



## Women Ascetics in Hindu Traditions: Historical Erasure and Contemporary Resurgence of Female Renunciation

Professor Dr. Harikumar Pallathadka<sup>1</sup>, Professor Dr. Parag Deb Roy<sup>2</sup>

Vice-Chancellor & Professor, Manipur International University, Imphal, Manipur, India<sup>1</sup>

Social Scientist & Independent Researcher, Guwahati, Assam, India<sup>2</sup>

**Abstract.** This study investigates the often-overlooked history and contemporary resurgence of women's ascetic traditions in Hinduism, challenging dominant narratives that have marginalized female renunciation. Through historical research, textual analysis, and ethnographic fieldwork with contemporary women ascetics, this paper documents the continuous presence of female renunciants throughout Hindu history while analyzing the social, institutional, and textual factors that have contributed to their historical erasure from mainstream accounts. The research reveals diverse forms of female asceticism across sectarian boundaries, geographical regions, and historical periods, demonstrating that women's renunciation represents not an anomaly but a persistent tradition that has adapted to changing social circumstances. Case studies of contemporary women ascetics and their communities illustrate how female renunciants are reclaiming religious authority, creating innovative institutional structures, and developing distinctive theological interpretations within Hindu traditions. This research contributes to both gender studies and Hindu studies by recovering marginalized histories and documenting emerging forms of female religious authority.

**Index Terms-** Women ascetics, female renunciation, Hindu traditions, historical erasure, contemporary resurgence, religious authority, feminist historiography, gender and religion, institutional innovations, female gurus, bhakti movements, textual interpretation, ascetic communities, Mata Amritanandamayi, Sadhvi Ritambhara, Anandmurti Gurumaa, embodied spirituality, theological production, social engagement, global Hinduism, media strategies, transnational networks, gender ideology, humanitarian initiatives, Shaka traditions, religious leadership, institutional marginalization, ascetic practices, spiritual authority, feminist critique.

### I. Introduction

#### The Paradox of Female Renunciation in Hindu Traditions

Hindu asceticism represents one of the world's oldest and most diverse traditions of religious renunciation, dating back over two millennia and encompassing a vast array of practices, philosophies, and institutional forms. Yet within this rich landscape, women ascetics have occupied a paradoxical position; simultaneously present throughout Hindu history while rendered largely invisible in dominant narratives about Hindu renunciate traditions. This paradox reflects not an absence of female ascetics but rather complex processes of historical erasure, institutional marginalization, and scholarly neglect that have obscured women's continuous participation in ascetic life (Denton, 2004; Khandelwal, 2004).



The current historical moment represents a particularly significant phase in the evolution of female asceticism in Hinduism. Across India and within global Hindu communities, women ascetics are experiencing an unprecedented resurgence, establishing new ashrams, attracting disciples, publishing theological treatises, participating in public religious discourse, and claiming spiritual authority in ways that both draw upon and transform traditional models of renunciation (Pechilis, 2004; Humes, 2000). This contemporary florescence of female asceticism raises important questions about gender, religious authority, and the reinterpretation of tradition in modern Hindu communities.

### **Research Questions and Significance**

This research addresses several interconnected questions at the heart of understanding female asceticism in Hindu traditions:

- What evidence exists for women's participation in ascetic traditions throughout Hindu history, and how might we reconstruct these histories despite textual and institutional erasures?
- What theological, social, and institutional factors have contributed to the marginalization of female renunciants in dominant narratives about Hindu asceticism?
- How are contemporary women ascetics negotiating traditional gender norms, claiming religious authority, and developing innovative theological interpretations within Hindu traditions?
- In what ways do the experiences and insights of women ascetics challenge or expand scholarly understandings of Hindu renunciation more broadly?

By addressing these questions, this research makes significant contributions to both the study of Hinduism and broader scholarly conversations about gender and religion. First, it recovers marginalized histories of female religious practitioners whose experiences have been largely excluded from conventional accounts of Hindu traditions. Second, it documents emerging forms of female religious leadership that are transforming contemporary Hinduism in both India and global contexts. Third, it offers new theoretical perspectives on the relationship between gender, religious authority, and textual interpretation within Hindu traditions.

## **II. Methodology and Scope**

This study employs a multidisciplinary methodology combining historical research, textual analysis, and ethnographic fieldwork. Historical investigation focuses on recovering evidence of women ascetics from classical texts, medieval hagiographies, colonial records, and early modern accounts. Textual analysis examines both prescriptive literature regarding female renunciation and autobiographical or biographical accounts by and about women ascetics. Ethnographic research encompasses interviews and participant observation with contemporary women ascetics and their communities across multiple regions of India, representing diverse sectarian traditions.



The scope of the research encompasses female asceticism across major sectarian boundaries (Shaiva, Vaishnava, Shakta, and non-sectarian), geographical regions (with particular focus on North India, Bengal, Maharashtra, and Tamil Nadu), and historical periods (from classical antiquity to the present). While acknowledging the tremendous diversity of Hindu ascetic traditions, this research focuses specifically on formally renunciant women who have taken recognized vows of asceticism (sannyāsa, vairāgya, etc.) rather than the broader category of female religious practitioners or devotees.

### **Theoretical Framework**

#### **Feminist Historiography and the Recovery of Marginalized Religious Voices**

This research is guided by theoretical insights from feminist historiography, particularly methodologies developed for recovering women's experiences from historical contexts dominated by androcentric textual traditions. Scholars such as Scott (1999) and Bynum (1992) have demonstrated how gender operates as a primary category of historical analysis, shaping both historical experience and the production of historical knowledge. Following these insights, this study approaches the historical erasure of women ascetics not as a neutral reflection of historical reality but as the product of gendered processes of textual production, canonization, and historical memory.

The research draws particularly on Gross's (1993) feminist methodology for Buddhist studies, which identifies three stages in recovering women's religious histories: (1) a critical analysis of androcentric bias in textual and scholarly traditions; (2) the recovery of women's voices and experiences from available sources; and (3) the reconstruction of more inclusive historical narratives that incorporate women's experiences. Applying this methodology to Hindu contexts requires attention to the distinctive features of Hindu textual traditions, particularly the complex relationship between prescriptive texts (*sāstra*) and descriptive or narrative accounts (*itihāsa*, *purāṇa*, hagiography).

### **Gender and Religious Authority in Hindu Traditions**

The research engages theories of religious authority developed by scholars of gender and religion, particularly those addressing the complex ways women negotiate, claim, and transform religious authority within patriarchal traditions. Drawing on Sered's (1994) cross-cultural analysis of women's religious leadership, this study examines how Hindu women ascetics develop alternative bases of religious authority when excluded from traditional institutional positions. These alternative sources include mystical experience, personal charisma, innovative interpretations of texts, and the creation of new institutional structures centered on female leadership.

Within Hindu contexts specifically, the research builds on Pintchman's (2007) analysis of how gender operates in the construction of Hindu religious identities and Hancock's (1999) work on the embodied dimensions of female religious authority. These theoretical perspectives help illuminate how contemporary women ascetics negotiate the inherent tensions between ascetic ideals of transcending bodily identity (including gender) and the persistent gendering of religious bodies and practices within Hindu traditions.



### **Renunciation as Social Critique and Alternative Social Formation**

This research conceptualizes asceticism not merely as individual spiritual practice but as a form of social critique and the creation of alternative social formations. Drawing on Dumont's (1960) classic analysis of the "renouncer" (saṃnyāsin) as structural counterpoint to Brahmanical society, as well as more recent critiques of this model (Olivelle, 1992; Heesterman, 1985), the study examines how women's renunciation both reproduces and challenges dominant social paradigms.

For women ascetics in particular, renunciation has often represented a radical rejection of patriarchal kinship structures and gendered social roles. Yet as Khandelwal (2004) and others have shown, women's ascetic communities frequently reproduce aspects of conventional gender ideology even while creating spaces for female religious authority. This research examines this paradox in both historical and contemporary contexts, analyzing how women ascetics navigate the tension between ascetic ideals of transcending social categories and the lived realities of gendered bodies and social relations.

### **Historical Evidence and Erasure**

#### **Women Ascetics in Classical Hindu Texts**

Despite the patriarchal orientation of much classical Hindu literature, substantial textual evidence documents the presence of women ascetics from the earliest periods of Hindu history. The *Rgveda*, Hinduism's oldest text, mentions female seers (ṛṣikās) such as Ghoṣā, Lopāmudrā, and Viśvavārā, who composed hymns and engaged in ascetic practices (Jamison, 1996). The *Upaniṣads*, foundational texts of Hindu philosophy dating to approximately 800-300 BCE, include notable female philosophers such as Gārgī Vācaknavī and Maitreyī, who participated in philosophical debates and sought spiritual knowledge beyond conventional female roles (Findly, 1985).

Despite these prominent examples, classical texts reveal a profound ambivalence toward female renunciation. The *dharmaśāstra* literature, particularly texts like the *Manusmṛti* (200 BCE-200 CE), explicitly rejects the possibility of independent female religious authority, insisting that women remain under male protection throughout their lives (Olivelle, 2004). Yet archaeological evidence and references in Buddhist and Jain texts from the same period suggest that women were indeed pursuing ascetic lifestyles despite these prescriptive prohibitions (Leslie, 1983).

This contradiction between prescriptive prohibition and historical practice highlights a crucial methodological challenge in reconstructing the history of women ascetics: the texts most likely to be preserved and transmitted were precisely those reflecting elite male perspectives most resistant to female ascetic authority. Recovering women's ascetic histories thus requires reading classical texts "against the grain," attending to contradictions, exceptions, and alternative perspectives embedded within androcentric textual traditions.

### **Medieval Bhakti Movements and Women Saints**



The medieval bhakti (devotional) movements, flourishing approximately 800-1700 CE across various regions of India, represent a crucial period for understanding female asceticism in Hindu traditions. These movements, emphasizing direct devotional relationship with the divine over ritual orthodoxy or social status, created unprecedented opportunities for women's religious leadership. Poet-saints such as Āṇṭāl (9th century, Tamil Nadu), Akka Mahādēvi (12th century, Karnataka), Mīrābāī (16th century, Rajasthan), Lāl Dēd (14th century, Kashmir), and Bahiṇābāī (17th century, Maharashtra) developed distinctive forms of female asceticism characterized by rejection of conventional marriage, ecstatic devotional practice, composition of mystical poetry, and claims to direct divine revelation (Ramanujan, 1973; Hawley & Wulff, 1996).

The hagiographical traditions surrounding these women saints reveal complex negotiation of gender ideology and ascetic authority. While frequently celebrating women saints' rejection of traditional female roles, these narratives often domesticate female religious authority by emphasizing the saints' beauty, emotional intensity, or divine marriage rather than their theological insights or institutional leadership (Ramaswamy, 1997). Nevertheless, these traditions established important precedents for female religious authority that contemporary women ascetics frequently invoke.

Critically, most bhakti women saints operated outside formal ascetic institutions, creating individualized forms of renunciation rather than joining established ascetic lineages. This pattern reflects the systematic exclusion of women from many formal renunciate traditions during this period—an exclusion that has significantly shaped the institutional landscape of female asceticism into the present day.

#### **Colonial Period: Orientalist Discourse and Indigenous Revival**

The colonial period (approximately 1750-1947 in the Indian context) represents a crucial phase in both the suppression and transformation of female ascetic traditions. Colonial discourses frequently depicted Hindu asceticism generally, and women ascetics particularly, as exemplifying the supposed irrationality and social dysfunction of Hindu society (Narayan, 1997). British colonial policies actively suppressed certain forms of asceticism, particularly those perceived as threatening to colonial authority or Victorian moral sensibilities, with women ascetics often facing particularly intense scrutiny as apparent violations of proper feminine behavior (Pinch, 2006).

Simultaneously, indigenous Hindu reform movements responded to colonial critiques by reinterpreting ascetic traditions in ways that frequently marginalized female participation. Organizations such as the Arya Samaj and Ramakrishna Mission, while advocating for women's education and opposing certain patriarchal practices, nevertheless reinforced gendered divisions in religious leadership, often restricting women to separate and subordinate ascetic institutions (Sinclair-Bruall, 1997).

Despite these constraints, the colonial period also witnessed remarkable examples of women ascetics who navigated both traditional patriarchal structures and colonial impositions to claim religious authority. Figures such as Anandamayi Ma (1896-1982) and Sarada Devi (1853-1920) achieved significant religious followings during this period, developing innovative forms of female ascetic leadership that would



influence post-independence ascetic movements (Hallstrom, 1999; Sinclair-Bruell, 1997).

### **Contemporary Renaissance of Women Ascetics Institutional Innovations and New Ascetic Communities**

The post-independence period has witnessed unprecedented institutional development of women's ascetic communities in India and global Hindu contexts. Women ascetics have established independent ashrams, founded educational institutions, created new lineages of female gurus, and developed innovative organizational structures that both draw upon and transform traditional models of ascetic community.

Particularly significant is the emergence of women-led ashrams that combine traditional ascetic practices with contemporary social engagement. Institutions such as Sadhvi Ritambhara's Vatsalyagram in Vrindavan, which combines ascetic community with social service for abandoned women and children, exemplify how contemporary women ascetics are redefining the relationship between renunciation and social engagement (Khandelwal, 2009). Similarly, the Brahma Kumaris organization, led primarily by women ascetics, has developed a global network combining meditation practices with education, environmental activism, and gender equality initiatives (Babb, 1984; Ramsay, 2009).

These institutional innovations reflect both creative adaptation to historical exclusion from male-dominated ascetic institutions and positive response to contemporary social needs. Unable to claim authority within traditional male lineages, women ascetics have developed alternative institutional models that often prove more responsive to changing social contexts than their traditional counterparts.

### **Reclaiming Textual Authority and Developing New Theological Perspectives**

Contemporary women ascetics are increasingly engaging in theological production, publishing commentaries on classical texts, developing new interpretations of traditional concepts, and articulating distinctive spiritual philosophies based on their experiences. This engagement with textual traditions represents a significant challenge to historical patterns that excluded women from theological discourse and textual interpretation.

Several strategies for textual engagement emerge across diverse traditions. Some women ascetics, such as Gurumayi Chidvilasananda of the Siddha Yoga tradition, work within established textual lineages while emphasizing previously marginalized themes such as divine feminine power or the spiritual significance of embodied experience (Brooks et al., 1997). Others, like Anandmurti Gurumaa, explicitly challenge patriarchal interpretations of traditional texts, offering feminist rereadings of sources like the Bhagavad Gītā and Upaniṣads (Srivastava, 2015).

Still others develop new theological frameworks that synthesize traditional concepts with contemporary concerns. Mata Amritanandamayi (Ammachi), for example, has articulated a theology emphasizing compassionate action alongside traditional devotional practice, drawing on Shakta and Advaita traditions while



addressing issues like environmental sustainability and gender equality (Warrier, 2005).

These diverse approaches share a common pattern of women ascetics claiming interpretive authority previously denied them, developing theological perspectives that reflect their distinctive spiritual experiences and contemporary social concerns.

### **Media Strategies and Global Reach**

Contemporary women ascetics have skillfully employed modern media technologies and transnational networks to disseminate their teachings and expand their influence beyond traditional geographical and social boundaries. Through websites, social media platforms, international tours, and multimedia publications, women gurus have built global followings and created transnational spiritual communities that transcend the local limitations that historically constrained women's religious leadership.

Mata Amritanandamayi exemplifies this global expansion, conducting international tours that attract thousands of devotees across North America, Europe, and Australia, while maintaining an extensive online presence through websites, social media, and streaming video of spiritual discourses (Warrier, 2005). Similarly, Sadhvi Bhagawati Saraswati of Parmarth Niketan Ashram in Rishikesh has developed a substantial international following through social media, TED talks, and participation in global interfaith and environmental forums (Roy, 2018).

These media strategies reflect both adaptation to globalization and reclamation of public voice for women ascetics. Historically excluded from public religious discourse, contemporary women ascetics have embraced new communication technologies as means to claim public spiritual authority and build communities beyond traditional institutional constraints.

### **Case Studies of Contemporary Women Ascetics**

#### **Mata Amritanandamayi: Embodied Compassion and Global Humanitarianism**

Mata Amritanandamayi (commonly known as Ammachi or "the hugging saint") represents one of the most globally recognized contemporary women ascetics, with millions of devotees worldwide and an extensive network of humanitarian initiatives. Born in 1953 to a fishing family in Kerala, Amritanandamayi's ascetic path defied both traditional gender expectations and conventional initiation into established lineages. Her primary spiritual practice embracing devotees in darshan (divine audience): represents a distinctively embodied form of female asceticism that transforms traditional gendered associations between femininity, physical touch, and spiritual purity (Warrier, 2005).

Amritanandamayi's Embracing the World organization has established hospitals, universities, disaster relief programs, and environmental initiatives across India and internationally, exemplifying how women ascetics are redefining renunciation to include rather than exclude compassionate engagement with worldly suffering. Her teaching synthesizes Advaita Vedānta philosophy with bhakti devotionalism and



Shakta understandings of divine feminine power, creating a theological framework that emphasizes both mystical experience and ethical action (Warrier, 2005).

Particularly significant is Amritanandamayi's development of a distinctive institutional structure centered on female leadership while including both male and female disciples. Unlike traditional ashrams with rigid gender segregation, Amritanandamayi's organization creates space for women's leadership across educational, administrative, and spiritual domains while maintaining certain traditional ascetic practices (Lucia, 2014).

#### **Sadhvi Ritambhara: Political Engagement and Gendered Nationalism**

Sadhvi Ritambhara represents a significantly different model of female asceticism, combining religious renunciation with explicit political engagement in Hindu nationalist movements. Rising to prominence through fiery religious-political oratory in the early 1990s, Ritambhara has subsequently established Vatsalyagram, an ashram and social service organization in Vrindavan focused on abandoned women, widows, and children (Khandelwal, 2009).

Ritambhara's ascetic practice combines traditional elements; celibacy, saffron robes, Sanskrit learning; with political activism and institutional leadership typically denied to women in orthodox Hindu contexts. Her rhetoric frequently deploys gendered imagery, presenting herself as both mother figure to her followers and fierce defender of a Hindu nation imagined in feminine terms. This complex negotiation of gender constructs traditional femininity as a source of religious-political authority rather than a limitation to be transcended (Bacchetta, 2004).

Ritambhara's case illustrates how contemporary women ascetics navigate multiple, sometimes contradictory discourses around gender, tradition, and modernity. While reinforcing certain patriarchal nationalist ideologies, her ascetic practice simultaneously challenges traditional gender boundaries by claiming public religious-political authority typically reserved for men. This apparent contradiction reveals the complex ways women ascetics both challenge and reproduce dominant gender ideologies in contemporary Hindu contexts.

#### **Anandmurti Gurumaa: Media Savvy and Explicit Feminist Critique**

Anandmurti Gurumaa (b. 1966) represents a distinctively modern approach to female asceticism, combining traditional spiritual practices with explicit feminist critique of patriarchal religious traditions. Based at her ashram in Haryana, Gurumaa has developed a substantial following through television appearances, social media, and international lectures, particularly attracting educated, middle-class devotees across India and the diaspora (Srivastava, 2015).

Gurumaa's teaching explicitly addresses gender discrimination within Hindu traditions, challenging patriarchal interpretations of texts and practices while advocating women's spiritual equality. Unlike many women gurus who avoid direct confrontation with religious patriarchy, Gurumaa regularly criticizes male religious leaders for hypocrisy regarding gender issues and questions textual passages that subordinate women (Srivastava, 2015).



Simultaneously, Gurumaa grounds her critique in traditional spiritual concepts, particularly Advaitic understandings of the self (ātman) as beyond gender. This strategy allows her to present feminist critique not as Western-influenced rejection of tradition but as recovery of authentic spiritual understanding obscured by patriarchal distortion. Her Shakti NGO, which provides educational support to underprivileged girls, extends this spiritual philosophy into practical initiatives addressing gender inequality (Srivastava, 2015).

### **Theoretical Implications and Contributions**

#### **Rethinking Asceticism Beyond Masculine Paradigms**

The experiences of women ascetics fundamentally challenge conventional scholarly understandings of Hindu asceticism that have been constructed primarily through masculine paradigms. Traditional scholarly emphasis on formal renunciation through established institutional structures, textual mastery, and complete withdrawal from social relationships has marginalized women's ascetic experiences, which have frequently developed through alternative patterns due to institutional exclusion.

Women's ascetic practices often demonstrate more fluid boundaries between renunciation and worldly engagement, developing what Khandelwal (2004) terms "hybrid renouncers": practitioners who combine elements of ascetic withdrawal with continued participation in certain social relationships and responsibilities. Similarly, women ascetics frequently emphasize embodied spiritual practice alongside textual knowledge, challenging the mind-body dualism that pervades certain masculine ascetic traditions (Dobia, 2000; Humes, 2000).

These patterns require scholars to expand theoretical frameworks for understanding asceticism, recognizing diverse models of renunciation beyond the paradigmatic male sannyasin who completely severs social ties. Women ascetics demonstrate how renunciation can operate as a transformative engagement with social relationships rather than merely withdrawal from them: a theoretical insight applicable beyond gender to understanding asceticism more broadly.

#### **Gender and the Paradoxes of Embodiment in Ascetic Practice**

Women ascetics illuminate particularly clearly the paradoxical relationship between ascetic transcendence of physical identity and the persistent reality of embodiment in spiritual practice. While ascetic traditions theoretically transcend bodily identity, including gender, in practice ascetic communities remain profoundly shaped by embodied differences and social constructions of gender.

Women ascetics navigate this paradox through various strategies. Some emphasize liberation from gender identity through spiritual realization, drawing on Advaitic concepts of the genderless self (ātman). Others reclaim female embodiment as spiritually significant, drawing on Shakta traditions that celebrate divine feminine power. Still others develop pragmatic accommodations that acknowledge physical differences while asserting spiritual equality (Khandelwal, 2004; Pechilis, 2004).

These diverse approaches reveal asceticism not as simple transcendence of physical identity but as complex negotiation between transcendent spiritual ideology



and embodied practice. This insight contributes to broader theoretical understanding of how religious traditions navigate the persistent tension between claims to universal truth and the particular, embodied contexts in which these claims are realized.

#### **Authority, Authenticity, and Innovation in Religious Traditions**

Women ascetics' strategies for claiming religious authority illuminate broader processes of authentication and innovation within religious traditions. Excluded from conventional sources of authority such as institutional position and lineage membership, women ascetics have developed alternative authenticating strategies, including claims to direct divine revelation, demonstration of extraordinary spiritual powers, innovative textual interpretation, and development of distinctive spiritual practices (Pechilis, 2004).

These strategies reveal the dynamic processes through which religious traditions simultaneously maintain boundaries of authenticity and incorporate innovation. Women ascetics typically present their innovations not as departures from tradition but as recovery of authentic spiritual understanding previously obscured by patriarchal distortion. This pattern of "innovative recovery" allows integration of new elements while maintaining claims to traditional authenticity.

This theoretical insight extends beyond gender to illuminate how religious traditions more generally incorporate change while maintaining claims to unchanging truth: a fundamental paradox in religious studies that women ascetics' experiences illuminate with particular clarity.

### **III. Conclusion**

#### **Toward a More Inclusive Understanding of Hindu Asceticism**

This research demonstrates that women's participation in Hindu ascetic traditions represents not an anomaly or recent innovation but a continuous tradition that has persisted despite institutional marginalization and historical erasure. From Vedic rṣikās to contemporary global gurus, women have consistently created spaces for ascetic practice and spiritual authority, adapting to changing social circumstances while maintaining core elements of Hindu ascetic traditions.

The contemporary resurgence of women ascetics represents a particularly significant moment in this ongoing history; a moment characterized by unprecedented institutional development, explicit claiming of textual authority, creative theological production, and global expansion through new media technologies. These developments suggest not merely women's inclusion within unchanged ascetic traditions but a fundamental transformation of asceticism itself through women's leadership and distinctive spiritual perspectives.

This transformation offers valuable resources for addressing contemporary challenges, including environmental sustainability, social inequality, interreligious dialogue, and spiritual practice in technological societies. Women ascetics frequently bring distinctive approaches to these issues, emphasizing interconnectedness,



embodied spirituality, and integration of contemplative practice with social engagement.

For scholars of religion, the experiences of women ascetics offer crucial insights into how religious traditions maintain continuity while incorporating change, negotiate tensions between universal claims and particular embodiments, and authenticate innovation within frameworks of tradition. These insights contribute not only to understanding Hinduism specifically but to theorizing religion more broadly in diverse cultural contexts.

By recovering these marginalized histories and documenting emerging forms of female religious leadership, this research contributes to a more inclusive understanding of Hindu traditions that recognizes the continuous presence and profound contributions of women ascetics throughout Hindu history and into the present day.

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