

Article

“Everyone Drinks from the Same Well”: Charismatic Female Gurus as “Religious Feminist Influencers” in South Asian Hinduism

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Abstract: This article examines the emergent leadership of two female gurus in South Asia who have declared their status as Śāṅkarācāryās (i.e., heads of monastic institutions) based on revelatory experiences. They have done this in order to change patriarchal monastic (*akhārā*) culture and challenge entrenched ideas of women’s inferiority in Hindu society. By combining ethnographic data and a gender studies-centered analysis of their narratives and teachings, I shall investigate the role and impact of gendered charismatic authority on modern women’s monastic lives. Their self-declarations as Śāṅkarācāryās profoundly break the conventional patriarchal mold for the type of guru women can be and the kind of *authorized religious power* they can have in this male-dominated role; thus, I term these gurus as “religious feminist influencers”. I argue that the gurus invoke charismatic authority by emphasizing the immediacy of the personal realization of the divine, the potency of the female body, and religious emotions, such as radical love, as sources of revelation. By “performing [these] revelation[s],” they construct alternative ways of practicing Hinduism, defined around modernist ideals such as gender equality, inclusion, and women’s rights. Moreover, they promote the normalization of women’s institutional leadership at the pinnacle of the monastic hierarchy.

Keywords: female gurus; Hinduism; South Asia; charisma; saints; religious influencer; authority; narrative performance; gender; affect; materiality; equality; *sādhus*; rights



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1. Introduction: Self-Styled Śāṅkarācāryās and Women’s Monastic Authority in Hinduism

This article examines the emergent leadership of two female gurus in South Asia who have declared their status as Śāṅkarācāryās (heads of monastic institutions) based on revelatory experiences. They have done this to change the patriarchal monastic (*akhārā*) culture and challenge entrenched ideas of women’s inferiority in Hindu society. Here, I shall investigate the role and impact of gendered charismatic authority on modern women’s monastic lives. This exploration of the gurus’ experiences through analysis of their personal narratives and devotional teachings illuminates how new forms of religious authority and influence are developing in South Asia.¹

As I shall argue, these leaders—Mataji and Swamini—proclaim Hindu “truths” that reverse the religiously sanctioned patriarchal order based on their revelations. Though charisma may be the means for mediating new knowledge, I am concerned with *how* charisma (in the context of personal revelatory experience) acts as a potent source of influence for the gurus by moving and inspiring them to challenge and confound traditional absolute gender and power hierarchies. This question frames the discussion of their teachings, practices, and lives.

Their leadership has arisen from collective grassroots efforts, and it has generated a groundswell of support for their quest to empower a class of female ascetics called *sādhus*, and Hindu women in general, with equal rights. Although the gurus serve as spiritual leaders for their communities, they are also renouncers. The Indic language term used to represent this class of female religious practitioners is *sannyāsini*. Apart from *sannyāsini*,

other terms used by the gurus to denote their renunciant status include *sādhu* (the gendered masculine term for ascetic) or *sādhvī* (female ascetic) and *sant* (holy person).² *Sādhus* follow an uncommon way of life called renunciation, or *sannyās*. As *sādhus*, the gurus have taken ritual vows of voluntary poverty, simplicity, and celibacy, dedicating themselves to serving humanity and worshipping the divine.

My research relies on extensive ethnographic fieldwork conducted with the guru Trikal Bhavanta Saraswati (“Mataji”) and her community over the course of four trips to India between 2014 and 2019. Since the life-altering COVID-19 pandemic of 2020, Mataji and I have conversed via telephone and video conferencing platforms on Skype and Facebook. In addition to participant observation at Mataji’s monastic center in north India, my methodology involved using digital audio and video recordings to conduct individual and focus group interviews with Mataji and her followers, collect Mataji’s oral history, and document her teachings and rituals; I was present when these recordings took place, either in person or on a social media platform. These platforms provided an archival trove of resources, including videos of Mataji giving talks, interviews, providing social commentary, and performing rituals at her temple and elsewhere, such as the Kumbh Melas.³

Analysis of the teachings and practices of the other guru, Sadhvi Hemanand Giri (“Swamini”), draws upon the information obtained through social media platforms, where her devotees uploaded videos of her interviews, teachings, and song and ritual performances. In more than fifteen videos, Swamini shares her knowledge with people in India, Nepal, Mauritius, and Hungary. As Swamini’s status as a female Śaṅkarācāryā was announced in late 2018 from Nepal, I utilized her archived online videos, primarily YouTube, as primary data.⁴

2. Holy Women: The Emergence of Female Leadership among Two Śaṅkarācāryā Claimants

Mataji lives in Prayagraj (formerly Allahabad), India, and is respectfully called Her Highness Gāyatrī Trivenī Prayāg Pīṭhādīśwar Ānant Śrī Vibhūṣit Ādya Svayambhū Mahilā Śaṅkarācāryā Jagadguru Trikāl Bhavanta Saraswatī Maharāj Ācharya Mahāmandeleśwar. Born in 1965, in Mirzapur, Uttar Pradesh, Mataji comes from a lower-middle-class family of peanut farmers, who are from a subordinated caste. She is one of four siblings and the third child of her parents. Intelligent, keenly self-aware, and impatient with small talk, Mataji has a commanding presence and is purposeful in her interactions. From our first meeting in 2014, I learned that she expects people to ‘say what they mean’ and ‘mean what they say.’ Her daily routine consists of waking at 4 a.m., worshipping the temple deities, meditating, doing postural yoga for an hour, then reading the daily newspaper while having her breakfast of seasonal fruit and milk. She spends the rest of the day with her devotees at the ashram or at their homes, fundraising to build other centers in India, and organizing in-house and outreach public events in which she connects women’s rights to Hindu teachings. Mataji is confident but not arrogant (she uses the knowledge that she has acquired through experience to correct others). As she has faced personal hardship, for self-protection, she has built a tough exterior, she stands up for her rights, and rarely suffers fools.

Mataji enjoys observing the beauty of the natural world (she has a flower and vegetable garden at her ashram) and watching the sunset after completing the evening’s worship. She engages in playful banter with some of her devotees and with the two elderly women who live at the temple (Mataji has initiated them as *brahmacārinīs*; they have vowed a life of purity). A devotee I met in 2014 described Mataji as “Lakshmi in the morning [she blesses people], Saraswati in the afternoon [she teaches people], and Durga at night [she protects people].” (See Figure 1).



Figure 1. Mataji Trikal Bhavanta Saraswati, Triveni Sangam, Prayagraj, 2018. Author's Collection.

Before she became a *sādhu*, Mataji was married with two children, a boy and a girl. Her family arranged her marriage and her youngest sister's marriage after their father passed away unexpectedly, which meant that Mataji could not complete her secondary school education. In addition, she suffered from hemorrhoids as a child and traveled with her elder brother to different hospitals for medical treatment. These treatments set Mataji's studies back by four years. She had only studied to the eighth grade by the time of her betrothal (she was eighteen years of age). She spent the next fifteen years living as a housewife. Moreover, Mataji attended school to become an Ayurvedic physician (*Vaidhyā*); she took employment as a nurse in hospitals in and around Prayagraj, and she engaged in social work as the General Secretary and Assistant Director of a women's NGO in Benares for two years. Mataji paid for her adult education and her children's primary, secondary, and college education with her earnings (the children went to private boarding schools in Benares and attended different Indian universities).

In 2000, at the age of thirty-five years, Mataji left her life as a housewife for good and became a *sādhu*. Her husband and son objected, but Mataji ignored them and pursued a religious path. She took initiation (*dīkṣā*) in Prayagraj from a male guru of the Saraswati

order of the Dashanami sect. Her *dīkṣā* occurred at midnight on the banks of the Ganges River. After relocating to an ashram near the Trivenī Saṅgam in Prayagraj, where the Ganges, Jamuna, and subterranean Saraswati rivers form a confluence, Mataji separated from her spouse and sent her children to live with her relatives; however, she provided for them financially until they started college. Mataji maintains contact with her daughter but not with her son or former spouse.

As a *sādhu*, Mataji applied her leadership training from the NGO in Benares to the religious field, immersing herself in grassroots activism with poor urban women and children and women survivors of domestic abuse. In 2004, she founded a NGO, the Śrī Gayatrī Mātā Jnān Mahāyagñā Sāmiti; in 2014, she founded a female ascetic order named Pari Akhārā, which I have translated as “Society of the Free Birds”. Currently, Mataji heads a monastic center (*math*) in Prayagraj where two different families and two elderly *brahmacāriṇīs* have settled (see Figure 2).



Figure 2. Mataji meets a devotee at her temple during the Kumbh Mela, 2019. Author’s Collection.

Her followers come from all walks of life, with the majority being lower-middle-class and poor women. Mataji also has many supporters that include Muslims, Christians, feminists, and secular humanists. To signal her authority, she wears a saffron-colored cloth wrapped around the left half of her body, leaving her right shoulder exposed, and she puts her shoulder-length black hair in a top knot (*jaṭā*). In addition to signaling that she has left her worldly life behind, this aesthetic symbolically conveys that she is the embodiment of the mutual powers of the goddess Durga and the god Shiv. She wears big and small *rudrākṣā* (literally, “the eyes of Shiva”) prayer beads, and beads made of quartz (*spatik*), around her neck to ward off malevolent spiritual forces. When she travels, Mataji carries a heavy three-feet-high metal trident (*triśul*) that was given to her by a (male) devotee in 2015 (see Figure 3).



Figure 3. Mataji and her disciple, Bhairavi Pari, at the Triveni Sangam of the Kumbh Mela, 2019. Author’s Collection.

In 2008, Mataji announced her self-appointment as leader, as a female Śaṅkarācāryā, via the local and regional Hindi-language news and print media. Prior to this, she had sought ordination as a Mahāmandeśvar through another *akhārā* led by a high-ranking guru; however, she declined to complete the ritual because she could not accept the terms of the order. She felt that its practices would subvert her leadership power and thwart her stated mission: to create an authentic *akhārā* culture that provides equal opportunities to female monastics to develop their talents. The news of her self-appointment came a month after the Kumbh Melā in Prayagraj in 2007. Mataji said she had a mystical vision in which the deities Durga and Shiv appeared to her, as though flashes of lightning, and they told her that she would be the female Śaṅkarācāryā of India. It occurred during the annual Magh

Mela (January–February) festival in Prayagraj while she was putting up the signboard at her camp.⁵ Mataji interpreted her vision to mean that it was an ordination performed by the gods, which thus invested her with the status of Śaṅkarācāryā⁶ and installed her in office. Her visionary experience provides an alternate form of *dikṣā* for Mataji’s authority.

Although the gods that Mataji recognizes in her visions represent pan-Indian deities, she perceives her power to have been bestowed upon her by deities linked to a specific region of India—in her case, the Trivenī Saṅgam. Mataji associates her power with the regional form of Shiv called Sarveshwar Mahadev, and with the localized river goddesses Ganga, Jamuna, and Saraswati, which personify the Saṅgam. This explains why Mataji has established herself in Prayagraj and why she has named her center and order the Sarveśwar Mahādev Trivenī Prayāg Pīṭh.⁷ The word “*pīṭh*” translates as “place of power”. She has declared her “seat of power” to be in Prayagraj to show that her alternative authority as a female Śaṅkarācāryā in India is tied to Prayagraj, and it has been bestowed upon her by the gods of Prayagraj. They have authorized Mataji to become a female leader in a precise location, which has enabled her to organize an order which parallels the male-led tradition.

Our second claimant (see Figure 4), Swamini, lives in Gauriganj, Nepal, and is called Her Highness Paśupati Pīṭhādīśwar Ānant Śrī Vibhūsit Pratham Mahilā Jagat Guru Śaṅkarācāryā Mā Hemānand Girijī Maharāj Mahāmandeśwar. Born in 1975, in Birgunj, Nepal, Swamini comes from a family of professionals who are from a dominant caste.⁸ She is an only child. Her father worked as a labor commissioner in the local magistrate’s court, and her mother taught in a public school.



Figure 4. Sadhvi Hemanand Giri (Swamini). Photo Credit: Namta Gupta. 2018. Used with Permission.

Based on the online material that I have studied, Swamini has graceful mannerisms, and exudes a sense of calm and clarity while maintaining a laser-sharp focus on the conversation in which she participates. She is knowledgeable about the Hindu tradition, citing various texts and passages; judging from the digital collection of interviews given by her, Swamini is well-regarded in Nepal, India, and Hungary. She listens to her interlocutors and responds thoughtfully to their questions. She extends kindness to the people she meets, is attentive to others, and has a gentle demeanor. Her social interactions affirm a sense of common humanity, and they emphasize the importance of selfless service (*sevā*). She wears flowing robes dyed in bright orange, which she wraps around herself, and paints a large, round dot (*bindu*) on her forehead to signify her spiritual power. During the process

of observing her interviews, I found Swamini's music video, professionally produced, in which she constructs the Śaṅkarācāryā identity around the roles of healer, activist, teacher, and "peace-maker". She calls herself a "priest of World Peace".

Swamini lived as a housewife and had a daughter before she became a *sādhu*. She went to school in Nepal and attended university in India, earning advanced degrees in Sanskrit and other subjects. She holds different religious credentials within the monastic order known as the Junā Akhārā. It is the largest and one of the few male-led *akhārās* that allows women to join (there are thirteen established orders). In 2015, the Junā Akhārā ritually recognized Swamini as a Śrī Mahant (head of several sub-orders within the *akhārā*) at the Kumbh Mela, India's biggest religious fair, held in Nasik that year. A year later, the Junā Akhārā invested Swamini with the title of Mahāmandeśwar at the Kumbh Mela in Ujjain, Madhya Pradesh. This status endows her with the institutional authority to teach the Hindu tradition and initiate devotees as *sādhus* and Mahants within the Junā Akhārā (as an ordained guru, she is recognized as having expertise in Hindu thought and ritual). Today, Swamini heads a sprawling monastic complex in Gauriganj, Nepal, where she provides meals, clothing, and shelter for hundreds of local women and children. She also runs five ashrams in Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, and Uttarakhand (see Figure 5).



Figure 5. Swamini with devotees. Photo Credit: Namta Gupta, 2018. Used with Permission.

Using similar methods to Mataji, Swamini made her leadership role publicly known in 2018 via the regional news and print media (see Figure 6); this occurred after she lost her bid for the Śaṅkarācārya candidacy that same year and before the Kumbh Melā of 2019 that took place in Prayagraj. Swamini was one of four candidates, and the only woman, nominated to become part of the mainstream tradition. If chosen, she would have become the next Śaṅkarācāryā—and the first female leader—of the Jyotir Monastery in Badrinath, India (Srivastava 2017). This center was involved in a prolonged legal dispute between two Śaṅkarācāryas, namely, the late Swami Swaroopananda Saraswati (d. 2022) and Swami Vasudevananada Saraswati (Zee Media Bureau 2022; Srivastava 2015).⁹



Figure 6. The priest of the Pashupatinath Temple presents Swamini with a certificate of recognition of her status as a Śaṅkarācāryā, 2018. Photo Credit: Namta Gupta. Used with permission.

Following the Allahabad High Court’s decision in 2017, which ordered the established leaders to select a new Śaṅkarācārya for the Jyotir monastery, Swamini was nominated for the role. Despite the backing of some high-profile male gurus who take part in the conventional system, including Swami Vasudevananada Saraswati, and despite receiving an endorsement from a puissant *akhārā* with significant qualifications, the all-male organizations known as the Vidhvāt Kāshī Parishad and the Bharat Dharm Mahamandal, which consist of Brahmin Sanskrit scholars, rejected her nomination. Swaroopananda Saraswati once again assumed control of the leadership role.

In the year that she announced her candidacy, Swamini identified Swami Vasudevananda Saraswati as her *dikṣā* guru who initiated her into *sannyās*; however, following her self-appointment into a leadership role, the terms of their relationship have become ambiguous. She has not mentioned the guru’s name since she has been in her new role. Despite this, significantly, Swamini has established herself in Nepal (the Śaṅkarācārya monastic tradition is specific to India) and leads from an unaffiliated center (the leaders do not recognize her center as being part of their monastic system). She validates her authority by calling on the “blessings” of Pashupatinath (a form of Shiv popular in Nepal that is associated with Hindu ascetic culture and symbolizes the practice of *sannyās*). The Pashupatinath Temple in Kathmandu, a renowned place of pilgrimage classified as a World Heritage Site, is named after the god.¹⁰ She suggests that the god has ordained her to lead from Nepal, although she does not claim to have *dikṣa* through visions. Swamini has named the center she leads as the Pashupatinath Pīṭh (not to be confused with the Pashupatinath temple), thus aligning her power with this god (Gupta 2018; Rawat 2018). Her leadership

role is conducted outside of mainstream religious practices; as with Mataji, her role is rendered legitimate through the power of a god that is connected to a place (see Figure 7).



Figure 7. Swamini (the fourth person to the right) with devotees performing ritual in Nepal. 2018. Photo Credit: Nampta Gupta. Used with permission.

In addition to male deities, both gurus view themselves as empowered by the goddess Durga, who has given them the status of a female Śaṅkarācāryā. A martial goddess, Durga is widely popular in South Asian Hinduism. (see Figure 8) Based on her mythology, which is featured in Hindu literary texts such as the *Devī Māhātmya* and the *Devī Bhāgavata Purāna*, but also retold in countless oral traditions, Durga destroys the demons that threaten the cosmic order. She protects the world from evil and restores balance. Hindu goddess traditions, such as Shaktism and Tantric Shaktism, imagine Durga as the Great Goddess (Devi). She is the supreme female, the universal power of life, and the divine mother (Erndl 1993; Pintchman 2001). She creates and sustains the world, which is associated with her, but she also transcends it. (McDaniel 2017, p. 306). She is both part of and beyond material reality.

Brahmanical (Sanskritic) Hinduism conceives of Durga along these lines, but it mostly circumscribes her power to the roles of mother and warrior. What distinguishes Durga from other goddesses is her self-determining agency and independent status. She acts in accordance with her own will, her power does not derive from the male gods, and she is not subordinate to them. On the contrary, the reverse is true: the gods fall under her authority. As the leader of the cosmic army comprising different goddesses, including the blood-drinking Kali, Durga receives the reverence of the gods that have been rendered impotent by demons. The gods address her as the majestic queen of the universe. Durga stands at the top of the divine hierarchy and rules the world.

In the practice of their religion, Mataji and Swamini invoke Durga's martial symbolism to justify their authority outside the monastic mainstream. Drawing upon the trope of the Śaṅkarācārya as the leader of the Hindu religion, a representation with roots in the martial history of Hindu monastic orders in colonial India (Kasturi 2015; Clark 2006), the gurus construct themselves as leaders of female armies which strive for equality. By comparing themselves with Durga, they claim to have received the power of the goddess that enables them to trounce the forces of patriarchy and misogyny, and to realign the balance of power by installing women as monastic leaders. As Durga holds all the power in goddess theology, through their leadership, the gurus aim to reverse the patriarchal gender order of Hindu *akhārā* society and reclaim what they call "women's glory". They do not see their leadership

as violating the principles of the Hindu religion, but as restoring the exalted status of women revealed to them by the goddess Durga. To be clear, although the gurus hold the same title, they lead separate women's orders from different monastic centers; each woman claims to be the "first" female Śaṅkarācāryā of the Hindu tradition.



Figure 8. A Ritual Image of Durga Enshrined at Mataji's Temple, 2018. Author's Collection.

3. Female Śaṅkarācāryās as Modern ‘Religious Feminist Influencers’ in Hindu Culture

In this article, I contend that by using their charisma, Mataji and Swamini are establishing themselves as women, leaders, and authorities for a new Hindu identity. They exemplify what I call “religious influencers”. This term has come to have many definitions in contemporary global capitalist market economies. In the commercial sense, an influencer “has the power to affect the purchasing decisions of others because of his or her authority, knowledge, position, or relationship with his or her audience” (Geysler 2023; Patel 2022). More generically, an influencer refers to “one who or that which influences”.¹¹ Here, it is implied that someone with “specialized knowledge, authority, or insight into a special subject” qualifies as an influencer.¹²

An influencer may be seen as an expert by those who follow them. We may draw a connection between “commercial influencers” and “religious influencers” based on their roles: to inspire, guide, and persuade others’ actions by establishing credibility and creating a sense of trust with their audience as mediators of knowledge. Significantly, both types of influencers have gravitas (the power of influence and the authority that influence creates). They have “established credibility in a specific industry, ha[ve] access to a huge audience and can persuade others to act based on their recommendations”.¹³ For their expertise, devotion, piety, morality, enlightened consciousness, and/or deep insight into reality, we may classify gurus as “religious influencers”.

Although “influencer” is an imported American English term, the rhetoric of the gurus suggests that the Hindi word “prabhāv” is a corresponding concept in Indic culture. It may be translated as follows: power, might, majesty, influence; *Pra*—forward, forth; *bhāv*—being, natural state, manner, mood, display, and so on. It is a rich term. The charisma that the gurus claim to manifest through revelation aligns with the meaning of the term; as vehicles of divine majesty, they promote themselves as “prabhāvaks” (religious influencers) based on a personal calling from God.

It is important to clarify that the gurus are elevating their status as religious influencers to another level. They have audaciously proclaimed themselves as Śaṅkarācāryās, a religious position traditionally held by male Brahmins that is grounded in orthodox theologies (Advaita Vedanta), Vedic cultures, and is located within a structure of authority that is based on the lineage of the Brahmin male, the polar opposite of Mataji and Swamini—women—whose authority is based on personal charisma, a holiness acknowledged by their followers. As Śaṅkarācāryās, Mataji and Swamini occupy the highest position of authority within a Shaiva-centered Hindu monastic tradition that dates back twelve hundred years, beginning with the first lineage guru Ādi Śaṅkarācārya (Mayeda 2022; Cenknner 1995; Clark 2006). In this respect, female gurus who claim the status for themselves appropriate a “traditionally” male category of monastic authority, hitherto available only to qualifying high-caste Brahmin men (DeNapoli 2019, 2022, 2023).

As the first leader of the lineage he organized, Shankara (ca. 9th century) is called Ādi Śaṅkarācārya, the first or primordial Śaṅkarācārya. The founder led his followers using the power of his personality (i.e., charisma), whereas Śaṅkarācāryas today lead by using the power of their office.¹⁴ Male Śaṅkarācāryas are appointed by others; they are not called to the role as the women are, and they do not appoint themselves. Their office ritually invests the Śaṅkarācāryas with “social capital” that renders them as powerful religious influencers in Hindu culture. Their authority in modern times is comparable to that of India’s erstwhile rulers; their monastic centers, collectively speaking, exert the royal force of the Hindu vestigial state.¹⁵ Through their words and actions, the Śaṅkarācāryas carry the weight of an ancient institution that has been at the helm of fashioning Hindu sensibilities for millennia. Historically, the title has been restricted to Brahmin men who have been educated within the system; this is because the system is structured as a hereditary priesthood. By limiting who can inherit the role, mainstream traditions have thus construed high-caste male authority as institutionally normative.

In this regard, the radical authority which Mataji and Swamini assume, and the weight and importance of the status that they have taken on, become clear. Their self-declarations

profoundly break the patriarchal mold in terms of the type of guru women can be, and the kind of *authorized religious power* they can have in this male-dominated tradition. Although female monastics (women who belong to an ascetic order) have accessed ordination¹⁶ as Mahants (temple heads), Mandeleśwars (teachers), and Mahāmandeleśwars (teacher-preachers who can ordain others into monastic orders), titled female gurus tend to exercise their power informally, and female authority ranks lower than male authority. Although female and male monastics may hold the same titles in an order, this does not mean they share power equally.

Furthermore, the role of female leadership in decision-making and policy shaping, in cases in which the views of women are solicited, is limited, as they have to obtain the permission of their male guru or the leader of their order. As male-led orders expect female gurus within the hierarchy to support patriarchal interests, women's authorized power is qualified and subordinate to male authorized power; thus it is incomplete (it is derivative of male authority). Despite occupying leadership positions, female monastics have come up against a "stained-glass ceiling" in terms of accessing formal power that is conferred by the leadership (de Gasquet 2010);¹⁷ however, as Śaṅkarācāryās, the gurus formalize women's legitimacy (their right to influence others) as they are at the head of the structure with a titled position, and thus, they have the ability to raise the status of women and render women's authority institutionally normative.

As they are bypassing the restrictions of mainstream tradition, the gurus implement a new institutional normativity that reveals how they are using their newfound status as promulgators of feminist-leaning ideas for Hindu morality and feminine virtue; thus, I classify the gurus as "religious feminist influencers". Charismatic authority offers them a form of religious power and influence that enables them to shape alternative conceptions of Hinduism that are defined around modernist ideals, such as gender equality, women's and human rights, and the inclusion of minority identities into power structures that were previously closed to them.

4. A Lineage of Mothers: Śaṅkarācāryās and the Gendering of Monastic Authority as Female

Although being charismatic has enabled Mataji and Swamini to situate their alternative authority within the Śaṅkarācārya tradition, they see themselves as the founders of different female lineages that they say originally began with the divine Mother (Śakti) in the cosmic realm ("heaven" or the Hindi term, *svargalok*) of the gods (*devtās*). This detail is crucial to note. It suggests that they have charismatically created co-existing female lineages that stand parallel to the established mainstream lineage of male leaders. They draw out the final 'a' vowel in pronouncing "*ācāryā*" to differentiate between the female-led and the male-led traditions.¹⁸

Moreover, as the gurus trace their lineages to deities that are linked to different regions, their charismatic authority is tied to separate places and power sources. In other words, despite the fact that there are two Śaṅkarācāryās, their leadership is not a case of "shared charisma," whereby multiple people within a movement "have access to the source of authority" (Wessinger 2012, p. 84). I prefer to represent their lineages as complementary rather than competing. This is because they have established themselves in different countries and they do not see each other as rivals; they have not publicly discredited each other's authority. For example, Swamini has not mentioned Mataji's leadership in the media, and in the televised interviews that she has given, which have been uploaded to YouTube. And Mataji only spoke about Swamini in response to a question I had asked her regarding their relationship to each other. Mataji said she knew of Swamini but had never met her in person. She expressed her congratulations upon hearing about Swamini's self-appointment.

Female embodiment has potency in the view of the gurus. It connects women and girls, as biological females, to the power (*śakti*) of the great goddess. In Hindu theologies, *śakti* denotes power and it manifests as the goddess (Śakti). As a type of power, *śakti*

is an impersonal and dynamic energy that activates and sustains the material world. Furthermore it “is identified as female energy because shakti is responsible for creation, as mothers are responsible for birth. Without shakti, nothing in this universe would happen” (See Johnson n.d.). Śakti, as the supreme, divine being, personifies the cosmic forces of creativity, fecundity, and flourishing. Simply put, śakti/Śakti is life. The gurus teach that the goddess has many forms, roles, and capacities, and importantly, that the divine dynamo is cosmically female. Śakti births the world into being through her divine body; the goddess has a womb (*yoni*), from which the world is born. Both of the gurus emphasize that everyone, including the male Śāṅkarācāryas, “are born from a woman’s body”.

Thus, material existence reveals and manifests the physical body of the goddess as the divine mother of the world. She exists *in* and *as* the world of creation. This idea suggests that the goddess is embodied in/as the entire natural world, including the stars and the planets, the sun and the moon, galaxies near and far, the cosmic realms of existence, and the natural and universal processes of birth, life, and death. Again, as is the case with the female body, the goddess’s body menstruates. Streams, rivers, lakes, oceans, and rain signify the Śakti’s blood, and more specifically, the continuity of life. She encompasses both the known and unknown. Life in its myriad forms materializes the ubiquitous presence of the goddess. Mataji refers to the river in Guwahati, near the Kamakhya Goddess Temple in Assam, that flows as red as blood, which may represent the menstrual blood of the divine mother. Such a conception of the goddess corresponds with the Hindu Shakta/Shakta Tantric worldviews described by June McDaniel in her study of Bengali village and tribal women (McDaniel 2017, p. 307).

To amplify the idea that she embodies Durga’s presence and power, Mataji recounted the following in a conversation we had at her temple in 2018: “Do you know what the name ‘Trikal Bhavanta’ means? It means power [*śakti*]. Mother [the goddess] has given me this power, and her power is working through me. She has given it to me to make the [established leaders] right. They are crooked. Through Mother’s power, I will set them on the right path. I am the real Śāṅkarācāryā”.

For Swamini, she sees her leadership in terms of cosmic events, comparing the historical era of her life with the mythic time of the goddesses, Durga and Kali, who battled evil to save the gods and to initiate *dharm*. She says, “In the age of truth (*satya yug*), Durga and Kali used to save the gods, such as Mahadev (Shiv), from evil. You see, we find scholars such as Gargi and Maitreyi who used to debate the *Śāstras* with ṛṣis [sages] and won those debates. This is what I want to represent [through my leadership] that women are equal to men”. Thus, both gurus use warrior goddess symbolism to interpret their alternative authority; they perceive their authority to be a necessary development in modern times that is required to bring monastic culture and its leaders back on the ‘right’ track.

With the goddess being the embodiment of the *female*, the physical components of the world of creation represent distinct, yet interrelated, signifiers of the divine materiality of the goddess. Alternately, the material female body carries multiple levels of divine feminine signification. More specifically, physiological capacities that are associated with the female form, such as menstruation, reproduction, pregnancy, childbirth, and lactation, bodily organs such as wombs and breasts, and bodily substances such as breast milk and menstrual blood, are ascribed religious meanings, and as a result of that ‘meaning making’, the female form is accorded sacrality and potency by the gurus (DeNapoli 2019).

By relating the perceived maternal power of the goddess to the potency of the female form, the gurus heighten the ontological value of the female sex, especially the idea of being a mother. They do this to reinforce their alternative authority as institutionally normative. This implication is evident in the explicitly gendered ways in which the gurus represent their leadership—as Śāṅkarācāryās. They describe themselves as “mothers [*jagadmātās*] of the world” as often as “world priests [*viśva pujāri*]” and “world gurus [*jagadguru*],” and they append the word “mātā” before their religious titles (recall that “mātā” comes in their formal titles).

In contrast to the mainstream tradition, the gurus magnify their maternal identities as “mothers” of monastic lineages. To construct their authority, they link their leadership to the Indic cultural concept of “woman power”. For them, it is exclusive to the female sex (McDaniel 2017; Humes 2000, p. 141). Although men and women have power (*śakti*) (i.e., the life force that sustains them physically), only women have reproductive power, as female bodily organs bear human life. This procreative aspect of ‘woman power’ is also referred to as ‘mother power’ (*matr- śakti*) by the gurus, who use these terms interchangeably. Woman power connects women, as mothers, to the generative power of the goddess as the divine mother of the universe. Woman power, conceived as such, distinguishes women as being essentially different from men.

Implied by their title, the gurus suggest that being a woman endows female *sādhus* with a sex-specific advantage over male *sādhus*. According biological females an absolute normative value undermines the dominant Brahmanical discourse on asceticism that views the female sex and body as snares to (men’s) liberation from rebirth.¹⁹ Sexist ascetic attitudes about women—more precisely, the idea of woman as a symbol—and women’s bodies also occur in practice.²⁰ When narrating their revelations, the gurus speak about encountering various forms of sexism and exploitation in everyday monastic contexts, explicitly connecting the dots between misogyny and women’s loss of spiritual power. Their narratives shine a light on the oppressive discursive, social, and material conditions with which they contend as female *sādhus* and gurus.

Elucidating their conceptions of woman power, the gurus explicitly associate their feminine gender with religious authority to bolster the legitimacy of their self-appointed status; thus, being female endows women with bio-moral traits that are identified with woman power, such as strength, confidence, energy, patience, love, honesty, perseverance, self-discipline, and sacrifice. This correlation supports the claim that women have an innate capability and the qualifications for leadership, traits which derive from the fierce goddess Durga who links the divine with human women. Durga’s own distinctive qualities, self-determination and personal autonomy, are thus intended to be illustrative of virtuous womanhood. The gurus argue that woman power reveals women’s moral superiority, thus making them “better” leaders than men. The female body equips women with spiritual potency, and therefore, it is implied that they have the natural/divine right to head monastic institutions.

Although divine and human females share the biological capacity for motherhood, the gurus neither singularly equate womanhood with being a mother and wife, nor do they restrict women’s roles to marriage and domesticity. They do not expect women to marry, procreate, and raise families simply because they have wombs. Unlike some established leaders who have glorified a woman’s reproductive role to be the quintessence of feminine duty (*strīdharm*), the gurus do not instruct women to have “ten children”—or ten sons—to get into heaven or achieve liberation from rebirth. Mataji has said, “let [the religious patriarchy] themselves give birth to ten children, and then they can tell us [women] to do the same”. In this respect, the gurus draw on the pervasive Indic ideal of motherhood to lend privilege to being female while reorienting its dominant discursive applications to strengthen women’s monastic authority as being institutionally normative.

5. Gender, Bodies, and the Psychology of Charisma: Understanding the Affective Impact of Charismatic Authority on Women’s Religious Leadership in Hindu Culture

As being an “influencer,” religious or otherwise, is related to building one’s following, both Mataji and Swamini are engaged in the grassroots project of growing their communities, and through that labor, they have been able to build their status and visibility as Śāṅkarācāryās (See Figure 9). They claim to have followers numbering in the tens of thousands; however, their statements seem exaggerated based on my observations and interactions with devotees in the field. It is difficult to know exactly how many followers they have; however, I would argue that a more conservative estimate of the size of their communities, which comprise diverse identities, number in the hundreds. I should note

that each guru attempts to influence the broadest possible audience, using social media platforms such as Facebook and YouTube to broadcast their teachings and events in order to attract devotees. Their intentional use of social media as a medium to engage and influence people in order to develop and increase their following suggests, to my mind, its importance for constructing themselves as dharmic *prabhāvaks*. The gurus aim to teach, inspire, and persuade as many people, in as many places, from as many backgrounds as they can. They stress that they want to have a “global reach” and create a “world community”. This rationale underpins the reason why I have classified the gurus as “religious feminist influencers”.



Figure 9. Mataji poses with a devotee for a photo at the Triveni Sangam during the Kumbh Mela, 2019. Author’s Collection.

Such an impact requires a solid foundation of monastic and lay support. From my observations, it seems that the gurus care about how the masses see and interpret them. Large communities amplify the gurus’ gravitas while rendering their leadership more impactful in the sense that they alter the deep-rooted patriarchal views of female *sādhus* (as inferior to male *sādhus*). Every follower or ally that the gurus attract becomes a seed of hope in that they can help collectively shift dominant attitudes toward the radical affirmation of the institutional normativity of women’s authority. As I see it, the gurus have been able to proclaim their status within right-leaning, Hindu nationalist political climates because they have an extensive support system. Mobilizing movements imbue people with the idea that, as Swamini says, “women are equal;” however, it also furthers the idea that women leaders at the top of the monastic hierarchy reveals the divine gender order.

In religion, proximity to the divine has been a catalyst for new revelations and ways of attaining truth. Mataji's and Swamini's leadership asserts an alternative narrative for women's monastic authority, wherein it is institutionally normative. Regarding mainstream religious practices, their female authority proffers a gendered alternative; indeed, their leadership is based specifically on charisma. Catherine Wessinger's sociological model defines charisma as the qualities of holiness and enlightened consciousness, which are either claimed by leaders, or those qualities are ascribed to them by their followers (Wessinger 2012, p. 81).

As charismatic gurus, Mataji and Swamini lead by the power of their personalities. Swamini's leadership attenuates the claim that credentials obtained through academic and religious training offer women an avenue for accessing leadership ordinations (Wessinger 2007, pp. 8–10; 2022). This example shows that even women with the requisite qualifications face strong opposition from intransigent male-led traditions that, by attempting to keep women out of the powerful elite, all but force them to seek other pathways to access positions of leadership.

By appointing themselves as leaders, the gurus endeavor to confront the problem of high-caste male privilege within the established system, dismantle dominant hierarchies that disenfranchise minorities, and alter prevailing attitudes and customs that condition women and oppressed identities to be subordinate. Their leadership as *female Śāṅkarācāryās* distinguishes them from other gurus, thus ensuring that their feminine gender comprises a new element of this religious tradition. Women's *presence* in authoritative roles is vital to troubling the dominant narrative of religious patriarchy that, at time of writing (2023), continues to deny women authority. At the same time, it is integral to altering access points within the religious hierarchy of monastic institutions that have long been resistant to change.

Via the weight of their charismatic authority, the gurus are unraveling intersecting structures of oppression and exploitation, and are revising normative authoritative structures. Furthermore, as self-proclaimed Śāṅkarācāryās, they enact a style of leadership, which I term "grassroots religious feminism," to construct the idea of the female *sādhu* as normative. Their quest to eradicate patriarchy, sexism, and misogyny from monastic culture discloses how they align the mundane plane of existence with the divine plane, to which they claim the gods have made them privy. Their leadership amplifies the influential role of religion in "not only planting the seeds of hope across societies but also in shaping efforts toward human flourishing and resilience".²¹

Let us now return to the question posed earlier in the article: 'How does charisma influence the gurus to resist and even defy worldviews invested with absolute status?' This question becomes more pronounced considering the nature of charisma. As Weber argued in *The Sociology of Religion*, charisma may be the source of religious insight, inspiration, and powerful "gifts of the spirit"; however, it is also unstable. Charisma must be constituted through the personality, experiences, actions, and missions of the leaders so that their followers continue to believe in them. This aspect of charisma poses a problem for charismatic leaders, and especially female gurus occupying positions of power and authority; this is because they are historically associated with men, and they inhabit religious cultures which socialize women to be humble and obedient.

Data collected through ethnographic observations and from the gurus' social media platforms, particularly their teachings captured on video, suggest that the answer lies in the psycho-physiological states that the gurus associate with their charismatic experiences. On the one hand, they emphasize charisma and revelation as the central source of their specialized knowledge; on the other hand, they also speak about how they *feel* in their "hearts" (*man*) and bodies (*śarīr*) during an experience. They describe charisma travelling down to the bone, touching the deep structures of the mind and the body. It generates an experience that is as affective as it is transformative. Along with their visions, dreams, auditory revelations, and so on, they experience intense feelings, emotions, memories, sensations, and perceptions that profoundly reorient their moral sensibilities and their rela-

tionship to the worlds in which they live. In other words, charisma occurs simultaneously with affectivity. Both components engender enlightened consciousness, and they impress and solidify dispositions within the mind–body complex.²² It is, in part, through affect that the gurus have learned what being Hindu and feminist mean at the bodily level.

Thus, the emotions and motivations evoked by charismatic experience have the same formative impact on the gurus' conceptions of holiness and styles of leadership as the revelation itself. Affect provides a parallel source of authority to charisma in that it constructs Hinduism as being congruent with certain rights. This may be explained as follows: both the gurus' visions of the goddess, and the sense of confidence accompanying that experience, inform their knowledge of woman power and fuel their conviction that the female *sādhū* is normative. This source of affectivity awakens a "new center of personal energy,"²³ moving and inspiring the gurus to act to change the structures of monastic culture at the grassroots level, while simultaneously motivating overt resistance to religious patriarchy.

By approaching the study of gurus and charismatic authority through the lens of affectivity, my work follows Robert Orsi's study, in that "Something called 'religion' cannot be neatly separated from the other practices of everyday life, from the way that human beings work on the landscape, for instance, or dispose of corpses, or arrange for the security of their offspring. Nor can 'religion' be separated from the material circumstances in which specific instances of religious imagination and behavior arise and to which they respond" (Orsi 1997, pp. 6–7, cited from Starling 2019, p. 12). This analysis builds upon the insights of recent ethnographic scholarship that discerns the intimate connections between gender, affect, and bodily experience when constituting religious identity and forms of authority (Zubko 2014; Bedi 2022; Langenberg 2022).

The rest of this article will focus on the constructive, affective, and transformative elements of the gurus' charismatic authority through an examination of their rhetorical practices. I offer a granular, gender studies-focused analysis of the relationship between gender and charismatic experience. Scholars across disciplinary fields in the Humanities and Social Sciences have investigated the nature and impact of charisma in modern times using varied approaches, from an exploration of the history of religions and textual analysis, to anthropology, sociology, and psychology; however, their research generally prioritizes male leaders' lives and experiences of holiness, and thus, they assume that the masculine perspective is universal and normative (but c.f. Wessinger 1993b, 1996, 2020; Lucia 2014, p. 95; 2021, p. 179; McDaniel 1989; Lucia 2021, pp. 175–85). Such approaches are then used to theorize how power and religious authority works, and how they shape individual and social understandings of religion.

Instead of relying solely on male figures and perspectives, this work emphasizes female gurus' revelatory experiences in order to bring forth fresh insights into the role of gender and to illuminate women's conceptions of holiness (the state of embodying divinity); these conceptions reinforce a deep sense of connection to the world and the permeability of personal identity.²⁴ Their teachings heighten an Indic idea of composite personhood that is built on traditional Ayurvedic principles which teach that all lives are permeable and interconnected. I explore their views concerning the (claims of) attainment of self-realization. To clarify, the gurus have realized the inner self (*ātmanā*) and the universal self (Brahman); they view themselves as immersed in God-consciousness.

Self-realization represents the highest aim in life as per Brahmanical Hindu theology. It connotes liberation and the end of rebirth. Female gurus have claimed to be enlightened from birth (Anandamayi Ma (Hallstrom 1999) and Mata Amritanandamayi (Lucia 2014)), through spiritual practice (*sādhana*) (such as Anandmurti Gurumaa (Rudert 2017) and the Mother Mirra Alfassa (see Beldio this volume)), through the transfer of power between gurus (such as Sarada Devi (see Long also in this volume) and Gurumayi (Pechilis 2017)), or via a combination of these components. The gurus Mataji and Swamini suggest obtaining self-realization through *sādhana*, and they portray it as an integrative state of *radical love*.

Their experience of radical love facilitates their awareness of the material self as permeable and interconnected with the universe. Such conceptions of holiness illustrate an alternative to the dominant model that is centered on radical detachment and the erasure of personal identity. Moreover, their leadership, inspired by the revelation of oneself and the world being essentially one, supports my idea of religious feminism and conveys the gurus' theology of radical love in action. I call it "radical," as it attacks religiously sanctioned inequities based on birth-ascribed status to affirm a common humanity that is informed by the idea of equality being a natural birthright.

As the gurus accentuate the attainment of self-realization to enhance religious authority, this study explores their descriptions of revelatory experience in great detail, and it examines its implications for women's leadership roles. It builds on the arguments of Karen Pechilis, with regard to ideas of "revelation as self-realization" (Pechilis 2021; this volume) and the female guru as being "universal" (Pechilis 2004, p. 5). I contend that the gurus, as self-styled Śāṅkarācāryās, construct their alternative authority by emphasizing two interrelated themes. These concern the immediacy of the personal realization of the *ātmā*, the universal consciousness (Brahman), or the "truth" (*Brahma-jñān*), and the potency of affect as sources of revelation, upon which basis they align Hindu teachings with their assertion of normative rights. It is noteworthy that the gurus take this further, by linking their revelations with Ayurvedic traditions; Ayurveda suggests that physical, mental, and spiritual health are interrelated, as are the human realm and the cosmos. The gurus link these aspects of Ayurveda in order to justify their status. They use Ayurvedic concepts as metaphors to amplify that they have attained Brahman, and to attribute the declining spiritual state of Hindu society to the oppression of women. Their emphasis on being "messengers" of God and the Goddess places the gurus' religious feminism within a Hindu moral framework to motivate society and mobilize change.

Furthermore, by narrating their charismatic experiences, which I term "performing revelation," the gurus fashion women's monastic authority and institutional autonomy (their equal right to organize independent lineages from the men's) as normative. Significantly, they reverse the customary gender/power dynamics between female *sādhus* and male *sādhus* in monastic culture to augment women's equality of opportunity for leadership and promote their parity of status as lineage leaders within and outside of mainstream religious practices. Speaking about their revelatory experiences reinforces their belief that they have been chosen by the gods to change Hindu society. Narrative performance strengthens their gendered identities as Śāṅkarācāryās while sanctioning their alternative authority. Let us now turn our attention to the gurus' teachings to acquire a better sense of the role of charismatic influence (*prabhāv*) on women's monastic lives, and the stories that the gurus tell in didactic contexts to construct their status as dharmic *prabhāvaks*.

6. "I Am Everything in the Universe": Self-Realization and the Immediacy of Charismatic Experience in Constructing the Female Gurus' Alternative Authority as Śāṅkarācāryās

One of the ways in which the gurus establish their charismatic authority concerns their narrative representations of themselves as self-realized god-women. In 2019, I returned to Prayagraj to work with Mataji during the Kumbh Mela.²⁵ One evening, while we waited for a journalist from Mumbai to arrive at her temple for an interview, I asked Mataji to talk about her leadership role. I wanted to know the categories she uses to interpret herself. Does she view herself as an 'activist,' 'healer,' 'reformer,' 'feminist'? Mataji responded by describing herself as "absorbed" in the Brahman consciousness, "immersed" in the emotion (*bhāv*) of Shiv (Parampita Parameshwar), "integrated" with the cosmos and nature (*prakṛtī*), and "connected" to all the gods and the *ātmā*:

I cannot explain what I think of myself. There are no words, no pictures that can explain what I am. Everything that is present in the universe (*jagat*), I see myself like that. So, God (Parameshwar) has given me the opportunity to attain God knowledge (*Brahma-jñān*), and through that knowledge I have

become God. Everything is in me. Brahma, Vishnu, Mahesh, all are in me, and I am in everything. Like the whole universe came out of God. I think of myself like that. I am a single one, but you can put any number of zeros after one. We all are from one world, and I want to make one world where there is no differentiation (*bhedbhāv*). I talk of equality (*samāntā*) as we all are born from God (Parameshwar), and we all have God in ourselves. We are all equal (*samān*). Changing the religion is a big work and will take time. I am like a small bulb that lights up the whole room. I am the sun behind the clouds, and when they will disappear, I will shine.²⁶

Similarly, Swamini talks about realizing God-consciousness to assert her charismatic authority in the wider male-dominated monastic culture that does not recognize it. In the interviews that she gives, she emphasizes that she has “mixed” her consciousness with that of the universal absolute, “united” her mind and body with the supreme being Pashupatinath, and “integrated” herself with the world (*brahmāṇḍ*). In 2018, Swamini told a Nepali TV journalist:

Life is all about peace and happiness. Life is an opportunity. God has sent the world a messenger in Nepal, and I am working for the betterment of life. I am working for the revival of self power (*ātmā śakti*) among the people of Nepal. Spiritual power provides us with self power, improves confidence and makes us peaceful and better people. I am the Brahman, I am the consciousness of the universe, and I am the one who is leading the world by integrating with it. Hindu religion believes in inclusiveness (*samāveś*). I am starting a movement for inclusiveness of everyone. We have to make everyone equal by seeing and treating them as equal. We created so many castes in our religion because of wrong knowledge. I have realized the truth that God created humans as equal. God came in the human form to this earth. So, for me, everyone is equal, everyone is a messenger of God. Everyone in my ashram recites the Gayatri Mantra [a Vedic prayer]. Women and men from oppressed (Dalit) castes recite it with me. We perform Vedic rituals (*havan*) together. I have opened the door for everyone to participate in the practices of the Hindu religion. Discrimination based on caste and sex is totally wrong. We must make our thoughts and behaviors pure by seeing and treating everyone as equal.²⁷

Both gurus represent their realization of God-consciousness as being akin to an integrative state. Charismatic experience creates the feeling (*bhāv*) of becoming mixed with, and absorbed into, the inner self (*ātmā*), the supreme self (Brahman), and the universe (*brahmāṇḍ*). Attaining self-realization is not only synonymous with receiving knowledge from the *ātmā* and the Brahman, as it also induces the bodily experience of God-presence. Each guru says that she sees, hears, feels, smells, touches, and tastes “the truth” revealed by the Brahman. In particular, Mataji’s narratives relate God-consciousness to a religious mood (*mahābhāv*). She suggests that God is sensed *as* and *through* religious emotion and experiencing God produces the intensification of feeling in two respects: the emotions are stronger and her sensitivity to emotions is improved. Self-realization is not disembodied, absent of pathos, or dissociative (i.e., a break from reality) to these gurus, but rather, it embodies God as they feel intertwined with everything in existence.

Their religious experiences seem to correlate with their social experiences. This means that the gurus do not undergo states of trance or deity possession, in which they temporarily lose consciousness and the god speaks through them to guide and heal others (Keller 2002). There is no interruption in consciousness, nor do they move in and out of divine states. By articulating their revelations, the gurus feel that they have achieved a permanent state of enlightened awareness through the immediacy of experiencing the self and the Brahman.

Mataji, and the religious claims she makes, have an interreligious appeal. For example, an Indian Muslim named Haider Sahab, with whom I spoke, described Mataji as follows. We met in 2018 at Mataji’s temple. He was a homeowner with two adult children, both

of whom are professionals in the IT and engineering fields and who live outside of the country. Haider Sahab was a retired engineer, but he also worked as a motivational speaker for different Indian companies which required him to travel a lot. At the time of our conversation, Haider Sahab had known Mataji for twenty years. They met in Benares in 1998 during a leadership seminar that he organized for a NGO, which was where Mataji was employed as a social worker. He considered Mataji a dear and trusted friend, and he called himself an “ally” in Mataji’s movement for gender equality. He supports her self-appointed leadership and views Mataji as a self-actualized guru.

Haider Sahab’s wife, Shabana, also identified as being one of Mataji’s supporters. Shabana told me that she adored Mataji. Shabana credited Mataji for encouraging her to lead women’s Quranic recitation sessions from her home (Shabana calls herself a preacher [*muhallā*]). “In the beginning,” Shabana said, “he [Haider Sahab] didn’t want me to preach”. Mataji interjected and said, “But I changed Haider Sahab’s mind. He was hard-headed. His wife has a talent and she should be encouraged. He tried to keep her down, but I raised her up”. Haider Sahab smiled silently as Mataji and Shabana talked about their friendship. When I asked Shabana how she met Mataji, she answered, “Mataji is everything to me”. Shabana visited Mataji often when I was conducting fieldwork, mostly with her husband. She had twisted her wrist from a fall a month earlier and had chronic back issues. Shabana came to Mataji for naturopathic healing and because, as she said, “I like to be near Mataji. I feel anxious when I am away from her”.

In addition to psychology and sociology, Haider Sahab spoke eloquently about religion. He described the teachings of Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam, regarding their founders as “God’s” messengers. He used this category and that of “saint” to refer to Mataji. He told me,

Mataji works for the people. This is one of her greatest qualities. In religions there are saints who come along and give a powerful message. And that message changes the society. Saints are connected to a power current. This is God. God is the power current. With Mataji, an electric current is flowing into her circuit. Those who are connected in any way, they will get some electric power. Look, we are here, you are here, and we are talking about Mataji’s divine power. Why? Because we are convinced. I come to her, talk to her, and I get a sense of peace. I have no ulterior motive. God sent Mataji for the people. She is very good with people. You can say that Mataji has divine wealth. Like, there is electricity in the switchboard. But it will not operate unless you switch on the button. Similarly, divine power is everywhere, but Mataji has switched on her button.²⁸

Other people with whom I spoke echoed Haider Sahab’s statements. They said that Mataji is “plugged into the switchboard of God,” she receives “signals” or messages from the “electricity” of supreme consciousness that flows through her, and she is “joined to her soul”. Two middle-aged, unmarried sisters and devotees named Moni and Seema used an analogy of a vehicle’s battery to talk about Mataji’s spiritual power. They said that Mataji’s “battery” (life force) runs on a boundless supply of God-energy and “never stops working”. These sorts of comments articulate the belief shared by followers and supporters that Mataji has charismatic power (that she is God’s messenger), and that she is the manifestation of a consciousness that has united with divinity. Their comments also suggest that they view Mataji as a religious influencer, and value her wisdom.

According to Mataji and Swamini, their assumed experiential connection to the *ātmanā* illustrates their natural way of being. It is not an altered state, as this would imply that God-consciousness is not normal for them; rather, immersion in divinity has become their center of gravity, the power source that enables them to breathe, think, act, and lead their followers. These gurus perceive themselves as dwelling in the *mahabhāv* (divine mood) of God-consciousness.

By foregrounding their self-realization, Mataji and Swamini suggest that they experience an ongoing state of *darśan* (to “see” and be “seen” by the divine). Integrating with the universal spirit enables the gurus to see and be seen by the Brahman, which they say

emanates through their consciousness and reveals knowledge to them. In accordance with this line of reasoning, possessing an enlightened awareness enables their followers to experience the immediacy of divine presence through the gurus' influence. For Mataji, along with blessing people in person, she says that she can send blessings and healings by speaking on the phone with her followers and appearing in their dreams; thus, the gurus experience divine *darśan*, but they also become a divine source of *darśan* for their devotees.

To the gurus, self-realization is neither the exclusive property of initiated Brahmin men, nor is it limited to the founder of the male lineage. What is more, because women have not been appointed as descendants of Ādi Śaṅkarācārya's lineage (institutionalized inequities prevent women's access to leadership roles), Mataji's and Swamini's elevated self-realized status amounts to a claim that charismatic authority functions independently of traditional authority. From this, we can derive two implications: first, the gurus' alternative authority stands on equal footing with Ādi Śaṅkarācārya's, and that of the established religious system; second, women's monastic authority is not derived from, nor subordinate to, men's monastic authority.

Charismatic authority authenticates the female gurus' leadership by anchoring it to a divine power source; moreover, it undermines the credibility of the established lineage, whose authority is represented by Ādi Śaṅkarācārya's charisma.²⁹ As the system started by Ādi Śaṅkarācārya relies on an unbroken chain of succession to retain the power of the original revelation, traditional authority is derived from the founder's own charisma (Cenkner 1995, pp. 84–106). The gurus reverse this longstanding patriarchal power dynamic by bringing the male tradition under the authority of the female tradition and engendering women's leadership as being institutionally normative.

7. Affecting Realization: Love and the Permeability of the Material Self in Mataji's Theology

Another way for the gurus to construct their charismatic authority involves linking God-consciousness with the potency of affect to emphasize the efficacy of revelation. What happens to the gurus' bodies during revelatory experience alters their perceptions of themselves, the world, and their relationship to it. They say that the revelation occurs through the *ātmā* and is situational (i.e., the revelation speaks directly to the circumstances of the context of the initial delivery). Affect, then, is conjoined with revelation, and it impacts how the gurus learn and it embodies what being Hindu means. Both gurus talk a great deal about the sensations they experience through revelation.

During our meetings, Mataji said that she heard "the voice of the *ātmā*" speaking to her through the "heart–mind" (*man*). As she explained, the heart–mind represents the center (*chakra*) of spiritual energy in the chest area that receives messages from the *ātmā* and sends them to the mind–body system. The voice heard from within told Mataji that "God created men and women as equals". When the *ātmā* speaks to her, other sensations come into her consciousness and provide a coordinate source of information for interpreting the revelation. When physically sensing the *ātmā*, her body responds by producing different sensations, such as heat in the chest (perceived as the heart melting with love), all over tingling (paresthesia), and buoyancy (feeling as light as a feather).

These reactions are temporary (they last a few minutes), though they are significant. Mataji perceives them as not only being "soul signals" (*pratīk*), but as bodily confirmation that the experience is real. The efficacy of charismatic experience is borne out in the body so that it authenticates the revelation. Mataji says that her revelations "fill" (*bharnā*) her whole being with a sense of inner peace (*śāntī*), happiness (*sukh*), and security (*surakṣā*). Affect arouses awareness of her intrinsic goodness and dignity, of belonging to God and the world, and of the female *sādhū*; this is considered to be a normative experience. This experience becomes the basis for Mataji's construction of equality as the female birthright, and it justifies the idea that it is a fundamentally Hindu concept. Mataji's narrative representations suggest that the *revelation is transmitted through affect. Sensory experience grounds the revelation*

in her body as physical proof (pramān) of the immediacy of charisma while generating inner spiritual potency as darśan (she has a visionary experience of God and attains divine universal consciousness).

Aside from sensory experience, the emotions associated with integrative states confirm that the gurus' attainment of Hindu truth is congruent with rights-based values. Mataji emphasizes love through the performance of revelation. She describes love as a feeling in which her mind–body consciousness expands beyond the limits of ordinary subjectivity and mixes with the universe. Love realized as God-consciousness is simultaneously a sensational, emotional, bodily, and spiritual experience. For her, it brings a sense of permeability; every part of her being, from her toes and fingers to her legs and arms, to her eyelashes and the hair on her head, absorbs the elements of the world around her. It is a feeling of 'expansion' (*phailnā*) and 'fusion' (*ektā*), of joining with God and the entirety of existence.³⁰ Her experience of the intrinsic permeability of the material self (the individual)³¹ rouses (*jagānā*) sensations of becoming fluid akin to water, and of becoming infinite, akin to the cosmos; in effect, it strengthens her belief that "we are all equal".³²

For Mataji, feeling love heightens her awareness that she is essentially everything and *vice versa*. It stimulates her personal consciousness of the permeability of the material world, and it reveals the knowledge that everything in existence is fundamentally interconnected. Emotions such as love have spiritual potency because, through them, Mataji experiences the revelation that she is the world that she inhabits, and that she consists of the same material and spiritual components that comprise interdependent life. Furthermore, the immediacy of the permeability of material existence enables her to refute religious patriarchal ideas of male superiority and female inferiority. It shows her that, as all life is permeable and divisible, men and women share the same normative status; as they are composed of the same elements, they share a common humanity and are inherently equal.

Significantly, in Mataji's experience, love softens the boundaries between self and other without altogether dissolving personal identity (she retains subjectivity in God-consciousness). Mataji describes love/God as the natural state of her existence, implying that she exudes the love/God she embodies and shares it freely with others (she further suggests that her body oozes with love/God). In her words: "Everybody is hungry for love. Rich, poor, old, young, man, woman. And love is such a thing that the more I give, the more I receive. Love never finishes. I will give it for the rest of my life".³³

As love has deepened her sense of permeability and granted her the religious insight that female and male humanity is ontologically normative, Mataji delights in the feeling of becoming mixed with others and absorbing them into herself. This capacity for radical love—the love that challenges social labels and distinctions normalizing inequality—has empowered Mataji to diagnose and heal people's suffering and illnesses; thus, charisma may provide a way for monastic leaders such as Mataji to acquire extraordinary powers such as ritual healing.³⁴

Mataji draws on the example of the Ganges River to elucidate the spiritual potency of affect in informing her perception of the mutuality of all life. In her teachings, the Ganges illustrates the nature of material existence as absorptive, and it signifies her moral vision of radical love. Similarly, taking a holy bath in the Ganges is analogous to experiencing divine love through the physical feeling of absorbing and becoming absorbed by God/dess. Hindu imagination, as shown in literary sources, conceives of the Ganges as the goddess Ganga, attributing sacred status to the river based on the idea that it purifies everyone who bathes in its waters by removing their sins (*pāp*). Pilgrims perform ritual ablutions in the Ganges to worship the goddess for their *darśan* (sacred sight) and to purify them from the *karm* of rebirth. Rituals for the dead involve immersing the deceased's remains in the river so that Ganga can transport the soul to heaven (*svargalok*). In these varied ways, vernacular Hindu discourse concerning the Ganges River as a purifying divine force constructs love as a Hindu moral virtue by relating the concept to the divine nature of a river goddess who accepts everyone regardless of their sex, age, caste, or class.

Mataji invokes this Indic motif, wherein Ganga is the ultimate purifying power of love, but she extends the metaphor to accentuate love as the experience of permeability between

the self and the world that renders women's exclusion from the monastic hierarchy invalid. Through that emphasis, she aligns women's equality of opportunity (in terms of monastic leadership) and institutional autonomy with Hindu principles. In 2018, Mataji related her experience as follows:

[Mataji]: Ganga Mata accepts everyone who comes to her. Does she reject people because of their caste (*jāti*), sex (*liṅg*), or age; because they are male (*puruṣ*) or female (*strī*), young (*yuvanī*) or old (*būdā*), rich (*dhanī*) or poor (*garīb*), or beautiful (*khubsūrat*) or ugly (*badsūrat*)? Does she reject thieves? She is the mother of all and loves everyone equally. Everyone is the same, regardless of who they are, what they look like, and what they have done. People who bathe in her waters offer flowers and different things. She absorbs everything and allows everyone in her holy waters. She does not make distinctions between thieves and saints but accepts them equally, because she is love.

[Author]: How did you learn this truth? Did Ganga Mata speak to you? Did you see her?

[Mataji]: It's a feeling (*hamko mahsūs hotā hai*). It comes when I take Mother's *darśan*. I can feel Ganga Mata absorbing me through her love, but I was absorbing her, too. Like Ganga is water (*jal*) and she enters into rocks, trees, soil, people, animals. Everything absorbs Ganga, and Ganga absorbs the qualities of everything that she enters. She takes others' pain into herself but then fills people with her *śakti*. That power cures all disease and sorrow. It absorbs everything without itself becoming destroyed. Absorption is the nature (*svabhāva*) of water. It doesn't lose anything when it penetrates the ground. But the ground changes, by soaking up the water. It needs water to be healthy and produce crops for food. If our bodies lose water, from sweat or dehydration, it becomes a problem. We cannot survive without water.

It's the same with love. Love has the nature of water. It spreads everywhere and absorbs everything. It adds [to life] without becoming subtracted or making distinctions. This is Mother's nature. I talk about equality because I have absorbed this truth. This knowledge is part of me. It's not an idea. I don't talk about God. Because I eat God. I speak God. I smell God. I taste God. I live God. The truth of God has penetrated me, and I have mixed myself with it. There is no distinction in nature, only form. God has made me learn on my own. By changing myself, my thoughts and my behavior, I have become God's master key, and I have opened the door to the truth. I fit in everywhere. Because of God, I became a giver to the world. I don't have money. But I have love. I am rich with love. This is my gift; what I can give to the world, and I give it equally to everyone.

Here, we see the role of revelation in shaping Mataji's idea of gender equality; she perceives it as an imperative Hindu ethic, and thus, it also motivates her religious feminism concerning the promotion of women's rights in monastic culture. Conceptions of holiness (crafted around the charismatic experiences of oneself and others) as permeable advance Mataji's alternative authority by reversing patriarchal gender ideologies that deny women equal rights. As her awareness that the female *sādhvi* is normative remains rooted in the immediacy of mind-body permeability, Mataji inverts women's status to reveal their moral superiority by showing, through narrative performance, that she has acquired access to the supernatural, in large part, on account of her sex. Her discourses make patently clear that the gods have chosen her as the female Śāṅkarācāryā because the mainstream tradition has lost its spiritual connection to the divine realm and is no longer qualified to lead Hindu society.

8. "Sannyās Is about Mixing with Nature": The Potency of Positivity in Swamini's Theology

Swamini emphasizes a related conception of integrative awareness based on her experiential understanding of the material self as permeable and of life as interconnected.

She links enlightened consciousness with the attitude of ‘positivity.’³⁵ Her idea of ‘positivity’ is consonant with Mataji’s principle of ‘radical love.’ In Swamini’s theology, positivity comprises a cluster of religious emotions, such as love, happiness, peace, and care for others (*sambhālnā*). It compels her to reach out and lift others up, encouraging people by instilling in them a sense of confidence, capability, bravery, and purpose. As Nepal is still recovering from the devastation wrought by a prolonged civil war (which started in 1996 after Maoists led an insurrection against the royal government),³⁶ Swamini addresses the problems of poverty, suicide, depression, healthcare (especially maternal care), poor development infrastructure, and migration. She clarifies the gravity of the situation with disturbing examples of villagers having to sell their organs for money, pregnant women dying before reaching the hospital due to the lack of roads and bridges, and women and girls ending their lives to escape abusive spouses and families.³⁷

For Swamini, these problems are interlinked; however, she is more troubled by the fact that, as she says, they are “depleting humanity’s self-power. People are losing self-power”. To my mind, Swamini’s use of the concept indicates self-confidence, self-respect, and self-assurance, along with a sense of one’s dignity and worthiness. Building people’s self-power ‘from the ground up’, to increase positivity in the world, starting with the people in her country, describes Swamini’s understanding of her role as the female Śaṅkarācāryā of Nepal. In a televised interview with a Nepali journalist that was broadcast on a local channel, she said,

I do not see this post in terms of honor or prestige. I see it as an opportunity to work for humanity, to work for the conservation of the Hindu religion. I see myself as a servant of *dharm*. I am a servant of my God. I am enjoying this journey . . . My role is to serve people on the ground. There are so many possibilities for helping people. It is important to convince and motivate the people of Nepal to regain their self-power. I want to provide a remedy for every challenge and problem that is hindering the development of my country. With every passing day, we are moving closer to death. I want to develop the attitude (*bhāv*) of positivity among everyone. We should imbibe positivity in our life.

Swamini aims to activate the same emotions within others that prompted her own personal awakening to God-presence and the association of Hinduism with the ideals of inclusiveness and equality. Within that awareness, she formulates the basis of her alternative authority, as follows: it discards religious patriarchal logic around sex and caste distinctions, and it denounces discrimination as “totally wrong”. Her knowledge of truth comes from personally experiencing the potency of positivity through bodily sensations. Embodying God through the feeling of positivity produces a physiological response and it conditions her Hindu identity and subjective experiences. Positivity activates the sensation of integrating with the universe, and it highlights an experience, similar to Mataji’s experience, which renders the material world as permeable and as one. Swamini talks about the profundity of the experience and its impact on her in the context of her initiation into *sannyās*:

It’s a feeling that is hard to describe. *Sannyās* is an active state. It is about sacrifice (*tyāg*). I am a person with a social life. I am always involved in social service . . . Religion (*dharm*) means what you can hold and absorb. It is realizing that you are a part of Nature (*prakṛti*), and that nature gives us everything. That which gives us anything is a god to me. The sun, moon, earth, fire, and air are all gods for me. We should believe firmly in our gods. This is what makes a person religious. To believe in every organism, in our gods, in nature. Everybody has their own perspective on god. Some believe that god is present in form, whereas others believe god is formless. For me everything is god.

In another interview with a different newscaster, Swamini elaborates further:

Sannyās is getting distorted today. *Sannyās* is about mixing oneself with nature and becoming part of it. As *sannyāsīs*, we have to shave our head and perform the

last rites of our ancestors. At midnight in the holy Ganges, we recite the *mantra* given by our guru . . . I vowed to take *sannyās* from the earth, water, air, sky, and fire. With this vow, I became a part of these five elements. I vowed that all my good deeds earned [from previous lives] should go to the people who have a hard life. I vowed for everyone to become peaceful and lead a good life . . . We all have the same soul. *Sannyās* wakes up the soul. It creates these emotions, and when that happens, you start seeing everyone as the same (*barābar*).

Although Swamini connects the attainment of integrative awareness with becoming a *sādhu*, she hints that she experienced this state long before her ritual initiation. In her interviews, she details growing up in a religious family and learning about the *sādhu* life at a young age from her mother, who renounced the world when Swamini was thirteen and joined the Junā Akhārā. Swamini recalls *sādhus* coming to her home for alms and to bless her family. She says, “I got this [*sādhu*] culture from my home life”. When recollecting her past, she focuses on the memory of traveling around Nepal with her mother and her mother’s guru, Nepali Baba Jagatacharya. They visited one-hundred and fifty villages in seventy-five districts on foot (*pad-yātrā*). Everywhere they went, they interacted with people across the social spectrum, learning about their lives and struggles. Swamini observed at the grassroots level that the problem of suffering is ubiquitous; however, she also learned to connect inclusion and equality with being Hindu. These values are at the core of her religious identity. For her accomplishments, the Nepali monarchy recognized Swamini with a certificate of achievement. More importantly, the experience strengthened her awareness of universal humanity insofar as she felt herself connecting deeply with people. Identifying with others at an existential level created a sensation wherein she feels she becomes the universe and *vice versa*.

As mentioned, Swamini was only thirteen when she began her journey; however, what she experienced was profound. It defined her values and structured her relationship with Hinduism. She conveys in her narrative that engaging with people awakened her sense of being permeable and fluid. Swamini indicates feeling as though her material self became less solid (she perceives herself as having disintegrated into the elements of air, fire, water, earth, and ether), that she integrated with others, and then she was reabsorbed into herself. The experience activated her realization that people share parts of their being while simultaneously incorporating others into themselves. To Swamini, this is what it means to be alive: to be present for the reality of life, which is interconnected.

She credits nature with revealing this insight to her. She envisions nature as the goddess Prakriti, who, in Hindu theologies (e.g., Sankhya and Yoga), represents the divine principle of materiality—that material existence comprises five elements, and being permeable, they are always in flux. Nature comprises both the material world and a divine female in Swamini’s theology. In accordance with her reasoning, if the goddess exists as the world that she permeates with her power, then she can show herself in the materiality of life, including feelings, sensations, and emotions.

I would argue that Swamini encounters Goddess-presence via the potency of affect. The goddess, as nature, appears and reveals information to Swamini through a confluence of emotions and sensations. In this sense, she learns that everyone is essentially connected, and that they share in each other’s humanity. One’s humanity is measured by experiencing others’ humanity, which comprises their own. I interpret Swamini’s statements to mean that “we are all one” and “we are all the same”. She equates equality and inclusiveness with the status of religious truths, thereby constructing them as spiritually potent, and based on the immediacy of bodily experiences. Spiritual efficacy (of these ideals) manifests in the body. As Swamini says:

When I was thirteen years old, Nepali Baba Jagatacharya started his Nepal *yātrā*, and my mother and me were part of that trip. We traveled to seventy-five districts and visited more than ten-thousand temples. I got the opportunity to taste water and food from all seventy-five of these districts...In the past, in the Hindu religion everyone used to drink from the same well. There was no caste (*jātī*) or class (*varn*)

divisions. We have lost our culture and the distinction of being a world teacher (*viśva guru*) because of the discrimination that we have created between ourselves. What we see today is people fighting with each other over petty issues. We are seeing an increase in corruption, pollution, all sorts of problems, and negative thoughts. This is depleting our power, energy, and bravery. The problem that we are facing today in Nepal is mostly because of the lack of respect for women. We are not giving them proper opportunities . . . We should respect women and woman power if we want to be a great country. [But] we have lost self-power. We have forgotten the principles of *dharm*.

Swamini performs acts relating to the materiality of enlightenment by calling attention to her personal realization that the universe is permeable and interconnected. She indicates that the spiritual potency of everyday material acts, such as religious journeying *on foot* and eating and drinking (water) with people she meets, are sources of revelation; however, quotidian practices not only reveal penetrating insight into the natural world, significantly, they motivate Swamini's religious feminist engagement with it. Struck by an "acute fever" of emotions, she feels moved to embrace others, affirm dignity, respect their natural birthright, and heal the festering wounds of discrimination, exploitation, and oppression caused by ascribed social divisions.

Swamini and Mataji suggest that the immediacy of self-realization impacts the deep structures of the mind and body. Recall Mataji's statements concerning "absorbing the truth". It details a prominent material metaphor for her personal realization of God in her narratives. In this respect, the materiality of God-consciousness is suggested by her comment, "I have absorbed the truth;" this separates Mataji from the mainstream Śaṅkarācāryas who, as she says, "only cram the Vedas in their heads without embodying it in their character". This emphasis constructs her status as the "real" Śaṅkarācārya; however, a further implication concerns the fact that the revelation impacts Mataji at the cellular level. Every molecule of her body is touched by the self-realization of the Brahman, such that she feels that she "eats God," "tastes God," "smells God," and "sees God". In 2018, Mataji told me,

When I sat with the [established] leaders, I saw that they are hollow from the inside. They have nothing inside. They do not do anything. They have not brought it into their ways of living, and their behavior is bad. And spirituality which is called religion, it means that you superimpose the truth on yourself. It means to speak the truth, to eat the truth, to wear the truth, to live in an environment of truth, to walk on the path of truth, and to guide others about the truth, to give one the right direction. I felt it. I am the original Śaṅkarācārya. Only the person who has absorbed the truth can be called a Śaṅkarācārya.

Both gurus underscore that personal transformation is a direct function of affect. For Swamini, affect emerges through the emotion of 'positivity' (i.e., absorbing and becoming absorbed by others), and for Mataji, she feels 'radical love.' These emotions are activated through revelation. It transforms them spiritually, emotionally, and physically, shifting their perceptions from ignorance to wisdom and restoring their bodies from sickness to health. By performing charisma, the gurus engender a correlation between the spiritual and the material.

9. Revelation and Healing: The Affective Potency of Charisma for Female Guru Authority

A third way in which the gurus explicitly render their charismatic authority concerns their emphasis on the knowledge they have acquired from revelations to diagnose and heal the mind and body. Although experience provides an immediate source for their wisdom, they also anchor what has been revealed to them to traditional authority; this is achieved by drawing on Ayurveda, which is a knowledge system for optimal health and well-being. Mataji uses her training as an Ayurvedic physician to sanction her leadership, and she correlates the attainment of physical/mental health with becoming Brahman. She compares

obtaining truth with taking medicine. She says that as medicine has to be ingested and absorbed by the body to heal disease and illness, so does spiritual knowledge. It has to travel beyond the head and into the tissues and blood vessels in order to reach the organs, muscles, and bones. Mataji talks about her journey toward self-realization in terms of learning to embody the truth as reality and not as an intellectual claim.

Material metaphors associated with enlightened consciousness repeatedly appear in the gurus' teachings concerning healing. Apart from changing the monastic culture, another purpose of their charismatic authority concerns curing illness. Self-realization has unlocked the gurus' capacities for ritual healing. It represents a central feature of their alternative authority. Ritual healing heightens the significance of their charismatic power by showing that immersion in God-awareness, in addition to being personally transformative, endows them with the spiritual potency to heal others.³⁸ Ritual healing illuminates a context wherein the gurus' role as religious influencers is particularly significant, as their work revolves around sharing knowledge that benefits people.

For instance, Swamini has participated in videos in which she recommends using naturopathic herbs and plants found in the Himalayas to treat COVID-19, which were subsequently uploaded to YouTube. Mataji has also participated in videos detailing how to treat ailments, including COVID-19, that she subsequently uploaded to her social media platforms. Many of Mataji's disciples are also her patients. I spoke with a twenty-six-year-old Brahmin man named Anshu who suffered from depression, a twenty-four-year-old Dalit nurse named Anjali who experienced panic attacks and loss of consciousness, and two middle-aged married sisters from the Barber caste, named Bebi and Gogi, with diabetes and high cholesterol. All of them said that Mataji ritually healed their illnesses. Mataji, however, stresses that God does all the healing and that she is a vehicle for transmitting divine power. Her knowledge comes from the medical training she acquired before her *sādhu* life; however, Mataji has spoken of receiving revelations that reveal healing formulas for treating specific types of diseases.

Thus, for the gurus, the materialization of spiritual truth magnifies the idea that the material self is permeable; moreover, it can also indicate the state of the physical and mental health of individuals, communities, and societies. Ayurvedic principles underpin her teachings, and Swamini draws associations between spiritual and bodily health by linking physical and mental illness, especially among women and girls, with the loss of self-power. Recall that in the gurus' theology, this concept refers to the qualities of bravery, strength, energy, and self-confidence, which comprise female and male humanity, and which is activated by accessing the inner self. Swamini attributes the loss of this power in Nepali Hindu society to people forgetting the truths identified with equality, inclusion, and woman power (i.e., the traits viewed as natural to women, such as self-discipline and perseverance, but also self-determination and fearlessness). She views societal amnesia as a causal factor in religious inequality, physical illness, and socio-political unrest; in other words, a woman's loss of spiritual potency and her becoming sick stems from her oppression. Swamini conveys a basic tenet of Ayurvedic philosophy, which promotes interrelationships between physical, mental, and spiritual health.

In her theology, Swamini equates disrespecting women and girls with oppression. In particular, what bothers her is the societal sanctification of the restrictions that tend to be placed upon the female sex. This usually occurs by equating gender-motivated, socio-cultural customs with traditions. To Swamini, disrespect occurs when women and girls are denied equal opportunities that could enhance their talents and skills, and when they are treated as second-class citizens. Swamini explains that this behavior has real consequences, detailing its impact on the increasingly alarming rates of suicide, depression, and intimate domestic violence, perpetrated by men, among women (for more information on female suicide and morbidity rates in Nepal, see [Hughes 2013](#)).

Swamini's understanding of the interrelation between women's sickness and their subordination intersects with the insights of feminist sociologists who "have argued that patriarchy actually makes women ill" ([Sered 1996](#), p. 104). In her study of the role of healing

in women's religions, Sered analyzed the sociological data of American scholars, stating that "Women in patriarchal societies may have no avenue available to them other than illness for expressing their dissatisfaction with their lives . . . In general, women receive far more positive responses when they define their problems in medical terms than in political terms" (Sered 1996, p. 105).

When speaking about the inequalities that women and girls encounter because of the religiously sanctioned Brahmanical representations of the female sex as weak, passive, and inferior, Swamini articulates a sense of disgust with patriarchal Hindu society. Her anger was palpable to the interpreter when she stated: "If a woman curses her house or country, that place is doomed". Swamini associates the loss of woman power (in this context, a woman's sense of herself as strong, dynamic, and capable) with religious patriarchy's propagation of incorrect knowledge. Her leadership role as a female Śaṅkarācāryā strives to recover woman power, and by extension, uplift and inspire the women and girls of Nepal through means of "right knowledge":

The Hindu religion is becoming ill because of patriarchal thought. Due to this narrowmindedness, people are not learning the real meaning of the texts. [Patriarchal thought] is creating a rift in the society by teaching that a woman cannot touch the image of God in a temple, that women cannot read the holy books, such as the *Gītā*, that women cannot recite the Gayatri Mantra, that women have to die as *satīs* (i.e., immolate themselves on their husband's funeral pyre), and live like an object of pity in widowhood. Hinduism has become ritualistic, and this [incorrect understanding] is depleting the religion. In the Hindu tradition, we don't have any discrimination, not even caste discrimination . . . We should come out of this thinking. My aim is to release Hinduism from this narrow-mindedness, because it is getting distorted . . . For the past twelve-hundred-and-fifty years, a woman has not been a Śaṅkarācāryā. But as per my knowledge, women were leading the religion in the Satya Yug. This being the case, why can't it happen in the Kali Yuga? (the fourth and final age; the age of destruction)? (See Note 37)

Here, Swamini implies that mainstream traditions have refused women's monastic authority and right to equality based on perceptions of their bodily impurities. Female biological processes, such as menstruation and childbirth, are considered to be ritually impure and socially taboo to Hindu orthodoxy. This ascribed impurity has become the justification for prohibiting women, between the ages of ten and fifty (i.e., women of menstruating age), entry into some temples (e.g., the Ayyappa Swami Temple in Kerala),³⁹ reciting the Gayatri Mantra, touching the images enshrined in temples, and learning/reciting the Vedas. At the heart of these gendered religious conventions, which proscribe female behavior, lie male-defined conceptions of impurity; such impurities are thought to be transmissible through physical contact due to the permeability of selves. However, Swamini refutes the patriarchal logic, arguing that it is distorted, and condemns the idea that menstruating women are impure. She does this by connecting the material bodies of the divine and of human females to bolster the idea that women are inherently pure and equal to men.

Significantly, Swamini reorders and reverses ideas surrounding contagions—from Brahmanical views of pollution to divine permeability spread through love (or 'positivity'); in other words, she promotes the idea of a positive contagion that turns the idea of disease/disorder onto its head. When performing revelation, Swamini draws on the idiom that "everyone drinks from the same well". It implicitly attacks birth-ascribed caste rankings that are associated with the dominant Brahmanical perception of purity and impurity, and it condemns social practices and ritual customs that reinforce the subordination of perceived lower-caste groups. For example, in some villages, caste status is coded in terms of location, with dominant identities residing at the center and oppressed (Dalit; Bahujan) identities residing on the periphery. This arrangement physically maps conceptions of ritual contagion and structures caste relations. Access to water heightens purity concerns because people can absorb others' ritual pollution by drinking water from the same well. In Hindu culture, water signifies purity and cleanses "negativity" (Swamini's words) by

removing *karm*; however, it also transmits ritual pollution by permeating substances. In this context, villagers are expected to draw water from a well in their location to avoid mixing essences and to contain the spread of impurities.

Swamini asserts that patriarchal perspectives concerning caste impurity and female bodily pollution oppose the egalitarian spirit of Hindu ethics. Her narrative emphasizes the idea that the body is ontologically pure *from birth*, thus challenging the practice of ascribing status based on sex and caste identities. In an interview with BBC India, conducted at the Kumbh Mela in 2019, Swamini condemned calling menstruating women “untouchable”. She said, “A woman is never untouchable. Those people who say she is [untouchable] are hypocrites. The man who enters the temple is born from a woman’s womb”. Her interview came in response to the religious patriarchal scathing criticism of the Supreme Court of India for overturning the ban on women entering the Swami Ayyappa temple in Kerala. The court cited the ritual custom as unconstitutional and as violating women’s rights to equality and freedom from sexual discrimination under Indian law.

In terms of performing revelation, Swamini makes similar claims about human equality and inclusion, but she situates them within a Hindu moral framework to intensify their status as inviolable truths. She professes that “God is in my body” in order to construct charismatic authority and to note the potency of the female form for its life-giving capacities. As God appears to Swamini and resides within her body, it amplifies the efficacy of her revelatory experiences. After all, as her narrative performance signals, why would God or the Goddess inhabit her body, or the female body more generally, if it were impure? Her rhetoric elevates the normative status of the female sex by emphasizing a shared trait of humanity; every person is born from a woman. Moreover, she also claims that women are morally superior. Swamini does this by refuting the hypocrisy of the male-led tradition for refusing to sanction female monastic authority.

She argues that women are assumed to be superior based on ascribed bio-moral proclivities that reinforce their spiritual potency as mothers and monastic heads; therefore, Swamini’s theology reverses gender hierarchies, thus bringing traditional leadership practices under the charismatic authority of the female Śaṅkarācāryā, and rendering them as institutionally normative. She accomplishes the reversal of gender status by emphasizing the immediacy of divine presence and the potency of positivity as sources of revelation for obtaining knowledge of gender/caste equality and their inclusion as Hindu values.

Swamini’s view of positivity resembles Mataji’s stance on radical love. By affecting their self-realization, these emotions have inspired their religious feminism, through which, they affirm dignity and equality as the female birthright. Moreover, they eradicate systemic discrimination, exploitation, and oppression which positions female *sādhus* at the bottom of the monastic hierarchy. Their leadership shows that self-realization and social engagement in an active feminist register represent complementary aims, and it delimits the status of an enlightened guru in modern times.

10. Conclusions: The Impact of Charismatic Authority and of Being a Feminist Religious Influencer on Modern Women’s Monastic Lives

Among holy people, gurus are the most significant religious influencers, dharmic *prabhāvaks*, in Hindu culture. They bridge religious and social spheres and the subjective and collective facets of human experience to define and scaffold human values, priorities, and practices. This article has shown the impact of personal charisma on modern women’s monastic lives through an analysis of the revelatory experiences of two self-styled female Śaṅkarācāryās, whom I have characterized as religious feminist influencers. Motivated by their revelations and the universal problem of suffering, these gurus have organized grassroots women’s liberation movements, comprising people across social identities, to uproot patriarchal mentalities regarding female *sādhus*’ inferiority, and to change the monastic culture. We have seen the tangible effects of charismatic authority in terms of how they have established separate monastic lineages for women in India (Mataji) and Nepal (Swamini). They have established these lineages in order to give female *sādhus*,

many of whom come from disadvantaged backgrounds, a female-identified place, away from the male gaze, where they can be nurtured, learn skills, imbibe ideas beneficial to their well-being, and develop their full potential *because they are women*. Their establishment of female-led traditions not only asserts the primacy of women, but it also constructs women's monastic authority and autonomy as institutionally normative. These forward-facing gurus combine modernist ideals with Hindu religious worldviews in order to enhance women's fundamental rights in relation to equality of opportunity and freedom from sex and caste discrimination. At the same time, they raise awareness of the struggles of female *sādhus* within the male-dominated hierarchy of Hindu monastic orders.

Perhaps less tangible, but no less impactful, are the gurus' rhetorical practices. Through narrative performance, they promote alternative conceptions concerning what it means to embody the Hindu faith and feminine virtue. Regarding performing revelation, the gurus unravel the implications of religious inequality, exclusion, and exploitation for Indic society, by drawing attention to the connection between women's sickness and gender oppression. They see illness as the material outcome of women's loss of spiritual potency due to injustice. Mataji and Swamini do not shy away from blaming patriarchy for the suffering of women and girls, nor do they hesitate to address the double standards to which society holds them. Not only do they recognize how Indic culture, through the apparatus of religion, politics, the government, law, education, and the mainstream media, conditions women's and girls' subordination, but they also make that fact poignantly explicit. These institutions call upon ambiguous notions of "religion" or Hindu "tradition" to sanction women's second-class status. Similarly, a woman's virtue is not infrequently measured against dominant, male-defined, idealistic standards, such as obedience, humility, passivity, moderation, and forgiveness; however, these idealized criteria that describe the "perfect" woman obliquely construct self-determination, self-expression, bravery, confidence, strength, and energy—indeed, the very qualities that the gurus affirm—as antagonistic, and even dangerous, to respectable femininity.

As female Śāṅkarācāryās, the gurus exercise the influence (social capital; gravitas) of their charismatic leadership to counter religious patriarchy's interpretations of female virtue and roles with religious feminist visions of women's capacities, potential, and rights. It is no coincidence that Mataji has named her monastic order "Pari Akhara," or, in my translation, the "Society of the Free Birds". It is as intentional as it is purposeful. Similarly to feminists across the globe, Mataji understands the generative power of representing reality in digital, discursive, and devotional modalities because she knows the stakes are high and that they involve religious meaning, identity, and authority (see [Gaddini 2021](#) analysis of female evangelical microcelebrities for a parallel example in western Protestant Christianity). Assigning the name "Pari" to a female ascetic order provides a way for Mataji to announce to patriarchal monastic culture that women have the right to live as they see fit. Importantly, for female *sādhus* who have vowed lifelong celibacy, this means fashioning one's life within moral parameters that increase spiritual potency and amplify feminine virtue, thus affirming female autonomy as normative. To Mataji, personal freedom qualifies as a "natural" right and precedes equality. The name Pari Akhara signals a woman's flight from the metaphorical cage of patriarchal traditions and expectations that circumscribes her aspirations, movements, and body to domesticity. Their lives, teachings, and activism provide an alternate world for women and girls who decide to fly from the cage toward a promising horizon of female achievement, which can be obtained through the religious feminism of two indefatigable gurus who are devoted to achieving that outcome.

Social media has been as valuable a platform for the gurus as religious influencers in that they have been able to impact societal perceptions toward embracing women's monastic authority. As mainstream religious practices shun them because of their sex, and thus their influence is limited by this repudiation of their authority, social media offers the gurus another way in which to proactively share ideas and shape what "counts" for the Hindu tradition; thus, it affords them the "power of representation" by heightening their presence online ([Gaddini 2021](#), p. 3). A month before the Supreme Court of India

announced its decision with regard to the Sabarimala Ayyappan Temple on September 28, 2018, Mataji had posted a video on her Facebook page to support the judges and encourage women to keep fighting for their rights.⁴⁰ As shown through this article's analysis of information obtained online, the gurus use social media to publicize their revelations, critique religious patriarchy, prescribe naturopathic remedies, and conduct healings, while solidifying their newfound status and repurposing Hindu identity. People who land on their pages and watch their videos may leave with the understanding that female Śāṅkarācāryās are institutionally normative. Arguably, one of their primary goals is to change Hindu society one viewer at a time.

In sum, this article has illuminated how charismatic authority provides an alternative source of power and influence for female gurus, enabling them to position themselves outside of a mainstream monastic tradition that does not sanction women's authority as leaders. Moreover, through revelatory experience, they are able to form alternative lineages and reverse gender hierarchies that perpetuate women's lower status in patriarchal *akhārā* culture. Although their orders are separate from the male-led system, female-led traditions may impact traditional conceptions of holiness and power, thus potentially opening doors for women in the future. Whether in person or via social media, these religious influencers are mobilizing a new institutional normativity that shatters the glass ceiling of authorized religious power, and which elevates women's status, thus affecting seismic cultural shifts.

However, charisma has been around for a long period of time. As Wessinger observed, charisma is one of the oldest forms of human influence and creativity (Wessinger 2012, p. 80). Why, then, has it taken twelve hundred years for women to lead as Śāṅkarācāryās?⁴¹

Modernization has facilitated social-justice-centered and "feminist-adjacent" changes in South Asian religious cultures (Langenberg 2022), ushering in paradigms that declare socio-political ideals, such as democracy, freedom, equality, women's and human rights, and female empowerment. Additionally, it is true that, faced with the ever-growing disparities of wealth and poverty, with women and girls typically affected the most by such disparities, people tend to draw on egalitarian principles to push for more equitable outcomes and enhance personal and collective well-being and happiness; thus, perhaps more people are refusing to accept or even rationalize ideas concerning social, gendered, and religious inequality, somehow perceiving them to be the consequences of one's *karm* from past lives.

Significantly, modernization has further normalized the idea of equality. Although there are many perspectives surrounding the concept, the gurus clarify their application of the term by linking equality with people's right to *equal opportunity*. For these gurus, equality is not synonymous with the post-Enlightenment notion of "natural equality". Men and women have the same essential nature and deserve the same rights. Here, the implication, as feminist moral philosophers have painstakingly drawn out, is that men and women share a common humanity based on the androcentric assumption of the (white, heterosexual) male as the universal human (See Nussbaum 2000; Bartky 1990; Tomm 1991).

Although they envision creation as being composed of the same natural material essence (e.g., fire, earth, water, air, and ether), the gurus conceive of women and men as having different essential natures with respect to their bio-moral inclinations and traits. These differences distinguish men and women from each other physically and morally. Indeed, first, according to the gurus, women have more *śakti* than men; second, that *śakti*, which manifests in the body as woman power, enables women to bear life. This distinction is crucial to their claims of women being morally superior (and sometimes physically superior) to men. Here, women's normative humanity is based on the premise that an essentialized female nature is universal as a class (this claim also applies to men as a class). Espousing gender essentialism, however, is not equivalent to promoting women's equal opportunity for monastic leadership, though it may boost support for their right to proportional representation and institutional autonomy. The gurus say they want equal opportunity, but their emphasis on gender essentialism constitutes advocacy of sex-specific rights for women based upon the assumption of their moral superiority and

biological capacity for motherhood. For the gurus, women have the right to leadership *before men* simply on the basis of sex; hence, these gurus are moving beyond demands for the proverbial seat at the table, rather, they are arguing that women should occupy the most powerful position, where (male) religious influence currently reigns supreme, and they should also occupy the vacant spaces within the established system (two are available).⁴²

Yet, the gurus stress that men and women are *ontologically* the same. They have the same normative status at birth. Using this logic, the gurus sanction men and women as entitled to equal rights while directing their energies toward enhancing opportunities for women's visibility and representation within the male-dominated field of religion. By performing revelation, they include gender equality and feminism within the conceptual parameters for embodying enlightened awareness in the modern world. Interpreting women's rights in "separate but equal" terms reveals a modern problem; however, these gurus assert that promoting men's and women's equal status and abilities aligns the social order in the mundane realm, with the natural order in the sacred realm. Their views echo Ayurvedic principles in that they understand humans as microcosms of the cosmos. Everything is permeable, interconnected, and interdependent.

Finally, what is especially noteworthy is that charismatic authority has the potential to alleviate social and structural inequality in Hindu culture *as long as there is a belief and expectation for gender equality among the practitioners*. It is not enough for gurus to preach the equality of the soul, which acts as a symbolic salve, or women's moral superiority (a common strategy among right-leaning Hindu religious movements), without backing it up with real, institutional change. My research supports Wessinger's contention that the "social expectation of the equality of women is crucial" with regard to transforming sexist, religious conceptions of gender norms and roles in patriarchal societies (Wessinger 1993a, p. 10; Tomm 1991, p. 72). As Wessinger has said, "[t]he various world religions demonstrate that religions in patriarchal contexts remain patriarchal, even when they conceptualize the sacred in terms of goddesses and impersonal principles" (p. 11). Although the gurus' inversion of power dynamics is not equivalent to transforming monastic society, as the latter would require abolishing hierarchies rather than reversing the status of dominant and oppressed groups, the move is consequential, and it brings women closer to achieving more rights and securing hopeful futures; thus, the use of "religious influencer" to probe the relationship between gender and charismatic authority has shown the expanding role of religion and feminist gurus in the modern milieu of digital and social media.

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Notes

- 1 In this article, I use the modern standard Hindi language transliteration of Indic terms to represent the vernacular language contexts in which I conducted research with the gurus. I use diacritical marks for their formal titles and foreign terms. Thus, diacritics occur for words in the gurus' titles, such as 'Mataji' ("Respected Mother") and 'Swamini' ("Respected Teacher"). However, use of diacritics occurs only when the title is first mentioned. Afterward, I do not use diacritics to denote 'Mataji' or 'Swamini,' or for the names of people, popular places (e.g., Kathmandu), and gods.
- 2 Mataji used both the generic 'sādhu' and the gendered feminine 'sādhvī' interchangeably in her rhetoric to denote her formal status as a renunciant (i.e., that she has been ritually initiated by a guru of an ascetic order in the role). By contrast, the other guru described in the paper, Swamini, uses 'sadhvī' in her title and public discourses uploaded online to social media platforms such as YouTube.
- 3 With the help of my research assistant, a Ph.D. scholar from Delhi University named Raj Kumar Singh, I transcribed and translated fieldwork data. This information constitutes the ground for my analyses.
- 4 Aside from this, I draw on the English and Hindi language news articles covering her leadership, alongside the email and SMS text messaging exchanges I had in 2022 with two male devotees of Swamini and a female journalist from India who interviewed her in 2017. Again, I relied on the assistance of Raj Kumar for translating these largely Nepali language materials.
- 5 The Magh Mela, held annually in the months of January/February (*Māgh*) in Indic society, is a cultural fair based on the Hindu lunar calendar; it occurs during Hindu holy days, such as Makar Sankranti, which is considered ritually auspicious and potent. The Magh Mela often coincides with another fair known as the Kumbh Mela, which is held every three years in one of four Indian pilgrimage centers, with the twelfth year of the fair celebrated as the Maha (great) Kumbh Mela. Similar to the Kumbh Mela, the Magh Mela occurs on a much smaller scale.
- 6 For Mataji, this status encompasses all of the credentials of Mahant, Śrī Mahant, Mandeleśwar, and Mahāmandeleśwar.
- 7 This label represents the shorthand for the formal title of the center: Gayatrī Triveṇī Prayāg Pīṭh Śrī Sarveśwar Mahādev Vaikuṅṭh Dhām Mandīr.
- 8 Incidentally, the United Nations designated 1975 as the International Women's Year.
- 9 Since Swami Swaroopananda's passing on 11 September 2022, Hindu monastic heads are debating issues of leadership succession to the Govārdhan and Jyotīr Pīṭhs where the swami was established and given legal authority to head both religious centers by the Allahabad High Court in 2017. Two successors have been named by the late Śaṅkarācārya's personal secretary, notably Swami Avimukteshwarananda and Swami Sadananda Saraswati, with the former announced to head the Jyotīr Pīṭh in Badrinath and the latter to head the Govārdhan Pīṭh in Dwarka. Nonetheless, Swami Vasudevananda Saraswati and his supporters are contesting the late swami's and his named successor's right to the leadership by representing himself as the head of the Jyotīr Pīṭh.
- 10 The Paśupatināth Temple was classified as a World Heritage Center in 1979.
- 11 "Influencer, n." *OED Online*. December 2022. Oxford University Press. Available online: <https://www-oed-com.ezproxy.tcu.edu/view/Entry/95522?redirectedFrom=influencer> (accessed 2 September 2022).
- 12 "Influencer?" Available online: <https://sproutsocial.com/glossary/influencer/> (accessed 5 September 2022).
- 13 Digital Marketing Institute, "9 of the Biggest Social Media Influencers on Instagram". Available online: <https://digitalmarketinginstitute.com/blog/9-of-the-biggest-social-media-influencers-on-instagram> (accessed 5 September 2022).
- 14 Weber (1968, pp. 18–27). In his writings, Weber distinguishes between charismatic authority as the "power of personality" from "traditional authority" as the "power of office." This is to say that the traditional authority of the Śaṅkarācāryas within the male-led system represents the routinization of the charismatic authority of the lineage's founder.
- 15 My use of "vestigial state" draws from the scholarship of feminist historian Naomi Goldenberg's elucidation of the concept to characterize religious institutions acting as "political formations" to plan and control the agenda of public policy and the public interests of the state. See (Goldenberg 2014, pp. 248–56).
- 16 In accordance with Béatrice de Gasquet's elucidation of the term, I use 'ordination' to mean: "the validation by a religious organization of the theological competences of an individual", p. 22. See (de Gasquet 2010).
- 17 The scholarship of the sociologist of religion Béatrice de Gasquet sheds important light on women's access to ordained leadership within Protestantism, Catholicism, and Judaism in the USA and France, and offers persuasive insights for feminist studies-centered comparative studies of the issues barring women's religiously authorized power within and outside of mainstream religions in global cultural contexts. See (de Gasquet 2010).
- 18 The linguistic emphasis made by the gurus in their rhetorical practices reinforces the visibility and existence of the female-led traditions to their interlocutors.
- 19 See (Khandelwal 2004). See also (Olivelle 1993, 1994). For depictions of the feminine in classical Buddhist literary contexts, see (Langenberg 2017, pp. 26–56; Wilson 1996).
- 20 For discussion of woman as symbol, see (Sered 2000, pp. 193–221).
- 21 Tiffany Puett (2022). Email message to author, 3 July 2022.

- 22 In other words: what we feel and sense helps us to make meaning of what we can know and perceive in and with our bodies, and it shapes our actions and behaviors; however, the meaning of emotion is not absolute, but rather it is culturally mediated and interpreted through culture-specific scaffoldings. See ([Proudfoot 1985](#)).
- 23 [James \(1902, pp. 254–319\)](#). I am drawing on William James’s model of religious experience.
- 24 My use of the concept “permeable identity” builds on Winnie Tomm’s elucidation of the concept. Tomm has said that the “[p]ermeable self” entails the notion of a person who shares one’s strengths through relatedness, ideally without differential social privileges or limitations . . . Recognition of oneself as permeable includes rejection of the notion of separate, self-sufficient self, as well as realization of one’s unique, individual contributions to social relations. Through permeability, expansion occurs” ([Tomm 1991, pp. 82–83](#)).
- 25 The Kumbh Mela (literally, “festival of the water pot”) refers to the largest gathering/fair of religious ascetics and pilgrims in India. It is held every three years in four different regions of India, with the one held on the twelfth year known as the Maha Kumbh Mela (the great fair).
- 26 Interview with Jagadguru Trikal Bhavanta Saraswati (Mataji). 2018. Prayagraj, Uttar Pradesh. 19 July 2018.
- 27 Jagadguru Sadhvi Hemanand Giri (Swamini). 2018. Interview by Pawan Acharya. Television Interview, Fireside Chat. Tinkune, Kathmandu, Nepal. 22 January 2018.
- 28 Haider Sahab. 2018. Interview by Author. Prayagraj, Uttar Pradesh. 7 July 2018.
- 29 The idea of routinization, as developed by Weber, describes the institutional process of authorization by which the charisma of the founder or leader of an organization is transferred to another base of authority, such as the teaching tradition, a hierarchy of leaders vested with the authorized power of their office, and so on. Routinized charisma changes into a rational/legal form of authority. See ([Wessinger 2012, p. 81](#)).
- 30 These are Mataji’s words. See also ([McDaniel 2004, pp. 119–28](#)).
- 31 The material self known (*jīva*) is not to be confused with the divine inner self (*ātmanā*).
- 32 In using the Hindi language, she says: “*ham sab barābar hai*.”
- 33 Trikal Bhavanta Saraswati, Interview, 7 July 2018, Prayagraj.
- 34 I will speak more about ritual healing performed by the gurus in the next section.
- 35 Swamini uses the English language term.
- 36 As of the year 2008, Nepal has become a People’s Democratic Republic.
- 37 Jagadguru Sadhvi Hemanand Giri (Swamini). 2018. Interview by Tikaram Yatri. Television Interview, Tamasoma Jyotirmaya. Tinkune, Kathmandu, Nepal. 19 January 2018.
- 38 According to sociological models, charisma works to benefit others. [Weber \(1968, pp. 252–67\)](#). Weber viewed the trait of beneficence as a criterion for the acquisition of charismatic power; however, see [Wessinger \(2012, pp. 91–92\)](#) for a discussion on the mismanagement of charisma.
- 39 In 2018, this temple became the center of a cultural firestorm because of its gender-related ritual prohibitions against menstruating women, who had been banned entry into the temple dedicated to the celibate male deity Ayyappa. The ban quickly morphed into an international women’s rights issue when the Supreme Court of India decided in September of 2018 to allow females between the ages of ten and fifty years entry. For information about this court case and its legal/political contexts see ([Moore 2022, pp. 153–74](#)).
- 40 Jagadguru Trikal Bhavanta Saraswati. 2018. Interview by Trikal Bhavanta Saraswati. Video Uploaded to Facebook. Prayagraj, Uttar Pradesh, 25 August 2018.
- 41 I am not suggesting here that institutional gender inequality is unique to Indic Hindu culture.
- 42 Since Swami Swaroopnanda’s death on 11 September 2022.

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