**1. Social Stigma and Discrimination** – Women and transgender ascetics often face societal resistance

due to deeply ingrained patriarchal and heteronormative structures that marginalize their religious roles.

**2. Limited Institutional Acceptance** – Many traditional akharas and religious institutions continue to deny full recognition and legitimacy to female and transgender ascetics, restricting their participation in key rituals and leadership roles.

**3. Economic Challenges** – Gender ascetics, particularly transgender individuals, struggle with financial insecurity as they often lack access to resources, land, and donations that sustain male-led monastic orders.

**4. Legal and Political Barriers** – While some progress has been made, transgender ascetics still face legal hurdles, including lack of official recognition in religious settings and difficulties in accessing government benefits and support.

**5. Internal Resistance** – Even within gender-inclusive akharas, conflicts and divisions arise over the extent of gender inclusion and the adaptation of traditional ascetic practices to modern gender discourse.

Call for women empowerment will gain strength during the mega religious fair of Mahakumbh in Prayagraj as all the recognised 13 ancient Akharas (Hindu monastic orders) are gearing up to not just prominently include women saints in their sacred 'Rajsi Snan (Royal bathing formerly known as Shahi Snan) but also appoint more than 50 women saints as senior office-bearers with titles of Mahant and Mahamandaleshwar in their monastic orders during the 45-day religious congregation, said saints.

Akharas to induct women saints, give message of empowerment. During the Mahakumbh in Prayagraj, all 13 Akharas will empower women by appointing over 50 as senior saints, highlighting their role in Sanatan Dharma.

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With possibilities of more names of women saints being added to the list by the akharas, their number may increase even further in the coming days ahead of the formal start of the mela on January 13, 2025, they said. Saints say that at a time when women are excelling on every front in the world, they are also doing so by becoming the flag-bearers of Sanatan Dharma. Akharas appoint Mahamandaleshwars and other office-bearers during Kumbh and Mahakumbh. Shri Panch Dashnaam Juna Akhada, the largest of the 13 akharas in terms of member saints, even hosts a full-fledged Mai Bada of women saints of its order, that will host a grand 'Sannyas Diksha' on a sacred day during the Mahakumbh to anoint women saints in its order.

Niranjani and Nirmohi Akharas have also made preparations in this regard. As part of this, a mega programme of Akharas will be organised on different dates during Mahakumbh, in which these names will be announced followed by the ceremony of their formal anointment.

Foreign women saints will also be conferred posts. Nirmohi Ani Akhara had appointed eight foreign women mahants in the Kumbh Mela-2019. Akhara's secretary Mahant Rajendra Das said that this time too many women foreign saints will also be given positions in the Akhara. This is necessary to propagate Sanatan Dharma in all four directions of the world, he maintained.

"Mothers and sisters are venerable for us. Like every other work, they also contribute in propagating and strengthening the reach of the Sanatan Dharma. During Mahakumbh-2025 we plan to confer prestigious posts during the fair and ensure that they ride with pride as part of the procession of saints for the rituals of the royal bathing on the major bathing festivals during the fair," said Mahant Ravindrapuri, secretary of Shri Panchayati Taponidhi Niranjani Akhara and president of Akhil Bhartiya Akhara Parishad—the apex decision-making body of the 13 Hindu monastic orders.

Today Hindu ascetic's traditional continue to evolve, with increase Singh visibility of women and nonbinary ascetics. The Kumbh Mela one of the largest Hindu gatherings has seen the emergence of female lead akharas (ascetics order) such as the juna kharas inclusion of Sadhvis. Organisation like the Bharat Mata Mandir in Haridwar provide platform for women renunciation.

No binary and transgender ascetics including hijra Sannyasis and kinner akharas have again recognition. Challenging conventional gender norms within Hindu ascetic traditions. The kinner akhara founded in 2015 is a significant example of transgender- led- ascetic order that has actively participated in major religious events like the Kumbh Mela are certain their spiritual legitimacy. These ascetics blend elements of traditional with contemporary activities, advocating for greater acceptance and social rights. Despite facing societal discriminations, their presence of firms Hinduism in herent inclusivity and its evolving nature in addressing gender diversity.

**Conclusion:** - Hindu ascetism historically perceived as male centric has always accommodated diverse gender expressions do often at the margins. The increasing participation of women and transgender assistics in contemporary Hinduism reflects abroad shift towards gender inclusivity. As these traditions continue to evolve they

reaffirm Hinduism dynamic and adoptive nature.

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