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two generations of public female gurus

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1. Introduction

[63] (1) The Vedas cry aloud, and the *Purāṇas* shout that no good comes of a woman. (2) Now I in the natural way have a woman's body. What means then have I to acquire the supreme spiritual riches [*paramārtha*]? (3) The characteristics (of a woman) are foolishness, selfishness, seductiveness, and deception. All connection with a woman is disastrous. (Such is their opinion). (4) Says Bahiṇī, "If a woman's body brings disaster, what chance is there for her to acquire in this life the supreme spiritual riches?"

[64] (1) I wonder what sin I committed in a former birth that in this birth I should be so separated from God [Purushottam]? (2) I am born with a human body, but in the form of a woman. It is evident that the innumerable sins (of my former birth) have now come to their fruitage. (3) (As a woman) I have no right to listen to the reading of the Vedas. The Brahmins have made a secret of the *Gāyatrī mantra*. (4) I am told I must not pronounce the sacred word "OM". I must not listen to philosophical ideas. (5) I must not speak to any one about them. (Abbott, 1929, p. 39)

The 17th century saint poetess Bahiṇā Bāi addresses the injustice faced by women seeking access to the Vedic scriptures and mantra recitation within the Hindu religious community. The poetess not only captures characteristic aspects of Vedic Brahmanical orthodoxy but also points to a larger problem faced by female religious aspirants: unequal access to religious knowledge and practices. Throughout Indian history, the predominantly male-centric Hindu traditions have been subjected to transformations and alterations. This framework forms the basis for a broader exploration of how female gurus use mantras as a means of gaining legitimacy and authority within the Hindu religious community while challenging and redefining the socio-cultural frameworks of female religiosity. As mantras are endowed with sonic efficacy traditionally passed on by male Brahmins, their reclamation for recitation by female spiritual leaders marks a significant change. The thesis analyses how female spiritual leaders use, employ and contextualise the recitation of mantras to challenge prevailing socio-cultural conventions within the constraints of Brahmanical orthodoxy that have predominantly defined traditional religious practices.

It will be examined how Ānandamayī Mā, a public female guru of the 20th century, has contributed to the transformation of traditional religious practices, particularly through the development of altered, gendered approaches to mantra recitation. Additionally, the thesis investigates how shifts in discourses regarding mantra practices of female gurus and their disciples between the 20th and 21st centuries occurred, with the focus on two different generations¹ of public female guru figures.

¹ Generally, the term generation for the public female figures of two centuries is employed in accordance with Charpentier, who has remarked that Ānandamayī Mā's practices and approaches belong 'to a past generation' (2010, p. 197) and in opposition to the categorisation offered by Pechilis (2004, p. 10). She categorises 'guru waves' within different centuries in reference to the periodisation of (transnational) spiritual movements. This employed division by generation allows for a detailed examination of the movements and discourses centred around approaches to increase women's religious participation and access to mantra recitation.

The aim of this thesis is to reconstruct discursive shifts. It investigates altered modes of lived religiosity, particularly focusing on mantra practices, engendered by female public gurus. The changes in religious mantra practices between the first to second generation of public female gurus will be propounded in detail. The analysis is based on the reconstruction of the discernment of initiation (Sk. *upanayana*) and mantra recitation by women. Therefore, the thesis consults hagiographic sources to gain insight into the life of the spiritual leader, Ānandamayī Mā. This method of hagiographic sources has been previously used by scholars to enhance the understanding about the female spiritual leaders past events (Aymard, 2014; Charpentier, 2010; Hallstrom, 1999). Translations of the hagiographies make it possible to reconstruct specific events from the life of Ānandamayī Mā and illuminate certain relevant aspects that shed light on the personal experiences of the narrator (Carman, 2001, p. 139; Charpentier, 2010, p. 51; Hallstrom, 1999, pp. 21–22). Ānandamayī Mā, from the 20th century, can be counted among the public gurus of the first generation. The examination of the second-generation female gurus of the 21st century is based on digital sources. Through the study of digital sources, the thesis explores how contemporary female guru figures democratise access to mantra recitation in the age of new media and a global cosmopolitan audience.

Mantras provide an interface for the study of gender inequality in a society that is marked by endemic injustice. Alternative forms of empowerment in a specific socio-religious context are analysed through the redistribution of spiritual resources by female gurus. The navigation by women spiritual leaders within the religious community shows that they are changing the context of mantra recitation whilst maintaining a deep connection to the Hindu tradition. The use of the female gurus' alternative religious-philosophical concepts, movements and models, which deviate from orthodox notions, equally emphasises the pluralistic character of the lived religiosity within Hinduism. The reconstruction of shifts and discourses brings to the fore historically rooted gender-specific convictions, rigid and elitist socio-religious structures and the dominance of patriarchal interpretations of sacred texts. It aims to show how the female gurus overcome obstacles, circumvent barriers and surmount difficulties to promote egalitarian mantra recitation regardless of gender. The historical contextualisation shows how disjointed practices emerged, how heterodox these developments have been and what basis of legitimacy is used to justify an inclusive participation as well as recitation. The investigation of these interwoven themes reveals how multi-layered and complex the authorisation of new and alternative realities in engendered religious practices are. In addition, it also covers how gurus have strategically advocated for change and how carefully they balance influences of modernity and tradition.

Studies on female religious involvement within religious systems and women as individual actors started in the 1980s as scholars recognised androcentrism prevalent in the field of comparative religion (Falk & Gross, 2001). Since then, the scholarly focus has shifted towards the particularities of women's participation within religious communities as ascetics, *sants*, renouncers and gurus to analyse women as subjects, agents and stakeholders within the Hindu religious domain. This work can be seen as an extension of the existing scholarly literature on various female guru movements, centring around transformations of traditional, cultural and (en-) gendered religious practices.

The first part of this thesis emphasises the importance of mantra recitation in the Brahmanical as well as the Tantric religious context. It also explains the specific roles, duties and responsibilities of the guru and disciples, at the point of initiation and thereafter to enhance understanding of the underlying power structures within this relationship. It retraces how women faced marginalisation and exclusion from the recitation of mantras, as outlined by Bahiṇā Bāī's poem. Through the discussion of the chanting of the *gāyatrī*-mantra as well as the perspectives on female initiation in Hindu traditions, the (historical and scriptural) limitations of gender-based access are analysed.

The second part examines the lives, movements and mantra practices (and the promotion thereof) of two generations of female gurus. After the 19th century reform movements and 20th century global spiritual and transnational meditation movement, Mātā Amṛtānandamayī and Ānandmūrti Gurumā are part of the 2nd generation of public female gurus. It dissects how they utilise digital media as a tool to spread their divine messages and advocate for increasing female religious participation (Pechilis, 2004, p. 10; Raj, 2004, pp. 204–205). This section outlines the general approaches of female gurus in different centuries who advocate publicly for a transgression and expansion of (en-) gendered boundaries concerning female religiosity and particularly access to mantra recitation.

The third and last part not only contrasts the approaches of the different female spiritual leaders but also seeks to investigate strategies employed by them to navigate and justify renunciation, gendered practices and empowerment within the constraints of orthodoxy and the normative patriarchally constructed understanding of Indian womanhood. Conflicts about socio-cultural gender-specific behaviour in relation to the occupation of leadership roles and the fight for recognition of legitimacy and authority is elaborated to enhance the comprehension of the compatibility of religious tradition and lived modernity within the Hindu religious context.

2. Mantras

Mantras are a central element of the relationship (Sk. *sambandha*) between a guru and a *śiṣya* (student) as they are communicated at the stage of initiation. To put it simply, mantras are particular formalized utterances or scriptures of a sound, word or phrase (Alper, 1989, pp. 3–4; Haas, 2022, p. 11). They can be described as codified resonances, sequences of syllables, words or hymns that are articulated mentally or acoustically during the performance of rituals or spiritual practices (Rao, 2019, p. 3). In the following chapter, the ritual use of mantras in various forms of initiation is analysed.

Especially in the ritual context, mantras are perceived as powerful and divine entities that are utilised as tools to achieve beneficial outcomes (Haas, 2022, p. 11). At the same time they are “charged with spiritual power” (Basu, 1965, p. 85) which makes them applicable for the ritual context. The recitation of mantras (Sk. *japa*) is considered an element of ascetic spiritual practice and discipline (Sk. *sādhana*) and is a central practice for attaining liberation (Sk. *mokṣa*), but is also used in various initiation ceremonies (Haas, 2022, pp. 70, 109; Lubin, 2011, p. 81; Rao, 2019, pp. 3–5). Their recitation gained additional importance during the rise of the orthodox Brahmanism (third century BCE) through the growing emphasis on Vedic learning whereby the application of mantras for ritual purposes was specifically disseminated (Haas, 2022, p. 143; Lubin, 2011, p. 89). One such specific sacred rite (Sk. *saṃskāra*) is the initiation (*upanayana*) ceremony (Bleeker, 1965, p. 71; Haas, 2022, p. 3; Larios, 2017, p. 159; Olson, 1977, p. 152; Zotter, 2010, p. 20). The role of the guru and the *śiṣya* is analysed to examine the transmission and reception of the utterances. Additionally, also within Hindu tantric circles, the inclusion of mantras for various initiation (Sk. *dīkṣā*) forms and tantric rituals is considered necessary as well as indispensable for spiritual advancement (Woodroffe, 2009, p. 253). The following chapters provide an outline of the relevant historical, social and religious factors involved in the consecration of initiation. The initiation of spiritual seekers into the various traditions is therefore accompanied by a heterogeneous series of practices and mantra applications. General conclusions are therefore hard to draw as particular instances need to be looked at separately.

2.1 Importance of mantra initiation

2.1.1 The socio-religious and historic background of *upanayana*

Historically, in the Vedic period, the initiation (*upanayana*) of young male individuals into the studies of the Vedas was reserved for the three upper classes (Sk. *varṇas*) of the Hindu society (Bleeker, 1965, p. 71; Haas, 2022, p. 121; Lubin, 2011, p. 85; Olson, 1977, p. 155; Zotter, 2010, p. 19). Therefore only members of the *Brāhmaṇa*, *Kṣatriya* or *Vaiśya* class were allowed to

receive the sacred thread (Sk. *yajñopavīta*) whereby the age of initiation of the boys differed according to the *varṇa* (Haas, 2022, p. 121; Lubin, 2011, pp. 85–86; Michaels, 2023, p. 118; Olson, 1977, pp. 155–156; Roy, 1985, p. 137). Among the three higher *varṇas* further differences were made regarding the materials used for the sacred rite (*saṃskāra*) (Olson, 1977, p. 156; Roy, 1985, p. 138). By performing this rite, the men who belonged to the various *varṇas* were endowed with agency within society (Bleeker, 1965, p. 71). Bound to that rite was the introduction into the literary tradition of the class and Hindu community (Olson, 1977, p. 156). If a male Brahmin student failed to undergo initiation “[t]raditionally, he would also be rejected by Brāhmaṇical society for not attending to his scholarly obligation and would become “like a *śūdra*”” (Larios, 2017, p. 159). The *upanayana* as an introduction into society was therefore an integral part of the Vedic religious tradition and linked to particularities according to the *varṇa*.

The codifications on the performance and execution of the initiation ritual as well as other domestic rituals can be found in the *Gṛhyasūtras* (approx. 800-300 BCE²) which were composed at the demise of the Vedic period for householders (Haas, 2022, p. 128; Olson, 1977, p. 152). Professor Kajihara M. of the Tokyo University states, in her essay about the emergence of the *upanayana* ritual, that the initiation of a *brahmacārin* was already mentioned in the *Atharvaveda* (AV) (approx. 1500-1200 BCE) (Kajihara, 2004, p. 1). It is suggested that already at the time of the *Atharvaveda* specific ritual actions for young men were specified which were later incorporated in to the *Gṛhyasūtras* systematized treatise about the *upanayana* (Kajihara, 2004, pp. 6, 10). This conclusion has also been noted by Haas who affirms the mention of the ritual within the AV and the *Śatapatha-Brāhmaṇa* prior to the *Gṛhyasūtras* (Haas, 2022, p. 128). He proposes that this specific mantra, which is most commonly used for the *upanayana*, could pre-date the *Gṛhyasūtras* as well (Haas, 2022, p. 129). “While some mantras are peculiar to Gṛhya ritual, others, like the *sāvitrīs* used in the Upanayana, were clearly taken from the Vedic Saṃhitās” (Haas, 2022, p. 129). From this section it becomes evident that the material of older texts has been integrated in the *Gṛhya* rituals (Haas, 2022, pp. 128–130; Kajihara, 2004, pp. 2, 10). Haas further argues that the *Śrautasūtras*, texts of older and more formalized rituals, impacted the household rituals of the *Gṛhyasūtras* by fusing the rituals with specific Śrauta principles, which also influenced the selection of verses for domestic ceremonies (Haas, 2022, pp. 129–130, 132). Both scholars propose that the origin of the *upanayana* can therefore be

² The struggle to date the historical sources accurately is a common issue among scholars who study Sanskrit texts (Rukmani, 2002, p. viii). Here, the dating of the historical Sanskrit sources will come from the consensus of literature cited, without any claim to general validity and unless it is refuted.

dated prior to their codification within the *Grhyasūtras* and has been practiced since the end of the Vedic period.

The elitism of the ritual can be explained by the rise of an orthodox Brahmanical culture in the third century BCE (Haas, 2022, p. 142; Lubin, 2011, p. 78). Through a particularised definition of their concept of society, Brahmins began to exert more influence and created exclusionary rules of belonging as well as introducing the category of *āryas* (Haas, 2022, p. 142; Lubin, 2011, pp. 78–79; Olson, 1977, p. 156). According to the Brahmanical interpretation the *ārya* is defined as a discerned person, male, wedded and knowledgeable in Sanskrit, who follows the Brahmin authority and code of conduct. To become an *ārya* required formal ritual initiation (*upanayana*), and to remain one, one had to adhere to a way of life codified by (ritual) laws, duties, responsibilities and practices (Haas, 2022, p. 143). Hence it was believed that without the consecration the aspirant could not gain agency within the society, a process that also promoted an elitist understanding of social belonging (Bhattacharya, 1992, pp. 42, 51; Bleeker, 1965, p. 71).

The ritual functioned as an exclusionary mechanism to authorise the affiliation of certain members of society and to propagate orthodox Vedic ideals. Part of this revitalisation of an orthodox Brahmanism was the emphasis on discipline or regimen (Sk. *vratas*) and textual authority like the *Dharmasūtras* (3rd —1st century BCE) (Denton, 2004, p. 5; Haas, 2022, p. 142; Lubin, 2011, pp. 79, 84). This resulted in an elitist religious practice in which only high-class members of the society were granted access.

[...] [L]ongterm Vedic study remained primarily a brahmin endeavor, an ideal was projected of Ārya society as unified by a common devotion to Vedic learning and an increasingly homogenized domestic ceremonial system. Marginal groups who wished to be recognized as Ārya could ‘prove’ their belonging by being accepted as Vedic students and by Sanskritizing their religious practice. (Lubin, 2011, p. 86)

Āryas were therefore not only classified as ideal members of the society but also equipped with certain characteristics that were perceived as ideal. However, because “the hereditary connection alone was not really sufficient” (Lubin, 2011, p. 81) the *upanayana* was performed to determine the suitability of the candidate for the *Ārya* society. The importance placed upon the first sacred rite (*saṃskāra*) of initiation, in order to be recognised as a dependant of the *Ārya* society, is mentioned within the later *Grhyasūtras* (Haas, 2022, p. 143). Whereas in the older Vedic texts the first *saṃskāra* was marriage, in the newer scriptures the emphasis was laid on *upanayana* (Haas, 2022, pp. 143–144; Kajihara, 2004, p. 10; Lubin, 2011, p. 86; Michaels, 2023, p. 92; Olson, 1977, p. 156). According to the newer logic if one failed to perform the initiation rite, one could be excluded from the society and the precipitation therein (Haas, 2022, p. 145; Lubin, 2011, p. 100).

Further, the attributed significance placed upon the religious studies and identity strengthened the concept of ascetic discipline (*vrata*) (Kajihara, 2004, p. 1; Lubin, 2011, p. 86). Lubin remarks that a central element of *vrata* was the recitation of mantras (Lubin, 2011, p. 89).

With Veda study no longer simply the badge of brahmin status but that of Ārya status, and mantra recitation widely recognized as a leading act of piety in itself, the set of rules to be followed when reciting also took on a broader significance. (Lubin, 2011, p. 89)

This established form of Brahmanism emphasised the recitation of mantras as a marker of the elitist Ārya identity. Through this process of universalisation, the rite, later, also became a marker of social initiation, a compulsory rite of transition (Haas, 2022, p. 144). As a result the established principles of Brahmanism subsequently impacted the broader understanding of the succeeding Hindu culture in later times (Haas, 2022, p. 144; Lubin, 2011, p. 100). With the elevation in status of the initiatory rite the recitation of specific mantras became more central at the end of the Vedic period (Haas, 2022, pp. 144–145). The ritualized use of mantras was consolidated because their recitation was considered useful and beneficial for social and spiritual endeavours (Lubin, 2011, p. 81).

While employed in the religious as well as social practices within the Brahmanical communities, mantras are also believed to possess power if pronounced or recited for specific purposes (Alper, 1989, pp. 4, 25–26; Haas, 2022, pp. 11, 20). This attention towards mantra recitation was further formally codified by the *Gṛhyasūtras* which attributed significance to their recitation (Lubin, 2011, p. 84).

Claims for the sufficiency of mantra-recitation as a form of worship in itself paved the way for the *gṛhyasūtras*’ codification of a variety of regimens consisting of ascetic discipline, recitation, and perhaps simple *homas* to expiate sins and to fulfill [*sic*] wishes (Lubin, 2011, p. 84).

Mantras were bestowed with powers beneficial for worship and humanity. Their increased use and utilisation for various purposes was fostered by Brahmanism, whose influence on society increased at the same time. It is noteworthy that in the late Vedic period ritual initiation, discipline and mantra recitation were mutually dependent and helped to consolidate the authority of Brahmanism. The universalisation of Brahmanical principles, such as the Sanskritisation of heterogeneous religious traditions, was further promoted through the exercise of these practices. It is important to note that the long-lasting ritual has been subject to modification due to its existence in various historical periods as well as texts. Zotter (2010, p. 21) also suggests that a ritual as important as the *upanayana* has always been subjected to change and was prompted by changes in order to ensure its continuity. This in turn has an impact on the understanding of the execution, emergence and genesis of the ‘archetype’ of this *saṃskāra*.

2.1.2 The transformation of the initiate

Initiation is a ritual state of transition for the celibate student (Sk. *brahmacārin*). Already in the *R̥gveda* and hymns from the AV references of Vedic learning can be found (Lubin, 2011, p. 84). Thereafter, initiation, followed by a dedicated learning period, is perceived as a ritual birth for the *brahmacārin* ('brahmin student') (Haas, 2022, p. 145; Lubin, 2011, pp. 95–96). Generally speaking, the student is referred to as *śiṣya* (Lubin, 2011, p. 96). *Upanayana* can be translated as "leading to himself" (Bleeker, 1965, p. 71) whereby the guru guides the disciple towards his inner 'new' self and a modification in the "existential condition" (Olson, 1977, p. 153) of the disciple occurs. The student is being familiarized with the rules and customs of *brahmacarya* (celibate studentship) (Denton, 2004, p. 95; Lubin, 2011, p. 81). "This rule of conduct, to be adhered to scrupulously until the end of the period of study, is both a transforming rite de passage and an apprenticeship in priestcraft or scholarship" (Lubin, 2011, p. 81). With the guidance of the guru (master, teacher) the *brahmacārin* must go through a period of rigorous apprenticeship whereby the disciple should gain knowledge, insight (Sk. *jñāna*), be devoted (Sk. *bhakta*) towards the guru, develop his character and learn specific codes of conduct (Sk. *ācāra*) (Bleeker, 1965, p. 74; Larios, 2017, pp. 5–6; Lubin, 2011, p. 89; Olson, 1977, p. 157). During this particular period, the student should study the Vedas as prescribed in the *Dharmasūtras* and *Dharmaśāstras* (Larios, 2017, p. 5; Roy, 1985, p. 137). "This period is considered a crucial life-stage of a *brāhmaṇa*, during which the state of Brāhmaṇahood (*brāhmaṇya*) is cultivated and established through the study of the Veda" (Larios, 2017, p. 6). The cultivation of the student as an act of preparation for participation in society marks a turning point in the life phase of the student.

This particular period marks the first life stage according to the Vedic system of *varṇāśramadharma* (fourfold life stages)³ as described in the *Dharmasūtras* (approx. 500-100 BCE) (Larios, 2017, pp. 6, 17; Roy, 1985, pp. 136, 142). During that process the child was separated from his preceding surroundings and put into a different environment in order to be acquainted with the next life stage (Haas, 2022, p. 243; Larios, 2017, p. 6; Lubin, 2011, p. 84; Olson, 1977, p. 154; Roy, 1985, p. 136). During that process the guru accepts a personal *śiṣya*, who then is required to follow a strict regimen and ritual peculiarities to obtain the necessary qualifications (Lubin, 2011, p. 84).

A student must be accepted by a master whom he will serve obediently and with whom he will reside for (it is said) up to twelve years or more. During this period, he must remain sexually chaste, eat only food gathered as alms (which he in turn offers first to his master), tend the master's fire unflinchingly, and serve him obediently. (Lubin, 2011, p. 84).

³ *brahmacarya* (studentship), *gr̥hasthya* (householder), *vānaprastha* (forest-dweller) and *sannyāsa* (renouncer) (Denton, 2004, pp. 3-4)

These principles of chastity had to be strictly adhered to as a means to receive the renowned social status. By this statement the hierarchical relationship between teacher and student is accentuated, which equally mirrors the broader order of society, e.g. the *varṇa* hierarchy (Roy, 1985, p. 139). The student receives personal patronage to submerge himself into the different remits of *brahmacarya*. This period tested the aspirant's suitability for custodianship by entering a phase of mentoring in which the adept practised the recitation of sacred texts, mantras and rituals while also studying various subjects such as grammar, logic, etc., with the guru's authority being linked to his knowledge of the various subjects (Lubin, 2011, p. 95). As a result, the basis of legitimacy for a universalised (Brahmanical) social system was established by creating demand and fuelling it with its own assets.

Within this system, the beginning of this learning period is marked by the *upanayana* (Lubin, 2011, p. 81). At the point of initiation the student receives the “first symbolic oral instruction” (Larios, 2017, p. 159) predominantly in form of a secret and sacred mantra, which is chosen specifically from the guru for the initiator, in order to be allegeable for the studies of the Vedas (Larios, 2017, pp. 159, 192). “In the Vedic period the initiation was regarded as a second birth (A.V. II. 5.3)” (Olson, 1977, p. 154) because a transformation through the divine power (Sk./Hi. *śakti*) is evoked within the disciple (Bleeker, 1965, pp. 74–75, 77). This second birth, after the oral instruction of the Vedic texts, marks the individual as a *dvija* (‘twice-born’) (Haas, 2022, p. 166; Larios, 2017, pp. 49, 159; Lubin, 2011, p. 87; Michaels, 2023, p. 91; Roy, 1985, p. 137). The initiation with a personalized sacred mantra therefore “[...] is a rite which symbolizes and represents the arising of new life” (Bleeker, 1965, p. 76). Initiation is a form of ritual birth that allows the student to participate in the religious community and thereafter is perceived as truthful (Sk. *satya*) (Michaels, 2023, p. 91). Meaning that the student is from that point onward allowed to study the Vedas, recite mantras and conduct specific ritual functions (Roy, 1985, p. 137).

The initiation transformed the initiate on three levels, the social, psychological and the ritual-spiritual (Michaels, 2023, p. 115). While at the same time this ritual reinforced the social “hierarchy of privilege” (Roy, 1985, p. 142), as not all members according to the *Dharmasūtras* were eligible for initiation (Roy, 1985, p. 139). Additionally, not following the prescribed rules of conduct and obligations was met with repercussions and the potential exclusion of society (Larios, 2017, p. 159). The initiation as well as the subsequent learning period were linked to social ideals, which were strictly regulated and followed by sanctions in case of non-compliance. However, these microcosmic regulatory mechanisms also helped to create a macrocosmic expansive structure of the Brahmanical tradition: “The reproductive mechanism

of this tradition was the regimen of *brahmacarya*, which sanctified the teacher-pupil relation as a spiritual filiation, and ensured the preservation and expansion of the texts and practices of the various subtraditions“ (Lubin, 2011, p. 92). The student played a central role in the expansion of the tradition by accepting the sacred thread and continuing within the tradition of the personal guru. Simultaneously the *śiṣya* aided the transfer of tradition due to his social conditioning and normative adaptation of Brahminical principles.

2.1.3 The guidance of the Guru

The relationship between the spiritual teacher and the *śiṣya* is intricate. The guru's main tasks include facilitating the disciple's acquisition of knowledge (Sk. *jñāna*), introducing him to his new status as a social member of the Brahmanical community and imparting ritual specialities (Larios, 2017, p. 159). “The primarily role of the teacher is therefore to impart the knowledge (*veda*) to the student, thereby removing his ignorance” (Larios, 2017, p. 158). The guru who embodies different personas empowers the disciple while the former role of the student is altered likewise. This relationship is metaphorically linked to family ties, as the authority of the guru is associated with fatherhood, while the *śiṣya* assumes the more submissive position of a son who draws inspiration from the guru's achievements and exemplary behaviour, creating a complicated relationship characterised by a hierarchical order (Larios, 2017, p. 160). This pattern of an intimate relationship allows the student to accumulate knowledge in various forms and bestows respect on the teacher for his leadership role. Therefore, the guru must be recognised as a role model, a spiritual leader (Sk. *ācārya*), who is morally superior and possesses knowledge (*jñāna*) and insight that has given him legitimacy as an authority figure, while he is bestowed with wisdom to impart the discerning aspects (Gough, 2021, p. 75; Larios, 2017, pp. 158–159). “Due to the fact that one of the main purposes of the *Upanayana* was the acquisition of knowledge and the building of character, the best possible teacher was sought” (Olson, 1977, p. 157). In the AV the *ācārya* is described as a person who upholds traditions, follows regulations, safeguards institutions and values traditional customs as well as practices (Olson, 1977, pp. 157–158). By the time of initiation the student must also be ‘adopted’ by a personal spiritual teacher (Lubin, 2011, p. 81; Michaels, 2023, p. 94) since “[w]ithout the guru, the student is excluded from the sacred knowledge he is entitled to by birth” (Larios, 2017, p. 159). The teacher plays a pivotal role in the ceremony and gains authority due to the emphasis on the personalized “oral transmission of knowledge” (Larios, 2017, p. 159) which the *śiṣya* receives during *brahmacarya* from him.

In general, the dissemination of textual knowledge was reliant on the various teacher-disciple lineages and its adherence to textual traditions, as they are considered the successors

of the lineage groups that date back to the Maurya period (Lubin, 2011, p. 81). The teacher therefore creates his offspring to ensure the continuation of the lineage. This specific lineage is preserved and continued by forwarding the guru's knowledge to the disciple. "The goal of a student is to "become like his guru" in all respects" (Larios, 2017, p. 160). Similarly, the guru must be respected and honoured for his willingness to teach (Bleeker, 1965, p. 77; Larios, 2017, p. 162). Because he is regarded as a vessel or representative of the divine, who is guiding the seeker (Basu, 1965, p. 84). Consequently, the admission of the student by a guru marks the first step of the new life stage. In preparation of the initiation ritual and to signify the rebirth of the student, the instructor symbolically carries the aspirant for three days in his belly (Michaels, 2023, p. 104; Olson, 1977, p. 154). Michaels in his theoretical elaboration about the formation and history of Hinduism uses the term of 'ritual parenthood' to highlight the role of the spiritual guru (Michaels, 2023, p. 114). It symbolizes that the teacher takes responsibility to carry and teach the student a specific knowledge.

At the initiation ceremony the guru not only renews his own sacred thread but also prepares one for the student and endows him with it the day after (Michaels, 2023, p. 98). The sacred thread simultaneously marks a symbol of status (economically, ritually and socially) since only members of the three highest *varṇas* are endowed with it (Michaels, 2023, p. 109). Only after having conducted the necessary prerequisites the student obtains his personal sacred mantra from his teacher (Larios, 2017, p. 159; Michaels, 2023, pp. 111–113; Olson, 1977, p. 154) (see chap. 2.1.2). The teacher recites the peculiar mantra into the initiate's ear under a cover to shield it from public gaze. Also, in this case, strict ritual codes of conduct like the sitting position towards certain celestial directions are being adhered to (Michaels, 2023, pp. 111–112; Olson, 1977, pp. 154–155). Thereby the guru is aware of these protocols while the *śiṣya* follows his guidance. The (Vedic) knowledge, through mantras and insights, is not just simply transmitted by the guru, the student must acquire this discernment in a particular way, e.g. through embodiment, mimicry or imitation, whereby the student is participating "in a particular socio-cultural milieu" (Larios, 2017, p. 160; Michaels, 2023, p. 113). One goal for the student is to memorize the recitation of the Veda which is transmitted from the mouth of the guru, while on the other hand he is prepared for his duties within the social order (Sk. *dharma*) (Larios, 2017, pp. 24, 101). Within this specific teaching tradition it is possible that the guru is even equated or linked with God (Sk. *bhagavān*) since he is recognised as the embodiment of the sacred knowledge to ensure the continuation of the patrilineage (Michaels, 2023, pp. 114–117). The emphasis on the initiation as well as an elitist teaching system ensured the ongoing reproduction of social exclusive structures within the orthodox Brahmanical traditions and generally

speaking (mainstream) Hinduism. The gurus are instances and figures of authority who lead by example and display certain qualities, such as knowledge and wisdom. However, it should be remarked that the guru's influential position of power over the student might be abused, and any hierarchical divergence can result in exploitation.

2.1.4 *Dīkṣā* – Tantric forms of initiation

A second form of initiation is referred to as *dīkṣā*. This practice of initiation or “consecration” is a term used for various forms of ritual initiation within the Tantric tradition (Bleeker, 1965, p. 72; McDaniel, 1989, p. 103). It is considered as a specific ritual of admission, purification and formation for the religious life (Lubin, 1994a, p. 241). The *Kulārṇavatantra* is used by Śākta ritual practitioners of the Kulācāra school as well as the Bengali Śākta practitioners like Ānandamayī Mā who incorporated tantric elements into her practice (Hallstrom, 1999, p. 143; McDaniel, 1989, p. 103). As rightly remarked by Bleeker and Denton these Tantric schools constitute a vital part of the entire later Hindu tradition and because tantric elements deeply pervade the practice of asceticism (Bleeker, 1965, p. 72; Denton, 2004, p. 39). Within the *Kulārṇavatantra* a detailed description of the various forms of *dīkṣā* can be identified (McDaniel, 1989, pp. 103–104, 106). While the guru-*śiṣya* relationship is similar to the one of *upanayana* (see chap. 2.1.2 and 2.1.3) the text provides distinct detailed etymologies for the concept of *dīkṣā* (McDaniel, 1989, p. 106). These several forms of initiation include sensory, auditory, mental, vocal and ritual elements: “[...] [T]he *dīkṣā* according to Tantric texts is a ceremony which can consist of rites or words or yoga or religious insight, but in practice most probably actually consists of a mixture of these elements” (Bleeker, 1965, p. 80). Through the combination of various elements, the aspirant is guided to the path of liberation (*mokṣa*) (Bleeker, 1965, p. 80).

Apart from the various forms of initiations that include touch, gaze or yogic postures, one central type of consecration is the *vāg-dīkṣā* also known as initiation by voice, e.g. a word or mantra (Bleeker, 1965, p. 75; McDaniel, 1989, p. 106). The tantric ritual is conducted in the following way:

The guru, having identified the found with the essence by concentration *samādhāya*, pronounces several interconnected mantras which are powerful by the highest principle. [...] By muttering these mantras in the ear of the pupil the guru causes the divine reality and power to penetrate and transform the pupil. (Bleeker, 1965, p. 75)

The change within the *śiṣya* is connected to the recitation of the secret mantra since his constitution is altered by the recitation and its effects thereof. The recitation helps with the focus and purification while spiritual perfection is attained through a rigorous repetition of the sacred utterances (*japa*) (Basu, 1965, p. 85). At the beginning, the *mūlamantra* (root mantra) in

combination with sacred syllables is presented to the initiate which are perceived as powerful means of an inner transfiguration (Bleeker, 1965, p. 75). Also, during the *samayā-dīkṣā*, initiation by ritual acts, a sacred mantra is recited into the disciples ear whereby the *śakti* (power, energy) of the deity permeates the initiate (Bleeker, 1965, pp. 77–78). “One may gauge the validity of the initiation if the mantra given by the guru appears to have consciousness (*mantra-caitanya*). This proves the lineage of the guru and is seen in the mantra’s effects on the initiate” (McDaniel, 1989, p. 107). The transformation of the consciousness thereby plays a pivotal role as it invokes (mental) transformation processes beneficial for the adept (Sk. *sādhaka*).

Thereby, it is important to note that depending on the different *dīkṣās*, the use of the specific mantras for different purposes will also change (Bleeker, 1965, p. 79). With the change of peculiar mantras, the purpose and desired outcome of the ritual can be altered as well (Bleeker, 1965, p. 80). “The *samayādīkṣā* with appropriate mantras may also serve other purposes, as for instance, to obtain wealth, to gain superiority over enemies, and so on” (Bleeker, 1965, p. 80). Thereby the multifaceted utilisations of mantras in the tantric and worldly context are highlighted. In addition, mantras are ascribed human-like qualities and are endowed with a consciousness, in the Tantric tradition (McDaniel, 1989, p. 107).

Because the mantra is believed to be conscious, as a person might be, it is subject to similar personality problems. A mantra may be angry, lazy, apathetic, ashamed, or young, adolescent, or old. It may be intoxicated, without affection, hungry, proud, and cunning. (McDaniel, 1989, p. 107)

The anthropomorphization of sacred sounds underlines the meaning attributed to them, as the attribution of qualities is based on the deepening connection between the practitioner and the mantra. The attribution of human-like qualities towards objects (*here*: sounds) is frequently an expression of the deepening attachment by the possessor of a mantra. At the same time the process can also foster the (growing) attachment towards the element of desire or worship. As a part of this ongoing process, the personal relationship between the reciter and the verbal formulas is considered especially meaningful (Lubin, 1994a, pp. 242, 250). Therefore, mantras are not only recognised and respected as living entities which are endowed with certain character traits, but they are also ascribed a central role in the initiation practice of the Tantric tradition since they are considered “expressions of the divine” (Lubin, 1994, p. 250). Because “Śiva himself is the one who is using the mantras, through the mouth of the guru” (Lubin, 1994, p. 250). Through the channelization of divinity, the modification is invoked within the *sādhaka*.

Compared to the Brahmanical tradition of *upanayana*, the use of mantras within the Tantric tradition slightly differs since they are employed as devices for spiritual transformations (as well as executed by them) (Lubin, 1994, p. 266). While in the *upanayana* the use of the recitation is considered an act of preparation for other responsibilities (see chap. 2.1.3) the

immediate effect of mantra recitation like purification is highlighted at *dīkṣā* (Lubin, 1994, pp. 256, 266). As remarked by Lubin, there is ample evidence that the Brahmanical tradition imbued the tantric practices and ritual patterns while Tantrism also incorporated elements of Yoga (e.g. *yoga-dīkṣā*) and Sāṃkhya, which ensured its merging into broader Hindu religious systems (Lubin, 1994, p. 238). Denton also states that “[a]ll tantric ascetic initiations have elements that mock or invert features of Brahmanical life-transition rites” (Denton, 2004, p. 98). At the same time, the systemic analyses of various consecration ceremonies by McDaniel (1989) and Bleeker (1965) hint at the complex and vibrant landscape of Tantric initiation forms that are mentioned in the *Kulārṇavatantra*. It has been evident that a certain ritual complexity, the recitation of mantras for ritual purposes as well as spiritual empowerment and a wider spectrum of initiation rituals, have been preserved within this Tantric tradition. Despite the influences of orthodox Brahmanism, and the widespread use of (daily) mantras therein, the uttering of mantras has found its way into other practices where different attributes, features and properties of them are emphasised. Particularly noteworthy is the self-efficacy of the mantras within Tantrism, since they initiate and execute the alteration within the reciter. Since these potent formulas are bestowed with powers of creation and destruction they must be dealt with caution. “Mantras thus stand on the very boundary between manifest and unmanifest, human and divine, ordinary and extraordinary” (Lubin, 1994, p. 266). It is precisely due to this borderline of efficacy that initiation as a tool of introduction as well as transformation is needed.

2.2 Women and prescription of mantra initiation

2.2.1 Vedic perspectives on female initiation

According to ancient Vedic textual sources, women could occupy other social positions beyond those defined by the dominant patrilineal system of orthodox Brahmanism. For example, equality between men and women was emphasised in the fifth *Ṛg* Vedic book (*Viṣṇu Purāṇa*), the sixth stanza and the eighth hymn express equitable respect for both genders (Devi & Subrahmanyam, 2014, p. 2; Young, 2002, p. 91). Within the *Ṛg* Vedic period the female subjects benefited from greater freedoms because as it will be argued the “[...] subjugation of women is a late phenomenon” (Bhattacharya, 1992, p. 40). There is textual evidence through indirect references and descriptions that female asceticism was always prevalent within the religious Indian communities (Denton, 2004, p. 23). It is also believed that in former times there were less rigid social obligations to be wedded, while intellectual as well as religious or spiritual endeavours by women could be pursued (Devi & Subrahmanyam, 2014, p. 2). Furthermore, they previously held positions of religious authority and were entitled to conduct Vedic rituals according to certain philosophical schools of thought, whereas a subordinated position was

already attributed to female deities in the *Ṛg Vedic* period (Flood, 2011, p. 179; Patton, 2002b). It is believed, that within that Vedic time-period, approximately 27 female ascetics (Sk. *brahmavādinīs*) participated in the formulation of Vedic hymns (Bishnoi, 2022, p. 225; Devi & Subrahmanyam, 2014, p. 2; Upadhyaya, 1974). They were permitted to study philosophy and theology throughout their lives, hence possessed the *adhikāra* (entitlement) to perform rituals in order to realise the ‘truth’ and to progress towards and realise *parabrahman* (Devi & Subrahmanyam, 2014, p. 2; Patton, 2002a, p. 6). The textual material alludes to the fact that “[w]omen were fully entitled to Upanaya [*sic*] and Brahmacharya, initiation and Vedic studentship equally with men” (Devi & Subrahmanyam, 2014, p. 2). There are textual sources that refer to the receipt of other sacred objects in connection with the initiation. “A very late text says that at the early age women were initiated with the sacred thread. A woman's father, uncle or her brother taught her the Vedas” (Bhattacharya, 1992, p. 42). The textual study of Bhattacharya suggests, additionally to the consistently prescribed sequence of instructions, that women were also provided with a personal mantra so that they could learn the Vedas.

This access for women to the studies of the Vedas and their participatory function within rituals is supported by Young who remarks that “ [...] at least some women once knew some Vedic hymns, including some Vedic mantras, and once performed some Vedic rituals, but the women were gradually marginalized” (Young, 2002, p. 88). She argues that the initiation was executed for different women, the *brahmavādinīs* and the *sadyovadhūs*, as well as the ones who were initiated before marriage and did not fully engage in the study of the texts (Young, 2002, p. 88). The emphasis and dominance of masculinity in the public sphere led to an emphasis on female chastity and turned the *upanayana* into a superficial ceremony for women. Additionally, most influential religio-legal texts were composed by men and convey androcentric views (Denton, 2004, p. 39). This led to a restriction of mobility and access to religious knowledge for women, preventing them from pursuing an ascetic lifestyle (Young, 2002, pp. 88–89)⁴. In the Atharvaveda, *upanayana* is considered feasible for women, but the domesticated position of women is further manifested as well as codified through restrictions, and they are ascribed a subordinate social position (Bhattacharya, 1992, p. 43; Young, 2002, p. 90). According to the *Manusmṛti* (stating the “laws of Manu”), a later text of the Vedic period⁵ and part of the

⁴ However, it is assumed that historically, female involvement within the ascetic community has been integrated into the male sphere and associated with the masculine gender, as there exists no evidence of any explicit female orders within the Brahmanical context (Denton, 2004, p. 2; Khandelwal, 2004, pp. 3, 5; Patton, 2002a, pp. 7–8; Pechilis, 2004, p. 5).

⁵ The more widespread emergence of misogynistic views and emphasis on domesticity (also chastity) for women within the brahmanized tradition are, according to Young and Bhattacharya, traceable to a period (ca. 300 BCE to 300 CE) of unrest, distress and increasing male dominance that equally impacted subsequent doctrines (Bhattacharya, 1992, p. 52; Proferes, 2018; Young, 2002, p. 113).

Dharmaśāstras, “[...] they should not pronounce the vaidika (Vedic) mantra” (Young, 2002, p. 89). It was the period between 100 BCE and 300 CE when females also lost the privilege to receive *upanayana* due to the lawgiver Yājñavalkya (Denton, 2004, p. 27). The transition from education to domesticity was thus a phenomenon that restricted women's religious participation, changed their social role and excluded them from the recitation of mantras.

According to this *Smṛti*, the *upanayana* for women could still be performed, but without the recitation of mantras (Sk. *amantravat*), as the emphasis on domesticity as well as household obligations did not create the need for the study of the Vedas (Denton, 2004, p. 25; Young, 2002, p. 89). Women were hence considered *avaidika* (unfamiliar to the Vedas) (Young, 2002, p. 90). In her field research of female renouncers in Benares, Denton notes the following implications for women after the prohibition on the recitation of mantras:

[...] [T]he fact that women are entitled to neither hear nor speak a mantra has certain far-reaching implications. Orthodox rituals are accompanied and rendered efficacious by the uttering of these sacred verbal formulae, so the fact that a woman is *amantravat* prevents her performing major religious roles. For example, she should not conduct any form of ritual deity worship requiring the use of classical Sanskrit mantras, whether in a public temple or a domestic shrine. [...] The historical process whereby women became—in the eyes of the lawgivers—unfit to hear or recite sacred formulae is not entirely clear, but it is correlated with the exclusion of girls from the first of the four stages of life, Vedic studentship. (Denton, 2004, p. 26)

This also prompted a drastic decline in the ritual agency of women who wanted to engage in spiritual contexts or lead a life of traditional Brahmanical asceticism to free themselves from their *samsāric* existence. The primacy of male priestly control and the denial of recitation, which prevented women from intellectually engaging with the Vedas, hence led to a loss of spiritual understanding and ritual specialisation among women (Young, 2002, pp. 89–90). However, it should be noted that in the late Vedic period, various communities and regional differences contributed to a differentiated understanding of women's initiation and mantra recitation (Young, 2002, p. 91). Young and Denton remark that orthodox communities who held the Laws of Manu in high esteem did exclude women from the recitation of any mantra, while others granted a special form of initiation without the utterance of *om* and more liberal strants allowed all kinds of recitations to women and *śūdras* (Denton, 2004, pp. 25–27; Young, 2002, p. 91). Therefore, the exclusion of women from initiation cannot be categorised as a homogenous tendency since it was based on the valuation of and reference to certain texts and their prescribed regulations for female subjects.

Other subsequent canonical texts and conservative doctrines such as the *Samhitās* of the later composed *Pāñcarātra Āgamas* included stipulations for women. In the 14th century women were formally excluded from receiving mantras necessary for initiation (Young, 2002, pp. 94–95). Within the *Viṣṇu* and *Śrīpraśna Samhitā* the prohibitions are explicitly mentioned: “If a disciple is deemed capable by the guru, all three mantras may be given; women and *śūdras*,

on the other hand, may not be given these mantras” (Young, 2002, p. 95). Women were not allowed or considered qualified (Sk. *adhikāra*) to reach an advanced level in the Brahmin circles of that time, as they did not have the right to receive the proper initiation ceremony (Young, 2002, pp. 96, 99). By placing an importance on the *strīdharmā*⁶ these doctrines included orthodox elements of Brahmanism and started to dismiss the former presence of female ascetics (Lucia, 2014b, p. 15; Young, 2002, p. 96). “To conclude, the Pāñcarātra Āgamas are generally conservative and entail restrictions for *sūdras* and women. At the heart of the restrictions of mantras is their association with Vedic rituals” (Young, 2002, p. 96). The formal prohibition for women to recite mantras served the function of preventing their participation in Vedic rituals and ceremonies. Due to their ineligibility as prescribed by certain authoritative texts and their equation with the status of *sūdras*⁷, “[w]omen have not been able to pursue asceticism in conservative circles” (Young, 2002, p. 111). Despite the implied earlier access to ritual practices for women, the emphasis on written and/or scriptural references encouraged their exclusion.

The proliferation of hegemonic rules for female members of society and their normative anchoring within the textual treatises demonstrates that the ritual participation of women has drastically changed, leading to the removal of female ritual practitioners. Further it can be observed that this development has not occurred in a linear progression but is characterised by various historical upheavals and gaps due to lacking insights. The increasing institutionalization and codification of Brahmanical ideals had far-reaching consequences for the wider Hindu tradition, as the universalisation tendencies also influenced social areas. Even if these textual passages cannot be translated into a socio-cultural reality, they nevertheless indicate a trend that has persisted to date. For the textual regulations are not without effect and authority in the real world, since they serve as the foundation for legitimising the inferior position of females within the ritual context and historical exclusion of women from initiation via the sacred mantra.

2.2.2 Tantric perspectives on female initiation

The Tantric perspective upon female initiation differs from the Vedic one. Within Tantrism, as well as the Vedic, the female is associated with the emergence of the cosmos and female power (*śakti*) is revered (Kinsley, 1998, p. 246). Even within particular ritual contexts women can be

⁶ Elaborated in the *Strīdharmapaddhati* text written by Tryambaka, a man who described the duties of women (Denton, 2004, p. 25). The Smṛti literature refers to the duty (Sk. *dharma*) of women (Sk. *strī*) and their responsibilities towards their husbands as part of the larger *Manusmṛti* (Charpentier, 2010, p. 191). It discusses the wife's duties in the home, in spiritual devotion and in society to maintain the cosmological order and divide the obligations between the sexes based on their social as well as gendered functions.

⁷ This identification with the impure *varṇa* automatically excluded women from the pursuance of Brahmanical asceticism (Denton, 2004, p. 26).

the centre of worship and are perceived as incarnations of the goddesses, sometimes in connection with reversing hierarchical concepts of purity and impurity during rituals (Kinsley, 1998, p. 247). The religious authority of women is equally recognised as “[i]n some tantric traditions, women are said to be the transmitters of doctrine, to play the role of a teacher or guru” (Kinsley, 1998, p. 249). Women thus can occupy the role of intermediaries of tradition and knowledge within the tradition that endows them with spiritual authority.

In a detailed description of early Tantric texts from the medieval period (7th to 9th century BCE), Törzsök analyses the positions and roles of women regarding initiation (Törzsök, 2014, pp. 339–340, 362). While these textual references should not be regarded as evidence of the actual existence of female practitioners (Sk. *sādhakī/ bhaginī*) during that period, they can be examined to reveal perspectives on women as spiritual practitioners who were considered divine (Sk. *yoginī*) (Törzsök, 2014, pp. 339, 343, 353). Her investigation of relevant passages from the Śākta scriptures reveal that within this tradition women were allowed to undergo initiation (Törzsök, 2014, p. 355). According to the *Svacchandatantra* women were eligible to take the *samaya* rite (Törzsök, 2014, pp. 354–355). “For the so-called *samaya* ritual, which is a preliminary to initiation proper (*dīkṣā*), can also be performed for women, which implies that they can observe the rules” (Törzsök, 2014, p. 355). This form of ‘seedless’ initiation liberated the women from the compliance with regulations following the initiation (Törzsök, 2014, p. 354). Thus, this format of spiritual engagement enabled them to attain a special form of deliverance. Moreover, in a commentary of Abhinavagupta of the *Parātrimśikā* it is remarked that both practitioners, regardless of the sex, could be immanently invested by the personal deity without the conduct of a specific rite or ceremony (Törzsök, 2014, p. 357). According to the commentator, it was therefore also possible for women to be regarded as accomplished practitioners by the deity, to be instructed into the rites and impart the canon of Tantrism. The following instances listed by Törzsök point to the egalitarian position of women within the Śākta tradition:

The [textual] examples demonstrate that women had the full right to perform ascetic observances (*vrata*), propitiatory worship to use the power of a deity (*sādhana*), including pantheon worship (*cakrayāga*) combined with visualisation (*dhyāna*), mantra recitation (*japa*) and fire offerings (*homa*). Although it happens that women are seen as less able to perform some rites than men, it also occurs that a rite or mantra (the *yoginīhrdaya*) is said to be more efficient for them. (Törzsök, 2014, p. 363)

From the provided examples it is noteworthy that the efficacy of certain mantras recited by women was perceived as superior to the male execution. The open-mindedness and egalitarianism of the access to religious practices as well as enlightenment, though only theoretically grounded by the relevant passages regarding *siddhis* (accomplishment⁸), can be

⁸ Mostly expressed by powers attained through intensive ascetic practice.

discerned as progressive (Törzsök, 2014, pp. 362–364). To phrase it with the words of McDaniel (2007) who studied the lives and roles of Bengali Tantrikas as well as female tantric *yoginīs* of the *Śākta* tradition: “It is accepted in the tantric texts that women have a special aptitude for both devotion and ritual practice” (McDaniel, 2007, p. 174). Since also other tantric texts, like the *Guptasādhana Tantra* (approx. 1050 CE), specifically refers to the visualization of an ideal tantric female guru, the notion of female spiritual guidance was already prevalent in the Indian medieval period (McDaniel, 2007, p. 164). Another investigation of several medieval female poetess-saints from the *Śaiva* tradition, spanning from the 6th to the 17th century, by Gupta, highlights the inclusiveness and tolerance for spiritual female autonomy within the Tantric tradition (Gupta, 1991, pp. 193–196).

[...] [T]he Śaiva poetess-saints were able to subvert their social roles and so achieve self-determination and spiritual fulfillment because the Śaivas – influenced by the *śakti* theology of the *tantras* – were apt to revere women’s spirituality and to respect the autonomy of women saints. (Gupta, 1991, p. 195)

The theological recognition of female energy (*śakti*) provided women with greater scope to pursue alternative lifestyles and spiritual paths. The central importance that tantric texts and practices place on worship and appreciative behaviour towards femininity also influences the self-perception of women within the community (Gupta, 1991, pp. 206–207). Even within the mythological context of the tradition, the female sovereignty is foregrounded: “Śakti is Śaiva’s creative impulse and thus represents the divine agency (*kartr̥tva*), and as such she is irresistible and enjoys autonomy (*svātantrya*). She carries the authority (*ājñā*) of Śaiva” (Gupta, 1991, pp. 207–208). Due to the mythological anchoring and attribution of goddess attributes with embodied femininity the independence (spiritual and worldly) of women within the tradition is legitimised. This logic can function as an explanation for the sympathetic and tolerant environment for social acceptance of female saints of the *Śākta* tradition⁹ in the medieval period while saints of different traditions, like the one from the Vaiṣṇava, were ineffectual in departing domestic surroundings and pursuing complete detachment (Gupta, 1991, pp. 208–209).

Through the devotion (*bhakti*¹⁰) of the women and their rootedness within the *Śakti* worship the medieval saints received acceptance and their life stories are still being narrated (Gupta, 1991, p. 208). Gupta argues, that in some *Śākta* families (e.g. in northern Bihar) the principal initiation is conducted by females (ideally by female relatives) and thereby the female gurus are preferred over the male imitators (Gupta, 1991, p. 208). The same argument is made by

⁹ The origin lies in the *Purāṇas*, where *Śākta* theology and evolved mythology became more pronounced and the concept of a Mahādevī was introduced, uniting all the various manifestations of female deities (Flood, 2011, p. 180).

¹⁰ The devotional practice, which emerged in South India between the 7th and 9th centuries and gradually spread to the northern parts of India in the 15th century, overturned the restricted access to worship according to the Brahmanical hierarchical system and thus promoted a more egalitarian worship (Pechilis Prentiss, 2000, p. 3).

Woodroffe (2009, pp. 160–161) and Shaw (2022, p. 6) who acknowledge the engagement of women in religious tantric practice. “[...] [W]omen can be gurus and perform rituals of initiation in Tantric traditions, and in some Tantric lineages women are regarded as preferable to men as gurus” (Shaw, 2022, p. 6). The initiation conducted by a woman is even perceived as beneficial if endowed with the proper provision, whereby a suitable (Sk. *anukūla*) mantra for the practitioner (Sk. *sādhikā*) is chosen (Woodroffe, 2009, pp. 493–494). The Tantric model of female initiation offers an alternative to the Vedic one, since it is generally contested that Tantrism allows for a wider spectrum of plurality within the religious practice:

If some forms of bhakti ignore orthodox traditions regarding ritual purity and its concern with gender and caste, Tantrism involves a symmetric inversion of those traditions and, thus, is more extreme in its heterodoxy. In addition to subverting brahmanic ritual prescriptions followed by orthodox renunciators, Tantrism also admits all without concern for caste or gender, on the condition that they have been initiated. (Khandelwal, 2004, p. 147)

Thus, the Tantric model allows for the emergence of female religiosity and renunciation since heterodox elements are a feature of the tradition, thereby fostering inclusion rather than exclusion within ‘alternative’ religious domains. While this form of spiritual pursuit is not necessarily accepted by all renunciators it nonetheless provides a framework for yogic, spiritual and religious practices which also foster the engagement with the feminine divinity. The scriptural and mythological sources suggest that women were valued differently within the tantric communities in contrast to orthodox movements, especially inside the Śākta offshoot.

2.3 Initiation by the Gāyatrī-Mantra

The *gāyatrī-mantra* (GM) is an ancient mantra which is widely used. D. Haas, who wrote his doctoral thesis on the dissemination and personification of the sacred hymn, attributed the first attestation of the mantra to the third volume of the *Ṛg Veda* (RV III 62.10) (Haas, 2022, pp. 43, 134–135). The religious praise is composed in the *gāyatrī* metre, a triple stanza addressed to the sun (Sk. *savitr*), which is worshipped as a Vedic god of procreation in *upaniṣadic* literature (Haas, 2022, pp. 46, 114).

Already towards the end of the Vedic period, however, RV III 62.10 virtually became the most frequently recited and most important of all *sāvitrīs*. As a consequence, it was in most cases no longer necessary to specify the verse, but rather to indicate if any other *sāvitrī* than RV III 62.10 was meant. (Haas, 2022, p. 62)

Therefore, both names *sāvitrī* as well as *gāyatrī*, are used to refer to the prominent mantra. The instruction in the *sāvitrī* verse (Sk. *sāvitrīyupadeśa*) (which is mostly equated with the teaching of the GM) as a part of the *upanayana* is also mentioned in the *Sūtras* (Haas, 2022, p. 112; Larios, 2017, pp. 192, 238). The GM is used in the *upanayana* of a disciple to mark his familiarization with certain religious rites, scriptures and their rendition in Brahmanical circles which is part of the ritual, since the termination of the Vedic-Brahmanical period. This specific

mantra “[...] has always strongly been associated with Brahminical Hindu traditions, and in particular with the Vedic tradition” (Haas, 2022, p. 19). It is therefore particularly employed for specific functions and objectives (Bleeker, 1965, p. 71; Haas, 2022, pp. 19–20, 109; Larios, 2017, pp. 159, 192). At the time of initiation, the disciple recites the GM as a prerequisite, through which the Veda in its entirety is conveyed in an abbreviated form (Haas, 2022, p. 140; Larios, 2017, pp. 159, 192) (see chap. 2.1.2).

It was especially at the end of the Vedic period that the mantra gained its central position within the rite of initiation (Haas, 2022, p. 3). As mentioned by Haas: “As Brahminism evolved, it even came to be seen as the epitome or essence of all the Vedas, and as such became a hallmark of Vedic or Brahminical orthopraxy” (Haas, 2022, p. 3). Also, within the *Manusmṛti*¹¹ it is regarded as the most supreme form of a mantra since its recitation can be especially rewarding: “[...] Manu says that repeating om [*sic*] together with the three exclamations and the *gāyatrī* for three years allows one to “become wind” and reach ultimate liberation” (Young, 2002, p. 89). The mantra as a tool for the attainment of favourable states does not explain its prominent use for *upanayana*. Haas argues that, on the one hand, there were limited options of mantras that were considered suitable for initiation, and on the other, that the Śrauta rituals and the frequent use of *sāvitrīs* contributed to its growing importance (Haas, 2022, p. 136). He suggests a underlying correlation between the mantras high occurrence and its employment for the initiatory ritual (Haas, 2022, p. 136). Thus, it can be concluded from the examined scholarly literature that the prominence of the GM has been procured over time leading to its central position within the various ritual contexts.

The recitation of *gāyatrī* is also prominent within daily rituals, especially *sandhyā* which is conducted at sunrise and sunset (Young, 2002, p. 87). Since this performance of the *sandhyā* ritual is also used for a transitional state (of the day) or ‘juncture’ the general application of the mantra can be associated with progression from one state into another (Haas, 2022, pp. 146–147). The frequent recitation of the mantra for the *sandhyā* ritual is considered a central Hindu ritual (Haas, 2022, p. 146). “The recitation of the *sāvitrī* may have had a similar momentum as the initiation ritual: learning a *sāvitrī* made the young boy a *brahmacārin*, and by repeating the same mantra, this status was restored with each new day” (Haas, 2022, pp. 151–152). This daily use of the mantra and its widespread distribution contributed to its dissemination and transmission within the Hindu sphere, which in turn was also influenced by orthodox Brahmanism (Haas, 2022, p. 231). The GM’s equation with the recitation of the Vedas ensured

¹¹ Also already the older *Āpastamba Dharmasūtra* (approx. 600-300 BCE) is concerned with the mediation of the mantra for specific purposes (Young, 2002, p. 87).

its employment within the ritual context as well as its associations with the Brahmanical society contributed to its cementation and widespread use.

This further could serve as an explanation as to why the mantra did not lose its central significance even with the ongoing evolvement of Hinduism, which was also influenced by processes of “Brahmanisation” and “Sanskritisation” (Thapar, 2001, p. 74). Thapar identifies the influences and power of charismatic personalities who helped shape the new understanding of tradition that promoted a form of “syndicated Hinduism” in which a ‘Hinduisation’ of Vedic rituals is promoted (Thapar, 2001, p. 77). Through these movements, formerly oppressed and excluded members of society gained admission to the recitation of GM, overcoming the historical hegemonic structures of egalitarian access. This aspirational movement towards a more egalitarian mantra practice has in turn ensured that GM’s recitation continues to be used for various transitory religious rituals in modern times regardless of gender or status. Not only internal and external conditions have contributed to a widespread use of the mantra but also reform movements that propagated a different understanding of the Hindu tradition. For example, at the end of the 19th century, svāmī Vivekānanda began to initiate non-*brāhmaṇa* students with the sacred thread and the GM. “[...] following the nineteenth century Hindu reform movement’s plan to extend the chanting of the *gāyatrī-mantra* beyond caste and gender limitations” (Larios, 2017, p. 192). The redefined accessibility of the mantra and its newly ascribed inclusive practice for different castes, classes and genders also popularised its use within the modern age of Hinduism, while at the same time disregarding the traditional prescriptions for its use (Haas, 2022, p. 5).

2.3.1 The GM recitation for women

The newly gained access for women from the 19th century onwards reignited the debate about affiliation and the acquisition of an elevated religious status as well as their participation in Brahmanical rituals. There is a consensus that Brahman-hood cannot be acquired but it must be attained simultaneously with initiation to gain religious and social authority (Narayanan, 2005, p. 23). However, since the sacred thread can also be attained by other *varṇas*, initiation is not directly equated with the Brahmin status, which is why there is room for women to also be taught the tradition. This was promoted also by the reformist movements of the 19th century: “Since the late nineteenth century, however, initially through the work of the Arya Samaj leader Lala Devraj, many groups in Maharashtra, women are trained to function as “priests”” (Narayanan, 2005, p. 2005). Within this community the members recite the Vedas as well as perform Vedic sacrifices (Gaur & Chand, 2021, p. 44; Narayanan, 2005, p. 25). According to Swāmī Dayānanda Saraswatī, the founding father of the Ārya Samāj, who considered education

a prerequisite for the development of the society, a scheme for the education of women was outlined in cooperation with Lala Devraj in the early 20th century (Fischer-Tiné, 2000, pp. 107–108; Gaur & Chand, 2021, pp. 44–48; Hüsken, 2010). Other examples can also be found within the district of Ahmednagar, Maharashtra. There is a community of women priests in an organisation called Shanker Sevā Samiti where women are endowed with the sacred thread since the end of the 1970s (Manjul, 2002; Narayanan, 2005, p. 25). “Now around 10,000 women are qualified priests. Many are even more popular in the community than their male counterparts because of their enthusiasm, concentration and devotion in doing worship” (Manjul, 2002). They rely heavily on the Vedic textual evidence in which the initiation and wearing of the sacred thread by women is mentioned. The reference to historical examples of famous female ascetics serves as a justification for reciting the GM and studying the Vedic scripts:

Other scriptures also mention women wearing the sacred thread. In the Harit Smṛiti it says, “Brahmin women have the right to a sacred thread ceremony, a fire ceremony, the study of Vedas and a right to sacred begging.” The Yama Smṛiti says, “Performing the thread ceremony for young girls, studying Vedas and recitation of Gayatri Mantra was allowed in ancient times. (Manjul, 2002)

Based on the analysis of various Vedic scriptural testimonies, they justify the instruction of female members in the Vedas, the recitation of the GM and their conduction of Vedic rituals. Another group in Pune, the Udyan Mangal Karyalaya, has been animated by the efforts of the Shanker Sevā Samiti and followed suit (Narayanan, 2005, p. 25). In the 1970s, standardisation efforts for the training of ritual officiants and reform efforts for the priesthood in Tamil Nadu were also promoted, but ultimately failed due to resistance by the priests (Hüsken, 2010, p. 299). These examples from the 20th century hint at a larger movement that took place at the beginning of the 21st century where larger religious organisations, e.g. like ISKCON (International Society for Krishna Consciousness), also conducted *upanayana* and gave the sacred thread to ten girls of Brahmin families (Hüsken, 2010, p. 299; Narayanan, 2005, p. 24; Pechilis, 2004, pp. 33–34). Furthermore, in 2006, the Tamil government amended the law to open the profession to all members of the community, which followed a major standardisation of the educational system of training institutions for priests introduced in the 20th century (Hüsken, 2010, pp. 312–314). V. Narayanan in her investigation about female participation in Hindu priesthood argues: “The reform itself is not understood as anything new or innovative; there are ample narratives in the more than three millennia of texts which provide precedents. These stories are retrieved, valorized and used as precedents for current changes”¹² (Narayanan,

¹² Other examples can be found in South India, Tamil Nadu, where a ritual Vaiṣṇava tradition (Pāñcarātra) that relies on a medieval Sanskrit text which originally allowed women to perform the initiation as they were considered equal to other *varṇas* (Hüsken, 2010, pp. 301, 306).

2005, p. 30). These groups and organisations adopt a specific logic that involves a justification process in which the historical or previous models serve as a basis for legitimising the implementation of religious gender-specific changes. This form of logic was also used by the reformer Saraswati¹³, who tried to uphold his commitment to women's education:

He cited examples of great female scholars from ancient India such as Gargi, Maitreyi, Lopamudra and said that like boys, a girl should acquire sound knowledge and culture by the practice of Brahmacharya and then marry boys of their own choice. (Gaur and Chand, 2021, p. 45)

Thus, this form of logic and historical argumentation based on precedence, as it is still used today, was used by various reform movements as well as organisations to justify women's access to education and religious participation.

Apart from the processes of Sanskritisation, which aimed at the unification of various sub-practices and religious currents that aided the universalisation of Brahmanical principles, and Hindu revivalist endeavours, the vernacularisation of certain religious movements also opened up new possibilities and fuelled transformation, especially for women (Narayanan, 2005, p. 31). While these developments increasingly enabled women to participate in religious movements, for instance in leadership functions, some argue that the credible performance relies on ritual internalisation, which still disadvantages female practitioners (Hüsken, 2010, p. 315; Narayanan, 2005, p. 31). Therefore, resistance to these developments can still be identified within the Indian society. Oppositional forces argue that the pollution and impurity caused through menstruation hinders the women to conduct rituals at all times. In addition, physical contact with the opposite sex outside the family and relatives is perceived as socially unacceptable as well as the conduction of rituals for someone else (Hüsken, 2022, p. 195; Narayanan, 2005, pp. 29–30). While innovative approaches have been justified according to the *Dharmaśāstras* and additional other textual Vedic sources the objection towards female initiation and participation in sacred rites is a point of controversy within the society (Hüsken, 2022, p. 196). At the same time, these developments of alternatives provide women with new opportunities for religious and ritual participation. By endowing women with significant leadership roles and allowing them to participate in religious practices, they can participate in the religious community and overcome the ascribed status of impurity. The progressive reformation endeavours based on cultural revivalism enabled women to occupy leadership roles and develop alternative modes of lived religiosity.

¹³ A strategy also used by Hindu nationalists and politicians like PM Narendra Modi to emphasise the contributions of female Vedic sages and link the existence of women's agency to the past (Mehta, 2024, p. 538).

2.3.2 The recitation of the GM in Tantrism

It would be short-sighted to solely focus on the recitation of the GM within Brahmanical traditions. Since the Hindu Tantric ritualism is also influenced by Vedic religious rites and traditions (see chap. 2.1.4), it has incorporated as well as adapted elements of the other scriptural sources, e.g. the *Purāṇas* (Flood, 2011, p. 180; Gupta, 2013, p. 81). The heterodox tradition consists of an infinite assortment of religious rituals of other traditions that also influence the everyday practice of practitioners (Gupta, 2013, pp. 79–82). The incorporation of the GM into Tantrism can be seen as particularly interesting, as practitioners have taken the mantra as a template and filled it with divine elements of their tradition, e.g. by exchanging *savitṛ* with their deities, resulting in a variety of different versions of the GM (Gupta, 2013, p. 82).

This incorporation of external elements results in a pluricentrism of the GM's recitation. Since the *sandhyā* is performed by Hindu tantrists as part of the *sādhana*, the GM is also modified for this particular purpose (see chap. 2.3).

After observing the ordinary worship of *sandhyā*, the Tantric invokes the goddess who resides in the sun and offers her three libations of water while uttering the Vedic *gāyatrī*. Then he repeats the *gāyatrī-mantra* of his *iṣṭa-devatā* (e.g. *Ṣoḍaśī-gāyatrī*) for a number of times. (Gupta, 2013, p. 94)

Through the evocation of a desired deity in combination with the mantra a personalized practice of recitation is created. What further differentiates the Tantric from the Vedic approach, is that the mantra may also be recited by *śūdras* which is contrary to the placed value of the GM within Brahmanical circles (Chattopadhyaya, 1990, p. 73; Kinsley, 1998, p. 247). As other utilisations of Vedic sources and the combination of other Vedic elements, like sacrifices or forms of worship, have influenced Tantrism, it is not surprising that the recitation of the GM has been included. “In tantra the gayatri mantra can be used in several ways to achieve worldly goals, to overcome specific obstacles, or to advance spiritually” (Tigunait, 2004, p. 49). It is considered effective in achieving ritual purity and therefore is counted to the favourable as well as beneficial practices (Tigunait, 2004, p. 49). The *japa* for the GM includes procedures which can vary according to the recitation content.

Eventually it is also possible to replace this offering with a session of meditation including the recitation of the GM and a visualisation (McDaniel, 1989, p. 104; Tigunait, 2004, p. 76). The visualisation and manifestation of a deity, e.g. that of Devī *gāyatrī*, is perceived as an ecstatic event, just as initiation is (McDaniel, 1989, p. 104). One of McDaniel's interviewees, a female guru of the tantric Śākta lineage in Bengal, who was interviewed between the 1980s and 1990s, uses Tantric rituals to synthesise with the female goddess Śakti (McDaniel, 2007, p. 167). In preparation thereof she employs different ritual technologies: “The mantras, hand positions, trances, and rituals were ways of preparing her body for the Shakti's entrance”

(McDaniel, 2007, p. 167). The ritual technologies aided her inner transformation in order “to gain” Shakti (*shakti labh kara*)” (McDaniel, 2007, p. 166). For Tantrikas the mantra recitation is an integral part of the ascetic disciplines. Generally speaking, the modification and transformation of ritual techniques and actions from Vedic practice offer Tantric practitioners a broader and more varied spectrum of the GM’s utilisation that is not subject to such social and religious prescriptions. The adapted mantra recitation is incorporated into the Tantric tradition through modifications, allowing it to be used for other spiritual purposes as well. The tantric use of the GM has shown how permeation enriches the practice, which equally promotes the integration of external elements by facilitating the adaptation process for other new ritual components. This section seeks to emphasise that the recitation of the GM has also been incorporated into other religious ritual practices outside the Brahmanical tradition. This phenomenon has been examined to illustrate the diversity of religious configurations prevalent in Hinduism resulting in a heterodoxy of practices.

3. Female gurus and mantra practitioners

The recitation of Sanskrit mantras connects the ritual practice with larger movements that strive for an egalitarian and inclusive approach to formerly exclusive practices. This section examines the mantra practices of two generations of three distinct public spiritual leaders. The passage seeks to shed light on the different female gurus approaches towards personal as well as gendered access to mantra practices and the propagation thereof. The translation of analogue and digital primary sources helps to understand how the chanting of mantras is linked to the guru's discourses on gender equality and the redistribution of religious resources in a society that exhibits endemic injustice against women. The elaboration of the text excerpts focuses on intergenerational shifts in equal access to recitation within the more traditional Ānandamayī Mā movement. In contrast, two contemporary public gurus are discussed as they negotiate the challenges of influences, aspirations and needs arising from the interplay between a globalised modernity and the traditional Indian sociocultural framework.

3.1 Ānandamayī Mā a revolutionary female guru example of the 20th century

Ānandamayī Mā (1896 - 1982) belongs to the first generation of public female gurus in the 20th century. She was actively involved in the promotion of religious practices and spiritual equality for female practitioners (Aymard, 2014, p. 16; Charpentier, 2010, p. 173; Hallstrom, 1999, pp. 204–208). Ānandamayī Mā, among others, fostered a more inclusive understanding of Hinduism, specifically concerning the participation of women in traditional Brahmanical rituals. As a female spiritual guru, her approach and several distinctive characteristics set her

apart from her male counterparts (Aymard, 2014, p. 16; Charpentier, 2010, pp. 155, 298, 310; Erndl, 2004, p. 247; Hallstrom, 1999, pp. 207–208). The following section will narrate her life story, her nuanced approach to devotional asceticism, which she similarly facilitated for other *sannyāsinīs* (female renunciants) in her *saṃgha* (Sk. community), as well as her understanding of gender and the engendered mantra practices for female disciples. This undertaking seeks to examine how she approached and transformed female religiosity in the 20th century while navigating within the patriarchal sociocultural norms of agency.

By translating primary sources from Hindi as well as drawing a comparison between female spiritual leaders, this effort ventures to reconstruct and elicit discourses about changes in the gendered mantra practice. The primary sources are analysed with caution, as personal narrative styles and devotional tendencies have influenced the compilation of biographical information about the guru. However, it also provides another form of information and knowledge source, as certain devotees were very close to the guru and therefore provide unique insights into the events of Ānandamayī Mā's life.

The Brahmin daughter Nirmalā Sundarī (“one of taintless beauty” or “immaculate beauty”) was born on the 30th of April in 1896¹⁴ in the village of Kheora, Bengal (Aymard, 2014, p. 11; Gurupriyā Devī, 2019, p. 1 Vol. 1; Hallstrom, 1999, pp. 42, 25; Lipski et al., 2007, pp. 6, 8). Her parents were pious Vaiṣṇavas, who both came from Brahmin families, who were spiritually committed and “whose ancestors were Vedic seers (*ṛṣi*)” (Hallstrom, 1999, pp. 23–24; Lipski et al., 2007, p. 7). It is told that she exhibited evidences of her supernatural talent as well as phases of bliss since childhood, e.g. by engaging in *kīrtan* (devotional singing), and therefore showed little interest in her surroundings (Aymard, 2014, p. 11; Hallstrom, 1999, p. 25; Lipski et al., 2007, p. 7). It is narrated that since her childhood she displayed signs of “extraordinariness”, while also exhibiting a great interest in religious practices (Gurupriyā Devī, 2019, p. 3, Vol. 1). This anchoring of an early engagement with spirituality in childhood is often associated with gurus to emphasise their predetermination for the engagement with the divine. From a very early age on she displayed stages of spiritual ecstasy (Sk. *bhāva*), stages of trance (Sk. *samādhi*) and fell into certain spontaneous yogic postures (Sk. *kriyā*) (Gurupriyā Devī, 2019, p. 4, Vol. 1; Hallstrom, 1999, pp. 6, 25, 28). It is commonly acknowledged by her disciples and other authors who wrote about the life of Ānandamayī Mā, that already within her childhood she engaged into ascetic practices, e.g. meditation, but allegedly also started mantra recitation from an early age on. “Once during the Durga Puja celebration at her maternal uncle's

¹⁴ According to the lunar calendar it was in the month of Vaiśākh, on the 19th, of the solar year 1953 (Gurupriyā Devī, 2019, p. 1, Vol. 1).

house, Nirmala fell into a trance and began to recite some mantras” (Hallstrom, 1999, p. 28). While there are repeated references to her mantra recitation in both primary and secondary sources, there is often a lack of information about which specific mantras she recited at what time. Thus, it becomes difficult to assess her level of recitation skills. While some of her relatives recognised that her spiritual states influenced those around her, it was not until her adulthood that her spirituality was officially acknowledged (Lipski et al., 2007, pp. 9–10). Lipski met the female guru, Ānandamayī Mā, personally in 1965. In his biographical narration, which includes translations of her teachings in Bengali, he elaborates on the life of the *avatār-guru*. He also remarks that she learnt the chanting for devotional purposes from her own father (Lipski et al., 2007, p. 10). McDaniel notes that within Tantrism it is not uncommon for women to have religious family members who give them the freedom to exhibit and accept ‘unusual behaviour’ that is ultimately linked to their individualised identity (2007, p. 230) (see chap. 2.3.2). According to the custom of that time, in 1909, when Nirmalā was only twelve years and ten months old, she was married to Ramaṇīmohan Chakravartī, who was later referred to as ‘Bolanāth’ (one of Śivas names) by her disciples and followed the Śākta tradition (Aymard, 2014, p. 11; Gurupriyā Devī, 2019, p. 6, Vol. 1 ; Hallstrom, 1999, pp. 30, 41, 109; Lipski et al., 2007, p. 13). After enactment of the arranged marriage, she remained in her parents’ home for a few years until she was sent to live with her husband's older brother family at the age of fourteen, where she fulfilled her duties as a daughter-in-law (Hallstrom, 1999, pp. 30–31; Lipski et al., 2007, pp. 13–14). As her husband lost his job in the police force, shortly after their marriage, he travelled around East Bengal in search of a new job, which is why she learned about her domestic duties from the wife of her husband's brother, Pramoda Devī (Gurupriyā Devī, 2019, p. 6 Vol. 1; Hallstrom, 1999, pp. 30–31; Lipski et al., 2007, p. 14). There she also began to experience *bhāvas* and went into a trances, which were perceived as accidents (Gurupriyā Devī, 2019, p. 7, Vol. 1). In retrospect her devotees interpreted these scenarios as an indication of her disinterest for a householder’s (Sk. *gr̥hastha*) life, as well as for mundane activities, as she showed increasing inattention to everyday tasks.

Scholarly works, such as Hallstrom's and Aymard's, have also highlighted her personal characteristics associated with the patriarchal-social behaviours of Hindu women who adhere to ideological norms. “Although Mā went through marriage, contrary to other late female gurus like Amma or Gurumayī, and is described as the exemplary housewife, completely devoted to her husband, she actually never consummated her marriage and gave no children to her spouse” (Aymard, 2014, pp. 11–12). Aymard and Lipski emphasise her role as a (house) wife, member of the joint family and guardian of social values, while at the same time emphasising her

renunciation of worldly pleasures, as piety is considered a vital component and characteristic of the spiritual ascetic way of life. However, their non-consecration of marriage also meant a rejection of the matrimonial expectations placed on women, which resulted in the spiritual elevation of the guru and her husband. It was only in 1914, after her husband got a job in Ashtagrama, that Nirmalā joined him there. It was there that she was beginning to be recognised for her spirituality and gained her first unofficial devotee, who referred to her as “Mā”, offered her *praṇām* (a gesture of respect) daily and asked for her *prasād* (offering) (Gurupriyā Devī, 2019, pp. 7–8, Vol. 1). By presenting her with respectful gestures and showing her loyal devotion, she was informally labelled as spiritually elevated. It was also during this period that the devotional chanting (Sk. *kīrtan*) of Ānandamayī Mā began and gradually resulted in a more extensive visibility of her spiritual ecstatic states (Sk. *bhāvavastha*) and uncontrolled states of divine possession (Hallstrom, 1999, p. 34; Lipski et al., 2007, p. 20). After a period of illness and poor health, she followed her husband to Bajitpur, where she began to pursue *sādhana* through mantra repetition. Thus, she took on the role of a *sādhika* and started to engage in *līlā* (divine play) (Gurupriyā Devī, 2019, pp. 10–11, Vol. 1; Hallstrom, 1999, pp. 36, 38; Lipski et al., 2007, p. 21). Due to the growing awareness of Ānandamayī Mā’s condition within the surrounding community and because her husband noticed a change in the frequency of her ecstatic states, as well as the onset of *ajapa*-mantra (involuntary) repetitions, he eventually called an exorcist (*ojhā*) and a doctor (Gurupriyā Devī, 2019, p. 11, Vol. 1). In particular, the expression of condemnation and stigmatisation by the village community indicates the perceived reluctance within society towards her changed or altered behaviour. It was constituted by the figures of (male) authority, e.g. the *ojhā*, that Ānandamayī Mā displays signs of elevated stages of spirituality and was associated with the divine (Gurupriyā Devī, 2019, p. 11, Vol. 1; Hallstrom, 1999, p. 37). Particularly the validation from exterior authoritative personalities highlights the underlying gendered power differentials. According to the hagiographic source written by one of the gurus’ closest initiated disciples Gurupriyā Devī (also known as Dīdī) (1899-1980), it was within this year that she also initiated herself:

In 1922, in the month of Vaiśākḥ¹⁵, within the mothers’ *bhāva* [stage of ecstasy] a special change began to occur. After three months, namely in the month of Sāvan [5th month according to the Hindu calendar, July-August], at midnight of the festival [Jhūlan Pūrṇmāsī: *lit.* swinging full moon] (*salūno*), the initiation (*dīkṣā-kriyā*) of Mā happened automatically.¹⁶ (Gurupriyā Devī, 2019, p. 11, Vol. 1)

Through the spontaneous adoption of yoga postures and the progressive practice of spiritual exercises, she was self-initiated (Sk. *svadīkhitā*). She not only received initiation without a guru,

¹⁵ Throughout the hagiographical source, the dates are defined in terms of the Hindu solar calendar.

¹⁶ सन् १९२२ के वैशाख महीने में माँ के भावों में विशेष परिवर्तन शुरू हो गया। तीन महीने के बाद यानी सावन के महीने में झूलन पूर्णमासी (सलूनो) की आधी रात को माँ की दीक्षा-क्रिया अपने आप हो गई।

but also practiced intense *japa* which is according to the *Dharmaśāstras*, particularly the *Manusmṛti*, for female householders a source of misconduct of the woman's (*strīdharmā*) as well as her wifely duties (*pativratādharmā*) (Charpentier, 2010, pp. 191–192; Lipski et al., 2007, p. 16) (see chap. 2.2.1). Additionally, through this spontaneous succession, she is regarded as a “gurulesse” female guru (due to her self-realisation by the revelation of *jñāna*) who does not belong to any spiritual lineage (*paramparā*), as a result divinity (*iṣṭa*) has been directly disclosed to her (Aymard, 2014, p. 13; Erndl, 2004, p. 247; Lipski et al., 2007, p. 21). Not only did she not follow any *paramparā* of succession, but she was also a guru without an institutionalised or established doctrinal tradition (*sampradāya*) which created the need to define her own theoretical and spiritual direction (Charpentier, 2010, p. 298; Hallstrom, 1999, pp. 135, 151). This autonomous initiation can be seen as a discontinuity between the more traditional ritualized form of initiation, e.g. *upanayana*, and the guru's unconstrained succession. It is further stated that the syllable of *om* revealed itself to her as a *dīkṣā* mantra before she chanted other *stotras* (divine Sanskrit hymns) (Gurupriyā Devī, 2019, p. 11, Vol. 1; Hallstrom, 1999, pp. 38–39). It is further stated that she revealed the mantra to herself by embodying the form of the guru while reciting it in the role of a *śiṣya* (Hallstrom, 1999, p. 39). By transgressing the traditional concept of the *guru-śiṣya sambandha* she bestows authority and legitimisation on herself, while also disregarding the traditional ritual setting, which requires the initiation by a personal guru and the adherence to *brahmacarya* or a period of apprenticeship. The spiritual concept of non-duality (*advaita*), which contests oneness with Brahman, recognises the contribution of every being to the ultimate reality. By internalising the oneness between the self and the highest principle, the neglect of ritual peculiarities as mentioned in the texts is justified. Therefore, this transgression also signifies a departure from the popular understanding of guruhood whereby the interdependent relationship is based on an exchange of knowledge and various forms of social recognition:

[...] in relation to Hindu gurus is that although they are absolutely central (not marginal) to Hindu religious life, their authority *as gurus* is essentially dependent on their personal charisma. In order to be considered gurus, they must have disciples who recognize them as being divine or having extraordinary access to the divine. Without that, it does not matter how high they have risen in a spiritual or monastic institution, they will not be considered gurus. Hindu gurus are a noninstitutional institution. (Erndl, 2004, p. 246)

Ānandamayī Mā thus transcends the traditional framework of guruhood through her own initiative and overcoming the need for an external, socially recognised authority figure by embodying both roles herself and parting with the framework of duality by emphasising universal similitude between herself and the divine. Social recognition of her elevated consciousness did not follow immediately as people started to avoid her proximity (Gurupriyā Devī, 2019, p. 12, Vol. 1). The public reaction appears to be interesting because, despite her

recitation skills, the initiation initially does not seem to have been widely accepted by her surrounding community.

It was only five months after her self-initiation, when she presented the *bīja* mantra¹⁷ orally to Bolanāth, who became her first official disciple, she used the conventional system of *sambandha* to initiate her husband (Gurupriyā Devī, 2019, p. 14, Vol. 1; Hallstrom, 1999, p. 41; Lipski et al., 2007, p. 24). “Touching his arm with her hand she recited very slowly the mantra, [and] from this Bolanāthji heard it”¹⁸ (Gurupriyā Devī, 2019, p. 14, Vol. 1). The *bīja* mantra was transmitted to the disciple through the form of *sparśa-dīkṣā*, where the touch consecrates the mantra initiation.¹⁹ The initiation is similarly perceived as a ritual bonding of the two and a ritual purification of the initiate (Bleeker, 1965, p. 74; McDaniel, 2007, p. 106; Narayanan, 2005, p. 30) (see chap. 2.1.4). While conducting the initiation, Lipski indicates that the female guru adhered to the *śāstric* prescriptions without being formally acquainted with them (Lipski et al., 2007, p. 25). At the same time, the reversal of gender-specific relationship roles is particularly visible here, because according to *strīdharmā*, the husbands’ utterance is to be linked with the command of the spiritual master (*guruvacana*) (Denton, 2004, p. 28; Hallstrom, 1999, p. 57). However, in this case the command is given by the female who embodies the guru for her husband, thus the man takes the subordinate position in this regard. Considering the background of Bolanāth as a Śākta believer, there is a tantric paradigm which allows the husband to evolve into the disciple of the wife (Hallstrom, 1999, p. 82; Lipski et al., 2007, p. 23). This paradigm found within the Bengali culture allows for women to be recognised as religious figures of authority through the embodiment of divinity and displaying elevated stages of *śakti* (McDaniel, 2007, p. 230). Drawing on the tantric model allows Ānandamayī Mā to transmit the teaching and endows her with the spiritual authority to ordain a male disciple (see chap. 2.2.2).

It was in Dhaka in 1924 that people came to the guru for the first time to receive *darśan* (sight) from her (Gurupriyā Devī, 2019, pp. 17–18, Vol. 1). More and more devotees came to Mā consisting mainly of *bhadraloks* (people of aristocracy and high status within the Bengali community) considering her as an incarnation of the goddess Kālī (Gurupriyā Devī, 2019, p. 18, Vol. 1; Hallstrom, 1999, p. 43; Lipski et al., 2007, p. 27). In 1925 Gurupriyā Devī, who

¹⁷ The source does not specify the kind of *bīja* mantra, but it is assumed that the syllable of *om* was recited due to its use during the guru’s initiation.

¹⁸ अपने हाथ से उनकी बाँह को स्पर्श करते हुए बहुत धीरे मन्त्र कहा था, बोलानाथजी ने उसे सुन लिया।

¹⁹ Through the *sparśa-dīkṣā* the initiate is consecrated by the means of touch while reciting a specific mantra without the deployment of a ritual (Bleeker, 1965, p. 74; McDaniel, 1989, p. 106). By the touch of the guru’s arm, who is embodying Śiva, the *śiṣya* is nurtured and affected while the guru imparts the blessing (Bleeker, 1965, pp. 74–75; Lubin, 1994a, p. 242; McDaniel, 1989, p. 106).

composed the hagiographic sources originally in Bengali, met Ānandamayī Mā for the first time (Gurupriyā Devī, 2019, p. 19, Vol. 1; Hallstrom, 1999, p. 43). For Ānandamayī Mā, these years marked the emergence of her guru persona in the public sphere and her entry into the public domain of guruhood²⁰, which was closely linked to the display of her mantra recitation skills, as she sought to convey authenticity by using the mantras in the public *satsaṅgs*, *bhāva* sessions as well as in personal relationships with her disciples or outsiders.

It was also during that period that she received her respectful title Ānandamayī Mā (“bliss filled mother/ mother of bliss”) (Aymard, 2014, p. 14; Hallstrom, 1999, pp. 23, 41). “Others envisaged Mā as a being that had attained the state of perfect realisation (Sk. *jīvanmukta*) and possessed extraordinary spiritual powers” (Aymard, 2014, p. 14). In the beginning mostly women approached the female guru, who still constitute a larger part in the postmortem cult around the female guru (Aymard, 2014, p. 44). Over the time their physical contact and proximity with the *sant*’s body increased, as the female disciples were able to spend time with the guru in her domestic spaces (Gurupriyā Devī, 2019, p. 27, Vol. 1). Gradually the guru also invited male disciples to her gatherings (Sk. *satsaṅg*) for *darśan* on the initiative of her husband to disregard social conventions which emphasise the segregation of the opposite sexes (Gurupriyā Devī, 2019, p. 31, Vol. 1; Hallstrom, 1999, p. 43). The separation however is enforced nowadays at her *samādhi* (tomb and place of devotion) and can also be observed within her disciple community (Aymard, 2014, pp. 36, 45). Gurupriyā Devī narrated that she disregarded the separation between male and female disciples, but still adhered to the custom of veiling (*ghūṅghaṭ*) to protect herself from the male gaze in public (Gurupriyā Devī, 2019, p. 23, Vol. 1). The close female disciple notes that she rarely saw the *sant* not fully covered, but on occasions such as a *kīrtan* (devotional singing) session in 1926, when she first exposed her *bhāva* in public, she lost her covering during states of possession as a result of surrendering her conscious body control (Gurupriyā Devī, 2019, p. 27, Vol. 1). Two aspects seem very intriguing considering the previous statement. First, the increase in conservative elements and practices after the death of the guru, to maintain and reaffirm her spiritual presence even after her passing. Secondly, her constant shielding from the gaze of the opposite sex thereby following cultural practices that emphasise gender-segregated behaviour. The incidence during the ecstatic state of the *sant* is described by the female disciple as follows:

When the *kīrtan* took place, it was almost noon, we people were also sitting near Mā. Suddenly Mā’s whole body started shaking, the cloth on her head fell down. [...] But it seemed that she had left the body, with the help of some invisible power, various *kriyās* [ritual action] started happening in the body. Seeing

²⁰ Ānandamayī Mā attracted many followers as a public guru figure; among them were Indira Gandhi and her mother, Kamala (Suthren Hirst, 2016, p. 163).

her condition, it was clearly visible that she had no will power left of her own.²¹ (Gurupriyā Devī, 2019, p. 27, Vol. 1)

Her deviation from social norms and prevailing gender-specific codes of behaviour was accepted due to her embodiment of divinity and spirituality, which she increasingly displayed publicly. Gradually, she also distanced herself more from her physical body, as well as her physical needs. As her detachment (Sk. *vairāgya*) grew she relied on others like Dīdī to nourish her and take care of her physical appearance (Gurupriyā Devī, 2019, p. 26, Vol. 1). However, this represents a paradox, since on the one hand the renunciation of worldly obligations can be found in the guru's actions, while in the other social customs, e.g. *ghūṅghat*, were adhered to. Her strict adhesion to cultural traditions rooted in the 19th century is also noted by Surenth Hirst (2016, p. 185). It is argued that her reliance on traditional cultural Hindu customs allowed her to develop her own practice of female asceticism without compromising on social acceptance. DeNapoli observes detachment as a form of renunciation which is prevalent among ascetics:

The construct of the ideal or real sadhu, then, constitutes a function of one's detachment from the world, an attitude from which the other corollary virtues are thought to stem. To that extent, *sannyās* images an extreme alternative to the cultural norms of householding, marriage, and family. In these texts, "giving up" everything implies renouncing not only things, places, and people, but also ideas, with respect to the normative sociocultural constructions that entrap people in what is understood to be an illusory and impermanent world. (DeNapoli, 2014, p. 9)

Vairāgya marks a transition from one life stage, which is characterised by attachment (e.g. *gr̥hastha*), to another (e.g. *sannyāsa*) according to the *varṇāśramadharma*. The Vedic system of *varṇāśramadharma* (fourfold life stages) essentially characterises the different life periods according to the degree of attachment (Sk. *upādāna*) to different members of the society. By detaching from previous relationships and personal affiliations one can progress spiritually. If there *upādāna* in some sort or form prevails, then *mokṣa* cannot be obtained. Therefore, the display of *vairāgya* marks a necessary step in the life of a guru to be perceived as a renounced leader, as well as to receive legitimate authority from disciples. *Vairāgya*, a psychological state of detachment, therefore is perceived as a prerequisite for ascetic endeavours while it also is presented as the ultimate goal of renunciation (Denton, 2004, p. 70). As above mentioned, according to the *Dharmaśāstras* the marriage (Hi. *vivāh*) of a women is equated with *sādhana*, therefore the renunciation is not perceived as necessary linking the spiritual development to domesticity (Charpentier, 2010, p. 299). Similarly, within the *bhakti* movement, attaining liberation at the stage of *gr̥hasthya* (domesticity) is considered a possibility, as spiritual practices can be performed in the household domain by the *gr̥hiṇī* (female householder) (Charpentier, 2010, pp. 216–217; Denton, 2004, p. 61; Patton, 2002a, p. 7). According to the

²¹ कीर्तन हो रहा था, लगभग दोपहर का समय था, हम लोग भी सब माँ के समीप बैठी थी। सहसा माँ का सारा शरीर हिलने लगा, सिर का वस्त्र गिर गया। किन्तु मालूम पड़ता था कि शरीर छोड़ दिया है, किसी अदृश्य-शक्ति की सहायता से शरीर में भाँति - भाँति की क्रियायें होने लगी। अवस्था देखकर स्पष्टतः प्रतीत होता था की इसमें अपनी कोई इच्छा-शक्ति नहीं है।

orthodox Hindu traditions, thus, the necessity for women to follow the conventional *varṇāśramadharma* is not given, since this path is considered only valid for male members of the society (DeNapoli, 2014, p. 11). Therefore, the female spiritual leadership is based on different principles than the male, as the female gurus strive for legitimisation through personal accomplishments located outside of the more established or older lineages. As a result they operate outside of the institutionalised contexts and structures, while they rely on different modes of authority which are characterised by personal achievements and marked by an “individual lived tradition” (DeNapoli, 2014, p. 20). These individualised styles result in a larger heterodoxy of religious practices. Also, a complete *vairāgya* from society is therefore not possible, since they rely on the social system to obtain support as spiritual leaders. By positioning themselves outside of the institutionalised mainstream, the “female spiritual masters challenge traditional notions of female selflessness” (Charpentier, 2010, p. 263). The detachment from social constructs that lead to an insubordination against the socially constructed female self-image is carefully managed, as the female guru is equally dependent on ties to society to assert her spiritual authority within society and gain public support for her endeavours. Khandelwal also observed the oppositional aspirations in her field study on female renunciants (Sk. *sannyāsinīs*) in Haridwar. She concluded that the *vairāgya* becomes difficult for the guru’s spiritual path, since *sevā*²² (Hi. service) to the community demands a form of attachment and thus can pose as an obstacle to spiritual advancement (Khandelwal, 2004, p. 116). Constantly balancing the degree of attachment and detachment from worldly matters while destroying the illusion of the ego (Sk. *ahamkāra*) can equally be seen as a sign of the guru’s saintliness and spiritual power (Khandelwal, 2004, p. 116).

In the hagiographic sources written by her devotees, her quality of chastity is emphasised, indicating her role as a woman who adheres to Hindu *dharma*, as the *pardā* (Hi. curtain) symbolises behaviour that ensures modesty and the upholding of family honour (*izzat*). This constant negation of traditional structures in combination with individual endeavour is particularly emphasised in the life of Ānandamayī Mā. For example, in 1927 she was travelling to the Kumbha Melā which took place in Haridwar:

Traditionally, the Kumbha Melā would certainly not be an appropriate destination for a thirty-year-old wife in purdah. *Dharmashāstra* texts prohibit women from attending festivals of any kind but would be particularly concerned about this one, as they warn of the dangers of keeping the company of renunciants. That Bholanāth allowed his wife to travel to the Kumbha Mela is another sign of his surrender to her. It also foreshadows her later attendance there as an honored spiritual leader. (Hallstrom, 1999, p. 74)

²² The concept of service has assumed special significance since the colonial period in India, when missionaries and social reformers began to emphasise the importance of service to the nation. This concept has also become an important term in Hindu nationalism as *sevā* contributes to the nationalist agenda and the development of national self-image.

It is particularly noteworthy that after her first public appearance at the Melā (festival of the ‘water pot’), a popular meeting place for members of the ascetic and spiritual society, which is characterised by religious patriarchy, even more devotees came to her for *darśan* (DeNapoli, 2023a, pp. 2, 16; Hallstrom, 1999, p. 47). Thus this participation in a “male-dominated public sphere” (DeNapoli, 2023a, p. 16) facilitated her growth of the community of devotees. It is evident that while she was operating within the traditional framework of patriarchy, she managed to utilise the system for her public recognition. It was also during this period that she began to travel extensively, therefore formally leaving behind her stage of *gr̥hasthya* and entering the stage of a *sannyāsa* (Hallstrom, 1999, p. 74). Whether it was her growing recognition as a public female spiritual leader or the advanced state of *sāadhanā* that prompted her transition from one life stage into the other remains open. At the guru’s later participations at the Kumbhmelā she also received companionship from one of the major Akhārās, the Mahānirvāṇī Akhārā (Suthren Hirst, 2016, p. 169). This indicates that the guru has been recognised for her spirituality by male communities and well-established organisations of ascetic practitioners. Her adherence to socio-cultural historical practices for women was thus accompanied by a recognition of her own asceticism in a larger setting. In doing so, she adapts to the system of *varṇāśramadharma* without completely detaching herself from or breaking with patriarchal socio-cultural norms, ideas and conventions, while at the same time transforming her understanding of female selflessness to publicly pursue an ascetic lifestyle.

3.1.1 Ānandamayī Mā and her female disciples

Among the followers of Ānandamayī Mā three female disciples were particularly close to her. One of them was a devotee from Austria, Ātmānanda (1904-1985) born with the name Blanca Schlamm, who was a disciple of the guru for four decades and translated, after having learned Hindi and Bengali for this purpose, a series of volumes of Bengali letters on the teachings of the *sant* titled *Mātrivāṇi* (Voice of the mother) (SriRam108, 2018, 13:10-14:40²³). The disciple only met her guru in 1943 in India after having taught in a school in Benares (SriRam108, 2018, 01:20-01:34). Since the guru did not leave South Asia, she only interacted with the ones who approached her:

Although she never went outside India and Bangladesh, she became well-known both in Western countries and in India for her deep ecstatic states and her charisma. During her lifetime, she had a large number of Western followers, even if these remained a minority, among others the famous French writer Arnaud Desjardin. (Charpentier, 2010, p. 69)

²³ This is an interview conducted probably in the Bhimpura Ashram in 1981 and uploaded on the Śrī śrī Ānandamayī saṁgha’s website [Retrieved February 06, 2025, from <https://www.anandamayi.org/>].

The Austrian disciple, a self-proclaimed critic of spiritual hypocrites and pseudo guru movements, met Mā during a *kīrtan* session in Almora in 1943 before the various *āśrams* of the guru were established, where she first experienced the extraordinary qualities of the female *sant* at a public gathering (SriRam108, 2018, 01:20-01:55). When the *āśram* was being built in Benares beginning from 1949 she initially would start visiting the guru regularly for small conversations and guidance on personal matters, while still teaching in the Kṛṣṇamūrti school of Benares (SriRam108, 2018, 07:12-09:56). It was only in 1954 that she left her teaching responsibilities and went on to live with her guru (SriRam108, 2018, 12:30-12:45). Although different reports are available about the practice of caste restrictions in the *āśram*, as well as the access of foreigners to the guru (Aymard, 2014, p. 37; Gurupriyā Devī, 2019, Vol. 1; Lipski et al., 2007), Ātmānanda states that she lived on the *āśram* premises and had access to the guru. The discussion about the purity of outsiders, particularly foreigners, and their access to the movement's premises is a reoccurring theme within the hagiographic as well as ethnographic sources. However, it is noted that orthodox purity rules relating to caste and ritual, emphasised by Brahmanical orthopraxy and less adhered to by Tantric Hindu practitioners, were observed by the guru after she was urged to comply by a pandit (Aymard, 2014, pp. 2223, 296; Suthren Hirst, 2016, p. 163). As foreigners are not born into the caste system, they are considered ritually polluting, which can hinder the spiritual advancement of orthodox Hindus. The concept is also applied to secular contact spaces, where exchanges between objects, people and food take place, which can lead to temporary or permanent pollution of Hindus if they come into contact with outsiders, and which also reinforces a hierarchical understanding of the social stratum (Larios, 2017, pp. 145–146)²⁴. Since the guru's followers were predominantly Brahmin women but not exclusively, caste-based restrictions regarding access to the guru were discussed (Gurupriyā Devī, 2019, p. 22, Vol. 1; Hallstrom, 1999, p. 103). Hallstrom who visited the *āśram* of the guru also recounts that the possibility of staying within the *āśram* compound was denied to her and that the untouchability of Westerners as means of restricting access was reinforced by the gurus devotees and high-caste followers rather than the *sant* herself, which in turn limited the proximity towards the guru (1999, p. 103). While foreign long-term devotees, such as Ātmānanda were granted closer access to the guru, devotees who joined the movement in later years, after the guru worship gained a more institutional character, report different experiences (Aymard, 2014, pp. 43–44). This ambivalent tendency regarding access to religious devotion and *sannyās* based on caste hierarchy is also found in other ascetic movements that combine

²⁴ The observance of these rules is in itself not only highly complex but also subject to regional, temporal and contextual changes resulting in a heterodoxy of purity regulations adhered to differently in various Hindu communities (Larios, 2017, p. 40).

caste and gender issues as a means of restricting approach to the divine (DeNapoli, 2023a, pp. 124–131). However, the possibility of the transgression of caste norms, which are part of an orthodox Brahmanical ideology, was already exemplified by medieval female *bhakta* poets like Mīrā Bāī from the 15th century, who legitimised female religiosity through her devotional chanting (Sk. *bhajan*) to god, Kṛṣṇa and flouted both caste and patriarchal rules in her performances, in public male-dominated and mixed caste spaces (DeNapoli, 2014, pp. 91–93; Gupta, 1991, pp. 202–203). While orthodox cultural influences can also be identified in the guru worship of Ānandamayī Mā, part of the ‘ideal renunciate’ is to transcend social categories, such as concepts of caste, purity and pollution. The guru’s partial adherence to purity regulations, whether instituted from outside or not, did aid her public image as a legitimate female renouncer resulting in support from members of the orthodox community.

In this debate, it is said that the female guru sometimes also disregarded the purity regulations, which creates a progressive impression of the guru. The adherence to notions of purity is additionally attributed to the institutional *āśram*, which enforces forms of gendered labour segregation and mandates adherence to ritual purity (Hallstrom, 1999, p. 219; Suthren Hirst, 2016, p. 177). In 1962 the disciple, Ātmānanda, took *sannyās* at another Kumbha Melā in Haridwar where she received her ochre robe (*kāṣāya/alkhāya*) from Mā (SriRam108, 2018, 20:20-21:00). In the interview from 1981, however, Ātmānanda relates that Ānandamayī Mā differentiated between European and Indian devotees in terms of style of dress. Sitting in a colour-faded robe on the floor with short white hair, she explains that the female guru gave the European disciples who took *sannyās* the *yogyakāṣāya* robe, which is considered a less formal type of robe than the *gerua*²⁵ robe given to native *sannyāsinīs* (Denton, 2004, pp. 72, 177; SriRam108, 2018, 21:00-21:25). This hints at a distinction made personally by the female guru based on the orthodox Brahmanical social norms. Ātmānanda emphasises that the female *sant* obeyed the oral rules of the *śāstra* which contain no reference regarding the initiation of foreigners outside of the *varṇa* hierarchy (SriRam108, 2018, 22:00-22:30). The European disciple took her vow of renunciation on 13th April, the day called Vaisākhī according to the Vikram Samvat Hindu solar calendar, the same date on which Gurupriyā Devī was initiated into *sannyās* in 1939 (Hallstrom, 1999, p. 207; SriRam108, 2018). However, as the *śāstras* do not mention or refer to the rules of *sannyās* for foreigners she was not perceived as a ‘proper *sannyāsinī*’ by the female guru, rather her mental state of *sannyās* was emphasised and publicly displayed by her wearing the *yogalkhāya* (SriRam108, 2018, 22:05-22:30). Thus, from the

²⁵ An auspicious garment that is traditionally dyed with clay as a colour and takes on an ochre shade (Denton, 2004, p. 177).

detailed narration of the European disciple, it appears that Ānandamayī Mā was not necessarily concerned with the caste structures as per the *varṇāśrama*. Nonetheless, she still adhered to the precepts of the Vedic scriptures and *śāstric* injunctions based on which the distinction between the initiation of different disciples was grounded, as well as the observance of the *āśramas* that she underwent during her lifetime. The guru said: “There is not one [right] path for everyone. Some people need to follow the path of renunciation and some need to follow the path of enjoyment”²⁶ (Gurupriyā Devī, 2019, p. 559, Vol. 2). The renunciant thus emphasises the options of self-sacrifice and the inconveniences of a transcendent ascetic lifestyle as opposed to an immanent path that maintains the worldly as well as sensual pleasures (Sk. *bhoga*).

While the female guru adhered to certain orthodox principles thereby upholding *dharmic* and *śāstric* values, a notion that was equally reinforced during the colonial period²⁷ (Charpentier, 2010, p. 114; Fischer-Tiné, 2000, pp. 168–169), she was simultaneously committed to the spiritual equality and progress of her female followers. In the twenty-volume hagiographic sources of Gurupriyā Devī also provides detailed records of the guru's statements regarding the sacred thread (*yajñopavīta*) at the *upanayana* ceremony. Thereby she notes how Ānandamayī Mā was actively involved in the promotion of spiritual equality for her female practitioners. The devotee also emphasised the historical occasion and the unique significance of initiation for women which was provided by the guru after a long period of consideration: “Upanayana of girls is not seen very commonly today. Mother had been thinking about this for many years”²⁸ (Gurupriyā Devī, 2019, p. 353, Vol. 1). Maronī and Dīdī were endowed with the sacred thread after the initiation of another devotee's son (Gurupriyā Devī, 2019, p. 353, Vol. 1). The devotees (Sk. *bhaktas*) of Ānandamayī Mā therefore recited the *gāyatrī-mantra* and were endowed with the sacred thread which marked the females as *dvija*. This initiation process was officially reserved for high-ranking male members of Brahmanical society before it was utilised for female initiation as well, organised by members of the Hindu reform movement of the 19th century. This aspiration also coincides with a transnational promotion of Indian

²⁶ सभी के लिए एक मार्ग नहीं होता। किसी-किसी को त्याग का मार्ग अपनाना ज़रूरी होता है और किसी को भोग का मार्ग अपनाना पड़ता है।

²⁷ Under British rule, the significance of and reliance on Indian scripts changed. The colonial government depended on the written evidence as projects of centralization, codification, bureaucracy and control became increasingly important for colonial rule to gain dominance over native subjects and to acquire more information about cultural practices. Due to the impetus of the colonial power to understand the Hindu tradition, Indian society and indigenous legislation, the writings and manuscripts were examined by Indian Brahmin *paṇḍits* on behalf of the East India Company. This also changed the discourse on the practice because the indigenous elites were consolidated for the understanding of Indian technologies and the imperialists relied on their elitist as well as selective interpretation of the scriptures. As a result, the lived practice (and heterogeneity) lost importance and the written testimonies gained authority, which led to a modification, systematisation and standardisation of the previously regional, situational, more flexible and varying interpretations of Indian practices (see Jain, 2016; Mani, 1998).

²⁸ लड़कियों का उपनयन विशेषतः देखने में नहीं आता। आज अनेक वर्षों से ही माँ का यह खयाल चल रहा था।

spirituality, which in turn required the adaptation and alteration of traditional rituals to foster inclusivity as well as universal dissemination (see chap. 2.1.1 and 2.2.1).

Since the female guru Ānandamayī believed that salvation can be obtained by reciting the GM itself she encouraged its recitation for all her disciples: “Some people have been able to attain the benefit of salvation by merely chanting the *gāyatrī-mantra*”²⁹ (Svāmī Kedārñāth, 2015, p. 85). A compilation of Ānandamayī Mā’s discourses dominantly consisting of questions and answers from her lifetime, published in Hindi in 2015 by svāmī Kedarnath (compiled from various available hagiographic sources and lifetime records), serves to explore the spiritual leader’s perspective on the (en-)gendered mantra practice. According to Kedārñāth³⁰ during a *satsaṅg* in 1962, the guru was asked an important question about the right to recite the GM by women: “Q.- Do girls and women have the right to recite *gāyatrī-mantra*? Mother- If your guru tells you to, you should even recite the Vedas and also repeat the *gāyatrī-mantra*”³¹ (Svāmī Kedārñāth, 2015, p. 373). By emphasising the authority of a guru, Ānandamayī Mā does not directly address the aspect of gender but focuses on the aspect of imparting knowledge for the benefit of the disciple. The absence of discussion of access restrictions based on gender differences can be explained by the fact that, as a *satguru*, she has overcome the categorisations, such as gender, and emphasises the equality of beings. Hence, attachments towards social constructs and dichotomous classifications are abnegated. Furthermore, the *ātma* is considered genderless but resides in all bodies, which promotes awareness of the Absolute, without gender characteristics (Hallstrom, 1999, p. 216). This inclination also fosters the transgression of appearance-based juxtapositions. Additionally, her authority is accepted as well as uncontested by her devotees, who not only display obedience but also accept the female guru’s outlook on the equal access to mantra recitation. This unquestioning following is characterised by the aspect that the disciples surrender to the guru, as well as the ascetic’s perspectives. In 1939 Ānandamayī Mā explained the relationship in the following way: “You are not a student; you merely attempt to become a student. In all ways by complete self-surrender to the guru, the particularity of studentship is to obey the guru-instruction without judgment”³² (Svāmī Kedārñāth, 2015, p. 11). While the guru surrenders to the divinity through devotion or extensive worship, the disciples are required to express surrender through reverence for the guru (see

²⁹ कोई-कोई केवल गायत्री मंत्र का जाप करके मुक्तिलाभ कर सके हैं।

³⁰ He is also responsible for the *āśrams* since the guru’s passing and has continued to inaugurate new premises in the name of Ānandamayī Mā, while being closely involved in the management of the trust (Aymard, 2014, p. 212).

³¹ प्र.- क्या गायत्रीमंत्र पढ़ने का अधिकार लड़कियों और नारियों को है?

माँ- यदि अपना गुरु कहे तो वेद भी पढ़े, गायत्री मंत्र का जप भी करे।

³² तुम शिष्य नहीं हो, शिष्य बनने की चेष्टा मात्र कर रहे हो। सर्वतोभाव से गुरु के निकट आत्म-समर्पण करना, बिना विचारे गुरु-आदेश पालन करना ही शिष्यत्व के लक्षण हैं।

chap. 2.1.2). Any remark or formulation of an independent opinion or judgement (Hi. *vicār*) is denied. Questioning the authority of the guru is therefore equated with a loss of belief, as complete submission is the first step in the relationship between guru and *śiṣya*. Additionally, Ānandamayī Mā was an authority figure for her disciples, who was perceived by them as a *satguru* (true guru) as well as a *siddha* (perfected being) and thus possessed the quality of leading them to the highest consciousness. This is an important aspect considering the continuation of the guru's movement. Particularly noteworthy in the case study of Ānandamayī Mā is that she failed to name a successor (Sk. *natparamparā*) within her lifetime, therefore leaving the *saṃgha* without a formal figure of authority (Aymard, 2014, p. 203). Considering that Dīdī had received *upanayana* and was therefore entitled to continue the lineage after the guru's death, the lack of succession seems at odds with the efforts she undertook during her lifetime, considering her investments in her students. However, it can be explained by the fact that the guru showed no interest in institutional matters, as she had already distanced herself from mundane values and saw her personal master in God, who in her opinion could not be replaced by any human being (Aymard, 2014, p. 14). Since she failed to name a direct descendent before her death other male *svāmīs* from the Śrī śrī Ānandamayī *saṃgha* took over the initiatory roles (Aymard, 2014, p. 243). The female leadership of the religious movement therefore not only began with the guru but also ended after *mahāsamādhi* [passing from the physical world] of the guru in 1982 (Aymard, 2014, p. 239). Despite her efforts to integrate women into the religious Hindu community, the permanence of her measures was not successful.

Gurupriyā Devī's emphasis on the rarity of the event indicates that, even in the 20th century, women's initiation was not considered a widespread phenomenon, despite previous efforts of male reformers (see chap. 2.2.1). Hallstrom's records of the guru's satsaṅg sessions (a gathering for spiritual indoctrination) contain a reference to a conversation between the guru and a *svāmī* of the Daśnāmi order, in which she inquires information about the initiation of women and then concludes that equal conduct applies to both sexes (Hallstrom, 1999, p. 208). The *sant* justifies the use of the transformation ritual for female disciples through the conception according to Hinduism's cosmological understanding of time. The *yugas* represent different social and moral states, but the guru states that spiritual practice can be carried out in both ages regardless of gender, as the true principles of divinity must be upheld (Svāmī Kedārnāth, 2015, p. 93). The renouncer bases this view on her own spontaneous recitation of the GM and her self-bestowal with the sacred thread, while in her experience these performances were perceived as automatic and directly from the divine. Her authority, thus, relies on the ability to recite the GM and carry

the *yajñopavīta* without the need for another spiritual master or initiator. It is therefore noteworthy that in 1980, during a conversation between the *svāmī* and the female guru, who inquired about her wearing the sacred thread as a female renunciate, the male authority figure was nevertheless consulted to confirm her views and actions, despite the fact that her initiation, as well as the female disciple's, had taken place several decades earlier (Hallstrom, 1999, p. 208). In the Hindi source, the disciple also provides an insight of how seriously the female guru took her initiation and what instructions she received from her: "This *yajñopavīta* (sacred thread) that you have been given is not a joke, you should be an ideal *brahmacārīṇī*. Marnī is already married. You should always eat and drink everything the way you did at the time of *upanayana*"³³ (Gurupriyā Devī, 2019, p. 354, Vol. 1). The personal guru instructs the new initiate in the rules of behavioural conduct (*ācāra*), ensuring that she adheres to her new lifestyle and offering the disciple spiritual guidance based on her own experiences. The *brahmacārīṇīs* of the guru were expected to engage in *sāadhanā*, which includes the recitation of the sacred mantras (*japa*). Examination of the hagiographic material also shows that the guru placed great emphasis on rules, a concept also identified by Hirst (2016), leading to an incorporation of orthodox elements and compliance with male authority in the movement.

This notion of orthodoxy however did not hinder the guru's advocacy for female religiosity. Eventually the gender-based social restrictions in society prevented women from participating in public gatherings. Ānandamayī Mā, thus, enabled other women and female devotees to participate in various *kīrtan* sessions, where the guru's display of divine qualities became evident (Gurupriyā Devī, 2019, p. 27, Vol. 1). In Hallstrom's interviews with female disciples, they talk about the situation in India in the 1890s:

Several women emphasized, in particular, that the cultural context into which Mā came was one in which women were extremely cloistered, to the extent that they were unable to participate fully in spiritual life. Because Ma took a female form, she offered protection to women wanting to pursue *sādhana*. (Hallstrom, 1999, p. 201)

Providing women access to spiritual practices such as *sāadhanā* was very meaningful for her female followers. She transgressed the social gender expectations by displaying a differentiated gendered ascetical behaviour, e.g. by wearing a *dhotī*³⁴, displaying states of ecstasy (*bhāvas*) publicly regardless of the circumstances or wandering alone outside in the night, that challenged normative defined concepts of femininity (Hallstrom, 1999, p. 202). The religious community

³³ यह यज्ञोपवीत जो दिया गया है यह खेल की बात नहीं है , तुम्हें आदर्श ब्रह्मचारिणी होना चाहिए। मरणी का तो विवाह हो गया है। तुम खाना-पीना सब-कुछ उपनयन के समय जैसे कर रही हो वैसा ही सदा करना।

³⁴ A long piece of cotton or linen wrapped around the legs that is firmly tied at the waist. Traditional garment of India for men which is considered cheaper than western pants. Regional variations can be found and are expressed often through the colour or pattern/prints at the lower edge of the cloth piece. Mostly worn by *svāmīs* as well as widows who are not allowed to continue wearing colourful and feminine clothing (Denton, 2004, pp. 19, 73).

of Ānandamayī Mā offered safe spaces to women at the end of the 19th beginning of the 20th century, which allowed for a transgression of social gender-specific norms, despite the consequences of confrontation with external criticism. Thereby concepts of religious and spiritual femininity are socially reconstructed as well as redefined. The immanence of the Brahmanic ideology of exclusion within the traditional socio-cultural framework increasingly restricted the religious engagement of female ritual actors, requiring female gurus to create spaces, outside of direct male control and sanction. As it has been noted above, despite providing such spaces the engagement of male authority in Ānandamayī Mā's movement was prevalent.

At one incident the guru was asked how the power of agency can be obtained, she answered accordingly: “Mother- *Śakti* is awakened by the transmitting of the guru's *pradatta kriyā* [*śakti(-pāt)*; lit. provided action]. Actions must be performed to keep the power awakened. It is also said in the scriptures, to conduct *satsaṅg* and *ātmakriyā* [a particular form of *sādhana* in this tradition]. Recite the *gāyatrī-mantra*, do daily rituals”³⁵ (Svāmī Kedārnāth, 2015, p. 441). The guru's emphasis on personal practice while adhering to the authority of the scriptures emphasises the practice of mantra recitation while striving for personal spiritual progress. From the section above it is evident that Ānandamayī Mā emphasised the inner spiritual transformations of her female disciples, rather than trying to subvert existing concepts of male hegemony within the religious domain and spiritual realm. By providing a space for and encouraging the realisation of female spirituality, the guru promoted a small-scale egalitarian access to religious practices while maintaining an emphasis on scriptural authority that reinforced a system of exclusion of members outside the *varṇa* order. It has been argued that ambivalence was present in the actions and teachings of the guru, as interference of male religious authority figures still took place, indicating lack in autonomy within her movement.

3.1.2 The guru and her promotion of gendered mantra practices

Mantra recitation constituted an integral part of the female guru's devotional practice. During Ānandamayī Mā's marriage with Bolanāth, during which she engaged in *sādhana*, she used mantra repetitions more frequently including yogic postures and *mudrās* (Gurupriyā Devī, 2019, pp. 11, 76–77, Vol. 1) (see Chap. 3.1.1). In the early 20th century, she eventually became a devoted *sādhika* (spiritual aspirant in search of the divine) who uncontrollably or involuntarily (Sk. *ajapa*) recited the powerful utterances (Hallstrom, 1999, p. 36; Rao, 2019, p. 59). Mani Rao defines the peculiar practitioners as follows: “A person who does sadhana is called a

³⁵ गुरु प्रदत्त क्रिया से शक्ति जागरण होता है। शक्ति उदबुद्ध रखने के लिए क्रिया करना ही चाहिए। शास्त्र में भी कहते हैं, सत्संग करना और आत्मक्रिया करना। गायत्री जप करना, नित्य कर्म करना।

“*sadhaka*” when sadhana is centered around mantras, the siddhi involves gaining siddhi over a mantra, or having the ability to harness its power” (Rao, 2019, p. 4). Utilising the energy or power (*śakti*) of the mantra serves to invoke the desired deity or to intensify the devotional practice for the enhancement of mental states. This allows the practitioner to receive visions from the deity and publicly be recognised as a guru after reaching an advanced state of consciousness (Rao, 2019, pp. 186–187). Rao also notes the receipt of the *sādhakas* mantra is mostly kept secret since “a pact of secrecy” (Rao, 2019, p. 188) seems to exist between the deity and practitioner. Like the initiation ceremony (see chap. 2.1.3), where the utterance of the mantra is shielded from public view to preserve the secrecy of the initiate's mantra, the *sādhakas* preserve the secret mantra to maintain the relationship between the divine and themselves.

Ānandamayī Mā's mantra practice was characterised by and consisted of mantras that arose ‘naturally’ and ‘spontaneously’ during her evening *japa* sessions, which is considered an ideal form of spiritual discipline, thereby causing physiological or psychological alterations in the body (Hallstrom, 1999, p. 38; Lipski et al., 2007, p. 23; Rao, 2019, p. 161). In 1922, shortly before her self-initiation, the female guru was reprimanded by her husband due to her chanting of the mantra of Kṛṣṇā. Her husband emphasised her belonging to the traditional Śākta family lineage and asked her to change the mantra to a chant dedicated to the god Śiva (Hallstrom, 1999, p. 38; Lipski et al., 2007, p. 23). It is noteworthy that this incident is not reported in the hagiographic sources of Gurupriyā Devī directly, as only the specific invocation of the sacred syllable *om* by the guru is emphasised as well as indirect hints of the husband's behaviour towards the guru (Gurupriyā Devī, 2019, pp. 11, 25, Vol. 1). Hallstrom equally remarks that this incident is very rarely mentioned in other available sources, however, according to the author, the female guru's practice intensified after she changed the mantra dedicated to a Tantric deity (Hallstrom, 1999, pp. 38, 238). Any reference to what kind of specific mantra the female guru recited is however absent. This emphasises that although Bholanāth accepted his wife as a spiritual role model at the time of initiation, he still interfered with her mantra recitation. The interesting sidenote is, that this incident happened shortly before her, as well as her husband's initiation, thereby, reversing the inherent hierarchy of the relationship (*sambandha*) between a guru and a *śiṣya*. Since traditionally the guru's guidance should be followed by *śiṣya* and total surrender is necessary without questioning the spiritual teacher's insights, a reversal of the traditional relationship can be observed. Thus, due to their personal relationship the female guru's mantra practice was changed by a male influence that restricted her freedom of practice. As there exist many forms of female asceticism some women, who renounced, opted for marriages to male deities, e.g. Durgā Mā a disciple of the older Gaurī Mā (both *sannyāsinīs*),

or decided to leave families with children behind, for instance in the case of Mā Jaya Satī Bhagavatī who also was an activist for the LGBTQIA+ community, to pursue an ascetic life (Pechilis, 2004). Thus, while other ascetics pursued alternative options in the 20th century, Ānandamayī Mā decided to spend her lifetime married resulting in a lack of autonomy, freedom and sovereignty in her spiritual practices.

Several other instances demonstrate that Ānandamayī Mā had to her altered state of consciousness to prove outsiders and display her mantra recitation skills she had attained in public to gain legitimacy as a realised and renounced being. By displaying her recitation skills, she contested the prevailing socio-cultural conventions about female religiosity and expanded the notion of female renunciation. At her first public event in 1925 she performed Kālī *pūjā* for her devotees and her husband's ancestors (Gurupriyā Devī, 2019, pp. 15–16; Lipski et al., 2007, p. 16). From that period onwards the guru was worshipped as an incarnation of the goddess, publicly displaying her immediate experiences with the divine (Sk. *anubhāva*). Since the guru's husband had a strong attachment to the goddess, the renunciant woman's identification with Kālī was accepted, and her tendencies could be socially situated due to her husband's familial inclination (Hallstrom, 1999, p. 82). It could be argued that her practice of female devotion took place within familial and scriptural boundaries. Thereby trying to negotiate for additional freedom based on socio-cultural established systems without transgressing the patriarchally influenced understanding of traditional female religious practices. Through her display of divine realisation, she sought (public) legitimation from her male counterparts who failed to recognise her spiritual achievements. Through her occupation of different roles over time, it becomes evident that she transgresses stages of confinement while operating within prevailing patriarchally influenced sociocultural conventions of female religiosity. By analysing the guru's public and personal encouragement of mantra recitation within her life, her attitude towards gendered religious practice becomes apparent, as her actions largely shaped and influenced her disciples' practices.

3.2 Contemporary female Gurus and mantra practitioners in the 21st century

In the following chapter the teachings of two contemporary female gurus, Mātā Amṛtānandamayī and Ānandmūrti Gurumā, from the 21st century are closely examined to foreground their engendered approach as spiritual leaders. It will examine the unique efforts of female gurus to evoke changes for female religious practitioners and promote access to an egalitarian mantra recitation for women. By employing media technology and entering digital spaces, the gurus aspire to transgress socio-cultural norms of female religiosity that challenge the aspect of exclusion while drawing on traditional spiritual parameters. This section will

explore women leaders' approaches to spiritual inclusion by examining the vigour and impetus provided by the processes of modernity in the socio-cultural context of India. The sources of the gurus' pluralistic approaches are explored based on their teachings, their media presence and influential ethnographic studies of the last decade, especially by A. Lucia (2014), A. Rudert (2017) and M. Warriar (2005), as these sources capture the basic features of the famous gurus' movements. Given that much has already been published about these two influential contemporary personalities, more recent publications primarily emphasise current trends and facilitate the examination of more recent developments within the movements.

3.2.1 Mātā Amṛtānandamayī's propagation of an egalitarian access

The first points of the following discussions will be depicting the movement of the South Indian guru. The female spiritual leader, also generally referred to as Amma, Ammachi or Mātā Amṛtānandamayī (Mother of immortal bliss) Devī, born as Sudhamani, embodies the gendered renunciation and spiritual equality for female aspirants (Lucia, 2014b, pp. 12, 17; Raj, 2004, pp. 204–205). Known for her hugs and embraces for her devotees during her *darśan* sessions the low-caste woman from Kerala is referred to as an *avatār* (incarnation) of the divine mother who transgresses traditional cultural idioms like caste regulations, customs of purity and impurity or socially constructed notions of gendered renunciation (Erndl, 2004, p. 247; Lucia, 2014b, pp. 6–7; Raj, 2004, p. 205; Warriar, 2005, pp. 53, 55, 75).

Belonging to the 3rd wave of Indian gurus, after the 19th century reform movements and 20th century global spiritual and transnational meditation movement, she is also part of the 2nd generation of public female gurus who uses media as a tool to spread her divine message (Pechilis, 2004, p. 10; Raj, 2004, pp. 204–205). Having exhibited signs of spiritual ecstasy since her early childhood she started to adopt the Krishna and Devi *bhāvas* and practiced intense *sādhana* (Lucia, 2014b, p. 82; Raj, 2004, pp. 207, 211; Warriar, 2005, p. 73). As already noted in the case study of the female guru from the 20th century, the emergence of spiritual affinity for this authority figure is equally located in the childhood and presents a reoccurring theme within the narrations about the gurus' backgrounds. Recognised by her devotees as a *satguru* she personally was initiated without a guru, but experienced spontaneous succession like Ānandamayī Mā (Erndl, 2004, p. 247; Raj, 2004, pp. 208, 210–211). Therefore, she did not receive a personal secret mantra of initiation but began with *nām japa* (recitation of the various divine names) (Raj, 2004, p. 208). The embracing guru thus embodies the female divinity through 'self-realisation' and shaped her own transnational global movement attracting thousands of ardent followers online as well as in real life.

Her personal reconstruction of gendered renunciation is highlighted in the ethnographic study from Amanda Lucia about the guru's global movement who remarks that while the guru draws on prevalent notions of maternity and motherhood she also "[...] campaigns to raise awareness of gender-based oppression and injustices while modifying power structures in society to be more gender egalitarian" (Lucia, 2014b, p. 115). While she operates with and draws on conventional concepts of femininity, she publicly advocates an egalitarian approach to spiritual practices as egalitarianism can be characterised as one of the central pillars of Amṛtānandamayī Mā's teachings. Through this approach the female guru valorises the emergence of alternative options for global female followers within the religious domain, thus prioritising the power of choice for individual spiritual pursuits.

It was during her rise as a global world guru that she received increasing media attention because of her humanitarian approach of inclusivity within her teaching and famous hugging gesture at her international *darśan* sessions (Mällinen & Utriainen, 2024, p. 77). In an event in Melbourne city, she talks to her disciples about the importance of mantra *japa*. In this video, part of a collective online series of her teachings for her global audience on her website³⁶, excerpts from the *satsaṅg* session are examined in the following arguments to explore her public propagation of an accessible mantra recitation. While her teaching is translated into Hindi from her native language Malayalam, her *bhajans* are sung in Hindi and her mantra recitation is conducted in Sanskrit, thus accentuating inclusivity through her diversified linguistic repertoire and for her pan-Indian audience. The series of teachings are professionally edited and show a collection of different clips that were professionally recorded during various events. In the video (season 3, episode 90), a close-up of the female guru is shown, with the female leader wearing a white sari and a large, round, two coloured *tilak* on her forehead. She is sitting on a red velvet chair, emphasising her words with deliberate hand movements. Her wrists are covered with stone and sandalwood *mālās* (prayer beads), while a large *mālā* (larger ones consisting of up to 108 pearls) also adorns her neck. Similar items are available in their online shop, where followers can purchase ritual items like those worn by the guru³⁷. This hints at a larger phenomenon observable within the guru movements; the commodification of material and immaterial ritual items. Thereby devotees become also consumers of ritual objects. It is possible to buy one of the *mālās* within minutes, in case they are not sold out, starting with three (approx. 269 ₹) and going up to fifty euros (approx. 4 483₹).

³⁶ www.amma.org (for the international community) or <https://www.amritapuri.org/> (for the South Asian community)

³⁷ Retrieved February 06, 2025, from <https://theammashop.org/collections/neck-malas-necklaces>

In the background of the video, a drawn picture of Kṛṣṇā in a wide gold frame covers the wall behind the chair, while on the left, a statue of a white Nelore bovine (*Bos taurus indicus*) looks directly into the camera. As soon as the guru begins to teach, the background blurs and her features come to the forefront, with strands of white hair framing her face. At the beginning of her teaching for the global audience, she emphasises the following for the practice of a *sādhaka*:

Meditation and spirituality are not the property of any particular path (*mārga*) or some special people, they are easily available to all. They are necessary for everyone. Complete consciousness and alertness, including attentiveness [*here*: meditation] contribute to living life. Just as dusting curtains, sheets and pillows is a preparation for sleeping, similarly praying, reciting mantras and selfless service are preparations for sitting in meditation posture.³⁸ (Chaitanya, 2024, Section 4:12-4:58)

Through her use of metaphors and analogies, she conveys the message that reciting mantras is a tool for the mind to enhance meditative practice. Particularly the guru's use of household references seems significant. As she continues in her speech with the inclusion of mantra recitation in daily tasks, activities and routines, she continuously emphasises the availability as well as accessibility to those recitations. Thereby, the mantra recitation is increasingly decontextualised from its original ritualized dissemination.

We say, while bathing, why don't you recite mantras? Pour water on your head and imagine your favourite deity. Recite during the shower as well. Many people read newspapers in the bathroom, so read a spiritual book or recite your guru Mantra.³⁹ (Chaitanya, 2024, Scene 5:42-6:01)

By referring to the use of mantras while doing daily chores, it provides a path for a practical *sāadhanā* that is consistent with the endeavours of the householder. Equally, the importance of availability and access towards recitation is emphasised as the observance of dedicated timings, e.g. at transformation periods during the day (see chap. 2.3), for the use of mantras is particularly neglected. Therefore, the recitation of mantras is also decontextualised and to a certain extent alienated, as purity rules are neglected, e.g. by recommending the recitation in unclean spaces. While reciting while showering is in line with traditional purity rules as it is considered purifying and cleansing, uttering sacred syllables or performing ritual acts in an impure environment is unacceptable according to the purity laws of the Brahmin community. Her approach is personal and focuses on individual fulfilment, opting for freedom of choice rather than external acceptance of traditional Hindu religious precepts (Warrier, 2005, p. 140).

Her adoption of an *advaita vedāntic* perspective of nondualism allows her to advocate for religious equality between the genders. This perspective is prevalent in her discourses and spiritual practices, in which she strives to overcome traditional forms of female subordination

³⁸ ध्यान और अध्यात्म किसी मार्ग- विशेष अथवा कुछ विशेष लोगों की धरोहर नहीं हैं ये सर्व-सुलभ हैं। सभी के लिए आवश्यक हैं। पूर्ण बोध एवं सजगता सहित, जीवन जीने में सहायक होता है ध्यान। जैसे पर्दे चादर तकिए झाड़ना सोने की तैयारी है वैसे ही प्रार्थना मंत्र जप निस्वार्थ सेवा ध्यान के आसन पर बैठने की तैयारियाँ हैं।

³⁹ हम नहाते समय बोलते हैं मंत्र जप क्यों नहीं करते? सर पर पानी डालो इष्टदेव की भावना करो। शौचादी के समय भी जप करो। कई लोग बाथरूम में अखबार पढ़ते हैं तो आध्यात्मिक पुस्तक ही पढ़ लो या अपना गुरु मंत्र जप लो।

and attempts to revive the formerly valued authority of female agents within the Hindu community and Indian society (Lucia, 2014b, p. 16; Warriar, 2005, p. 139). Advocating spiritual transformation through traditional religious practices such as the chanting of Sanskrit mantras, *sevā* and the observance of rituals, she also operates within the framework of orthodox male Brahmanical conventions. By operating within the paradigm of *śāstrīan* injunctions of the Tantric tradition and *dharmaśāstric* conventions, as these are believed to provide the foundation of the righteous path, the female guru strives for spiritual transformation for female devotees and ritualists (Lucia, 2014b, pp. 131, 268; Warriar, 2005, p. 56). It is therefore not possible to characterise Amma's movement as a rupture from the influence of the social conventions regarding the female gender, which have been constructed by male hegemony. Rather, it involves operating within the constraints of "socially sanctioned femininity" (Lucia, 2014b, p. 17) while adhering to traditional cultural understandings of motherhood and maternity associated with the South Asian femininity. The practice of mantra chanting conducted by women is perceived as efficacious and a central element within her movement thus providing an alternative framework of religiosity in contrast to more orthodox institutions that restrict the ritual participation of women.

The guru also emphasises the accessibility of spiritual practice to all genders in her public speeches. She also employs female ritual agents, who have started to conduct rituals within the religious movement, which started in 1997 through the inauguration of priestesses and female ritual officiants (Hi. *pujāriṇīs*) in her temples in South India, Kerala (Warriar, 2005, p. 58). An important step for her *pujāriṇīs* to be considered eligible for the life of *brahmacarya*, is the women's display of certain 'qualities' before they are initiated through the *brahmacarya dīkṣā* (Warriar, 2005, p. 6). The inauguration of female priestesses took place, which the spiritual leader justified through the following argument: "How can one possibly justify saying that a woman, who is the creator of man, is inferior to man?" (c.f. Raj, 2004, p. 215). Thus, she draws on the woman's unique capacity of reproductivity to transgress traditional restrictions of female ritual participation. Hence, she evokes changes through her "gendered innovations", as Lucia calls them, which are visible through the instalment of *pujāriṇīs* for rituals. Through this, the guru also provides the fundamental framework for gender-based alterations within her movement. Her refusal to accept the exclusion and devaluation of women due to traditional, socially and patriarchally constructed ideas of femininity illustrates her confrontation with cultural constraints placed on women (Raj, 2004, pp. 215–216). This event coincides in conjunction with a larger trend for legal and social adjustments in the 20th century concerning the inclusion of women within religious communities and transnational spiritual movements

(see chap. 2.3.1). Amma, who is not an immediate descendent of a lineage or renunciatory order, in turn provides institutional support for female renouncers and disciples who desire to pursue religious endeavours (Warrier, 2005, p. 83). She publicly positions herself in solidarity as a representative of female participation. Her devotees and female renouncers perceive the participation of women in rituals as innovative, since the female guru holds the opinion that in God's vision both genders are equal (Raj, 2004, p. 215). Through her uplifting approach, the guru encourages the performance of Vedic rituals and mantra *japa* performed by women, while her achievements within the religious domain also function as a template for female aspirants to follow her example (Charpentier, 2010, pp. 173–174). Her confrontation with prevalent constraints, however, operates within the boundaries of an Indic sociocultural understanding of femininity, e.g. through her emphasis on reproductivity and fertility, thereby adhering to traditional perceptions of the female gender instead of reconstructing it within her movement.

The female guru attributes the exclusion of women's participation in religious rituals to the previously ascendant dominance of the male Brahmanical worldview that emerged during the *purāṇic* period. She argues that the Brahmanical community introduced prohibitions against women's religious and reinforced their oppression and abuse through a misogynistic perspective, exploiting their subordinate social position (Lucia, 2014b, pp. 123, 127). Thereby she transcends traditional notions of female impurity by encouraging women to participate in ritual acts despite their menstrual cycles, such as singing the hymn to Devī, thus contradicting the orthodox Hindu notion of impurity attributed to menstrual blood (Warrier, 2005, p. 58). Those changes however seem carefully constructed as the female guru does not argue for the redefinition or subversion of socially, historically and culturally constructed Indian femininity. Instead of referring to the paradigm of feminism, which is often associated with Western influence, to maintain its legitimacy as a traditional religious authority figure, she rather aligns with the culturally, religiously, socially and publicly appropriate constructions of the feminine in South Asia, e.g. through the aspect of self-sacrifice for her devotees. Indian feminism differs from Western feminism insofar as it emphasises specific cultural, legal and social issues and has developed concerns in relation to the understanding of Indian femininity. The first wave or phase of Indian women's movement can be traced back to the mid-19th century, when gender-based restrictions on access to education were taken up by reformists and advocates campaigning for equal rights for women, as well as social reforms (Gandhi & Shah, 1992, p. 21; Rajan, 2020, p. 3). The second wave in the 1970s was marked by debates around the cultural identity of Indian women while also addressing issues of discrimination and inequality (Gandhi & Shah, 1992, p. 22; Rajan, 2020, p. 28). In the 1990s the third wave arose as a counter

movement to the second, emphasising the individual agency of women as actors within a liberal economy that can be reconciled with traditional cultural values (Gandhi & Shah, 1992, p. 26; Rajan, 2020, pp. 35–36). By referring to the particularities of the third wave of the Indian women’s movement, the female guru can challenge the normative hegemonic structures within Indian society without undermining the Hindu customs that form the basis for recognising her status as a renunciate and legitimise her aspirations towards liberation. At the same time, she uses concepts, (ritual) items and symbols that give her movement a particular Indic socio-cultural identity, which enables her to claim cultural authenticity, despite her global impact.

Another example is the initiation of women during the display of the gurus *Devī bhāva* sessions, where her (mass) devotees receive a personal mantra and initiation from the guru (Raj, 2004, pp. 212–213). The guru also incorporates tantric textual elements in the disciples spiritual practices like the *Lalitāsahasranāma* a worship hymn for the goddess (Warrier, 2005, pp. 56, 92). Through the equation of the guru with the goddess *Lalitā*, she includes elements of the tantric *Śāktasampradāya* of the *Śrī Vidyā* tradition prevalent in South India (Lucia, 2014b, p. 65). The chanting of the *Lalitāsahasranāma* is not only included in the guru’s personal events but can also be purchased in the Amma Shop and on Amazon as an audio file and book edition (digital and physical), accompanied by Amma’s recommendation on when to chant these mantras (The Amma Shop, n.d.). If her devotees or disciples desire to become *sannyāsinīs* or *sannyāsīs* therefore requesting initiation or a personal mantra for the personal spiritual evolvment, she provides them with personal mantras and a *dīkṣā* (Amrita, 2016; Raj, 2004, pp. 212–213). Devotees can choose which deities the guru incorporates into their personal mantra, depending on their preferences for certain deities or inspirations through different religions such as Buddhism, Christianity or the entire Hindu pantheon (Amrita, 2016). The guru thereby provides her devotees with mantras according to their spiritual necessities, aspirations and religious alignments without observing the traditional period of preparation in advance, before determining whether they are qualified to receive it. By respecting individual spiritual endeavours, the female guru accepts different practical spiritual pursuits and modes of worship within her movement, which she justifies through her compassion. As Warrier notes in her ethnographic study about the construction of modern ‘Hindu’ selfhood within the female gurus mission, the “heterogeneity, plurality and individual worship” (2005, p. 55) within the movement represents a deviation from other lineages where monolithic worship towards deities of the Hindu pantheon pervades. While she sees mantra *japa* as a key tool for spiritual transformation, it ultimately serves as an instrument for liberation from *saṃsāra* and overcoming the restless mind, which is made accessible to all genders, castes and religions,

thereby emphasising the efficacy, rather than the regulation (Amrita, 2016; Warriar, 2005, pp. 56, 61). In return, she demands loyalty, dedication and continuous practice from her disciples, while at the same time benefiting from the purchases of ritual objects that her devotees use to perform *japa*.

In her speech she uses relatable real-life examples as an analogy to convey the benefits of mantra recitation: “We see it written on the walls, do not tape posters here. These words are capable of keeping thousands of other words away. Do mantra *japa* like this”⁴⁰ (Chaitanya, 2024, Scene 7:05-7:16). By simplifying a complex process and using analogies, she not only demonstrates an understanding of the immediate effectiveness of mantra recitation but also employs relatable comparisons that allow followers to understand her content, without requiring specialised knowledge of religious technical vocabulary. Thus, the level of education, prior knowledge, or familiarity with the specific religious vocabulary becomes secondary. Through her simplistic egalitarian approach and empowerment, she is “[...] democratizing the historically institutionalised hierarchies of traditional Hindu ritual. [...] Amma’s interventions destabilize male Brahmanical control over ritual activities” (Lucia, 2014, p. 125). Her public encouragement to transgress socially influenced constructions of cultural constraints is intricately linked to an egalitarian approach of mantra practice. At the same time, when Lucia speaks of destabilisation, it is nonetheless a very calculated mode of ritual democratization taken by the guru, who still relies on the authority of Vedic models and traditional concepts of womanhood or femininity to legitimise her transformative approach. One can also observe a calculated advance to destabilise the hegemonic structures in the religious context, as their movement equally strives for public (and global) recognition, while operating within the logic of Hindu renunciation. The guru democratises female ritual involvement by accentuating the power of female agency within the sociocultural context that highlights the active rather than the submissive qualities of femininity. It can be described as an expression of predominant feminine qualities that were always present but were pushed into the background of collective consciousness in favour of emphasising other ideals which are now resurfacing to legitimise the various gendered aspirations.

While her appearance as a *pujārīṇī* is perceived by her followers as a legitimate embodiment of the divine, due to her high spiritual achievements, orthodox outsider Hindus, who are not part of the spiritual movement, have criticized this innovative accession or, as Warriar calls it, ‘modern’ approach to female religiosity (Warriar, 2005, p. 61). Through her emphasis on

⁴⁰ हम दीवारों पर लिखा देखते हैं यहाँ पोस्टर न चिपकाएँ। यह शब्द दूसरे हजारों शब्द दूर रखने में समर्थ हैं। ऐसे ही मंत्र जप करें।

spiritual practicality and the inclusion of spiritual practices in daily tasks, it challenges Brahmanical notions of female ritual exclusion and offers alternative cultural spaces of female religiosity heavily influenced by discourses of globalisation, Hindu nationalism and Westernisation that have led to changes in societal perceptions of femininity, female religious participation and female renunciation (Basu, 1993; Warriar, 2005, pp. 141–142). For example, during the guru's 70th birthday, in 2023, the prime minister of India, Narendra Modi, personally congratulated the female guru. Modi emphasised his thirty-year personal relationship with the guru and her contribution to the social welfare of the Indian nation (Modi, 2023). These religio-political frameworks have co-conditioned the progressivity and rising influence of the female gurus' public persona in transnational movements opting for an egalitarian access to spirituality and asceticism through a redefinition of selfhood that accentuates alternative configurations of contemporary religious movements, e.g. by linking morality, femininity and auspiciousness with moral purity as well as service (*sevā*) to the nation (DeNapoli, 2023a, p. 12; Khandelwal, 2004, p. 189). There is ample evidence that the female guru publicly promotes spiritual equality based on individual (mantra) practices in online and offline spaces, thereby engendering the traditional access to mantra recitation, while also receiving public and political support.

Her understanding of the divine implies the transgression of social concepts that lead to restrictions based on external gendered physical body (Sk./Hi. *śarīr*) characteristics. By adhering to the written integrity of the religious texts, she attempts to restore its authority, an approach equally undertaken by Ānandamayī Mā. Thereby she employs a peculiar strategy to receive legitimation for her movement and engendered endeavours within the religious community:

In so doing, Amma's movement follows in the footsteps of many nineteenth- and twentieth-century Hindu reform movements (Arya Samaj, Brahmo Samaj, Ramakrishna Mission, Swaminarayan Hinduism, and so on) that justify their modernist innovations with claims to vedic and upaniṣadic authority. (Lucia, 2014b, p. 128)

Her approach is therefore based on a mode of justification that has already been successfully applied in the past to legitimise reform endeavours for female religious participation based on scriptural authority, through which she wants to transform and transcend practiced religiosity. It is precisely due to the reformist ventures in the 19th century which paved the way for the inclusion of female religious participation since a re-evaluation of the written sources was undertaken by the members of the Indian elite for their own argumentation, which also aids the contemporary movements as they can use it as a basis and justification for reformist aspirations (see chap. 2.3.1). Based on these elements, Amma promotes 'modern' principles of equality by invoking the prehistorical examples of female Vedic renouncers as well as the impetus on

scriptural authority, a recourse that has also been utilised by the colonial power to legitimate reforms, thereby employing a strategic measure to undermine socially constructed gender norms to also make Vedic mantras available to women and to offer modes of female religious participation within patriarchal structures, as well as socially accepted parameters of religiosity. Other modern female gurus in contrast rather argue that the exclusion of women based on scriptural authority is not justifiable as the renunciators conduct is the decisive factor of eligibility for asceticism (DeNapoli, 2023a, p. 13). While other female religious leaders have moved away from justifying female religious participation based on textual authority, Amma still resorts to strategies already employed within the last century.

In the upcoming section the movement of Gurumā is analysed to examine another female guru's movement of the 21st century who envisages a more transgressive remodelling of female religiosity through a direct empowerment of women. Pertaining to the needs of her global audience, the movement of the female guru in her ochre robe has attained an iconic status within the religious community.

3.2.2 Ānandmūrti Gurumā on speed dial

Ānandmūrti Gurumā belongs to the generation of 'new age' gurus. The guru is known globally for her integration of elements from various religious traditions such as the Hindu, Buddhist, Sufi and Sikh, while advocating against the reproduction of gendered and traditional cultural values (Charpentier, 2010, p. 257; Rudert, 2017, p. xvii). Angela Rudert who conducted an ethnographic field study about the gurus new age movement explains the guru's shifting appeal towards a multitude of traditions as follows:

But in constantly changing, from garb to garb, from singing Hindu *bhajan* to Sikh *gurbānī*, from chanting Vedic *mantra* to Sufi *zikr*, from decorating the stage (or temple) of her body according to her moods, she denies her regular listeners and observers the luxury of making tradition-bound truth claims. (Rudert, 2017, p. 118)

Through the transgression of religious boundaries, she emphasises the reconcilableness of different traditions while providing the devotees with constant new experiences compiled by different influences. The plurality in her spiritual practice also results in a larger following, as she embodies acceptance and tolerance in her approaches. Charpentier in her study notes that among the contemporary female gurus, she embodies her own line of empowerment since she is an educated women who accumulated economic wealth through her organisation, while demonstrating her independence and agency (Charpentier, 2010, p. 257). Setting an example through her own life as a respected female spiritual master, she equally rejects prevalent South Asian cultural notions of womanhood, like marriage, domesticity or subordination. This approach can be, according to DeNapoli, defined as 'grass-root religious gender activism'

(2023a, p. 1), which is characterised by public female spiritual leaders who advocate for empowerment and social equity within the patriarchal society (Rudert, 2017, p. 132). This ‘insubordinate’ approach clearly distinguishes her from other female gurus who do not express their criticism of male religious authority and social injustices so publicly and progressively. Through utilising sustainable Indian ‘grassroots gender activism’, Gurumā seeks to invoke change for women within a patriarchal society (DeNapoli, 2023a, p. 1). Within her movement, education and empowerment of women as well as girls are promoted while she tours around the world. For example, in her online videos in Hindi, Ānandmūrti Gurumā talks about the capabilities of women to be and do anything (Anandmurti Gurumaa, 2024). She does not exclude women from the pursuance of spirituality and helps them to awaken their transformatory *śakti* (Rudert, 2017, p. 133). Additionally, her empowerment programs, such as the NGO *Shakti*, support girls during their education as well as provide vocational and financial support through the distribution of scholarships, according to the information on the guru’s website. Through the support of secular education in combination with spiritual education she seeks to provide an alternative path of empowerment that values female liberation attainments. However, when examining the personal stories of the female beneficiaries, all but one continue working in the traditionally women-specific trades, such as arts and crafts⁴¹. Apart from stating that girls from lower economic backgrounds are selected, the criteria for choosing women for the programmes are not listed transparently.

Besides the female guru’s empowerment programs, her advocacy of spiritual engagement focuses on an egalitarian approach to the recitation of mantras in a global context and on the adaptation of traditional religious practices to contemporary needs. Her devotees recur to the use of technical vocabulary to emphasise the impact and importance of the personal mantra within the *sādhana*:

A common *sādhana* in the context of guru-bhakti is repetition of the mantra given by the guru (*mantra-japa*). [...] Gurumaa’s devotee Meera expressed the importance of *guru-mantra* in her own practice: “Having a mantra from the guru is like having the guru’s phone number!” Indeed many disciples felt that mantra chanting forged “the link” necessary to tune in to the guru’s “wave length.” (Rudert, 2017, p. 89)

The guru and her followers, drawing on her linguistic repertoire, fuse technological influences from the global world with ancient teachings or techniques to incorporate the needs of a global and transnational audience. Thereby empowerment of a modernised self, individuality and self-development are particularly highlighted while combining it with the modern technology (Rudert, 2017, p. 20). The guru’s presence on various social networks, e.g. Facebook and Instagram, as well as her live sessions on YouTube, are changing the way disciples engage with

⁴¹ Retrieved February 06, 2025, from <https://gurumaa.com/shakti>

her as well as her spiritual messages. This altered relationship between a guru and a *śiṣya* not only changes traditional modes of spiritual practice but also gives rise to new forms of female religiosity and spiritual equality. Part of the philosophy of this new form of religious movement is the easy connectivity and accessibility of the female guru, fostering a new relationship of closeness between the guru and disciple while expanding her presence in virtual and physical spaces (Copeman et al., 2023, p. 3; Rudert, 2017, p. 164). This results in the need to maintain online spaces and a virtual presence while operating within the logic of the market economy. This phenomenon of the guru's increasing digital presence can be seen as a continuation of the media presence by yoga gurus in the television era, for instance, consider the TV presence of Baba Ramdev (Copeman et al., 2023, p. 3). While the accessibility of the guru increases for the audience, the interaction lacks a tangible relationship and a reciprocal exchange. Pechilis, in her article on *Women Gurus in Hinduism*, remarks:

In terms of interaction with the guru there is an 'event intimacy' cultivated through defined moments of the guru's presence at scheduled gatherings, which often deploy technology to widen the reach; however, much of the spiritual work of the disciples is done away from the guru's embodied presence, in contrast to the traditional *gurukula* system. (Pechilis, 2015, p. 407)

The alternation of traditional aspects, or rather their transfer into digital spaces, within modern guru movements can also be transferred to ritual objects or material commodities necessary for *sādhana*. These transformations result in mass movements that bring about, not only social but also religious and ritual changes. What remains, however, is the fact that guru figures still rely on a 'critical mass' (Pechilis, 2015, p. 403) to grant them recognition as spiritual authorities.

On her official website⁴², videos of her current teachings, discourses on divinity, *bhajan* sessions and talks about women's empowerment are available for free. The female gurus' widespread presence across various online platforms enables her disciples to access and engage in her discourses, teachings, songs, meditation sessions and mantra recitations anytime, from anywhere in the world. A quick search with the keyword mantra on their website yields eleven pages of results, consisting of *bhajan* texts, instructional videos, lectures, products (e.g. *japamālā*), books and audio files on the subject⁴³. Thus, while she clearly managed to democratise access for mantra recitation by providing instructions and manuals on how to conduct mantra *japa*, also access restrictions based on socio-economic parameters are introduced through paywalls. While she is neither the first one, nor will she be the last one, it is meaningful insofar as the aspirants do not require authorisation from anyone but monetary resources. This is related to a larger current debate within the community about the qualifications of devotees who recite the mantra without possessing the required (pre-)

⁴² Retrieved February 04, 2025, from <https://gurumaa.com/>

⁴³ Retrieved February 06, 2025, from https://gurumaa.com/searchresults?search_str=mantra&results_type=all

knowledge. While a similar debate has been going on concerning the qualification of women as spiritual role models and figures of authority (see also DeNapoli, 2023a; Pechilis, 2015, p. 402), the easy accessibility and availability of resources or traditional knowledge for spiritual practices in online spaces is also discussed in other movements (Okita, 2012). More often than not, movements compromise on this issue, as the dissemination of knowledge, sources and materials to outsiders is a corollary of accessibility, outweighed by the desire to educate and promote the spiritual organisation (Okita, 2012, pp. 216–217). Additionally, specific religious knowledge or affiliation with the guru to engage in mantra practices are also no longer a prerequisite. By granting access and providing materials, even manuals, for chanting, the access restrictions by the orthodox community based on eligibility are being lifted and subverted. For example, the *bhajan* text of the Vedic mantra ‘hari om tat sat’⁴⁴ (for complete *bhajan* see appendix 1), which is also used for meditation purposes and intensive spiritual practices, is freely available on the guru's website and accessible to anyone. The mantra contains references to a hymn in the Bhagavadgītā (17.23), in which *satya* (truth) and *tat* (reality) are mentioned as a reference to Brahman, the syllable *om* in various Vedic rituals to establish cosmic connection, with the addition of *hari* as an invocation to Vishnu (Lipski et al., 2007, p. 23; Young, 2002, pp. 84–86). While this *bhajan* contains a reference to the devotion to Viṣṇu, through the story of Prahlāda, who became invincible through his limitless devotion to god Viṣṇu, regional differences can also occur in various versions of the same *bhajan*. Its recitation is therefore not only context-bound but also requires special knowledge to recite it correctly, as the mantra should be recited again at the end of every stanza.

DeNapoli, who has researched female *sādhūs* in Rajasthan, notes that the singing of *bhajans* can be seen as a form of ‘devotional asceticism’ through which renunciation can also be analysed (2014, p. 4). The practice found in the *bhakti* movement serves as a vehicle for female practitioners to express their devotion to the divine, which is different from the Brahmanical notion of *sannyās* and therefore provides an alternative model of devotion for individuals with soteriological aspirations (DeNapoli, 2014, pp. 212–217; Pechilis Prentiss, 2000). Due to the positioning of female *sants* within this religious devotional context, female gurus locate their devotion within an alternative model that allows for more individualised practices while maintaining a socially accepted connection to the divine. Devotion can take many different forms as it is practised alongside elements of Brahmanical Hinduism. Through the singing of *bhajans*, reverence for the Absolute is evoked and expressed, while at the same time the social status of practitioners can be transformed through spiritual insight, as they create a personal

⁴⁴ हरि ओम् तत् सत हरि ओम् तत् सता

connection between God and themselves which is socially recognised and respected (DeNapoli, 2014, p. 211). This form of devotional worship, characterised by a personal relationship towards the revered deity, also found within more vernacular forms of asceticism, was already taken up in the middle ages by female renouncers such as Mīrā Bāī⁴⁵ and enables women today to socially legitimise, as well as foster their relationship with the divine (Pechilis, 2015, p. 406). DeNapoli argues that “[p]erformances of modesty enable women to safeguard their reputations as good women, while accomplishing their religious goals” (DeNapoli, 2014, p. 116). Singing *bhajans* thus enables the female guru to transcend socially constructed gender roles by engaging in religious participation through worship and practice a form of alternative renunciation within the socially accepted parameters of modesty and chastity, constructing a femininity associated with devotional religiosity.

In a question-and-answer sessions the female guru explains the benefits of mantra recitation in detail, thereby providing insight into the intellectual gain of the recitation as well as the advantage of reciting the *gāyatrī-mantra*. Seated on a beige chaise lounge in front of a simplistic black background, dressed in a red blouse and orange sari she elaborates on the advantages of mantra recitation. A long *mālā* necklace adorns her neck, while she wears a thin line of *tilak* on her forehead and uses a headset microphone as a mouthpiece. The simplistic setting emphasises the underlying notion of detachment from the material world, expressed by her lack of other eye-catching ornaments on her body. She explains the importance of the intellectual development (Hi. *buddhi vikās*) fostered by mantra recitation in order to incorporate the main points of the yogic and Vedānta philosophy (Anandmurti Gurumaa, 2021, Scene 0:45-1:20). While closing her eyes frequently and incorporating pauses in her speech, she emphasises her immersion in thought as well as awareness and meditative process. Important relations are visually complemented by gestures and hand movements. She provides her listeners with relatable analogies based on the achievements of modern entrepreneurs and famous personalities or scientific developments. According to the guru, by chanting the GM, the cultivation of *buddhi* can be achieved. These referenced examples point to the overall concept and attainment of *paramātmā* (supreme reality), which for her is closely connected to the recitation of the GM (Anandmurti Gurumaa, 2021, Scene 2:45). She goes on to accentuate the historicity of the tradition of the recitation:

⁴⁵ Although this Rajasthani princess did not neglect her social obligations for most of her life, “[s]he obviously refused to follow the sedate life of a royal widow” (Gupta, 1991, p. 202). Her transgression of the *pativrata* ideal and her personal devotion to Kṛṣṇa allow contemporary female ascetics or spiritual adepts to place their own spiritual priorities above social obligations as well as to legitimise them by means of a historical precedent (DeNapoli, 2014, pp. 89–90).

Therefore, our intellect should be cultivated and our sages (*ṛṣis*) especially asked to employ this *gāyatrī-mantra* because the “sound vibrations” that are created with this *gāyatrī-mantra* have a direct effect on the unique structure of your brain. It has an effect on it [the brain] and when you recite the mantra, through the electrical waves of this mantra “bioelectricity vibrations” are formed.⁴⁶ (Anandmurti Gurumaa, 2021, p. 4:37-5:11)

The guru not only links recitation to historical precedents, but she also provides examples of how traditional knowledge and insights can be used and incorporated to solve modern problems, while also using medical as well as modern technological terms to explain the efficacy of mantras. By incorporating foreign language elements into her speech, the guru mixes Hindi and English and switches back and forth between them. While the integration of a lexical item (“sound vibrations”) into a Hindi sentence is referred to as code-mixing, the addition of a complete syntactical unit or structure at the end of the Hindi sentence (“bioelectricity Vibrations” are formed”) refers to the process of code-switching. While this is a phenomenon mostly identified by sociolinguists within multilingual communities, who utilise various registers to expand their linguistic repertoire, it has become a common practice, also in other guru movements (see Lucia, 2014b), to address transnational, educated and multilingual audiences. By interchangeably integrating different language registers into her speech, the guru appeals to a modern and diverse audience, which is familiar with the integration of foreign language elements (esp. English) into Hindi. Gurumā also avoids resorting to a less frequently used lexical repertoire of Hindi, which would appear artificial or stilted due to complicated terms. Therefore, she specifically employs a common linguistic repertoire that promotes approachability, understanding and insight to convey her fundamental message. At the same time, she also uses references to Western scientific terminology (“bioelectricity”) and concepts to make her argument plausible. However, the biological process she refers to is in itself very complex, while at the same time utilising reductionist rhetoric and explanation to convey her message. By mixing different subjects from Indian religion (*ṛṣis* and mantras) with Western biological terminology, she postulates intercultural connectedness between these notions as well as mutual applicability of them.

The guru continues with the importance of mantra recitation for women and highlighting their benefit for the female body. “So, the chanting of mantras has a deep impact on our body. That is why I keep saying that reciting mantras is like a medicine for women. This can cure “hormonal imbalance””⁴⁷ (Anandmurti Gurumaa, 2021, p. 8:02-8:22). Although the female

⁴⁶ इसलिए हमारे बुद्धि अच्छी ही होनी चाहिए और हमारे ऋषियों ने इस गायत्री मंत्र का उपयोग विशेष करके इसलिए कहा क्योंकि जो “सॉउंड वाइब्रेशन्स” इस गायत्री मंत्र के साथ बनती है वह आपके मस्तिष्क का अद्वितीय जो संरचना है।

एक तो उसके ऊपर प्रभावी होती है और इस मंत्र की जो विद्युत तरंगें जब आप मंत्र बोलते हैं “बीओएलेक्ट्रिसिटी वाइब्रेशन्स” आरे फ्रॉम्ड।

⁴⁷ सो जो मंत्र उच्चारण है यह हमारे शरीर पर इतना गहरा रहा है, इसका प्रभावता इसलिए मैं बार-बार यह कहती हूँ कि महिलाओं के लिए तो मंत्र जप करने एक दवाई जैसा है। हार्मोनल इम्बैलेंस वह ठीक कर सकती है।

guru also mentions the importance of recitation for men, she indicates the power of mantras to restore a woman's hormonal balance, thus linking spiritual effectiveness with reference to gender-specific characteristics and differences. Within the socio-cultural framework of female religiosity, she invokes gender-specific essentialism to legitimise the recitation of the mantra by women and to emphasise its effect on the female body. Based on this juxtaposed logic, she implicitly explains why access to recitation for women could also benefit social coexistence, as restoring hormonal equilibrium is advantageous not only for the individual but equally for society as a whole. This justification of reciting mantras, specifically for women, reveals the guru's reproduction of internalised socio-cultural as well as patriarchal dispositions. It remains questionable why sexist preconceptions and assumptions are reproduced by a public figure who advocates for equal empowerment. At the same time, however, this also illustrates that she feels pressurised to legitimise herself for promoting equal recitation. The additional justification reveals her own socio-cultural attitudes, rather than effectively overcoming sexist views.

At the end of her session, she advises seekers to practice *sandhyā*, the recitation of the GM during sunrise or sunset, which is said to bring benefit (*lābh*) to the *sādhaka* or *sādhikā* (see chap. 2.3). This ritual, which involves the recitation of the GM and focuses primarily on spiritual and intellectual growth as well as spiritual manifestation, is advocated by the female guru for men and women. This practice, which is mainly performed by *brahmacārins* (male disciples), has also been adopted as part of Tantra practices, albeit women were previously excluded from performing it. She publicly propagates the recitation of mantras as well as formerly exclusive male practices for all genders but does not do so without resorting to body-related distinctions. At the same time, she offers free access to various resources on mantra *japa* on her website, allowing anyone to immerse themselves in the practice of recitation. Therefore, the female guru clearly advocates, propagates and promotes a democratic approach to mantra recitation, transcending historical and orthodox notions of restricted access for women. By offering the possibility of *samādhi* (absorption) through her own embodiment of *paramātmā*, she propagates an inclusive approach towards religion that considers the women permissible to attain liberation and recite mantras for beneficial purposes. While the female guru fosters the involvement of women into the spiritual realm by providing empowerment schemes and institutional structure for support, she also relies on gendered differences to justify her approach. Whereas other female gurus have evoked and established religious devotional movements, Rudert notes in her ethnographic study of Gurumā, that it is the establishment and maintenance of institutionalised religious structures that provide the space for 'anti-normative teachings' (Rudert, 2017, pp. 30–32, 186). At the same time, the example of Gurumā

demonstrates that the female gurus are occupying a new territory of public visibility despite lacking institutional support from the outside (DeNapoli, 2023a, p. 16). Gurumā's movement therefore is characterised by the demand for women's empowerment and spiritual progress, which publicly voiced through the support of a now well-established institution that allows women to freely engage in their religiosity.

In the upcoming section the subjects of female renunciation within traditional patriarchal structures, gendered approaches towards female religiosity and alternative modes of empowerment within the Hindu religious context are going to be explored to identify general notions and differences within the various female gurus' movements. This allows for a more generalised and broader contextualisation of the spiritual endeavours in relation to gender realities. Furthermore, it enhances the broadened understanding of female renunciation in the context of a traditional patriarchal society to elucidate other gendered aspirations of the female gurus that challenge gender confirmative behaviour according to orthodox Hindu norms.

4. Modern female guru practices

The next chapter discusses how the female ascetics, renunciants, and gurus strategise their spiritual pursuits within patriarchal Indian society to justify gendered forms of religiosity and promote spiritual inclusion. It will be elucidated how the female gurus extend gendered limits within the traditional framework to promote female agency within the religious domain, thereby drawing on accepted sociocultural concepts of femininity to legitimise their undertakings. This section aims to call attention to the possibilities of transformations and redefinitions of gendered religious practices by drawing on prevalent theological concepts, reformist strategies, and Hindu philosophical theories to recontextualise as well as justify increasing female religious involvement.

4.1 Female renunciation within patriarchal structures

Institutionalised female renunciation is a rather recent phenomenon that was largely influenced by reformist aspirations to revitalise female involvement within the religious domain after a period of Hindu Brahmin orthodoxy that fostered female exclusion. In general, renouncement can be defined as a form of abandonment of duties with the aim of experiencing salvation (*mokṣa*) from the cycle of rebirth (*saṃsāra*) (Denton, 2004, pp. 58–59; Khandelwal, 2004, pp. 24–26; Warrier, 2005, p. 44). As *saṃsāra* also entails the liberation from the sociologically constructed world, the pursuit of liberation serves as a form of release from the metaphysical and sociological (Denton, 2004, pp. 58–59). Ultimately, the goal of a renouncer is defined as detachment (*vairāgya*) from the impermanent world, striving for spiritual liberation

(Khandelwal, 2004, p. 26). By inserting misogynistic views into the textual sources and emphasising the aspect of celibacy, including strict rules of conduct and *brahmacharya*, it was seen as a male prerogative that would be inaccessible to women (Denton, 2004, p. 101; Young, 2002, p. 113) (see chap. 2.2.1). Therefore, female renunciation within a patriarchal-dominated society like India requires a constant process of negotiation between socially accepted modes of (religious) femininity and customary gender roles, as the ideal renouncer has predominantly been associated with the male. While female gurus try to renegotiate social parameters of female religiosity within the patriarchal society, they resort to culturally established forms of femininity (Erndl, 2000, p. 94; Khandelwal, 2004, pp. 26–27). By relying on and operating within traditionally⁴⁸ expected patriarchal conventions and socio-religious patterns of womanhood, they attempt to subvert gendered codes of behaviour through an alternative narrative (DeNapoli, 2023a, p. 16).

Patriarchy here is defined as a sociocultural tendency that subordinates women to male hegemony in the public and private sphere leading to an imbalance between the sexes and/or gender identities. This emphasis on a ‘new mode of patriarchy’, which emerged from nationalist reform movements in the 19th century, that were formed as an ideological response against Western influences, led to a conservative moulding of social practices and ideas (Chatterjee, 2020, p. 116). Whilst retaining the essential principles of native Indic culturalism, a reformulation of classic traditional tendencies was simultaneously incorporated into the assertion of a ‘modern’ expression of ‘femininity’ (Chatterjee, 2020, p. 129).

The *new* woman defined in this way was subjected to a new patriarchy. In fact, the social order connecting the home and the world in which nationalists placed the new woman was contrasted not only with that of modern Western society; it was explicitly distinguished from the patriarchy of indigenous tradition, the same tradition that had been put on the dock by colonial interrogators. Sure enough, nationalism adopted several elements from tradition as marks of its native cultural identity, but this was now a "classicized" tradition—reformed, reconstructed, fortified against charges of barbarism and irrationality. (Chatterjee, 2020, p. 127)

This reformulation of social ideals, considering gender-specific aspects in which the subordination of women manifested itself, was a decisive process. Linked to this was the search for a differentiated self-definition of the Indian nation in the 19th century which differed from Western notions of femininity. The discourse on the cultural production of Indian womanhood and femininity was not only led by members of the ‘new’ Indian middle class, who were the dominant voices in the national reform movement, but also excluded female participation in the formation of a nationalist understanding of femininity (Chatterjee, 2020, pp. 131–133). This national reformist ideology shaped the understanding of ‘modern’ femininity in the context of

⁴⁸ ““Traditional” in reference to women is widely employed to translate “normative”” (Hansen, 1992, p. 4).

the Indian nation. The recourse to a system of dichotomies and exclusions thus created new forms of subordination of women, which also included new forms of spiritual and religious practices (Chatterjee, 2020, p. 130). The emphasis on a reformed understanding of patriarchy, promoted by Indian nationalist aspirations, placed the maintenance of national, social, and familial honour (Hi. *izzat*) on women, creating a differentiated form of female subordination that was legitimised by the nation's quest for sovereignty, thereby producing a necessary reformulation of alternative 'female emancipation' (Chatterjee, 2020, p. 130). Hence, it became the task of women to preserve the tradition and indigenous spiritual values associated with womanhood to counter foreign influences, while maintaining a distinct nationalist identity.

Also emerging in the 19th century, a distinctive Hindu revival and revitalisation of religiosity in combination with nationalistic aspirations influenced prominent devotional movements as spirituality advanced as an essential component of the Indian national self-understanding (Sinclair-Brull, 2013). Khandelwal in her empirical study about *sannyāsīnīs* in Hardwar has highlighted the effects of a nationalistic philosophy within the domain of female religiosity and renunciation. She attributes to the emergence of Hindu nationalism, a tendency of politicising religion; a tendency that further disempowered females through obstruction of recognition of female agency (Khandelwal, 2004, p. 197). This idea has also been previously echoed by Basu (1993), who argues that the Hindu nationalist sphere in the 1990s provided women leaders with a framework for public visibility. She demonstrates that the aspect of renunciation enabled women, like Uma Bharati a powerful figure of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), to connect their political agenda of Hindutva to aspects of moral chastity, purity and spirituality, which in turn legitimised the occupation of public politicised spaces by women (Basu, 1993, pp. 25–28). Inspired by Gandhian advocacy for involvement, this equally prompted the emergence of various powerful female religious leaders and gurus in the public sphere (Basu, 1993, p. 32; DeNapoli, 2023a, pp. 1–2). Through the reverence of traditional practices that incised female autonomy and decision-making as well as resistance, the nationalistic philosophical ideology has contributed to representations of women within Indian as well as public society. Hence, a complete rupture with traditional or modern nationalistic concepts of femininity could damage the reputation of female gurus, as they are dependent on social recognition to legitimise their influential leadership positions.

Charpentier notes that, on the one hand, female asceticism can pose a threat to traditional social family structures, as it disrupts the traditional intergenerational contract that ensures the preservation of the familial unit and challenges social expectations, while at the same time renunciation offers women agency over their sexuality, enabling them to withdraw from male

control and rendering direct domination more difficult (Charpentier, 2010, p. 197). Any change in traditional parameters requires female gurus to carefully assess the subversions in the context of patriarchal ideology. Consequently, it is quite common among female gurus and renunciators to expand rather than deconstruct socially prevalent notions of femininity in combination with Indian spiritual mythology, which is perceived as an indispensable component of the nationalistic religious renaissance.

Especially the figures of female deities within Indian mythology serve as prominent examples of female involvement within the religious sphere. The use of the mythological symbolism of the goddess legitimises the equation of divinised aspirations with female spirituality (Erndl, 2000, pp. 94–95). By incorporating central pillars of Indian female religiosity, they construct their own frame of reference for spiritual aspirations while obliging to the concept of *izzat*. Thereby the figure of the goddess also symbolically represents change and transformation through *śakti*, a concept employed by female gurus to display the manifestation between the divinity and the self (Pechilis, 2004, pp. 8–9). The promotion of ‘female agency’ (Khandelwal, 2004, p. 196) draws on the embodiment of a theological concept that endows the female with cosmological power (Erndl, 2000, p. 96; Khandelwal, 2004, p. 211; Pechilis, 2004, p. 8; Rudert, 2017, pp. xvii–xviii, 130). Women are culturally linked with “[...] *ādi paraśakti*, or primordial energy, and as such are associated with the creative and life-giving aspect of the goddess, and with inner qualities such as strength and wisdom” (Charpentier, 2010, p. 249). The employment of this theological framework allows women to be associated with power, force as well as moral chastity that enables them to exercise agency within socio-cultural male-dominated structures. The recourse of 21st century female public gurus to models of female chastity, as a legitimate framework consistent with normative sociocultural models of femininity, is also incorporated into modern movements:

Strong patriarchal attitudes, such as expectations to follow role models of wifely devotion, are sometimes encouraged by female gurus. Amritanandamayi encourages female housewives to set an example for other women by following the scriptural advice and following in the footsteps of Sītā, Savitrī, and Satyavatī, all examples of the classical *strīdharma* ideal. (Charpentier, 2010, p. 271)

While it does not seem particularly transformative to draw on and promote traditional notions of femininity, based on mythological associations of women with goddesses, another reading of the recourse to epic heroine figures allows for a more nuanced interpretation. In her analysis of *Heroic Modes of Women in India* (1992), Hansen illustrates how specific qualities and powers are attributed to women through their association with goddesses and heroic figures, which are an expression of female power and authority. For example, a woman's identification with Savitrī gives her supernatural abilities as she can accumulate good merit through devotion (Hansen, 1992, p. 7). “In each case, the heroine’s self-sacrifice, like the ascetic’s self-denial, leads to an

accumulation of extraordinary merit or power” (Hansen, 1992, p. 7). Albeit this can be seen as a problematic concept, as the accumulation of female power is only fostered in dependence on the male counterpart, e.g. through conjugal obedience, the traditional *purāṇic* model serves as a legitimation for women to accumulate a form of (spiritual) power that is associated with the supernatural (Hansen, 1992, p. 7). This interpretation is also aligned with the conception that patriarchal inspired female subordination prevails because the underlying recognition of female agency exists, since these women are endowed with creational and destructive potentials due to their *śakti*. The recourse to these socially accepted concepts of patriarchal-inspired gender conformant *ācāras* (codes of conduct) allows the female gurus to gain legitimacy without facing social rejection from orthodox members of society (Charpentier, 2010, p. 273). Although Amma advises her householder disciples to adhere to the prevailing traditionally mythologically inspired *ācāras*, she also takes a different approach to the ritual participation of women in her temples. Though there is a segregation of social genders in her *āśram*, she allows women to perform sacrifices, participate as ritual officiants (*pūjārīṇīs*), and endows her *brahmacārīṇīs* with authority (Warrier, 2005, p. 131). For those purposes she exercises a peculiar strategy, which is characterised by subtility (Lucia, 2014b, p. 122). This orderly approach enables the guru to realise changes in gender roles, female religious participation, and authority within the logic of Hindu mythology. The historical example of egalitarianism in Hindu mythology from the ‘Golden Age’ of the Vedic period allows her to justify women's religious commitment while upholding the *śāstric* idealisation of virtuous and righteous conduct, a similar standpoint to Ānandamayī Mā (Lucia, 2014b, pp. 121–123). This reconnection to tradition allows female renunciators to connect their subjecthood to accepted social ideals despite increasing modern influences. However, it must be acknowledged that the structures of patriarchy within the Hindu society are not fossilized, rather a constant reconfiguration in relation to them constantly takes place (Erndl, 2000, pp. 95–96). Therefore, connecting the feminine principles with spiritual aspirations outside of traditional Brahmanical orthopraxy and more publicly accredited Hindu religious movements, allows women to emphasise the qualities associated with femininity by applying a mainstream concept that equally creates a sense of (cultural) belonging.

As the renunciant narrative reconstructed by DeNapoli shows, Indian women believe that enduring suffering caused by social constraints and customs enhances their *śakti* (DeNapoli, 2014, pp. 97–98). Paired with the display of selflessness, it enables women to utilise their subordinate social position to develop even more power as well as gain moral leverage (Basu, 1993, p. 34; DeNapoli, 2014, pp. 86–87). The divine power is also prevalent in the figure of the guru (male and female) who transmits energy to the aspirant during initiation; both female gurus

and renouncers employ the traditional Indian concept associated with the feminine to bring about gender-specific changes (DeNapoli, 2014, p. 85; Rudert, 2017, pp. 130–131). Within the yogic tradition, *śakti* is associated with a transformative or creative power that can be evoked within a spiritual seeker who follows the guru *bhakti* path (Rudert, 2017, p. 133). The construction of an alternative (religious) femininity is thereby based on an occupation of altered gender roles in line with traditional cultural values. The inclusion of ambiguity and accommodation within the *bhakti* movement not only has enabled its continued survival alongside the more orthodox and conservative movements, but it has also allowed female gurus to construct an alternative female religiosity that is situated in an ‘in-between’ sphere which does not ignore prevalent social-gendered perspectives (Charpentier, 2010, pp. 271–272; Pechilis, 2004, p. 8). However, these intermediate spaces are subject to negotiation, as the limits are not set in stone, but are continuously being renegotiated in terms of cultural acceptance.

The female guru Ānandmūrti Gurumā draws on a different strategy to legitimise her spiritual authority. When asked whether women can also become gurus, Gurumā replies that “[a] guru is neither she or he. Guru means knowledge, wisdom, so how can you put a gender on a wisdom?” (Anandmurti Gurumaa., 2019, Section 1:02-1:11). Therefore, a guru who has realised *ātman* should be recognised as a body without gender. The body is without gender since “[...] the final state of liberation is defined as a transcendence of the very social conventions and distinctions (regarding, for example, ritual purity) that characterize much of renunciant social life” (Khandelwal, 2004, p. 142). Although the guru embodies a category beyond gender, the female gurus are nevertheless subject to gender normative roles defined by patriarchally constructed socio-religious conventions. Rudert provides an explanation for the prevailing aspect of gender markers through the study of Gurumā: “As the body becomes in a sense global and reflects a certain type of composite pluralism, it nonetheless remains a body situated in a particular place and time and gendered form” (Rudert, 2017, p. 109). Khandelwal (2010, p. 197) argues that since the exclusion of female participation in the religious sphere was the norm, women who embody renunciation per se can be categorised as transgressive because they actively defy the restrictions of access and thus demonstrate agency. However, this notion of ‘transgressiveness’ is perceived differently within the various public female guru movements of several generations, who employ various strategies to legitimate female religiosity within the patriarchally influenced Indian society. This becomes evident when one investigates how different female renouncers manoeuvre the deeply patriarchally entrenched socioreligious spaces. As Pechilis remarks in the anthology about various female gurus in leadership positions:

The most radical challenge of the female gurus is not directed toward the received guru tradition but rather the received social expectations. Their asceticism is in keeping with the guru ideal, but it challenges the Hindu social norms of womanhood, which are marriage and bearing children. (Pechilis, 2004, p. 7)

Instead of overcoming the prevailing notions within the male-dominated understanding of guruship, the social categorisation and normative understanding of femininity, which is mostly associated with the traditional aspect, is reconstructed within a religious context. The construction of the gendered order and the reshaping of boundaries, hence, must be considered individually to avoid making generalised assumptions about female renunciation within a patriarchal context.

Furthermore, when analysing the representation of (public) female religiosity in Indian society, contextual awareness of historically determined cultural conditions must be considered. For example, as illustrated by the analysed case study of Ānandamayī Mā, the 20th century female guru, her emergence into the public sphere was characterised by male interventions (Pechilis, 2015, p. 404). While she was committed to ensuring that her female disciples could perform *upanayana*, which in Brahmanical Hinduism was traditionally reserved for male disciples, the female guru also strictly adhered to the orthodox regulations. For instance, her adherence to traditional concepts like the *varṇāśramadharma* within her personal life mark her as orthodox, a notion which has also been observed by Suthren Hirst. She argues that Ānandamayī Mā as well as her organisation benefited from her traditional approach, as her public persona was perceived as ‘respectable’, which also provided her access to powerful political figures, such as Nehru and Indira Gandhi (Suthren Hirst, 2016, p. 174). The female guru's connections to a certain Hindu elite not only gave her public authority, but also enabled political leaders, like Indira Gandhi, to legitimise themselves in the public sphere, further illustrating the close political-religious nexus in India (Suthren Hirst, 2016, pp. 169, 189). Since Ānandamayī Mā did not oppose change but encouraged it, she subtly promoted the development of change in line with traditional orthodox Indian values and scriptural prescriptions for progress.

The attentiveness and emphasis on devotion of women according to scriptural ideals, is however not restricted to female religious movements of the 20th century. Even within the 21st century, the call for the adaption of tradition is not directed at general hegemonic and suppressive institutionalised or social structures. As a direct critique would limit the authority and public influence of female gurus, religious leaders like Amma stress the aspect of self-responsibility (Lucia, 2014b, pp. 137–138). This places the responsibility for change on the individual, rather than on the generally hostile and oppressive forces which seek to hinder female religious involvement. These subordinate notions are bridged by referring to certain

socially compatible frameworks. By drawing on the concept of motherhood, a form of biological reductionism, Amma counteracts the concept of masculinity through emphasising the centrality of feminine qualities. Associating the creative, mythologically inspired power of mothers with modern femininity, Amma makes use of a widespread concept from Indian feminist dialogues, which is based on a specifically culturally generated understanding of Indian Hindu femininity (Lucia, 2014b, p. 143). This interpretation of the culturally shaped and traditionally legitimate model of understanding the feminine allows women like Amma to justify female authority within the religious sphere, without contradicting patriarchal normative perceptions of Indian womanhood. This topic of motherhood is a central element of the gendered rhetoric, employed by many female gurus, as remarked by Pechilis (2015, pp. 406–407). Amma, who embodies the ultimate “ascetic habitus of universal motherhood” (Lucia, 2014b, p. 144), amplified by her ‘motherly compassionate hugs’ for her devotees, advocates through a universalistic and inclusive rhetoric. To gain recognition and receive legitimation from outsiders, for her reformist religious commitment, she incorporates widely accepted cultural-religious notions of Indian womanhood into her discourses and movement. Operating within the patriarchal constraints of Indian femininity, women's religious participation is enabled, and at the same time, the culturally dominant paradigms of femininity are reinforced. Within Amma's movement, there is no radical departure from normative assumptions about the feminine; however, other female gurus, such as Ānandmūrti Gurumā, take a different stance in relation to the reproduction of normative, patriarchally enforced religious cultural values that restrict women's authority. Rudert distinctively differentiates the female guru's embodiment of femininity from Lucia's analysis of Amma which is highlighted by the following:

Gurumaa understands herself to embody Shakti, a feminine divine power. However, I do not see Gurumaa to “construct” her self-identity “in terms of maternity,” through her words and actions or in the media's repackaging of her words. In this aspect, she stands apart from most other female gurus today. (Rudert, 2017, p. 187)

The 21st century new age guru differs from other female gurus of this generation by adopting an alternative strategy that emphasises her qualities as an educated and empowered leader, rather than as a female embodiment reliant on mythological concepts. However, she still carries the title “mā” within her name and on her official website, indicating that she is respected as a motherly figure by her devotees despite her aspired alternative self-identification and self-positioning outside of the motherhood locus. She aspires a transgression by highlighting her achievements as examples of emancipation and liberation (*mokṣa*) for both male and female followers, by displaying her female agency in the religious sphere. Similarly to Ānandmūrti Gurumā, Amma seeks to inspire her devotees to emulate her ideal by providing opportunities for female religious participation. The aspect of female religious leaders as role models appears

to be a recurring theme within various guru movements. Although Gurumā tries to accentuate her personality as an aspiring role model, she cannot escape the analogy with the aspect of a caring mother. As female gurus have helped to co-construct the narrative around motherhood in recent generations, the question arises as to whether and how this role can and will be rejected by individuals in the future, especially if they do not aspire to perform within these categories. If more female gurus also refuse to take on these ‘motherhood’ roles, the issue of social acceptance equally emerges.

Gurumā can also be distinguished from other gurus, as the rhetoric of Western feminist discourse has found its way into her movement. Albeit Rudert emphasises the guru's alignment with the frameworks prevalent in traditional Indian religions, she points to the permeability of the movement, which also refers to Western feminist discourses, among others, that identify the female renunciate as ‘contemporary’ through her adaptation of different cultural perspectives (2017, p. 138). One could argue that it is precisely this amalgamation of different discourses that characterises her movement as innovative for female followers in the 21st century, as “[s]he argues with sages past and speaks out in a new voice, broadening the conversation, extending it to new partners” (Rudert, 2017, p. 137). ‘New partners’ are women who see the model of Indian femininity rooted in the mythological sphere as inadequate, in an era of globalisation and transnational movements, as their audience consists of educated, ‘modernised’ and liberalised women who believe in autonomy rather than self-restraint. Gurumā utilises the potential of the digital era to advocate as a woman, for transformation within the male-dominated society as well as the religious sphere, thereby transgressing hegemonic discourses that fostered the subordination of female religiosity. As subordination to paternalistic norms and the influence of male entitlement were clearly predominant in the 20th century female guru movements, e.g. in Ānandamayī Mā's, in the 21st century the negotiation of female religious participation is based on a gender-specific assertion of authority while similarly adhering to traditional religious practices. The generation of Ānandamayī Mā, as Charpentier calls them, can be characterised as an adherence to a *dharmaśāstric* understanding of femininity, fostered by both Brahmanical hegemony and colonial influences that overemphasised the importance of scriptures, which promoted a more conservative view of women's ritual and spiritual participation (Charpentier, 2010, pp. 50, 193; Denton, 2004, p. 3). However, the dissent against the prevailing socio-cultural norms in the 21st century is still situated within a traditional Hindu discourse, through which female gurus gain religious authority. Rather than envisaging a complete rupture with dominating traditional structures, through which they risk losing charismatic authority within society, the female gurus opt for ‘small-scale’ change situated

within their movements. The presence of female gurus and ascetics in the Indian public sphere is evidence of the permeability of modern Hindu religious communities. As female renunciants mostly operate outside dependable hegemonic and more institutionalised structures, they have created their own spaces for transformation. The model of renunciation, however, only allows for limited leeway since the cultural boundaries define the parameters for spiritual asceticism and sainthood. Although renunciation is possible outside the mainstream Brahmanical framework, as DeNapoli's study shows, female renunciants equally reproduce hegemonic notions to legitimise their aspirations and use these to create a form of respectability within the socially subordinated community (DeNapoli, 2014, p. 225). "Despite the ideological misogyny of some Brahmanical texts, the sadhus' representation of divine union as an intimate and direct experience of wholeness enables them to engender their agency, legitimacy, and power as female renouncers" (DeNapoli, 2014, p. 288). The recourse to the dominant ideologies and the male Brahmanical model accompanies female asceticism in one way or another because it also allows women to negotiate leeway within the tradition, e.g. by referring to Vedic historical examples of female sages, that are also recognised by the mainstream society. This does not mean that all female gurus are negotiating latitude in the same way, since different reforms are envisaged within the various movements. However, it also means that a certain constant (*here*: the Brahmanical model) is necessary for demarcation to be able to present itself as an alternative, authentic and viable option. Without a recourse to dominant models, significantly differentiating or varying practices would not be possible. As illustrated by the *bhakti* paradigm, a certain extent of variation from hegemonic influences is necessary to ensure survival through adaptation. This does not exclude the possibility of negotiating boundaries within alternative movements that change the sphere of influence on these organisations. At the same time, this raises the question of the method of demarcation from mainstream contributions. A reconstruction of the discourse within the Ānandamayī Mā movement has shown that negotiations tended to take place at a subtle level, while Gurumā, for example, took a more overt approach, publicly drawing on Indian and Western discourses to promote religious emancipation. Drawing primarily on Indian feminist dialogues, Amma seeks to bring about change in her sphere of influence and authority whilst incorporating traditional elements into her movement. One can thus observe varying degrees of transgression of Brahmanical orthodox notions of women's religious participation.

Just as Butler argues that identities are performative, the identities of the female guru movements are also shaped by their performance in relation to social norms (Butler, 2007, p. 34). What is considered acceptable must, therefore, always be understood in relation to

dominant, influential performative structures that provide a reference point for normative socio-cultural or religious deviance or derivation. Since the identities of the female guru movements are in a constant state of flux with historically, culturally, and socially accepted modes of existence, the different identities or subjectivities of female religiosity emerging within women-led movements become visible.

4.2 Gender and Guruship

Female renouncers in the 20th and 21st centuries have utilised their gendered identities to transgress traditional and cultural frameworks of female religiosity. There are clear distinctions in gender conceptions between the female gurus of the 20th and 21st centuries. The famous gender theorist Judith Butler elaborates extensively on the category of gender. According to her, it must be noted that the category of the female (or any other) gender is far from being coherent or homogenous as gender is an imagined cultural as well as social construct that lacks a unitary identity (Butler, 2007, pp. 7–8). Emerging out of a discursive context the understanding of gendered identities is subjected to cultural, social and historical changes (Butler, 2007, pp. 10–14; Lucia, 2014b, pp. 108–109). Since gender relies on a constructed identity it is linked to its performance, thereby constituting itself as a *social temporality* that can entail discontinuity between identities (Butler, 2007, pp. 191–192). Through performance, a cultural meaning is created so that no ‘real’ gender identity is present, while equally reproducing similarly dominant gender identities as a formation of the habitus, concealing alternative performative possibilities that undermine hegemonic discourses (Butler, 2007, pp. 192–193). Ultimately, the social construction of norms is subjected to context specifics, e.g. time and space, which is based on fictitious and generalised assumptions of external influences rather than autonomous allocations. Female gurus can be located at the interlocation of alternatively performed gender identities, while subverting restrictive gender discourses.

While within the Indian cultural context renunciation and guruship are typically associated with the male gender, the female gurus in this study draw, among others, on the *bhakti* model to legitimise their religious involvement (DeNapoli, 2014, pp. 19, 25; Pechilis, 2004, p. 6; Rudert, 2017, p. 152). What has been observed by DeNapoli about female vernacular renouncers in Rajasthan can also be applied to the practices of female gurus since they “[...] combine normative and non-normative, orthodox and unorthodox, and Brahmanical and *bhakti* elements, and bring this synthesis into its new context of *sannyās*” (DeNapoli, 2014, p. 30). The female gurus’ peculiar, gendered renunciation draws on the synthesis of different concepts and ideas to legitimate their spiritual advancement while operating within a traditionally male domain of religiosity. According to Pechilis, it can also be described as a ‘religious perspective’

that guides everyday practices but also embraces alternative regional variations (Pechilis Prentiss, 2000, pp. 5–6). Especially the model of *bhakti* or *guru-bhakti* allows them to foster their personal relationship with the divine that includes worship, prayer, meditative practices, and recitation of Vedic mantras or scriptures (DeNapoli, 2014, p. 70; Rudert, 2017, pp. 12–14). Within the different *bhakti* traditions, stories and tales of historical *sants* legitimate the endeavours of female gurus, as the various predecessors provide a framework for the guru's personal experiences (Larios, 2017, pp. 8, 51; Rudert, 2017, p. 13). The model of *bhakti*, also outlined within the *Bhagavadgītā* as one of three paths⁴⁹, especially in North India, focuses on devotion is grounded within practice rather than epistemology. It faces critique from other intellectual ideals emphasising knowledge (*jñāna*) over direct worship, since it constitutes an ideological confrontation as outlined by Brahmanism (Khandelwal, 2004, p. 23; Larios, 2017, p. 8). The three female gurus of this study, therefore, draw on the paradigm of *bhakti* to emphasise the possibility of spiritual advancement through the practice of individualised or personal worship that can appear in many different forms and shapes. “The conception of individual existence as a journey along a particular path provides Hindus with a way of understanding individual variation in religious life and engenders a context-sensitive view of the world” (Khandelwal, 2004, p. 138). Disciples who follow the path (Sk. *mārga*) of guru devotion (*guru-bhakti mārga*), therefore, believe in the inherent power (*śakti*), prevalent within both genders, of the renouncer that can diminish or even eliminate ignorance (Sk. *avidyā*) within the aspirant and therefore is perceived as more egalitarian than other *mārgas*. Within the *guru-mārga*, the spiritual role model helps to annihilate the ignorance, referred to as darkness, to gain illumination in form of the path of knowledge (Sk. *jñānamārga*) for the aspirant as well, to ignite the inclination towards liberation (Denton, 2004, pp. 91–92; Fischer-Tiné, 2000, p. 5; Khandelwal, 2004, p. 23) (see chap. 2.1.3 and 2.2.2). As the gurus are perceived as *avatāras* of female deities, the *guru-bhakti* model is presented as an alternative to more orthodox and institutionalised tradition, e.g. the Brahmanical. DeNapoli points, for example, to the great acceptance and openness of the devotional tradition, which enables the recognition of spiritual achievements outside institutionalised contexts:

The Indian hagiographical and vernacular-language *bhakti* literature undermines, or rejects altogether, the idea of literacy as a sign of authentic spirituality. Some of India's most famous sadhus and saints, men and women alike, were “unlettered” and still achieved remarkable religious status and leadership during their lifetimes. (DeNapoli, 2014, p. 231)

The female gurus thus rely on this model of worship as it prioritises spiritual enlightenment over institutionalised authority; an authority which entails restrictions on access. This path

⁴⁹ There are three legitimate paths listed for the fulfillment of spiritual pursuits, namely *jñānamārga*, *bhaktimārga* and *karmamārga* (Denton, 2004, pp. 90–92; Khandelwal, 2004, p. 23).

through the prioritisation of personal worship equally allows for pluralistic devotional manifestations that do not denounce female adepts since it provides an alternative to prescriptive institutionalised ritualism as cultivated by Brahmanism.

Gender-specific expectations of female gurus also play a central role within Hinduism, as mostly any deviations from socio-cultural norms are perceived as unconventional (Rudert, 2017, p. 187) (see chap. 4.1). Female gurus are not only addressed as mothers (*guru-mā*; *mātājī*) according to their external gender, but also embody symbolic aspects of motherhood and emphasise “selfless service, love and compassion for all humanity” (Lucia, 2014b, p. 142). By drawing on the concept of divine motherhood, in accordance with the qualities of the goddesses, the female gurus combine their gender identity with a form of asexuality that has overcome the need for direct exertion of male dominance (Charpentier, 2010, p. 33; Erndl, 2000, p. 94; Khandelwal, 2004, p. 177). The association with and adoption of certain traits such as asexuality, care, selflessness, sacrifice, mysticism and traditional divine motherhood allow women to be viewed as figures of spiritual authority within the Indian hegemonically male Hindu community (Charpentier, 2010, p. 145; Denton, 2004, p. 119; Erndl, 2000, p. 94). This divine motherhood, however, differs partially from the cultural understanding of domestic motherhood. Since the inner and spiritual qualities of motherhood are emphasised rather than the outer qualities, e.g. reproductive capacities or conjugality, which can conflict with societal ideals of domestic femininity (Charpentier, 2010, p. 223; Pechilis, 2004, p. 15). This interaction of domestic duties, wifehood/motherhood, and spiritual aspirations also emerges within the *bhakti* and Tantric scriptures. While the Tantric discourses authorise the female embodiment of divinity, the *bhakti* school of thought acknowledges the tradition of female saints (Flood, 2011, p. 177; Khandelwal, 2004, p. 147; Pechilis, 2004, p. 15). While according to the Śākta tradition, the concept of divine motherhood resides within all female bodies, in the Brahmanical Hindu tradition, the manifestation of the divine motherhood must be evoked through the embodiment of a goddess and her associated qualities (Charpentier, 2010, pp. 231, 240; Denton, 2004, p. 119; Flood, 2011, p. 177). The heterodoxy of the tantric spirituality, which has also influenced the understanding of Hinduism, therefore accepts the embodiment of the divine as feminine, allowing for greater freedom of female religious participation (Erndl, 2000, pp. 93–94; Pechilis, 2004, p. 20) (see chap.2.2.2). Denton remarks that “[...] the tantric recognition of women’s preceptorial capacities and the specific sexual embodiment of the divine [has] encouraged women’s participation in its ritual tradition” (2004, pp. 118–119). As the compatibility of domestic and spiritual pursuits has historically found more acceptance in the Tantric tradition, female gurus invoke tantric elements, through which they simultaneously expand Hindu

femininity imagery. Charpentier calls the reference to motherly ideals a ‘strategy’ used by female gurus within the Hindu tradition to overcome dichotomies such as religious aspiration and the social expectations of marriage (Charpentier, 2010, p. 299). A similar viewpoint is also emphasised by Pechilis: “[...] [T]he female guru’s primary identity is as a religious exemplar and not as a sexually-defined wife and mother” (Pechilis, 2015, p. 405). The female guru Amma for example proposes a different concept that disregards the dichotomy between female procreational capacities and divinity. She promotes a concept of “universal motherhood” (Lucia, 2014b) that is linked to specific cultural attributes associated with motherhood and are positioned outside of the gender debate as Indian maternity is associated with asexuality. It is precisely this universalising rhetoric of spirituality that attracts global followers, as different pathways within the movement are acknowledged (Mällinen & Utriainen, 2024, p. 79). Cultivating these specific universalistic maternal qualities is therefore also seen as a possibility for male devotees. This is why the application of the concept is thought of in a metaphorical realm, rather than prioritising physiological processes associated with motherhood. Warriar defines this as an aspiration of ‘effeminization’ that allows also male devotees to establish a personal connection with the guru based on motherly compassion (Warriar, 2005, p. 142). The invocation of different understandings of motherhood can therefore be observed in the movement of Amma, as the metaphorical use of the term does not exclude reference to its literal meaning (see chap. 3.2.1 and 4.1). The multi-ambivalent use of the concept of motherhood serves not only as a model for overcoming socially determined gender-specific expectations. It also accentuates the gendered characteristics associated with the term at the same time.

The gender discrimination caused by the hegemony of orthodox Brahmanism that led to the restriction of women's religious participation can be traced back to the prioritisation of particular scriptural sources. The philosophy of the *Advaita Vedānta*, which was founded by Śaṅkara in the 8th century and resurfaced during the 19th century within the reform movements, underlines the perspective of “nondualism as the “culmination of the Vedas”” (Larios, 2017, p. 193; Pechilis, 2004, p. 14; Sinclair-Brull, 2013, p. 18) (see chap. 2.3.1). According to this school of thought, drawing from *upaniṣadic* sources, gender-based distinctions are associated with spiritual imperfections since the illusion (Sk. *māyā*) of difference still prevails within the seeker (Pechilis, 2004, pp. 14–15; Stietencron, 2001, p. 42). Since the prescriptive Dharmaśāstric literature limits the involution of female religiosity, because women are allocated to the *varṇa* of *śūdras*, an alternative scriptural source of authority is referenced, which stresses monism (Chattopadhyaya, 1990, p. 73; Stietencron, 2001, p. 42; Young, 2002, pp. 90–91). Within the Vedic and *upaniṣadic* literature, the only real unity can occur with *brahman* as the “ultimate

reality of universal oneness” (Lucia, 2014b, p. 172) of all beings and any distinctions are deemed to be illusory rather than real (Khandelwal, 2004, p. 198; Pechilis, 2004, pp. 14–15). By emphasising the *nirguṇ* (absence of quality) of *ātmā*, which leads to a genderless and formless understanding of the Absolute, the concept of dualism, e.g. gender-based differences, is suspended (DeNapoli, 2014, p. 192). Hence, the experiential self-understanding based on knowledge in contrast to the dedication of the exterior form is accentuated (Rudert, 2017, p. 47). As a result, the dichotomy between body and mind is lifted, along with the transcendent aspects of illusory distinctions (Khandelwal, 2004, pp. 176–177). Nonetheless, society perceives only the exterior therefore, “[...] what people see and base their ideas on acts as a “curtain” that conceals the *ātmā*, shielding their realization of its potent truth [...]” (DeNapoli, 2014, p. 193).

According to the philosophical view of Hinduism, its external appearance or gross body (Sk. *sthūl śarīr*) bears the specific sexual characteristics, while the subtle body (Sk. *sūkṣma śarīr*) is not defined by mass or external appearance and consequently does not have the property of decay, but is perceived as intangible (Khandelwal, 2004, p. 176). As the *sūkṣma śarīr* can detach itself from the *sthūl śarīr* in times of mental migratory endeavours, it is interesting to note that both are gendered. Meaning, it is believed to be sheathed by covers that bear gender markers. The ascetics, who pursue renunciation, strive for the dismantling of layers in which gender imprints are ascribed (Khandelwal, 2004, p. 177). Renunciation can, consequently, be described as a process of detachment and indifference from bodily layers that bear the imprints of societal and bodily gender categories, assumptions and inscriptions. Khandelwal, who is concerned with the question whether gender matters in the context of female renunciation states, that “[f]rom the perspective of the *laukik* (worldly) and the *jīva* (living person) gender is an obstacle to asceticism, but from the perspective of the *alaukik* and the *atma*, it is irrelevant” (Khandelwal, 2004, p. 180). From this statement it becomes evident that, ultimately the perspective matters. Depending on which philosophical concept or perspective is employed, gender identity can be an obstacle and at the same time be characterised by irrelevance. Female gurus, who are described as prime examples of complete renunciation, thus transcend ascribed gender categories to embody the realisation of *paramātmā*, which underscores the inapplicability of gendered categories.

However, as explained above, outward appearance is therefore decisive for the acceptance of spiritual aspirations, which forms the basis for the subordination of renunciates along gender lines rather than inner aspirations. The universalistic philosophical logic is also used by female gurus to foreground inequalities in terms of socio-cultural perceptions and the distribution of

material benefits based on gender (Khandelwal, 2004, p. 177; Lucia, 2014b, p. 172). This philosophical view, which also influenced the emergence of an amalgamated “Neo-Hinduism”, also found its way into other nationalist and reform movements of the 19th century, such as the Brahmo Samāj⁵⁰, Ārya Samāj⁵¹ or the Ramkrishna Movement⁵², which campaigned for the religious involvement and education of women (Charpentier, 2010, p. 65; Sinclair-Brull, 2013, pp. 9, 70; Stietencron, 2001, p. 43) (see chap. 2.3.1). By adopting the philosophical position of universalist equality, an expression of neo-vedāntic Hinduism, the female gurus utilise a traditional logic that does not conflict with socio-cultural gender-specific hierarchies (Charpentier, 2010, p. 65; Larios, 2017, p. 193). Rather, it allows the female gurus to argue for the indifference of gender distinctions in the context of a traditionally accepted philosophical, religious framework. The philosophical “dissolution of difference” (Lucia, 2014, p. 35) allows female gurus not to be perceived as particularly revolutionary or feminist, but to legitimise the aspirations of both genders through a traditionally accepted framework of Hindu philosophy.

By overthrowing socially constructed gender norms through the framework of Hindu religiosity, the female renouncers manoeuvre their discourses between traditional culturally accepted modes of femininity and veracious religiosity (Lucia, 2014b, p. 110). Especially in the 21st century, it has become a balancing act for female gurus like Amma or Gurumā to deal with the different cultural performances and perceptions of diverse gender identities by their global followers, as the female guru’s movements are characterised by “global interconnectivity” as well as a transnational followership base (Lucia, 2014b, p. 110; Rudert, 2017, p. xxiii). This approach is particularly characteristic of transnational guru movements, which aim to appeal to different target groups in different cultures and use universalist rhetoric to appeal to global followers. This is achieved by the 21st century public gurus through the construction of “[...] engendering alternatives to “traditional” religious authority while remaining spiritually “Indic” in continuity with teachings from the rich Indian religious past” (Rudert, 2017, p. 24). As it will be discussed in the upcoming section, the recourse to the rhetoric of Western feminist discourses is largely avoided, as the importation of Western feminist constructs are considered insufficient for the cultural understanding of the complex (regional) identities of Indian womanhood(s) as well as multiple subjectivities (Gedalof, 1999, pp. 2–4, 8). The emergence of

⁵⁰ Founded by Rammohun Roy, an influential social reformer of the Bengali elite (bhadralok) and the Hindu revivalist movement, who advocated a reformist approach to the study of the Vedas (Fischer-Tiné, 2000, pp. 9–14; Sinclair-Brull, 2013, pp. 9–10).

⁵¹ While the movement did not apply the philosophical stance within their movement it was discussed and eventually rejected based on the believe of monotheism that rejects the unity of soul and the Absolute (Fischer-Tiné, 2000, p. 18).

⁵² The spiritual teacher of Ramkrishna was a female Tantric acetic named Bhairavi who guided him in his spiritual pursuit (Fischer-Tiné, 2000, pp. 13–14; Sinclair-Brull, 2013, pp. 16–17).

a “new global religious milieu” (Rudert, 2017, p. xxiv), situated within the Indian public, relies on specific cultural interpretations and understandings of complex gender identities that are in line with traditional philosophies and dominant religious concepts. This sociocultural strategy relies on the gendered reformulation of spiritual as well as theological practices rather than the overthrowing of traditionally gendered social ideals (Charpentier, 2010, p. 288; Lucia, 2014b, p. 111; Rudert, 2017, p. xxiv). The diverse Indian mythological and philosophical configurations allow an alternative reading in the context of modern religiosity, because the permeability of altruistic influences is inherent to lived Hindu religiosity, which has also prolonged its existence by incorporating external influences.

This section highlights how female guru figures navigate their adaptations between traditional, culturally accepted gender roles and veracious religiosity. Female gurus legitimise their spiritual ascent despite the limitations imposed by their gender identity by incorporating various indigenous ideologies, concepts and philosophies that represent an alternative to societies’ perception of gender. At the same time an inherent ambiguity can be observed, which dominates the discourse around gender within the female guru movements as their femaleness serves as a distinctive marker in demarcation to male renouncers. Simultaneously, however, the aspect of gender is negated in accordance with Hindu philosophical perspectives to justify aspirations of liberation efforts. Within the female gurus discourses, it has been observed that the degree of emphasis on gender is consequently used variably depending on the situation and context requirements.

4.3 Alternative modes of empowerment in Hindu religious practices

As the power of authority, according to Hindu scriptures, rests with the male subjects, female religious aspirants need to be empowered by alternative sources of authority to realise their potential agency within the dominant religious ideology. According to Kabeer (1999) empowerment “refers to the processes by which those who have been denied the ability to make choices acquire such an ability. In other words, empowerment entails a *process of change*” (Kabeer, 1999, p. 437). This change needs to be evoked by members who possess the authority to legitimise the envisaged modifications. Another important aspect is the recognition of realisable alternatives that depend on the available resources and the subject's potential agency to implement the desired change (Kabeer, 1999, pp. 437–438). The factor of agency thereby depends on the individual’s capacity to act in correlation to hegemonial structures, which need to be recognised as such: “It can take the form of bargaining and negotiation, deception and manipulation, subversion and resistance as well as more intangible, cognitive processes of reflection and analysis. It can be exercised by individuals as well as by collectivities” (Kabeer,

1999, p. 438). Female gurus use a subtle form of subversion to strategically address the need to reverse power structures that are perceived as inherently gendered within the religious domain, influenced by cultural norms (Kabeer, 1999, pp. 439–441). The movements of female gurus thus participate in and contribute to the collective reorganisation of boundaries and the dismantling of the effects on the individual caused by non-normative aspirations.

Within the religious movements of Hinduism, self-transformation and transcendence are an essential part of the ascetic lifestyle, which presupposes the concept of empowerment and the incitement to change the status quo (DeNapoli, 2023b, p. 9; Khandelwal, 2004, p. 132; Khandelwal & Hausner, 2006, pp. 12–14). Female gurus serve as role models for identification, as they embody an Indian female leadership position that is conditioned by the prior transgression of sociocultural norms, but at the same time these are maintained through the construction of an example of aberration (Khandelwal, 2004, p. 201). The female gurus integrate the religious empowerment of female disciples in line with the religious paradigms of Hinduism in their movements to incite engendered alternations within the general Indian society as well. Already in the 20th century, Ānandamayī Mā advocated for female religious participation within her movement by fostering the spiritual progress of her *brahmacāriṇīs*, as analysed by Hallstrom:

Ma empowered the women close to her to learn new skills and take charge of things which were normally within the male domain. In this way, she nurtured a certain kind of independence in her celibate women devotees, which I felt when I interviewed them. The seven *brahmacāriṇīs* and one *sannyāsinī* whom I met were, as a group, very strong, outspoken, and independent. (Hallstrom, 1999, p. 209)

It is interesting that within the movement, the female guru focused on providing religious equalisation for women who were in proximity to her. While this form of supportive empowerment based on proximity can also be observed in the movement of Amma, Gurumā rather advocates publicly for empowerment through technology and education programs, therefore altering the aspect of adjacency. Rudert notes in her elaborations about the movement of Gurumā, that she possesses the material and social resources to invoke change through which she retains agency to empower females within the Indian society (Kabeer, 1999, p. 137; Rudert, 2017, pp. 131–132). Her movement, extensively discussed by Rudert, has emerged as a women-led religious institution, the Mātā Amṛtānandamayī Mission and Trust, outside the archetypal male-dominated institutionalised structures, allows her to openly and publicly challenge gender differentials as she possesses institutional support for invoking change (2017, p. 30). Ānandamayī Mā, who founded a Sanskrit school for women (*Kanyāpīṭh*) in Benares, in 1938, to enable young girls to study Vedic scriptures by learning Sanskrit, equally sought to advocate empowerment through an educational institution (Denton, 2004, pp. 129–131; Hallstrom, 1999, p. 206). During Denton’s field research of five years, she studied 134 female ascetics in Benares

and visited the female guru's *Kanyāpīṭh*. Besides the 45 residential *brahmacāriṇīs* adherence to the strict rules of celibacy, everyone took *mantra-dīkṣā* and thus took the vow of formal *brahmacarya* (Denton, 2004, pp. 129, 137). Denton states that “[...] to those who will pursue serious scholarship and who may act as ritual officiants at the deity worship ceremonies in their respective temples, the sacred thread investiture (*upanayana*) is allowed” (2004, p. 137). Only a small number of women who endeavoured to follow a religious path of devotion received the sacred thread, which thus became a symbol for the selective entry of women into the ascetic community. Suthren Hirst remarks that nowadays the institution emphasises a curriculum that teaches girls how to sew and cook, contributing to the traditional ideal of Indian womanhood (Suthren Hirst, 2016, pp. 186–187). In this context, the aspect of a modern *sevā* is particularly emphasised, which is characterised by the contribution to welfare through social organisations, which is equally linked to a form of national commitment (Suthren Hirst, 2016, p. 186). Apart from this, Ānandamayī Mā's commitment to women's religious participation is also evident in the establishment of a *yajñśālā* (offering hall for fire rituals)⁵³, which was constructed by a female committee chosen by the female guru herself (Hallstrom, 1999, p. 208). The desire to legitimise empowerment within the traditional religious framework of Hinduism through the establishment of institutions, that would serve as a tool to bring about change, was thus already present in the 20th century female gurus' movement. However, these changes can be considered moderate and cautious, as the male intervention was strongly present within the movement. Khandelwal & Hausner remark in the anthology about female renouncers of different Indic religious traditions, that the practice of asceticism itself can be understood as empowering, as a sacrifice for spiritual advancement endows females with a form of religious and political authority since their celibacy defines the role of the male protector to safeguard the female sexuality (Khandelwal & Hausner, 2006, pp. 16–17). By creating alternative religious communities and monastic institutions for women, the female gurus provide spiritual as well as material support for empowerment, while equally contributing to the national development through organisational welfare projects thus aligning with traditional subjectivities (Khandelwal & Hausner, 2006, pp. 7–8). Nonetheless, female renunciation poses a threat to hegemonic patriarchy as it provides women with an alternative framework for social endeavours that disregard the traditional domains of womanhood, such as marriage or domesticity. Rudert links this definition of divine power with the concept of empowerment,

⁵³ Concrete information about the date of construction are not mentioned within the sources, however the *satsaṅg* hall in the *āśram* at Kankhal was built in 1978 and the *yajñśālā* officially inaugurated in 1981 (Hallstrom, 1999, p. 208).

also emphasised by the female gurus themselves, as the revelation of the divine can be brought about by the guru's *śakti* (Rudert, 2017, p. 133) (see chap. 4.1).

Keeping in mind this yogic perspective of power as *shakti*, and *empowerment* as the awakening of that transforming power already existing within human beings, then *shakti* is both the power itself and the empowering transformation; thus it is the power and the empowerment. (Rudert, 2017, p. 133)

By linking the theological concept of power with empowerment, the scope of agency of the female gurus is gradually expanded within the framework of a subordinate gender-specific social position. Throughout the creation of an independent institutional framework the necessary resources are provided for emancipatory endeavours, while the prominent religious paradigms of Hinduism are protected as the enterprise remains outside the mainstream.

Additionally, the degree of advocacy for religious egalitarianism within the public realm has changed over time. Gurumā for example not only provides a structure of empowerment through her social engagement that tries to uplift women within the context of education. On her website she states: “I do not want the girls of India to remain weak and dependent. I want them to be powerful and strong. Educate them! Empower them!” (GuruMaa, n.d.). By postulating her own achievements as imitable she proposes to her female disciples to emulate her undertaking. Her spiritual attainments therefore constitute a “model of empowerment” (Rudert, 2017, p. xxiv) as well as “a gendered model of freedom” (Rudert, 2017, p. xxxiii) which encourages her female spiritual seekers to act upon their individual agencies to induce a broader engendered transformation process. It is noteworthy that education itself is not necessary empowering for women, as colonial interventions into the education system have proven within the context of India. The educational framework by the female gurus aims to provide access to (religious) knowledge as a form of empowerment in order to act as independent agents within the Indian society (Khandelwal, 2004, p. 208). Similar to the 19th century reformers who promoted various upliftment endeavours, education is perceived as a tool to create female visibility in the public sphere, while it is closely linked to male-inspired agenda, it equally enables women to engage actively in various religious and cultural domains (Khandelwal, 2004, p. 38) (see chap. 3.2.2).

Generally, the reference to concepts of female empowerment associated with the Western feminist discourse and school of thought is largely rejected by female gurus. Hindu nationalists, revivalists and post-colonial perspectives perceive the importation of foreign Western feminist empowerment aspirations as highly problematic and insufficient for theorising Indian female subjectivities, as the gender dimension largely differ and asymmetric hegemony prevails (DeNapoli, 2014, p. 113; Gedalof, 1999, pp. 4–8; Khandelwal, 2004, p. 197). While on one hand, the Western feminist concept is perceived as insufficient for the prevailing diversity due

to inherent social and cultural differences, for instance the aspect of caste, on the other hand, the incompatibility of the idea of differing understandings of femininity is postulated. As remarked by Chaudhuri this does not mean that Indian feminist endeavours are devoid of Western influence⁵⁴ since its distinct formulation occurred against the background of and in deduction to these foreign perspectives (Chaudhuri, 2012, pp. 21–22, 31). The construction of an alternative empowered selfhood and different modes of desired agency heavily rely on “[t]he context, within which concepts emerge and the contexts where they travel to [...]” (Chaudhuri, 2012, p. 35). As noted by various scholars, female gurus therefore shy away from relying heavily on the Western empowerment rhetoric in their movements, as culturally specific efforts to construct an alternative understanding of Indian femininity have been criticised by outsiders (Charpentier, 2010, p. 255; DeNapoli, 2014, p. 113, 2023a, pp. 9–10; Khandelwal, 2004, p. 200). The underlying goals of Indian and Western feminism differ, as the former seeks to enhance the societal position of women within the public and private sphere, while the latter advocates for equal acknowledgement (Lucia, 2014b, p. 111; Rajan, 2020, pp. 11–12). As it has been remarked, in contrast to external perceptions, empowerment in the female guru movements correspond to the culturally accepted forms of Indian femininity, which expand the ritual agency and participation of women instead of undermining normative structures. By referring to the symbolism of goddesses, the gurus apply a form of empowerment that is accepted in society at large due to its historical, mythological and cultural roots. Instead of speaking of general notion of empowerment, it makes sense to speak of individual aptitude within the different guru movements, that are oriented towards the requirements of the situation and circumstances. This allows female gurus to occupy a place within the general Hindu religious community without forfeiting legitimacy due to their progressive approaches.

⁵⁴ It must be remarked that overall, not only the Western influences, e.g. colonialism and missionaries, but also indigenous elites and Hindu nationalism shaped the public discourse around the debate about women’s agency within Indian society.

5. Conclusion

The underlying aim of this thesis was to explore how female gurus employ mantras as a means of gaining legitimation and authority within religious Hindu society, while simultaneously challenging and redefining the sociocultural frameworks of female religiosity. By focusing on the religious practice of mantra recitation this work has shown how female gurus strive for the recognition of authority and legitimacy in the Indian religious sphere, which is largely dominated by Brahmanical orthopraxy. The discursive reconstruction has revealed that female spiritual leaders shape alternatives and transgress access restrictions in relation to gendered behaviour by drawing on accepted forms of Indian femininity. Thereby, they are simultaneously challenging dominant, patriarchal power structures. The gurus equally strategise their spiritual pursuits within patriarchal Indian society to justify gendered forms of religiosity and promote spiritual inclusion within their movements.

The juxtaposition of Tantric and Brahmanical Hindu traditions has shown how, over time, female religious aspirants have been excluded from participation in rituals and mantra recitation, especially within orthodox Brahmanical Hinduism. In contrast, Tantrism has been more accepting of the embodiment of female authority figures. From the provided examples, it is noteworthy that the efficacy of certain mantras recited by women within certain Tantric circles was perceived as superior to the male execution. Incorporating elements of different traditions, e.g. *bhakti* and Tantrism, into their movements and referring to historical or Vedic examples of female ascetics and sages, the female gurus redefine prevailing ideologies about female asceticism. In doing so, they opt for alternative configurations of female religiosity while at the same time holding on to and upholding the authority of the scriptures as well as *dharmic* and *śāstric* values, as required by Brahmanical orthopraxy. The female guru movements thus play a decisive role in the collective reorganisation of boundaries and aim to reduce the negative effects on female individuals caused by non-normative inclusion efforts. Therefore, the analysis of female spiritual leaders serves as a prominent example of female involvement within the public religious sphere.

Against the background of this framework, the efforts of 19th and 20th centuries social reform movements were reconstructed to retrace the emergence of female spiritual leaders in the public sphere. The reformers' promotion of a neo-vedāntic understanding of Hinduism provided women with access to Vedic learning and increased their ritual participation (Gaur & Chand, 2021, p. 44; Narayanan, 2005, p. 25). Based on their study of various Vedic scriptural records, the reformers justified the teaching of Vedic knowledge to women, their articulation of the GM as well as the conduction of Vedic rituals by women. While female *sants*, like Mīrā Bāī,

in the Indian medieval age are often used as a precedent to justify the increasing religious commitment of women, the reform movements of the late 19th and early 20th centuries offered institutionalised support for women with religious aspirations. The progressive reformation endeavours based on cultural revivalism eventually enabled women to occupy leadership roles and develop alternative modes of lived religiosity.

This work mainly addresses the emergence and role of female gurus who advocated publicly for women's religious participation and promoted equal access to mantra recitation within their movements. The example of Ānandamayī Mā particularly shows that women held influential public religious leadership positions in the 20th century, fostering egalitarian access to Hindu religiosity and supporting public and gendered mantra recitation. The analysis of the hagiographic sources on Ānandamayī Mā has highlighted the unique importance for her female disciples to obtain *upanayana* in the 20th century. Examining the guru's personal mantra recitation provides insights into her endeavours to gain legitimacy in both the public and private spheres. While the spiritual leader advocated for tradition, as suggested by her adherence to *strīdharma*, she also endowed herself with the *yajñopavīta* and promoted the recitation of the GM for all genders, which was historically prohibited for women by Brahmanical orthodoxy (Hallstrom, 1999, p. 208; Lipski et al., 2007, p. 102). Believing that salvation could be attained by reciting the GM itself, she encouraged all her disciples, regardless of their gender, to chant it. Her expansion of female religiosity, thus, was facilitated by the transgression of social gender norms, focussing on inner spiritual transformations rather than the undermining of hegemonic or patriarchal structures, as male influences have also been identified within their movement. Through providing a space for and encouraging the realisation of female religiosity, the guru promoted small-scale egalitarian access to religious practices within India while maintaining an emphasis on scriptural authority that equally reinforced a system of exclusion for members from outside.

As figures such as Ānandamayī Mā rather carefully advocated for women's religious participation, contemporary public gurus negotiate the challenges of influences, aspirations and needs procured by globalised modernity and traditional Indian frameworks. Through a reconstruction of discourses centring around the second generation, it has been explored how public female gurus of the 21st century employ mantra recitation as a method to foster female spiritual advancement and transcend gendered boundaries concerning female religiosity enforced by Hindu Brahmanical orthodoxy and patriarchal structures.

Especially within the 21st century, it has been observed that female gurus advocate for a more egalitarian, inclusive, democratised approach towards female mantra recitation through

the employment of new technologies, media and global networks as well as more tolerant elements of Indian religiosity that enable women to legitimise their transgressive religious participation. Gurumā, who has an entire ‘tech team’ that produces, transmits and manages the distribution of her mantra chanting in online spaces, also benefits from the revenue generated by her recitation to fund her mission (Rudert, 2017, pp. 99–100). Transnational and cosmopolitan audiences can follow her teachings worldwide through social media, YouTube and new forms of technology that subvert the culturally sanctioned path of restricted access to certain religious practices. Digital religiosity not only expands its audience/viewership but also removes the constraints of religious orthodoxy as the public female guru promotes a democratised approach to religion. Audiovisual engagement is also offered by Mātā Amṛtānandamayī, who also provides the opportunity to purchase booklets (*archana* books) containing the GM in Sanskrit as well as its translations in other European and Indian languages (Lucia, 2014a, pp. 97–98). The global group of devotees is, therefore, no longer dependent on personal encounters with the guru but gains access through the dissemination of chants and hymns via the new media and technology, hence alternating the traditional *guru-śiṣya sambandha*.

The proliferation of ritual objects (tangible and intangible) on online networks has in turn raised new concerns within the religious community about unfiltered access to religious resources. The approaches of Mātā Amṛtānandamayī and Ānandmūrti Gurumā increasingly focus on a deliberate access to resources for pursuing spiritual aspirations through an inclusive and pluralistic approach to Hindu religious traditions. By employing modern technological terms to explain the efficacy of mantras the female gurus enhance the sacred mantras accessibility and distribution over space and time. The changing degree of advocacy for religious egalitarianism and generalised access to mantra recitation within the public realm over time has been at the centre of this discursive analysis.

It has become clear, female gurus who embody renunciation generally expand rather than deconstruct socially prevalent notions of Indian femininity in combination with Indian spiritual mythology. Women gurus not only embody various female deities, like Kālī, Durgā or Lalitā, during *bhāva* sessions, which are accompanied by *japa* and chanting sessions, but also refer to the qualities of these female deity figures within Indian mythology to gain religious authority (Hallstrom, 1999, p. 159; Lucia, 2014a, p. 106; Rudert, 2017, p. 57). Connecting the feminine principle with spiritual aspirations outside of institutionalised Hindu religiosity allows female spiritual leaders to emphasise the qualities associated with and reshape the culturally generated understanding of Indian Hindu femininity.

By elaborating on various aspects such as gender, empowerment and patriarchy that are interwoven in the movements, in conjunction with the aspect of guruship and female renunciation, this work attempted to explain the challenges and resistances faced by female aspirants trying to foster an alternative gendered approach towards traditional Hindu religious practices like mantra chanting. As the female gurus actively support the involvement of women in the spiritual realm by providing empowerment schemes and institutional structures for support, they are entering a new territory of female institutionalised patronage. Thereby the female religious leaders apply a form of empowerment through the concept of universal equivalence that is accepted in society at large due to its historical, mythological and cultural roots.

As female gurus mostly operate outside of the archetypical male institutionalised contexts and structures, they rely on different modes of authority, which are characterised by personal achievements, for instance, by establishing their own institutions and marked by an individual religious style of embodiment that clearly differs from the male one. Through their engendered attempts to evoke transformation for other female spiritual aspirants, it sheds light on how female spiritual leaders evoke alternations within Hindu religious tradition. The underlying focus was placed on different endeavours to promote progressive female engagement such as the chanting of mantras. At the same time, there can be an inherent ambiguity observed which dominates the discourse around gender. Within the female guru movements, their femaleness serves as a distinctive marker in demarcation to male renouncers while similarly, the aspect of gender is negated in accordance with Hindu philosophical perspectives, e.g. the *Advaita Vedāntic* philosophy, to justify aspirations of liberation efforts. As renouncers are believed to perceive life beyond categorisations, such as gender, caste and the materialistic world, they focus on the process of detachment, transition and indifference from bodily layers that bear the imprints of societal and bodily gender categories, assumptions and inscriptions. Within the female gurus' discourses, the degree of emphasis on gender is consequently used variably depending on the situation and context requirements.

This work thus joins a field of scholarship that seek to illuminate alternative forms and stories of female religious engagement in the context of a domain largely occupied and influenced by male religious authority and hegemony. These male-dominated influences led to misogynistic rhetoric, which promoted the historical exclusion of female religious engagement. It has been argued that in the current age, these are increasingly being challenged by alternative female authorities who are in favour of progressive change and promote equal access to religious mantra practices among all members of society, despite gender and caste. Instead of

speaking of a general aptitude for empowerment, it seems logical to speak of individual aptitude within the different guru movements that have focused on various approaches to negotiating religious authority. The result is a more personalised and individualised style of mantra recitation by providing the necessary resources and materials in online spaces for their performance, while they also function as symbols of (cultural) authenticity within global movements. It has been indicated how the religious authority figures occupy a place within the general Hindu religious community without forfeiting legitimacy despite progressive approaches.

This thesis demonstrated that female gurus managed to democratise access to mantra recitation by providing instructions and manuals on how to conduct mantra *japa* in online and offline spaces. This is meaningful insofar as religious aspirants do not rely on authorisation of access, specific religious knowledge or any personal affiliation with the spiritual teacher to engage in mantra practices anymore. Similarly, within the movements, the employment of mantras serves as a link to the upholding of traditional elements and values despite progressive endeavours. By granting access and providing materials, even manuals, for chanting, the access restrictions by the orthodox community based on eligibility are being lifted and subverted. However, this in turn introduced new access restrictions through paywalls for the purchase of ritual items and accompanying materials for the recitation of mantras. Despite this, the public figures have managed to transfer the recitation of the mantras into spaces that are located outside the control of Brahmanical authority and sanction. Through this the female spiritual leaders not only establish cohesive links between tradition and modernity but also connect the efficacy of mantras to the female body. The women gurus, thus, have managed to design a more appealing modern form of religiosity, which equally ensures its continuation, but also promote an egalitarian mantra practice that can be situated in a global context reliant on altered modern needs as expressed by their followers. The female gurus' peculiar, gendered renunciation draws on the synthesis of different concepts and ideas to legitimate their spiritual advancement while operating within a traditionally male domain of religiosity that fused the integration of external elements by facilitating the adaptation process for new ritual components.

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7. Appendix: Gurumā bhajan

महामंत्र है यह जपा कर जपा कर,

हरि ओम् तत् सत हरि ओम् तत् सत।

1. जब साँस निकले जुबां पर यही हो,

जिधर देखूं बस एक दृष्टि यही हो,

है केवल यही शांति सुख का सरोवर।

2. अगर घेर ले दुष्ट चण्डाल कोई,

न हो पास तकदीर की ढाल कोई,

तो बोलो यही नाम मुख से गरज करा

3. असुर ने जो अग्नि का खंभा रचा था,

तो निर्दोश प्रहलाद क्यों कर बचा था,

थे कौन से शब्द उस वक्त जुबां पर।

4. लगी कहने एक दिन हिमाचल कुमारी,

है कौन सा मंत्र कल्याण कारी,

तो बोले त्रिलोचन महादेव शंकर।

This is the [great] mantra recite it, recite it: “Hari om tat sat hari om tat sat”

1. When breathing out, only this should be on the tongue,
wherever I look, there shall be only this one vision,
There is just an abundance of peacefulness and tranquility.
2. If some evil surrounds you,
[and] nearby there isn't any shield of destiny,
then you speak this name [Viṣṇu] roaringly from the mouth.
3. The demon [Asura] who has created the pillar of fire,
Then why was the innocent Prahlāda rescued,
which words were on his tongue at this moment.
4. One day the Himācali princess began to ask,
which mantra is of universal well-being,
Then the three eyed Lord Śaṅkara replied.

Abstract

English

This master thesis examines the (en-)gendered changes in the discourses on the transformation of access to mantra recitation in Hindu religious traditions, with a focus on the Indian female guru movements of the 20th and 21st centuries. Focusing on the unequal access to religious knowledge and practices that have historically limited women's participation in the Brahmanical Hindu tradition, the changing role of Indian female gurus is examined. Particularly, how they challenge and reshape traditional gender roles as well as alter religious practices for women while striving for legitimacy and authority. Considering historical, social and religious factors, topics such as lived Hindu religiosity, female spirituality, and Indian femininity are addressed in the context of the transformation of Hindu traditions by female gurus, with a particular focus on mantra practices in online and offline spaces.

Deutsch

Diese Masterarbeit untersucht die geschlechtsspezifischen Veränderungen in den Diskursen über den Wandel des Zugangs zur Mantra-Rezitation in den religiösen Traditionen des Hinduismus mit einem Schwerpunkt auf den indischen Guru-Bewegungen des 20. und 21. Jahrhunderts. Mit Blick auf den ungleichen Zugang zu religiösem Wissen und religiösen Praktiken, hervorgerufen durch die historische Ausgrenzung und Teilhabe von Frauen an der brahmanischen Hindutradition, wird die sich wandelnde Rolle indischer weiblicher Gurus untersucht. Dabei wird analysiert, wie diese geschlechtsspezifischen Herausforderungen begegnen und bei der Neugestaltung von traditionellen Geschlechterrollen sowie Veränderungen religiöser Praktiken für Frauen nach Legitimität als auch Autorität streben. Unter Berücksichtigung historischer, sozialer und religiöser Faktoren werden Themen, wie gelebte hinduistische Religiosität, weibliche Spiritualität und indische Weiblichkeit im Kontext der Transformation hinduistischer Traditionen durch weibliche Gurus behandelt, wobei ein besonderer Schwerpunkt auf Mantra-Praktiken in digitalen und analogen Räumen liegt.